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## **MOVIE RATING SYSTEM**

There's no business like Show Business I have heard, and now-a-days movies are our primary form of entertainment. How do we choose the movie our families and we go to see? Many American families use the rating system put in place by the Motion Picture Association of America to make their viewing decisions. We have come to rely on this rating to make good choices on proper content. It empowers the individual to discern what is entertaining or appropriate for themselves or the minors in their care. But, the question remains, does the rating system really give us an accurate measurement to make the decision about what is to be viewed?

In order to answer that question, we would have to look at the development and progression of the movie rating system and how it was formed. An organization to advocate for the industry began in 1922 and later changed its name to the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) in 1945. At the onset of this organization they were monitored by their own code of offensive material, which was called the "Hays Code" named after William Hays. With the freedom movement in the mid-50s and 60s debate ensued over a balance of rights versus censorship. In 1952, the Supreme Court of the United States confirmed that motion pictures were a form of expression protected by the first amendment. In 1966 the president of the MPAA begins to devise an innovative new movie rating system. In 1968 the modern

voluntary movie rating system was born.

On November 1, 1968, the voluntary MPAA film rating system took effect, with three organizations serving as its monitoring and guiding groups: the Motion Picture Association of America or MPAA, the National Association of Theater Owners (NATO), and the International Film Importers and Distributors of America, (IFDA). The initial ratings used since 1968 were:

**Rated G:** General audiences (all ages admitted)

**Rated M:** Mature audiences (parental discretion advised)

**Rated R:** Restricted- persons under 16 not admitted unless accompanied by parent or adult guardian

**Rated X:** Adults Only- persons under 18 will not be admitted (It should be noted that the “X” rating was not an MPAA trademark and would not receive an MPAA seal.)

In the mid 80’s some significant changes took place. The “M” category for mature audiences was changed to PG (Parental guidance suggested) and in the 1990’s the NC-17 rating replaced the “X” due to the negative stigma of “X” rating associated with pornographic materials. These changes ushered in the rating system we still use to this date:

**General Audiences (G)** - All ages admitted to this movie. Contains nothing that offends parents viewing and children. Such films may contain only mild violence or crude humor, and may have no nudity, sex, drugs or coarse (as distinct from impolite) language. The discrimination, bullying and emotional intensity must be minimal, alcohol and tobacco may be used in small amounts by adults in the movie, but not by minors, especially in older G-rated films. The violence or horror must be cartoonish in nature or minimal in quantity.

**Parental Guidance Suggested (PG)**- Some material may not be suitable for children. Parents are urged to give parental guidance as the motion picture contains some material that parents might not find suitable for their pre-teenagers.

**Parents Strongly Cautioned (PG-13)**- Parents are urged to be cautious as the motion picture contains some material that parents might consider inappropriate for children under 13 years of age.

**Restricted (R)**- People under 17 years of age may only be admitted if accompanied by parent or guardian.

**Adults Only (NC-17)**- This film is exclusively adult and people aged 17 years and under are not admitted. (Replaced the X rating)

**Not rated or Unrated (NR)**- Sometimes used while appeals are being settled.

So, given all these considerations and adjustments, just how helpful are these ratings to the American viewing public? I guess that would depend on whose opinion you value. According to the article published in Roger Eberts' journal archives, "The movie industry created its Code of Ratings Administration in the late 1960's to head off local censorship." In this article he went on to say that, "Theaters stopped enforcing its guidelines. "Adults Only" was abandoned and NC-17 is useless because no studios will release a movie under this rating." Roger Eberts' article eluded to the fact that the "R" rating was not fit for those under 17 and the theaters were not enforcing the guidelines of the rating system anyway.

This focus was revisited in 2007 when in the February issue of the American Family Association Journal the question was posed, "Why Parents Can't Trust Movie Ratings. Does the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), exist to serve the viewing public of mainstream America or the entertainment industry?" This question prompted a meeting of several representatives from the film industry. This meeting just resulted in further discussions and concluded that there were no laws governing movie ratings.

The anonymity of the identity of the raters were brought into question in a 2001 Washington Post article written by Sharon Waxman. In the article she interviewed a former rater who revealed that he had signed a confidentiality agreement. In addition, the former rater stated that the secrecy of the MPAA movie raters was “hurting the system, not helping it.” He stated “There’s no reason why the movie ratings can’t be dealt with in a reasonable, public way, so there is accountability.”

In a 2006 article of the New York Times by David M. Halbfinger an investigation into the identity of the movie raters caused quite a stir. The author explained that for several months he investigated and tried to identify the ten movie raters chosen by the industry. Upon identifying these movie raters, a short film entitled “This Film is Not Yet Rated” was created and detailed his investigation into the anonymous raters. He further learned that the board had gone against the MPAA recommendation that the raters have children between the ages of 5 and 17 years of age and/or some training in child development. The short film showed that the rating board members either had children 18 and over or have no children at all and were given no specific training. Furthermore, being given an NC-17 rating blocked the film. Upon appeal of the NC-17 rating by the filmmaker, it went into the Not Rated (NR) category.

Richard Corliss illustrates the confusing subjective nature of the rating system in a TIME magazine article. The criteria of two very different movies is

critiqued and questioned. A comparison was made which illustrated reasons for the need to revise the current rating system. “He had just seen the horror comedy entitled “Scary Movie” in which a psycho killer stabs a woman in her breast and removes her silicone implant with his long knife.” Obviously, the scene is graphic in sex and violence towards woman. Yet “Scary Movie” was rated R (Restricted) meaning it could be attended by any kid with an adult accompaniment, assuming the local theater management and ticket sellers enforced the rating, (which is not always the case.)

In contrast, in an independent film, “The Cooler”, a sentimental story about an unlucky casino employee and his girlfriend was smacked with an NC-17 classification- no one under 17 allowed to attend, which will not be shown in theaters. The film’s offending passage was a love scene with a brief glimpse of the actor’s genitals. Given the artist nature of the film and that most kids can see the same nude body parts if they attended an art museum and see the classic paintings, it’s easy to see the subjectivity of the rating system. When it comes to rating movies we can see where shades of grey is the color scheme, not black and white.

The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) claims they “serve as the voice and advocate of the motion picture industry.” According to Jack Valenti, MPAA president, the basic mission of the voluntary rating system is to offer to parents some advance information about movies so that parents can decide what movies they want their children to see or not see. The entire rating program rests on assumption that parents are responsible. If parents don’t care, or if they are not

responsible in guiding their children's movie going, the rating system becomes useless. Indeed, if you are 18 or over, or if you have no children, the rating system has no meaning for you. Basically, ratings are meant for parents- no one else.

I wondered if parents were happy with the rating system and if they used them to determine movies selected for their minor children. I decided to conduct a survey of my own in an attempt to help me determine if the MPAA was in fact communicating an informative rating system to the public. I stood outside a local movie theater, which had 10 separate movie listings and viewing theaters. I interviewed strictly adults who had children under the age of 18.

The questions proposed were:

1. Do you have any children age 17 or under?
2. Do you use the current movie rating system to make your movie selection choices?
3. Are you satisfied with the current movie rating system?

I chose to take my survey questions to the movie theater on weekends, expecting a more family movie going crowd on days off from school. I agreed with the MPAA statement that adults with children were the group that would be most concerned about the movie rating system. So, with the help of an assistant we attempted to get a general idea of how these adults would assess the movie rating system and if the parents/guardians felt the system communicated the information properly, giving enough information for these movie goers to pick a movie for their under aged children. Although quite a few patrons ignored us, we managed to get 82 valid responses to our questions. These 82 tallied surveys all had at least one

child 17 years old or younger. Those surveys collected that indicated no children were excluded.

Of the 82 asked, 49 responded that they were satisfied with the current movie rating system. The remaining 33 interviewed were not satisfied with the current rating system. Most of the comments against the rating system were based on the opinion that there was too much violence and sex in the movies being released. Although this really pertained to the content rather than the rating system itself, I found this to be interesting that those not satisfied with the rating system referenced the moral standards of film with the rating system.

The percentage of satisfied and non-satisfied was not significant, but I was surprised that the group that was satisfied with the current rating system outweighed the non satisfied. This research was not only interesting, but I found myself wanting further answers. Does the location of the research have an effect on the study? If these questions were posed nationwide, would the results be different? How does the influence and use of the internet, video games, and television affect the mind-set and opinions that individuals have about the movie rating system? I might have come up with different questions or further demographics if I had to do this over again.

Stephen Vaughn, who teaches History of Communication for the University of Wisconsin, gives an excellent insight into movie rating system in his book, "Freedom and Entertainment: Rating the Movies in an Age of New Media." He chronicles the history of the movie rating system and how the development of society interacts

with advanced media communication. I think this research makes me take a more detailed look at how in this day and age, with all the new technology available, it would be nearly impossible to satisfy everyone's expectations as to what a perfect rating system should be.

With the abundance of information available in today's high speed technology, the communication from the movie industry to the viewing public could be improved. There are numerous web sites indicating what movies are available and a brief summary of the movies plot. The movie rating is indicated for the movie and if one looks further in some instances there is explanations why the movie is rated with its specific rating.

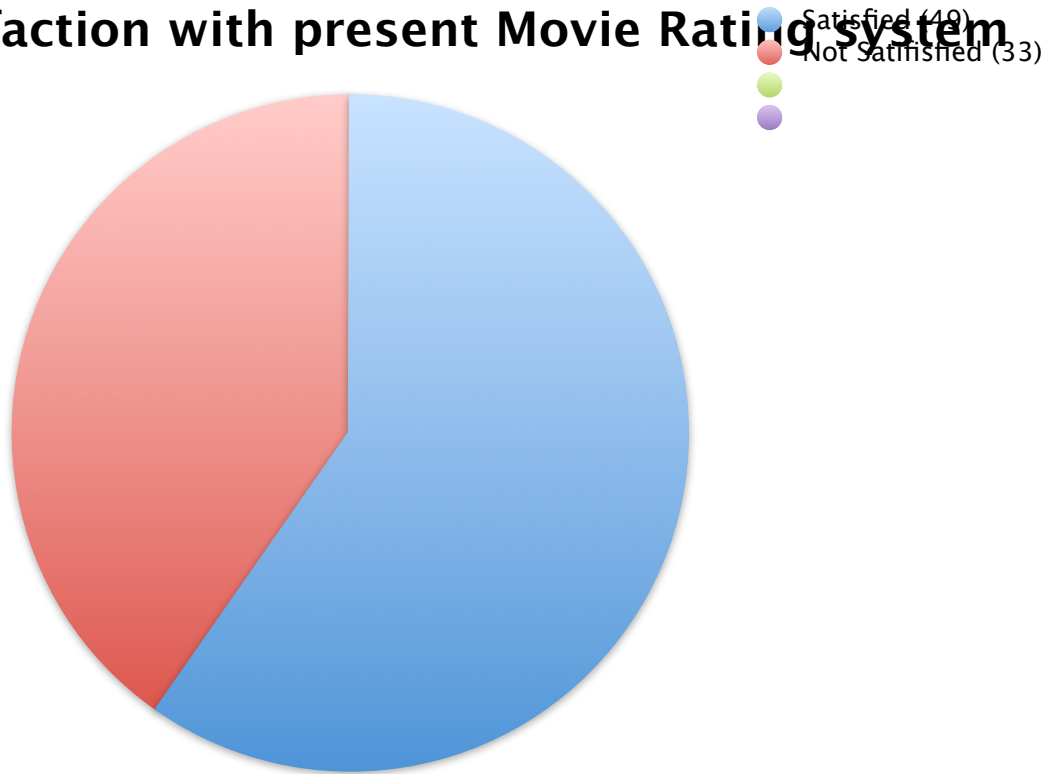
To confirm this information, I went on the Internet and entered a search on Movie Ratings, then clicked on the Movie "Divergent." It indicated the movie was rated PG-13. I then clicked on Content Details , which took me to the detailed categories, Violence, Sexual Content, Language, Alcohol/Drug Abuse. Under the category of Violence there were several comments, such as characters have guns to their heads, characters hand is impaled with a knife, characters taunted, pushed, and humiliated. There were many more details. I wondered how many parents even knew this feature. Under the categories sexual content, language, alcohol/drug abuse there were also several details. The question still remained, should this movie have been rated PG-13?

With all the access to details of movies on the internet, is the rating really

relevant, and is the public made aware enough about the access to detailed information about the movies they wish to view? After researching for this paper I have come to the realization that if a responsible parent is highly concerned about the content of a movie before it is seen, there is available an abundance of information provided on the internet, in order to make a viable decision. So regardless of the rating system which seems to be insignificant in today's technological world, parents who are responsible have many avenues for information about the movies to be seen if they seek the information out and are tech-savvy.

ATTACHED PAGE:

## Parent Satisfaction with present Movie Rating system



Communication to the public is vital in the movie industry. The industry relies on the public for its profit margin.

The objective of this paper was to:

1. Research the development of the movie rating system

2. Determine if the movie rating system is communicating proper ratings for the movie to be viewed
3. Does the movie rating system need to be changed?

Procedure:

A simple survey given to of the movie patron parents of minors were issued and tallied to determine if in their opinion the movie rating system is adequate to make good choices for their children.

As indicated in the graph above forty-nine (49) of the 82 questioned believed the movie ratings were satisfactory. Thirty-three (33) of the 82 felt the movie ratings were not satisfactory. This group had the most comments to add, usually that the content of the movie was not detailed enough.

These results indicated that most parents are satisfied with the present rating system, however, there is a need for the movie industry to educate and clarify that the movie rating system is merely a guideline for parents and additional information is available to the public should they need it.

Those parents who are concerned and who rely on the present ratings for determining what movie to view should use the many other sources of information that is available.

I think this paper indicates that those resources are not known and/or used by a significant portion of parents and would benefit both the movie industry and parents alike if they would educate the public of its availability.

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