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“She brought it on herself”:
A Discourse Analysis of Sexual Assault in Teen Comedy Film

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Senior Project 2017

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Abstract

This thesis examines messages that teen comedy films send to audiences surrounding the topic of sexual assault. Sexual assault is arguably one of the largest issues on college campuses today, and while colleges, non-profits, and government offices have sponsored numerous sexual assault prevention efforts, across the United States, sexual assaults still occur. While watching comedy film, viewers often excuse mixed messages about sexual assault because comedy films are made for entertainment purposes, however, teenagers normalize messages in film. In fact, many viewers do not notice the negative messages about sexual assault in film because a film's humorous aspects may overshadow its problems. This thesis will build on previous research about the normalization of messages in film, gender schema in film, and sexual assault and sexual violence in film as well as in real life. It will use film popular comedy films to showcase the pervasiveness of these messages in teen comedy film, and how comedy distracts from problematic behavior. The films of focus include *Sixteen Candles*, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, *Superbad*, and *Easy A*.

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Introduction

After a night of heavy drinking and joy rides, the freshman nerd who has never been able to “get the girl” humorously wakes up next to the beautiful and highly sought after queen bee. In fact, while she has no memory from the night before, the queen bee’s boyfriend had offered the freshman nerd could take her home. Viewers root for this freshman boy, who throughout the film, tries to prove his desirability to his friends. In the morning, she cannot remember if they had sex, but she concludes they did, and that she enjoyed it. This scene from *Sixteen Candles* masquerades an instance of sexual assault as a lighthearted and comical moment within a teenage coming of age film.

There are many examples of modern media including messages in television, film, and online that confront sexual assault directly and do not shy away from discussing assault. Sometimes, however, a storyline that uses sexual exploits or encounters as just one part of a larger plot may skip the discussion of ramifications for sexual assault. In these instances, it’s highly possible that the film might gloss over the assault and character reactions all together.

This thesis examines sexual assault through the lens of teen comedy film, a genre that can easily dismiss the seriousness of sexual assault in favor of laughs or for entertainment. Sexual assault, for purposes of this thesis, is defined as an unwanted sexual act perpetrated by a male on a female. Unwanted sexual acts that occur between strangers, friends, and partners are all considered assault. It includes both attempted

and successful unwanted sexual encounters. If a person is unable to give affirmative consent, regardless of a person's previous communication about sexual desires, the sexual encounter is unwanted and considered a sexual assault.

Teenage comedy films place the issue of sexual assault into a framework that ultimately displaces the ramifications of sexual assault into a comic frame. Dialogue occurs in the movie and people consider the problems with sexual assault, but end up not choosing to make consent important. The films relay messages against sexual assault in two ways. On one hand, the literal dialogue within comedy film promotes the idea that sexual assault is acceptable for various reasons. In these films, numerous characters engage in troubling dialogue, including perpetrators as well as bystanders and friends of the perpetrator or the victim. On a larger scale, the messages of comedy films perpetuate a similar notion that the dialogue implies. Oftentimes, film narratives punish the victim of the assault through character behavior and plot resolution. Other times, the narrative resolves the need for guilt on the part of the perpetrator all together through a lack of reaction to the assault from characters including the victim. This thesis examines five teen comedy films across multiple decades. In order of release date, the films examined include *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984), *Superbad* (2007), and *Easy A* (2010).

According to the End Rape on Campus website, 21% of college women have experienced sexual assault. While colleges, nonprofits, and government offices have

sponsored numerous sexual assault prevention efforts, it still poses a threat on college campuses. Problematically, the comedic spin found in coming of age films overshadows the seriousness of the sexual assault scenes, making it easier to spread messages against sexual assault prevention movements. These forgiven negative and taught messages include victim blaming and false explanations of consent.

Methodology

In this thesis, I will perform a discourse analysis that examines the way teenage comedy film presents a discursive framework that challenges traditional teachings that sexual assault is bad.

I first cast a wide net to uncover literature that discusses relationships between men and women today as well as in the media, including television and film. I also examine literature linking the messages in these forms of media to life choices and views of teenagers, grounding my personal research in its importance. After grounding my research in a wide set of related information, I explore the ways in which teen comedy film frames sexual assault.

To maintain a manageable set of data during my personal research, I limited the selected media texts to a small sample of feature films. I chose to examine popular teen films because of the prevalence of sexual assault among high school and college aged persons. I chose the genre of comedy film because I found that through my film search, perpetrators of assault in teen comedy film are often unpunished, and the assault

oftentimes serves as a plot device more than an accurate depiction of how a person may be punished for an assault, making sexual assault seem more acceptable than its truth.

Before choosing these films, I pretested these films against other teen comedies and alongside other films with iconic sexual assault scenes such as *The Accused* and *Gone With the Wind*. To examine a wide variety of teen comedy films, I chose to not limit the release date of the films and to examine five films.

Within my search through the teen comedy film genre, I noticed a few things that limited my study deeply. Statistics from End Rape on Campus report that seven percent of college men have experienced sexual assault. Additionally, members of the LGBT+ community are much more likely to experience sexual assault, and “21% of TGQN (transgender, genderqueer, nonconforming) college students have been sexually assaulted, compared to 18% of non-TGQN females, and 4% of non-TGQN males” (RAINN). However, there were not many comedic representations of sexual assault against members of the LGBT+ community, and there were not many representations of sexual assault against men. Across races, findings in a similar analysis might produce different results. When these assaults did occur in films across genre, it was not as easy to fold the issue into a comedic structure and the messaging was not as pervasive as my examples. For this reason, I chose to limit my study to only include examples in which a man assaults a woman. Not purposefully, the selected films all featured Caucasian characters. Since men and women of different races might be held to different

behavioral standards, I operated under the assumption that the findings from my research are representative of a Caucasian idea of masculinity.

Once I decided which films best depicted elements that I wished to uncover, I performed a secondary information gathering analysis and identified specific instances in which the films promoted sexual assault. I analyzed the messages that the film sent literally through dialogue, and through the resolution of the victims and perpetrators of sexual assault.

Literature Review

Sexual Assault and Blame

Although sexual assault in comedy film is pervasive, it has not been discussed thoroughly in any accredited literature. A study on sexual assault in comedy requires a background across an intersection of several different subjects such as gender schema, a man's desire to have power over a woman, and the normalizations through visual media of negative stigmas against women who are sexually active. However, the literature does underscore that visual media such as television, film and print portray strong themes about hegemonic masculinity which are representative of rape and must be understood relative to power, and that these representations tend to foster negative attitudes towards women who are sexually active.

Sexual assault, including rape, has been a part of "American Culture" for as long as there has been such a thing as "American Culture", and many actions that society

today considers sexual assault have not been marked as problematic in the past. Formerly, women only experienced sexual assault when there was no room for assumption regarding personal responsibility. Police officers, judges, and even peers ostracize sexually active women, women who drink alcohol, or women in unhealthy relationships rather than appropriately treat women when they report cases of sexual assault.

In fact, some people blame women who claim they have experienced sexual assault for drinking prior to an unwanted sexual encounter. Seemingly, society infers that women cannot agree to sex if they are not able to give consent in a clear mind, but negative stereotypes surrounding women and sex suggest that women must be drunk to feel comfortable engaging in sexual encounters with men. Stories with sex and alcohol are often intertwined, especially in adolescent settings. Sexual assault is often represented in a less severe lens because of the traditional mindset that a woman is compelled to apply to her sex life, such as the idea that men desire women and that a woman must submit to a man's urges. As Meyer argues, the intersection of alcohol and sex is "more forcefully claimed for women, possibly because it connects the two powerful myths that women a) lack the ability to directly communicate sexual desires and b) become more sexually promiscuous under the influence of alcohol" (Meyer 23). Under these standards, a woman cannot express her sexuality without alcohol, but a

woman who was assaulted while intoxicated might face criticism because she made the decision to drink. Teen comedies replicate this stereotype completely.

Historically, laws accompanied cultural viewpoints that women took some of the blame for their sexual assaults, and gave perpetrators less responsibility towards their actions. Laws introduced in the 1970s blocked any legal basis for defendants in rape cases to justify rape based on sexual history. Specifically, rape shield laws blocked a defendant's ability to say that their attack should not be considered an assault because the woman is promiscuous. Films such as *The Accused* ignore the existence of rape shield laws, and originally depict courtroom proceedings for Sarah Tobias' rape case under the assumption that a jury would not convict perpetrators of sexual assault because of her sexual history. The logic behind rape shield laws was that "allowing testimony about a rape victim's sexual history into evidence was a key factor in the underreporting of rape, because it ensured that legal proceedings surrounding rape worked to place the victim, and her sexuality, on trial" (Markowitz 408). If women were sexually active, they were told that their assault was their fault because they enjoyed sex. While women are not placed on trial for their sexuality in any official capacity, women are still judged if they are sexually active outside of court, and sometimes the claims of women who like sex are discounted. In the representation of the courtroom in *The Accused*, Tobias' perpetrators originally receive a light punishment in the form of a plea bargain. These perpetuated beliefs contribute to the negative inferences

surrounding sexual assault victims and the film's oftentimes inaccurate depictions of perpetrators because they echo the idea that a woman might be to blame for her own assault.

Blaming a woman for her assault has been closely tied to neoliberalism by scholars including Nancy Welch. At a recent speech at the International Socialist Organization meeting, she made this connection between neoliberalism and personal responsibility of women in sexual assault, stating, "women's rights are being reassigned back to the individual, using the rhetoric of personal responsibility and family values, plus the scapegoating of women and families of color who fail to measure up". Once again, and relatable to persons in tough economic situations, the responsibility is thrown onto to the victims or the powerless. In relation to this thesis, shifting the blame from the perpetrator to the victim arguably makes comedic aspects of films easier to swallow. Welch claims, "it has become so utterly mainstream that we're supposed to watch a movie like *This Is the End* and chuckle at the rape jokes--while accepting the logic that groups of men naturally give off a 'rapey vibes,' and that it isn't really rape if we're talking about a girl like Lindsay Lohan, and she's drunk and she doesn't know what's happening". This neoliberal mindset also detracts guilt that a viewer might feel about finding these comedies funny, and play a large role in how members of society might justify laughing in cases of sexual assault.

Gender and Power

Research focused on sexual assault suggests that acts of sexual violence are predicated on the societal belief that men have power over women. Revelations of the power dynamic's existence in art are thoroughly examined in John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*. Berger notes that in traditional artwork such as paintings, "a man's presence is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies" (45). In the artwork, a man is depicted in certain ways to imply the power that that man has over the rest of the parts of the painting. A woman might be, for example, positioned to sit below the man or under the man. Men not only strive to have more power than other men, but also, to have power over women.

Additionally, there are clear differences in depictions of men and women. In fact, "women are depicted in a quite different way from men—not because the feminine is different from the masculine— but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him" (Berger 64). In this comment, Berger points out that in many cases, artwork that contains women places women in positions shows a man's dominance over women. Even more so, artwork is made for male viewers, and relevant to this thesis, film creators often orient teen comedy films toward a male audience. Even today in film, characters who are women are still often supporting roles whose relevance are simply to act as the love interest of the male characters. Women are also often the prize for the male at the end of the film.

Berger doesn't confine his analysis to historical paintings, though, pointing to the diffusion of values across contemporary media. He understood that these values were spreading more quickly because of the variety of mediums. He claims, "today the attitudes and values which informed that tradition (roles of women) are expressed through other more widely diffused media—advertising, journalism, television" (Berger 63). Advertising, journalism, cinema, and television, while still relevant to today's world, have expanded more than Berger likely could have anticipated, and these representational strategies remain deeply connected to power.

Different forms of media preach different standards about the roles of men and women. Although power dynamics are often introduced in subtle ways, women by and large are taught submission and to allow the man to take the lead in relationships. For example, women-focused magazines define expectations for women and what it takes to be a good girlfriend. Now retired magazine *CosmoGirl!* "echoe[d] other cultural texts by telling girls to stand unwaveringly by their boys as they play video games and basketball, to avoid head games by letting boys affirm their desires first, but to leave a boy who becomes too disrespectful" (Enck-Wanzer 71). Teachings like this example imply that women are not supposed to express when they have problems with their significant others unless the behavior is bad enough that she should leave him for it. These opinions also suggest that the woman should wait for a man to decide what he wants and she should wait to express her opinion until after he has made up his mind.

In the film *Fifty Shades of Grey*, for example, Christian gets Anastasia to agree to participate in BDSM after she originally has no desire to submit to him and he coerces her to participate. She continually submits until eventually, he hurts her to tears and she decides to end the relationship. This type of behavior towards men is important while examining sexual assault in comedy because these teachings set up a power dynamic between men and women. Not specific to comedy film, they delegitimize a woman's discomfort surrounding sexual interactions with men because these opinions suggest that a woman think of a man's desires before her own.

Examples of an imposed power dynamic exist in many forms of both visual and print media. In a technical sense, the male gaze puts a spin on the notion that media is made by men and for men. The male gaze is the notion that visual media is created and marketed with the male viewer in mind, and shaped to give male viewers pleasure while watching. Scholars admit that the male gaze affects how movies are viewed, and, "given that the male gaze is predominant in our film and TV culture, it is only fair to assume that we are profoundly influenced by such a gaze" (Dirse 19). Sexual assault affects everyone, but more often, women are sexually assaulted. Because of the male gaze, it's difficult to say that sexual assault in film is an accurate depiction of real life if the scenes are made with the male gaze in mind because they are fantasy depictions that deploy women's bodies in peril for a male viewer. Sexual assault scenes could be

sexualized to make the scenes more enjoyable. The male gaze also contributes to the lack of labeling troubling scenes as sexual assault scenes.

Studies have shown that adolescents are socialized on the male gaze through many avenues including their teachers. Some researchers discovered that how male teachers taught their students bred a culture of dominant masculinity that valued the male gaze. In their interactions with students, teachers implicitly taught certain markers of hegemonic masculinity and girls ran the risk of feeling like outsiders, concluding “if recognition and acceptance is given only to those females who outwardly align themselves in accordance with, and what is expected by, the ‘hegemonic gaze’” (Skelton 29). Peers and teachers called Maggie, one of the girls in the class during the study, bossy and difficult. Punished for her confidence, for breaking from the norm, and considered an outsider, Maggie did not fit into the hegemonic gaze. Vivaly, a gendered society sets up ample opportunities for film to replicate gendered stereotypes and to make statements about the role of women in society.

The Pursuit Narrative

Within plotlines as well, gendered film exists on many fronts. As previously mentioned, movies are flooded with the pursuit narrative, in which men in films pursue women as either a plotline or a subplot. Laura Mulvey and Molly Haskell, two prominent feminist film critics, speak strongly to the effects of the portrayal of women in films, and make similar arguments about these effects. Haskell highlights a common

role for women in film, noting, “generally her role is to make herself attractive enough for a man to come home to” (Haskell 29). Almost every genre of film has movies in which a woman tries to live up to the standards of men and what they desire. In their attempt, they could go against their values and do more than they hope to with a man to gain their attention or become the object of their desire, a problematic concept because it gives off the impression that women are expected to conform to the desires of men. Mulvey points out that sometimes the presence of a woman serves as a film’s plot device in movies with male lead characters, adding, “The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a storyline, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (Mulvey 62). In Mulvey’s opinion, women in film sometimes function as a distraction from the action based plot of the film. In either sense, women take a secondary role to the men and male pursuit in the film, and it’s highly possible that women take on one dimensional roles in film.

One well known film that portrays the pursuit narrative is the film *Silver Linings Playbook*, focused on main character Pat who tries to get his life back together after he gets released from prison. Pat attempts to win back his ex-wife Nikki after he went to prison because of a violent action against Nikki’s lover, which culminates with Nikki attending Pat’s dance competition with his opposing love interest, Tiffany. As in this film, power dynamics are easily seen in pursuit narratives because women frequently

are complacent and unattainable. The man spends parts of films trying to win a woman over, upsetting the notion that women are equal and have a choice in the matter. Men try to win women over in various ways, through their sexual abilities, through trickery, through alcohol consumption, or winning her as a prize. A recent study on teen movies claims that women do not have control over their lives in their films and are often complacent or misled until a man takes his place as having power over her. Abigail Zwiener notes, "women are taught to be stagnant, to second guess themselves, and to wait for a man to come along to lead them" (Zwiener 115). There are so many films in which men save women, including several targeted towards children; Disney princess movies such as *Cinderella* are simple examples of this phenomenon. Many films reinforce the notion that women cannot and should not have power over their own lives and that what they want is not a priority. Zwiener contributes to current attitudes about men and women in film by supporting the power dynamic that exists in film and the ideas in film that reflect on real life. This idea of the pursuit narrative goes against the notion of consent and gives the impression to viewers that if a woman says no or rebukes a man's advances, men simply have not tried hard enough.

An often ignored and realistic complication of sexual assault cases is that a woman needs intense persuasion to partly or fully consent to engaging in sexual acts, and unfortunately, "coercive sexuality is legitimized and played out in high school and college" (Carr 281). This is important because men often use societal standards

regarding power in sexual relationships to fulfill their own sexual desires, sometimes at the expense of a woman who does not wish to engage in sexual activity.

In addition to these “softer” forms of coercion, men who sexually assault women sometimes do so just to prove that they have power. From silent films from the early 1900s to classics such as *Gone with the Wind*, rape serves more of a purpose than fulfilling sexual needs, and “current scholarship on rape emphasizes that the act is about power—a man’s ability to force another person through intimidation or violence to engage in sexual behavior” (Shrock 85). Through this lens, sexual assault is a byproduct of a man’s desire to exert power over a woman, and power functions as a trait of masculinity. In *Gone With the Wind*, for example, Rhett uses his physical power over his wife, Scarlett, forcing her to have sex with him as punishment for her poor attitude. After this encounter, Scarlett’s mood improves immensely and she does not see any problems with the fact that she was forced to have sex with Rhett. A common occurrence in older films, a man’s ability to force a woman to have sex demonstrated the power he had over her traditionally. Although there has been a shift in the outward value of women and their autonomy over their bodies and lives since the release of these older films, patriarchal mindsets are still deeply embedded in our culture.

The growing level of power that women collectively share often threatens men because, in the past, men have been awarded certain levels of privilege. One lens of power implies that for women to gain access and autonomy, men lose their rights and

their power. Within the discourse that one scholar labels as the crisis of masculinity, this mindset suggests “through the emancipation of women, men have lost something; that power is finite; and that if women have gained power men must therefore have lost power” (Cann 15). Power is not earned, but exists in everyday life because it is given to men by society, an ideal is named “conferred dominance” by scholar Peggy McIntosh. Within society’s shift to give women more power, it is suspected that men must prove their masculinity through exerting power in subtle ways. Rather than outwardly having control over a woman, they can use their strength and their manipulation abilities to convince, trick, or force women to have sex with them. These gender roles and societal expectations for men to maintain power are visible throughout popular culture, including film, and shapes viewer’s opinions of what is natural.

Film Messages in Real Life

Both Mulvey and Haskell agree that stereotypes of women come from society’s stereotypes. Mulvey points out, “in reality, the fantasy world of the screen is subject to the law which produces it” (Mulvey 61). Haskell agrees, “if we see stereotypes in films, it is because stereotypes existed in society” (Haskell 30). Both Haskell and Mulvey decide that identifiable stereotypes in film come from the stereotypes that exist in society. This is important for this thesis because it brings up film’s tendency to capture society’s beliefs and standards for people of different identities and backgrounds.

In a cyclical fashion, people viewing film normalize character behavior. Mulvey describes the concept of cinema shaping and normalizing behavior as cinematic code, explaining that “cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire” (Mulvey 67). Women’s roles in film are shaped and socialized, and cinematic codes such as the male gaze shape how viewers interact with the film to please the ideal viewer, the man. Cinematic code coincides with this thesis in many ways because it acknowledges that films are made for a certain audience and that the film might privilege certain perspectives to please that ideal audience.

Mainstream media gives viewers suggestions as to what behavior is acceptable for each role that a person plays, and while these suggestions do not influence behavior directly, they still put pressure on viewers and other society members to conform to the line that the media draws. Specifically, character traits shape our understandings of how members of groups should act in real life.

One strong example that shows the complexity and flow of media personalities is that of presidential characters on television. “Imagined Presidencies” points out that for many people, the most experience that a person has as to how a president acts is with the media portrayal of presidents in true-life oriented shows such as *Scandal* or *West Wing*. The public’s perception of what qualities make up a good president is shaped by what the perception of presidents are when they are on the small screen. As the

president acts citizen-in-chief, presidents on the small screen show us American's shared values about traits that make a successful president.

Different TV shows have given slightly different views, but for the most part, TV presidents share similar values. The text states, "*The West Wing*, *24*, and *Commander in Chief* create characters that serve as models, epitomizing American citizens' popular views of an effective, personable, and honorable leader" (Phalen 546). To be believable, the presidents in television shows have qualities that many Americans believe presidents should have, but simultaneously, the television shows broadcast the standards of a good president to their viewers. This idea is only one example of how portrayals of characters affect viewers' understandings of real life character traits, and how perceptions and real life can reflect each other. The character traits in films affect teens' understandings of how they should behave to fit in the boundaries of normal or successful.

In fact, a great deal of research has demonstrated that media consumption shapes people's perceptions on the world. One group of scholars who spoke about teen sex comedies, specifically the movie *Mean Girls*, noted, "research examining the effects of media exposure demonstrates that media consumption has a measurable influence on people's perceptions of the real world, and, regardless of the accuracy of these perceptions, they are used to help guide subsequent attitudes, judgments, and actions"

(Behm-Morawitz 131). In this article, the authors discovered that teens are susceptible to influence while trying to decide how they want to live their lives.

One study conducted by these researchers uncovered a strong connection between adolescents who identify with characters in teen movies and behavior. Specifically, “the more emerging adults identified with teen movies and characters and the greater the exposure to teen movies, the more likely they were to report negative perceptions of their friends’ friendship behaviors” (Behm-Morawitz 140). The clear correlation between perception of behavior based on characters suggests that teens have malleable attitudes towards life events based upon what films they watch and how they relate to characters or events in the films. While direct and strong effects are difficult to prove, indirectly, teens could make problematic life choices or take on problematic character traits if they base their idea of normal behavior in adolescents on what they view in teen comedies.

Feminine Behavioral Expectations from Film

Previous film scholars have studied how movies across genres provide expectations for both men and women when it comes to behavior. Jennifer Nesbitt’s “Deactivating Feminism” utilizes the film *Avatar* to make important statements about women, agency, and power. Through the plotline of *Avatar*, women are punished for their attempts at independence. Jake Sully, the main male character, goes into the Avatar world so that he can experience life in a body with full movement again.

Throughout the film, he meets a host of female characters that challenge his ideas of “womanness” on earth. This article points out that “the film does present ‘strong’ female characters, but the narrative space has been cleared for a renewed patriarchy in the person of Jake Sully, the white man inhabiting the native body” (Nesbitt 24). Sully’s masculinity is revitalized when he is released from his disabilities in his new body, and it seems that his journey and story are more important than making room for a strong storyline for the female characters in the film. He reclaims his masculinity and traditional gender schema that accompany his masculinity. In the film, the strong female characters take a backburner to Sully’s conquest of reclamation.

Female characters who do have storylines end up failing without effort on the part of males. Nesbitt notes, “any female-centered, female-motivated activism that assumes equity and equality of agency regardless of gender is portrayed as chaotic and futile” (Nesbitt 25). This notion that a female is lost without a man is echoed in many successful Hollywood films old and new. Women may attempt and show signs of independence, but at the end of the day, they are unable to achieve their goals without the help of a man. This recurring theme with independence reinforces the notion that men have power over women and that they can control women’s fates. These assumptions of power can lead to less consensual sexual encounters, as sexual encounters become extensions of larger cultural patterns of domination. In comedy films, these patterns still exist and the comedic aspects of the film buries these patterns.

Women are punished in films for deviating from social norms that include power imbalances. Additionally, films punish women who express their sexuality, and consequently, women have negative experiences during the film. One scholar speaks about female sexuality in movies, and notes, "when movie plots depart from ideal scenarios, women who see virginity as a gift ... tend to have positive experiences, ... stigmatized women tend to have negative experiences" (Carpenter 824). One of the most commonly used examples, in *Forrest Gump*, Forrest's love interest Jenny frees herself sexually and sleeps with men as she chooses, but the storyline punishes her as her story ends when she passes away from AIDS. These ideals in *Forrest Gump* and other movies go against the grain of masculine-centered societal norms, so women and men are both punished if they do not fit the norms that women are best as virginal characters. This is important when examining sexual assault in comedy because of the negative attitudes associated with women and sex. Film preaches that healthy attitudes about sex promote abstinence and underlying tones towards women in films suggest that women must be punished for their desires to have sex or their engagement in sexual activity.

Sex Expectations

Another stigma that women must overcome is that of enjoying casual sex. Women are often told that if they are not virgins, that they must treat sex as significant because of the serious consequences that can accompany sex. In a similar fashion to the

virgin stereotype, men who see casual sex as a taboo are looked down upon. The pursuit narrative and stereotypes against men who do not pursue women are highlighted in the film *American Pie*, in which four high school friends make a pact to lose their virginity before they graduate from high school so they are not looked down upon in college. In some ways, stigmas in films are changing and women are more often able to engage in casual sex without punishment, however, the stereotypes that are perpetuated by films shape the views that teenage film watchers have about normal sex rituals and concepts. This idea is important because these comedies are so centrally concerned with these stigmas.

For one thing, studies show that teenagers who view films that include casual sex scenarios can, “increase the willingness to engage in casual sex among young adult women” (van Oosten 128). This recent study found a link between teenagers screening shows and films that have worlds in which casual sex is prevalent, and their actions to what the study proved they think is the norm.

Exposure to other versions of relationships that have sexual components also affects how teens believe healthy relationships function. Scholars point out that, “exposure to such content has been related to adolescents permissive attitudes toward sex and their beliefs about sex in relationships” (van Oosten 128). Teenagers are exposed to relationships in these films, and filmmakers could easily emphasize some aspects of a relationship and forgo others because of their storylines for the films.

Viewers perceive relationships in films as normal, increasing the willingness of a person to engage in that behavior (van Oosten 129). Teenagers might not understand what defines a healthy relationship if they treat every interaction they see within visual media as normal. Merriam Webster defines heteronormative as “of, relating to, or based on the attitude that heterosexuality the only normal and natural expression of sexuality”. Teen comedies reflect heteronormative characteristics to an audience that are most often learning to be sexual.

No matter what type of beliefs, through their narratives, many movies today shape the viewpoints of what a healthy teenage relationship or sexual encounter looks like. Because women’s attitudes changed based on the prevalence of actions in a film, expectations that women have for how they should act, be treated, and respond to men change as well. Some research conducted with high school seniors uncovered that “girls who had internalized normative messages about gender ideologies, including body objectification...were less able to enjoy sex, refuse unwanted sex, and insist upon the use of protection” (Smith 327). This research is important because teenagers could assume that it is unacceptable to refuse unwanted sex. Moreover, they might come to believe that using coercion to receive sex qualifies as affirmative consent.

The website of End Rape on Campus(EROC), a national organization dedicated to decreasing levels of sexual assault, highly endorsed a 2014 California Affirmative Consent law, which clarifies the specifics of affirmative consent in the legal realm. The

website defines affirmative consent here: “The law established that consent is a voluntary, affirmative, conscious, agreement to engage in sexual activity, that it can be revoked at any time, that a previous relationship does not constitute consent, and that coercion or threat of force can also not be used to establish consent. Affirmative consent can be given either verbally or nonverbally. Additionally, the law clarified that a person who is incapacitated by drugs or alcohol, or is either not awake or fully awake, is also incapable of giving consent”. In this context, consent means much more than hearing the word yes.

Based off this research, it seems that teens may shape their behavior in relationships on what they see in television. For this reason, the content of visual media is extremely important. Other research conducted, in this case on primetime television, discovered, “although 12% of the media coded was found to be sexual in nature, only 0.19% made any mention of safe sex practices or the consequences that stem from unprotected sex such as pregnancy and the risk of contracting STDs or AIDS” (Callister 461). It’s extremely problematic that sexual activity often occurs on shows, but safe sex practices rarely make appearances. It’s been proven that teens who watch films and television that include sexual interactions believe that the correct way to engage in sexual activity follows the pattern in the film’s or television show’s plot. Conversely, if a viewer does not see scenes in which a person gives their consent to have sex before the

scene in which the characters have sex, one could assume that consent is an abnormal requirement for engaging in sexual activities.

Other studies have examined specific teen films to analyze messages about sex. The coming of age film, *Juno*, exemplifies the style of sex messages that popular films impose upon their viewers. Willis writes in her article "Sexual Subjectivity: A Semiotic Analysis Of Girlhood, Sex And Sexuality In The Film", "During the scene in which the two youth engage in sexual intercourse, verbal communication between Juno and Bleeker is brief" (250). She continues to explain, "The lack of dialogue during sex conveys a cultural conception of conversation as simply unnecessary during physical intimacy" (250). Willis' thoughts on the matter are imperative when discussing sexual assault in teen comedy. These cultural conceptions and others are shown to viewers and reflected into society, becoming absorbed into the media. Because of this cyclical transfer of information about healthy sexual relationships, adolescents are not being shown the attention that conversations about consent deserves.

Rarely does visual media communicate healthy aspects of relationships. Teenagers also might view other examples of sexual relationships as normal, such as those relationships in porn. A lot of porn is made for men, and a woman's willingness or unwillingness and how to navigate each situation often underlies porn videos. In "The Pornography of Reality", "typically (in heterosexual material) a man or men with a camera persuade an apparently unsuspecting girl to have sex with him/them" (Hardy

61). When women are shown that they should refuse sex until they are convinced, it gives off an unhealthy attitude about sex to women. Simultaneously, it shows male porn viewers that if they work to convince a woman to have sex with him, that she will eventually say yes. These messages in porn are bad news for affirmative consent, and predicate that women will eventually consent to have sex with enough male persuasion.

Pushing a woman to have sex with a man is seen acceptable in many forms of film other than porn and emphasizes aggression as a major film theme and marker of masculinity. Previous research on the topic of gender violence and the media concludes that “film themes such as masochism and victimization are feminized in mainstream film, whereas aggression, dominance, and violence are markers of masculinity” (Cuklanz 344). Men must prove their masculinity through violence against women, and they often do so in a sexual form. In this sense, media perpetuates false ideas about masculinity and can convince men that aggression and dominance are qualities that are acceptable to be considered masculine.

Rape Myths in Media

Previous literature has also examined rape myths and representing rape falsely in visual media. When rape is discussed in television or film, some literature points out that interpretations of rape are misconstrued. Rape myths include myths such as women are only raped by strangers, women are likely to lie about assault if they are ashamed of having sex, or that only women can get raped. One scholar notes, “there is

an increasing trend in the entertainment media to portray rape with more complexity by infusing plots with proactive female characters and more ambiguous rape situations” (Kahlor 731). Therefore, visual media perpetuates ideas that rape allegations and stories must contain certain components to be considered legitimate claims. These claims might be de-legitimized without the certainty that a woman could not possibly have suggested that she is interested in sex because of her clothing, actions, sobriety or sexual history. It’s important to point rape myths out for this thesis because women might not consider experiences that they were uncomfortable with as rape if they think that sexual assault must contain certain attributes that dramatized versions of sexual assault.

Both inside and outside visual formats, the same work points out that women might be hesitant to consider themselves as being victims of sexualized violence because of the stigmas that inhere to women who are sexually assaulted. The author points out, alongside other work previously mentioned, that some sexual assault survivors are blamed for their experiences in some ways and that they probably did something to deserve the assault or that they could have prevented their assault if they behaved differently in some way. Kahlor states, “rape myths perpetuate beliefs that not just anyone gets raped—only bad girls get raped” (736). Sexual objects in films are portrayed as sex-crazed innocents looking for experience, or as predators themselves. This is another relevant problem while examining sexual assault in comedy because a

woman might accept these rape myths, experience sexual assault, and not report it because she does not want to be associated with these stereotypes for allowing someone to violate her. These falsities could lead to a misunderstanding about sexual assault, and translate to real life, promoting rape culture.

The Rape Crisis Center Website quoted Emilie Buchwald in her book *Transforming a Rape Culture* to define rape culture as “a complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself”. Outside of film, rape culture pervades society and reactions to rape in real life.

Studies from *The Chasing Amy Bias in Past Sexual Experiences: Men Can Change, Women Cannot* emphasize that women are looked down upon for expressing sexuality or having sexual experience. Their study found that “women who have extensive sexual histories are given less respect and degraded by men, and are seen as more culpable if sexually assaulted” (Jones 26). Even outside of visual media, some men look down on women and consider women more responsible for their own assaults if they have sex frequently. In further studies of the same article, “Men...were not likely to overlook the same sexual experience, regardless of shifts toward monogamy of the woman...when [they] are concerned over the pragmatic issue of partner stability and loyalty, whereas

men have persisting concerns perhaps revolving around reputation and societal perceptions” (Jones 32). Both aspects of this study support the backbone for this thesis and helps to make a point for research on sexual assault in film comedy because women are stigmatized no matter what level of experience they have with sex. Simultaneously, women judge men less on their sexual histories. Women are given mixed messages and told that they should hold out on having sex until they are emotionally attached to someone, and through these teachings, might believe that a guy must want to have sex with her enough for her to give in when he bothers her and tries to convince her after she says no on multiple occasions. The perception that women are bad if they have sex and men are not punished in the same way constructs negative notions about sex for women and men and creates unrealistic (and uneven) expectations for both genders.

Because of the perceptions and messages that sexual violence within the media disseminate, there are a variety of problems with representing rape in the media that have already been examined and are relevant to this current work. For one thing, there is a large body of visual scenes that portray sexual assault but are not labeled as such. Projansky’s *Watching Rape* summarizes this issue with his words that “representations of rape pervade contemporary popular media and thus our everyday lives” (2). The representations currently in the media, such as popular shows *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, give us a narrow view of what is and what is not considered rape. In addition to this narrow viewpoint, another significant issue with representing rape is

the message that film and television directors send by representing rape. Projansky describes this idea as “a feminist paradox between a desire to end rape and a need to represent (and therefore perpetuate discursive) rape in order to challenge it” (19). For example, a person might want to not discuss rape in film because that concedes its existence and as earlier discussed, suggests its prevalence. At the same time, limited representations of rape in film and on television deny for viewers that rape still exists. Discursive rape is extremely important to represent because of the realities regarding rape. At the same time, representing and discussing rape halts progress in breaking the cycle of reality from visual media to the real world. This is vital to this project because unfortunately, sexual assault in comedy film is representative of many of the concerns that sexualized violence is not usually labeled as such and that non-consensual sex is normal. In some ways, sexual assault scenes that do not include any pushback or movies that include healthy sex scenes are uncharacteristic of our society and would not represent reality. Simultaneously, troubling types of scenes discussed above do not help engender better attitudes about sex among viewers.

Unfortunately, very little literature exists pertaining to representation of sexual assault as a grey area, except for representations of sexual assault in which the grey area is a main part of the plotline. The most prevalent version of sexual assault in media is that which is passed off as normal or not discussed within the media that one sees it in.

Case Study

Quite often, teen films follow similar structures and patterns. Although the release dates of *Sixteen Candles*, *Superbad*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, *Easy A*, and *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* span several decades, they represent a set of shared values. In a more focused manner, these five well known films contain scenarios that present differing opinions about sexual assault that represent the larger issues with sexual assault in film.

Director John Hughes' *Sixteen Candles* (1984) centers on sophomore Sam Baker around her sixteenth birthday. In the film, her entire family forgets her birthday because her older sister's wedding consumes their lives. As a subplot of her teen angst and frustration with her family's oversight, Sam finds herself pursued by high school freshman Ted.

After making a bet with his friends at a high school dance, Ted tries to persuade Sam to sleep with him. Although she denies his advances, in a state of pity she gives him her panties so that Ted can win the bet and prove that he is a womanizer as he claims. Meanwhile, Sam has a deep crush on senior Jake Ryan. Jake throws an after-party at his parents' house, and Ted and his friends crash the party. By the end of the party, Jake and Ted converse and Jake unearths the arrangement between Ted and Sam. Jake offers to let Ted drive home Jake's girlfriend, popular senior Caroline, who passed out drunk during the party, in exchange for Sam's panties. Ted accepts, and takes

Caroline home in Jake's father's car, in which it is implied they have a sexual encounter. Jake ends up finding Sam the next day, and by the end of the film, they start dating.

On the way back home, Ted stops at his friend's house to take pictures of Ted and Caroline. The events of the night get blurry, and because of intoxication, Ted and Caroline wake up the next morning and assume that they have slept together. Caroline and Jake break up because of her evening with Ted, and Caroline clings to Ted because what she does remember about the evening was positive. In *Sixteen Candles*, Ted violates Caroline and Sam to build his reputation, and neither Caroline nor Sam mind being used in this way; this entire subplot is used for comedic purposes.

Greg Mottola's *Superbad* (2007) tells the story of Seth (played by Jonah Hill) and Evan (played by Michael Cera), two high school best friends who will soon graduate and attend different universities. They each make it their goal to have sex with a girl before they go to college, and decide they will do anything necessary to accomplish their goal.

Near the end of their senior year, Jules (Seth's love interest) invites Seth and Evan to her graduation party. After bragging about their fake ID's, she asks them to supply some of the alcohol for their party. She asks them to supply alcohol, and they begin their quest to have their friend purchase liquor with his fake ID. They hope that if they bring the liquor to the party, Seth can get Jules drunk, and Seth and Jules can have sex.

When Seth finally makes it to the party, he gets inebriated and then tries to get Jules drunk as well. As one of the most concerning themes of the movie, it seems normal throughout the film. Ironically, Jules doesn't drink so his plan doesn't work.

Meanwhile, Becca (Evan's love interest) is heavily intoxicated by the time that Evan and Seth make it to the party. At this point, Evan questions whether a person should have sex with a drunk person. Evan questions his motives of getting her drunk to sleep with him, but one of Becca's best friends says it's not bad to sleep with someone who is drunk "if you're drunk too!" Rather than solidify that it's not acceptable to use alcohol to persuade women to have sex, they make it seem so acceptable that they can laugh about it.

Opposite of Seth and Jules' story, Becca tries to seduce Evan. Becca is clearly too drunk to consent and Evan tries to stop her from coming onto him, but the interaction does not stop until she gets sick. *Superbad's* plotline is focused around main characters attempting to get alcohol for women so they will want to sleep with them. The entire time, Seth and Evan believe that Jules and Becca will not want to have sex with them if they are not drunk. The film invalidates the seriousness of conversations about consent by hosting them in a comedic setting.

Director Jeff Kanew's *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984) begins on the first day of college for Lewis and Gilbert, two nerds and friends from high school. After the Alpha Beta fraternity men set their house on fire, Lewis, Gilbert, and other college freshmen are

forced to relocate everything to the school gym so that the fraternity can stay in the dorms instead. The school allows fraternity rush to happen in the first days of school so the college freshman do not have to live in the gym all semester, and most freshman join a fraternity house. As nerds, Lewis and Gilbert are ostracized from the Greek community. They try to complain to the Greek council, but their complaints are rejected because they are not members of a fraternity.

To combat the problem they faced this semester, the two men try to charter a new fraternity on their college campus (Lambda, Lambda, Lambda). After facing embarrassment from Alpha Beta as well as Sigma Pi sorority, the Tri Lams decide to try to get back at the other chapters. They invade the Pi house and put up cameras to spy on the Pi's. With these cameras, the Tri Lams invade the space of the women and use it as a revenge tactic.

Later in the film, the Tri Lams compete against the Alpha Betas in a Greek Carnival, and the Tri Lams sell pictures of one of the Pi's breasts at the bottom of their pies. The Alpha Betas and Pi's host a kissing booth, so they don't understand why the Tri Lams are doing so well until they discover that these pictures are being sold along with the pies. During the kissing booth, Betty (a Pi) tries to sleep with her Alpha Beta boyfriend Stan, but gets rejected.

Betty runs into a dark mattress room (one of the activities at the carnival) and because everyone is wearing costumes during the carnival, Lewis takes Stan's costume.

He pretends he is Stan and sleeps with Betty in the mattress room. After they are done, Lewis reveals to Betty that he is not Stan (who she thought she was sleeping with), she is impressed by Lewis' sexual abilities and makes him her boyfriend. In *Revenge of the Nerds*, men have rights to a woman's body if they are clever enough, and women are more interested in good sex than being lied to about who it is with.

In *Easy A* (2010), Olive (played by Emma Stone) becomes the school slut after she lies to her best friend by saying she lost her virginity to a boy in college to avoid spending the weekend camping with her friend's parents. Marianne, a religious classmate, hears this lie in the women's restroom, assumes that it is true, and spreads the lie to the entire school.

Many people believe Marianne and assume that Olive is the new school slut. Brandon, her longtime classmate, knows that she lied. Because he is not openly gay, they bond over the fact that they both are keeping secrets about their sexuality. He bribes Olive and asks her to pretend that she slept with him so that people at their high school don't find out that he is gay. They go to a school party, pretend to hookup there, and end up furthering both covers of Olive and Brandon.

Word spreads that Olive will pretend to do things with guys for money, and she embraces her new stereotype, dressing to play the part. During this semester, she reads *The Scarlet Letter* for a class, and in a similar fashion to the main character in the book, she sews a red "A" onto all her clothing.

After a while, Olive has a growing business and client base, but she loses hope that anyone could like her. When Anson asks her out, Olive gets excited because she thinks that he genuinely wants to be with her. She goes to dinner with Anson, and everything seems normal until the end of their date when he pulls out a gift card and asks to have sex with her.

Olive is taken aback—not only is he not truly interested in her, he also does not realize that Olive has not had sex with any of the guys that she supposedly slept with. She explains that she does not actually have sex with people for money, but he comes onto her anyway. When Olive is not enthusiastic about having sex with him, he tries to force himself onto her multiple times until she finally must find another ride home. She fights back against Anson and ends up not having to have sex with him. Regardless, this movie still implies when women are sexually active (real or fake) or enjoy sex, that they will like sex with whoever, and that when they say no, it doesn't count as a real no.

Amy Heckerling's *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) focuses on 15-year-old Stacy Hamilton and other classmates at Ridgemont High. This film is full of troubling sexual encounters, and while everyone in this movie has sex, most of the troubling scenes are with Stacy herself. Stacy seems very sexually inexperienced compared to her other friends at the beginning of the film, and her sexually experienced friend (Linda) suggests that she explore her sexual curiosity.

Stacy is approached by a 26-year-old stereo salesman, and she ends up having her first sexual relationship with him. She enjoys her new relationship, but after a few months, he disappears from her life and she does not understand why. When she starts to feel lost and she decides to seek sexual validation from other men, classmate Mark Ratner musters up the courage to ask her out, and they go on a date. Mark and Stacy get along well and clearly have a connection. Even though he has a crush on her, when she tries to sleep with him, he runs away, causing Stacy to assume that Mark does not like her or want to be with her.

Because nothing progresses between Stacy and Mark, Stacy starts to like Mark's friend Damone. Damone and Stacy start to hang out and they sleep together in Stacy's pool house. Stacy invites Damone to go swimming in their pool, and when they go get changed in the changing booth, they end up having sex instead.

Unfortunately, Stacy is not enthusiastic about the sex and it does not satisfy her. She becomes pregnant from this encounter, and Mark finds out that Stacy and Damone were together, putting a strain on their relationship. Stacy gets an abortion, and the situation is resolved. When the initial scene with the abortion is over, no one asks about it again or sees any after effects of the procedure. In this film, it's okay to violate a woman even if she gets taken advantage of—like the first man Stacy sleeps with—or if she is not enthusiastic about having sex.

Discussion

Teenage comedies place the issue of sexual assault into a neoliberal framework that ultimately displaces the political ramifications of sexual assault into a comic frame. These films contain dialogue that seems anti-sexual assault, however, characters end up choosing the wrong path. The literal dialogue within comedy film gives off the idea that sexual assault is acceptable for various reasons. In these films, various characters engage in troubling dialogue, including perpetrators as well as bystanders and friends of the perpetrator or the victim. The message of comedy films perpetuates a similar notion that the dialogue gives off, and oftentimes the victim of the assault is blamed for their assault or they are grateful they were assaulted.

Many iconic comedy films misrepresent sexual assault. A prevalent issue from *Sixteen Candles* to *Easy A*, comedy films promote a false explanation of consent and how a person consents to engage in sexual activity. In all types of film, women are often taken advantage of when sexual activity occurs, but in comedies, the lighthearted premise discourages a correction of wrongdoings.

Within comedy film, when there is a sexual assault, bystanders are some of the most problematic characters in the film. In the context of sexual assault, a bystander can be defined as a person present before, during, or after the assault, who has the power to change what is happening or shape how others feel about the situation. Bystanders can be active (meaning they intervene when they see a situation occurring) or passive

(meaning they do not do anything to change the interaction). Oftentimes, bystanders are friends of the victim or perpetrator. In cases of sexual assault, bystanders often do nothing to stop the assault or do not provide proper support to victims. Unfortunately, scenes of sexual assault in comedy film include many passive bystanders and even bystanders who encourage a perpetrator to sexually assault a woman.

Superbad

In the film *Superbad*, countless bystanders encourage Seth and Evan to engage in sexual activity with their love interests only after excessive alcohol consumption has occurred. By the end of the film, the characters that attempt assault get let off the hook, while the characters who are almost sexually assaulted are viewed as aggressive. The comedic elements of the film effectively perpetuate the larger message that having sex with intoxicated women is okay.

Seth acts as a poor bystander in his conversations to Evan about how Evan must behave to get Becca to sleep with him. After they get invited to Jules' party, Seth explains that his plan to sleep with Jules is to bring her alcohol and get her drunk so that she will be "out of her mind" enough to want to sleep with him. After making these remarks, he instructs Evan to do the same thing to sleep with Becca. He remarks, "When you guys are shitfaced at the party, you get with her". He continues to explain how he aspires to be the mistake that girls talk about when they have sex with someone after they have been drinking. He encourages Evan to aspire to be such a mistake in

Becca's mind, rather than providing positive encouragement in support of a healthy relationship. He builds an unrealistic picture of consent for Evan, central to the discursive framework, and his encouragement shapes the way that Evan thinks he needs to behave to sleep with Becca.

Throughout the film, Evan pushes back against Seth's original plan, and when they have trouble obtaining alcohol for the party, he decides that it is not actually important to retrieve alcohol because he can just ask Becca out. When Seth asks Evan why he does not want to get Becca drunk, Evan explains, "Because I respect her, Seth. I'm not going to put that unfair pressure on her". Evan does not want to put pressure on her in terms of owing him for buying her alcohol, alongside feeling more pressure or desire to sleep with him due to her lowered inhibitions. He originally states that women should not be coerced to engage in sexual activity with anyone, by any means, or for any reason, but Seth makes fun of Evan for feeling that way.

Unfortunately, Seth convinces Evan of the necessity of alcohol and tries to engage in sexual activity with Becca when she is drunk. Becca's friends do not help her case; when the two main characters finally make it to the party, her friends also act as bystanders and encourage Evan to find the now-drunk Becca. Most of the characters in *Superbad* serve as negative examples of bystanders because they continually promote negative ideas of how one should engage in sexual activity with alcohol, namely that affirmative consent is not required. Even though Evan knows that someone cannot give

affirmative consent while intoxicated, the people around him constantly speak a different narrative.

In fact, one of *Superbad*'s recurring conversations revolves around consent, even though the term is not once used in the entire film. As previously stated, Seth constantly encourages Evan to wait until Becca is drunk to sleep with him, and Seth also feels he must do the same thing in the context of his relationship with Jules. Unfortunately, these conversations occur repeatedly and show how the film *Superbad* perpetuates negative understandings of consent through a dialogue about consent. Evan and Seth fight with each other after they finally retrieve alcohol for Jules' party. When Seth snaps at Evan, Evan retorts sarcastically, "Good luck getting Jules drunk enough to have sex with you". Evan has his doubts about using alcohol to convince women to have sex, but Seth's low confidence levels lead him to believe that he must intoxicate a woman before she would want to sleep with him. Seth speaks to Jules at the party, and while drunk, he admits "you'd never get with me if you were sober". These instances are only a few in this film that promote the idea that a person can still have sex with another person guilt-free if they agree to have sex when they are intoxicated. The website for the *Foundation For A Drug-Free World* states that that alcohol lowers inhibitions and causes a person to act abnormally. This lowered inhibition accounts for a person's inability to give affirmative consent.

Additionally, film oftentimes does not show the effects that sexual assault has on victims, and characters who are assaulted in films oftentimes do not acknowledge that the problematic behavior nor are steps taken to punish the perpetrator of assault. Neither Seth nor Evan has sex with their crushes, but it is not because they change their minds that intoxicated sex is unacceptable. Rather, Jules does not drink, and Becca is so drunk that she vomits in the bed next to Evan before anything happens. Therefore, the film supports the popular idea from the main characters that alcohol does not affect someone's ability to give consent. It's extremely problematic that this film does not explicitly state that it is wrong to wait for a woman to be drunk to engage in sexual activity with her. Even though the characters toy with the idea that alcohol and sex should not mix, at the end of the day, it does not stop them from attempting to use alcohol for this purpose. No one corrects Seth or Evan for their way of thinking, and when Evan asks if it's wrong to have sex with someone who is drunk, Becca's friend Gaby tells him, "Not if you're drunk too". They are not punished in any way nor do their peers hound them for thinking that they need to get their crushes drunk. Viewers receive the improper message that drunk consent is affirmative and complete consent, a simply untrue fact.

Overall, the movie tries to position Evan as more morally centered than Seth. In the larger dialogue and message, the film asks viewers to empathize with Evan, the guy who is willing to engage in sex with an intoxicated partner but questions the idea up

until he goes through with it. It's much easier to vilify Seth and not Evan.

Simultaneously, Evan almost assaults Becca, but Becca is framed as aggressive and the narrative ultimately tries to let Evan off the hook because Becca approaches him and insists that they have sex while she is still drunk. The humorous aspect of the film helps viewers feel comfortable accepting its problems. Rather, the conversation focuses on the humor behind Evan's sexual encounter, and how after working up to sleeping with Becca during the entire film, it ended because Becca threw up. This aspect overshadows the seriousness of the film: that he almost slept with a drunk girl, and therefore did not have affirmative consent. Because the comedy overshadows the seriousness of the attempted assault, the film gets away with pushing the message that sexual assault is acceptable and in some ways, and the narrative tries to let Evan off the hook because he questions having sex with Becca during earlier parts of the film.

Easy A

In *Easy A*, Olive's reputation as the school slut and the ridiculousness of the film helps viewers displace blame back onto herself and disregard the actions of her assailant. *Easy A* presents an improper view of consent and the permanence of consent. Olive's status as the school slut gives many people the impression that she always wants to have sex, even if she says otherwise. After pretending to have sex with her gay friend Brandon for money, Olive runs into her classmate, Evan, who knows that her and Brandon's experience was not real. He asks her to make the same deal with him,

and she originally refuses. Upset, Evan threatens her and tells her that he could just tell people they slept together and that it would have the same effect. Evan remarks, "At the rate you're going, I don't see how people won't believe it". When Evan makes this claim, he insinuates that her perceived sexual experience overrides her insistence that she not tell others she slept with him. Because of her perceived sexual experience, her consent, even in simply saying that she slept with someone, is not mandatory. Olive ends up agreeing to help him, but only after Evan invalidates Olive's consent. This threat implies that a man's word is more viable than a woman's word.

Olive also receives scrutiny when one of her classmates, Anson, tries to hook up with her. Throughout the film, many people ask Olive to pretend that they have sex, and she loses hope that men want to truly be with her. When Anson asks her out on a date, she regains hope in her likeability. They go out to dinner, but at the restaurant, they see Olive's best friend (Rhiannon), who had a crush on Anson for a while. Olive and Anson hurry out of the restaurant to avoid detection and head to his car. In the parking lot, Anson gives her a gift card in exchange for sex, and attempts to kiss her. She tries to push him away, exclaiming, "Stop! I'm not really having sex with people for money. I'm saying that I'm having sex with people for money but I'm not having sex with people for money". She keeps telling him to stop, but he keeps trying to convince her, instructing her to relax and telling her everything is okay.

Anson's actions and insistence imply that someone who originally says no can be convinced to change their mind. Her perceived sexual experience adds another layer to this issue because Anson seems to think that since Olive has had sex before, she wants to have sex with him as well. He insinuates that once someone gives consent they cannot take it away, and that if someone has sex with one person, that they want to have sex with other people too. Thankfully, Anson fails in his attempts to sexually assault Olive, but he does not stop because he realized that it was wrong to try and force her to have sex with him. Rather, Anson ceased his pursuit on Olive because she gave him the gift card back. The characters in *Easy A* suggest that women who are sexually active do not have an option about when and with whom they wish to have sex.

After Olive is almost assaulted by Anson, Todd and Olive talk about what happened and how she is not actually sleeping with classmates for money. Todd admits that he genuinely likes Olive and asks Olive if he can kiss her, but Olive asks him not to try. Olive explains she does not want to kiss Todd because she had a bad night, and says "some horndog guy just having tried to stick his tongue down my throat". She seems more upset that Anson was not genuine when he expressed interest in her than she is upset about the fact that Anson tried to violate her. She implies that the way Anson behaved was her fault because people think she slept around for money. In blaming Anson's actions in part on his horniness, she proves that she subscribes to the

“boys will be boys” narrative, a narrative that protects men by implying that they cannot control their actions when it comes to sex, and removes Anson’s perceived control. Her reaction also invalidates how a person could feel after they are a victim of sexual assault, because she does not perceive his wrongdoing as a problem of humanity.

Bystanders also place blame on victims of sexual assault in conversation by dictating if a woman has sex and bad things happen to her, that it is her own fault. In the film, Olive’s teacher assigns the book *The Scarlet Letter* to the class. In the book, the townspeople punish character Hester Prynne for her adulterous act. Nina, Olive’s classmate, compares Olive to Prynne, and insulting Olive. Nina calls Prynne a skank, but the professor suggests Prynne was unfairly punished for her crimes, remarking “A skank? You don’t think she was a victim at all?”. Nina retorts, “Why should I? She brought it on herself”. After Nina makes this remark, she insinuates that Olive deserves whatever bad luck might come her way.

Nina voices her belief that victims who previously engage in sex get what is coming to them, and contributes to the negative dialogue surrounding women who are sexually active. She invalidates women and their struggles by placing blame on women who have bad things happen to them, in which sexual assault is only one example. She also implies that Olive is deserving of punishment because of the rumors that she has had sex. Nina does not indicate that she would provide proper support for Olive if she

found out that she was the victim of sexual assault because of her fake sexual history. People who promote punishment for people who have sex remove blame from the assault perpetrators and redefine sexual assault to blame the victim more than the perpetrator. Simultaneously, victims of sexual assault could be shamed and told that they were asking for it.

In the film, Olive adjusts her life rather than critiquing Anson and his life. She models that Anson could not help himself in trying to sleep with her and that her actions led more to their negative interaction than his actions. In addition to the fact that Olive's actions perpetuate a victim-blaming account, Anson's lack of punishment implies other troubling tones. Nothing happens to Anson after he tries to sleep with Olive. This narrative in the film sets the tone for viewers that a person will not receive punishment for ignoring someone's wishes to refrain from sexual activity. This scene serves as a climax of the film that shifts its direction, but not towards a path of retribution of Anson's crimes. Rather, it shifts Olive's thinking and actions so she removes her label as the school slut, starts dating Todd, and overall, she protects herself more from future attempted sexual assaults.

By the end of the film, Olive completely subscribes to Nina's ideas and takes responsibility for what happens to her. This film plays out dialogue with different perspectives, and in the end Nina is vindicated, and Olive decides she has brought it upon herself. The film's message sides with Nina because Olive decides to fix her own

problems, and the comedic aspects of the film distract from the serious issues of victim blaming. In this film, one of the largest aspects of humor comes from the ludicrous series of events, and some points, *Easy A* is comical because how the story unfolds is ridiculous. The insanity of the plotline, the fact that Olive is believed when she lies about having sex, and the fact that the story keeps getting worse all distract from the film's flaws about sexual assault. Not only does Anson attempt to assault her, Nina relates her ideas about the misfortunes in Olive's life to Prynne, and in a neoliberal mindset, insists they were brought upon herself.

Sixteen Candles

In the film *Sixteen Candles*, the plot of Jake Ryan's pursuit of Samantha Baker alongside "Farmer" Ted's ridiculous attempts to seem like the cool kid both take away from the seriousness of the trade that Jake and Ted make with each other to accomplish their personal goals. Jake decides he wants to be with Sam, the main character, even though they have exchanged few words. Jake hosts an after-party at his house and Ted ends up as the last guest at the party. During the dance, Ted ends up asking for her panties to impress his friends and talking with Sam in the auto-shop.

Later that night, when Jake indicates his interest towards Sam, Ted offers to help him, and Jake offers to Ted his girlfriend. By this point, his girlfriend Caroline is passed out drunk. He quite literally suggests that he has the power to non-consensually sexually engage with her when he exclaims to Ted, "I got Caroline in the bedroom right

now, passed out cold, I could violate her ten different ways if I wanted to". In this case, the dialogue clearly indicates that he knows that she cannot consent but he still has the agency to have sex with her if he so desires. Rather than have sex with her, however, he offers that Ted violate her instead and take her home. Ted originally hesitates with the offer, not because she is drunk but because he is not her boyfriend. Jake points out her state of intoxication once again to Ted, remarking, "She's so blitz, she won't know the difference" and when Caroline wakes up and questions who is in the car with her, Jake lies to her and tricks Caroline to believe it is Jake taking her home. Ted drives away with Caroline in the car, stops at his friend's house to take pictures with her as proof that he can attract women, and eventually falls asleep in the car with her.

Throughout the dialogue of *Sixteen Candles*, viewers can focus on Jake's pursuit of Sam and the humor of how Ted and his friends are picked on as younger students, so it's easy to ignore the direct dialogue giving Ted permission to violate Caroline. Jake trades his girlfriend for his main goal of the film, the pursuit of Sam Baker, and that Ted takes Caroline on a joyride when he cannot drive, falls asleep in the car with her but wakes up with his headgear on. All of these instances lighten the mood from the serious tone in which sexual assault conversations often occur. These small comedic elements distract from the extremely problematic and direct dialogue that Jake has no problem taking advantage of his drunk girlfriend, and his willingness to trade this woman to another male to pursue another female.

By the end of the film, the overall success of the male characters shapes a message that indicates to the viewers that it's okay to sexually assault a woman. On one hand, Jake's opinions about being able to violate Caroline are never corrected, and he completes a successful pursuit of Sam. Simultaneously, Caroline wakes up from her drunken adventure to find Ted in the car next to her. After reintroducing themselves to each other, they discuss whether they think they slept together. At this point, Ted asks Caroline if she enjoyed her time with him and Caroline replies, "I have this weird feeling I did". Caroline decides to continue her relationship with the freshman boy who potentially assaulted her and sees no problems with the fact that she most likely engaged in sexual activity without properly consenting. Therefore, Ted proves he can find a woman like the often told his friends, which until then, he could not fulfill. Ted's stumbles and humor that lead to the outcome of his success in sleeping with Caroline allow viewers to ignore the seriousness of the fact that Caroline could not have consented if they did engage in sexual activity.

Comically, Caroline's reaction to waking up alongside Ted also takes away from the seriousness of sexual assault. She places an element of blame upon herself because she knows how drunk she was and immediately accepts that whatever must have happened is normal and okay. She is not affected or traumatized by the assault in any way, and once again the humor of the storyline kicks in when she admits that she must have enjoyed it and Ted is surprised by her reaction. The only character development

that occurs for Caroline is that she goes from dating Jake to enjoying her sexual experience with Ted and dating him instead. During the film, characters objectify her, she is praised for her attractiveness at her peak age of 18, and other characters in the film do not bring her up in any way besides mentioning her beauty. The focus on her body also persuades viewers and makes it easier for them to accept what happens to her.

More so, Caroline's potentially traumatizing experience is only a subplot to the focus of the film, which highlights the romance between Sam and Jake. Ted's experience provides comic relief for viewers compared to the experience of Jake and Sam, in which the comedy of Sam's story lies in the disbelief that her entire family forgot her birthday, and that Ted tries to hook up with her to truly hook up with anyone who is willing to do so. After the potential assault, Caroline rewards Ted with a budding relationship. Not only do the characters all end up in their ideal relationships, no one engages in a literal dialogue that calls out its problematic messaging of the film. Not one character struggles with the decision to violate Caroline, even herself, and Jake even takes it one step further by lying to her so that Ted may take her home. The main jokes of the film — that Sam is easily forgotten because of her sister's wedding and that freshman "Farmer" Ted works things out so that he sleeps with a woman — both make the sexual assault of Caroline less serious because the assault ties in with the goals of Ted, Jake and Sam. Caroline's needs are also met because she desires to engage in sexual activity with Jake

while she is heavily intoxicated and ends up doing so with Ted. Caroline breaks up with Jake because she sleeps with Ted and believes she likes it, and Jake and Sam start dating after they realize Jake is now single. Caroline's assault puts the pieces in place for everyone to get what they want in the film.

Fast Times at Ridgemont High

The film *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* indicates an acceptable yet problematic version of consent through its dialogue and the film's larger message. Throughout the film, the main character's sexual needs overshadow any potential issues with consent that a person might consider.

Men in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* utilize affirmative consent as one of the most imperative to justify sexual assault. When Mark Ratner decides that he wants to try and sleep with a woman, Mike Damone gives him advice about how to properly read a woman's signals. These signals, in his mind, indicate whether a girl would have sex with him. He insists that talking is not necessary because he can tell through other forms of communication if she wants to engage in sexual activity. He suggests that Ratner use body language to communicate his desires as well, explaining, "You don't talk to her, you use your face, you use your body, use everything, that's what I do, I just send out this vibe and I have personally found that women do respond". Damone eventually divulges that he constantly sends out this vibe to maximize the number of potential women that he could sleep with. Ratner tries to get Stacy to like him but his

awkwardness and his clumsiness overshadow the problematic advice that Damone gives him. He stumbles on his words, says awkward things, forgets his wallet when they go on the date. When Ratner embraces the advice, and tries to use his vibe to attract women, he acts in a humorous way, and the audience can easily forgo the fact that he is trying to sleep with women without verbal communication.

Fast Times at Ridgemont High also introduces some competing dialogues about sex and a woman's decision to have sex or not. Damone gives advice to Ratner about sex throughout the film, and Damone openly suggests that a woman decides from the beginning whether to have sex with a man. Speaking to Ratner, Damone claims, "A girl decides how far she is gonna let you go in the first five minutes". Although first impressions are important, this quote suggests that a person does not change his or her mind about consent. Through what Damone frames as a statement of fact, he assures Ratner that a woman makes her decision during first impressions and that her opinion about a man and whether she wants to sleep with him does not waver. This idea is opposite an important component of consent: that it can be taken away at any time. Stacy decides she wants to pursue Ratner, which makes Damone's statement seem true. The hilarity behind how much Stacy wants to sleep with Ratner and Ratner's confusion as to how to respond to Stacy's pursuit of him leaves the audience to not worry that Damone told Ratner that one yes implies perpetual consent.

In fact, throughout this film, Stacy puts on an aggressive front and it's comical that she must pursue a man. It's ironic that he does not realize what she is doing, and when he finally understands, he refuses to sleep with her. Stacy goes on a date with Ratner but ends up sleeping with Damone because Ratner does not understand Stacy's signals. She is so sex crazed that she ends up engaging in a brief partially unwanted sexual encounter that ends up glossed over. Stacy has Damone over to her house and they both are seemingly willing to have sex in the pool house, but Damone moves too quickly. Stacy hesitates before they have sex, and when he puts his penis inside of her, she struggles and starts to scream, "Mike! Mike!". The film does not focus on the sexual assault in the film and this moment is covered up with the comedic twist that she cannot get Ratner to have sex with her so she resorts to having sex with Damone. Damone treats her poorly after they have sex, but in a way, it seems like she is punished for her sexual prowess. This scene is not only indicative of literal dialogue in the film that promotes negative stigmas about assault, but also worthy of shaping a larger message about women who are sexually aggressive.

Linda and Stacy both work at Swenson's Ice Cream Parlor and during work they have frequent conversations about sex and sexual experience. One day, Stacy surprises Linda with her lack of sexual experience at age fifteen, because Linda is seventeen, has an older boyfriend, and they have sex often. When Stacy admits that she does not have much experience with men, Linda sounds shocked, and questions, "You've never given

a blow job?”. Linda is confused and concerned that Stacy has not given a blowjob, among other things. It’s easy to think oddly of Linda for judging Stacy for her lack of experience, but Stacy seems to embrace the challenge to get more experience, which possibly contributes to Stacy’s desire to pursue men for the rest of the film.

Later in the film, Linda comically teaches Stacy how to give a blow job using a banana, while the men next to them in the cafeteria cheer them on. This comedic aspect distracts viewers from the normally concerning fact that Stacy’s friend pushes her to have sex. While sex can and should be fun, and the show that Linda and Stacy put on seems funny, they sexualize themselves and openly perform for the men around them. The comedy of these scenes covers up the belief that Stacy feels the need to catch up and have sex to be a normal high school student.

Linda puts in work to challenge Stacy’s sexual inexperience and push her to do more, but when something bad happens to Stacy, she blames herself. Rather than anyone feeling sorry for her throughout the film, viewers can put the responsibility back on Stacy, which spreads a larger message about consent and what it means to consent. After Stacy and Damone have sex, they think nothing of Stacy’s hesitation during the sexual encounter. When Stacy admits to Damone that she is pregnant, he immediately tries to pass the problem back to Stacy and claims, “It was your idea! You wanted to do it. You wanted it more than I did”. Stacy challenges Damone’s claim and they agree they had shared responsibility even though Damone was much more

aggressive than Stacy when they had sex. Once again, Stacy receives the blame for the sexual experience even though she was not as enthusiastic about having sex with Damone, and though this isn't a humorous part of the film, the film quickly shifts directions from a potential conversation about assault. The film even frames Stacy's sexual encounters in a comedic light. Stacy's aggression for sex is not taken seriously and is laudable more so than concerning. In other words, it's funny that Stacy seeks sex as much as she does. This film directly addresses that there was an unwanted sexual interaction and its brevity followed by a reassignment of blame, once again framing assault in a neoliberal mindset.

Revenge of the Nerds

In the film *Revenge of the Nerds*, the characters inside and outside of nerd fraternity Lambda Lambda Lambda make concerning remarks about women and sex that, as underdogs, viewers can easily dismiss. After the gentlemen decide to have a party, they all look for dates to impress the older members of the fraternity. Most of the men in Lambda Lambda Lambda assume they will get a date from the group of women from the Sigma Pi Sorority that serenaded them, but one of the men, known as Booger, decides to find a date within a different set of women. When the men talk about who they are each bringing, Booger remarks, "I've been out combing the high schools all day". Booger is so creepy and gross that it's funny, and his ridiculous comment makes his friends laugh at him rather than explain to him that it's inappropriate for him to

bring a date who is not eighteen to a fraternity party. This comment is indicative of Booger's behavior throughout the film, his continual creepy persona and disrespectful attitude towards women is applauded or laughed at.

Later in the film, all the Greeks on campus compete in a Greek Carnival. The Alpha Betas (nemesis of the Lambda Lambda Lambdas) and the Sigma Pis host a kissing booth and during the event, queen bee Betty Childs tries to get her Alpha Beta boyfriend Stan to have sex with her. Stan rejects her, and Betty runs off to the mirror room. Lewis takes Stan's mask and follows Betty into a private area at the carnival, where he proceeds to pretend to be Stan and sleep with her. He keeps Stan's costume on during the sexual encounter and does not speak so Betty does not discover that it's Lewis instead of Stan. When they are done, Lewis takes off the mask to reveal himself and Betty. Rather than being upset that it's not her boyfriend, Betty is happy with the sexual encounter. She remarks, "You're that nerd, oh god, you were wonderful". It's hilarious that he could trick Betty, and she really enjoyed the encounter to the point where she was happy it was him instead of Stan.

This example of Betty's ease to forgive Lewis for tricking her to having sex with him is indicative of the entire film and the ease at which the Lambda Lambda Lambda men are forgiven for their assault. When they decide to seek revenge for their mistreatment from the other Greek Chapters, they harass the Pis by putting cameras throughout their house to spy on them. This action, rather than be scrutinized, is

applauded and laughed at by everyone involved. In fact, the aspect of revenge makes it comical and acceptable even though they do not have permission to videotape the women in general. This film sends the message that viewers can laugh when nerds get their revenge on others and that they have every right to violate others to seek revenge.

One of the other reasons that it's funny for Betty to be taken advantage of is because the film frames the assault so that Lewis gives Betty the sex she needs. When Betty asks Stan to have sex with her, he refuses and exclaims "God, Betty, you're like a goat". This quote is an example of how women are dehumanized if she expresses her sexuality and that women are crazy sex addicts.

Not only are the nerds justified in their actions because they are seeking revenge, in framing Betty and other women as sexual and crazy for sex, the women are blamed for the assault on themselves. The nerds seek revenge on the Pis in some part because they lied about wanting to attend the party and that makes it funny that they decide to violate and videotape the sorority women rather than anyone taking concern to the fact that they are filmed. On a smaller scale, it's okay that Lewis had sex with Betty when she thought it was her boyfriend because she wanted it, so it seems in some ways that the film implies he was doing her a favor. Because the nerds are the underdogs in this scenario, they "win" when they successfully break into the Pi house and when Lewis sleeps with their queen bee.

On another level, Betty's reaction after she finds out that Lewis had sex with her promotes the wrong idea about how a person might react to trickery or coercion for sex. Betty goes as far as break up with her boyfriend after she has sex with Lewis once. After the Alpha Beta and Pi joint Greek performance, Betty watches Lewis during the Lambda Lambda Lambda performance and realizes she does not want to date Stan anymore. Standing next to her boyfriend, she breaks up with him and explains to him, "God, I'm in love with a nerd". She then runs over to Lewis instead. This action is further proof that even though Lewis used the mask to trick her and to have sex without her permission, one can be rewarded if they convince someone they are interested in to date. Because she rejected Lewis and she made fun of Lewis throughout the entire film, the funniest part is that she never expected to be in love with a nerd. Betty takes no action against him for dressing up and lying beside deciding to date him instead of her current boyfriend, and the boys come out on top by the end of the film. Once again pursuit of women is applauded, everyone is okay, Betty is happier because she is sexually pleased and no one receives any punishment for their actions.

In *Revenge of the Nerds*, the comedy of the nerdiness of the helps the movie sets up the nerds to be the underdogs, which allows their poor decisions to torture and rapes girls to be easily dismissible.

Conclusion

Overall, viewers generally accept problematic situations and oftentimes characters do not see any issue with the fact that the women were coerced or tricked into having sex. Because of the comical tragedy of some of the characters' pursuits of women, audiences can justify siding with potential and successful perpetrators. Whether perpetrators are successful, the victims are often to blame in the film for their own experiences. Comedy films approach serious situations in a comedic light, which contributes to the everydayness and acceptance of sexual assault as well as negative attitudes towards women and relationships.

This thesis examined the negative messages about sexual assault predicated by comedy film through a discursive analysis of five popular teen comedy films from 1982 until 2010. This analysis shows that the aforementioned films use their dialogue and their larger film messages to make frank statements about qualifications for sexual assault.

All of these films have the potential to contribute to the dialogue about sexual assault, but none of the assaults are labeled as a sexual assault. Not naming it makes it so less people identify it as such. Essentially, the films surface these problematic behaviors without addressing them, and cover them up through comedy.

One of the biggest issues is that the comical aspect of the films distracts from its problematic sexual behavior. The entertainment factor of film allows the ideological

work to get done and for the film to continue to spread false messaging regarding the standards for sexual assault. It allows serious issues to be folded into a comedic structure that makes assaults easier to swallow, and frames the films and the perpetrators as forgivable. After all, these films are American Teen Comedy classics because of their comedic edge.

Additionally, structured films favor victim blaming over placing any power or responsibility onto the perpetrator. In the films, none of the perpetrators are questioned or punished after they commit assault. The lack of consequences could presumably increase the acceptance of problematic behavior because perpetrators do not understand the issues behind the cases of assault. It makes films complicit in the discursive framework by portraying assault in the way they do.

These results matter because viewers, especially teenagers, absorb messages in films and have the potential to normalize the situations they see in films. Films that improperly display affirmative consent or appropriately blame the victim for their own problems introduce a narrative that sexual assault is normal in society, and the ways that sexual assault is portrayed in these films are not actually representations of assault. Future research could widen the genre and scope of this analysis to include other genres of films, sexual assault against men, or in the LBGT+ community.

Overall, these films have both benefits and drawbacks for the current conversation surrounding sexual assault. These films are good in the sense that

awareness of the issue spreads. However, if the assaults such as the ones that occur in these films are not labeled as assault, the action in real life could spread because viewers could assume they are not committing assault when their story of sexual conquest takes a course like those narratives in the film. It is possible for these portrayals in film to be a good thing if viewers learn and understand that unpunished sexual encounters are sexual assaults. Without commentary against the negative actions on the part of the perpetrators, comedy films run the risk of adding to acceptance of these behaviors.

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