
G-rated animated film violence: An issue waiting to be managed

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This paper compares secondary data from a major study by the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis assessing violence in G-rated animated movies, with primary survey data from parents and caregivers of preschool-aged children. The comparison identifies a significant mismatch between actual violence levels and parents' understanding of violence levels. Further, parents were found to hold a misconception as to the meaning and administration of ratings, and to hold movie studios responsible for the violence watched by their children. This paper argues that entertainment franchises need to recognise parental misconception about ratings as an issue to be managed, and shows how this could be approached using issues management tools and quadrant analysis.

A corporation's reputation is a reflection of that organisation over time, as seen by employees, stakeholders, customers, vendors, and other publics (Nakra, 2000). Organisations commit significant investment to creating and enhancing reputation. Reputation affects product sales, employee morale, customer perceptions, and the bottom line. Once lost or tarnished, a solid and positive reputation is difficult to regain. For public relations practitioners as organisational spokespeople and communication managers, this translates to a need for a continual proactive reputation management stance. Public relations involves maintaining an acceptable reputation level, and constantly monitoring issues that may affect reputation in future, or develop into crises.

Public relations practitioners know to pay particularly close attention when media coverage on a topic is intensified. Agenda setting theory tells us that where there is media interest, there is public interest, or at least the opportunity for significant public interest.

Currently, an issue that should be attracting the attention of relevant public relations departments is violence in television and films, particularly in content designed for children. Although on-screen violence has received media attention for decades, the United States' Federal Communications Commission has recently placed renewed emphasis in that country on shielding children from inappropriate material (Sullivan & Jordan, 1999). The American Academy of Paediatrics encourages parents, paediatricians, and educators to discuss the importance of limiting the time their children can watch television in an effort to reduce exposure to violence (Media Violence, 2001). Despite these precautions, G-rated animated films are a popular purchase or rental in America. Five of the top ten best-selling videos in the United States in 1998 were G-rated animated films (Prange, 1999). A study by the Annenberg Public Policy Center showed that parents of children aged two to five reported their children watch an average of 1.5 hours of videotapes per day (Stanger, 1997).

The current study examined parents of preschool aged children in order to shed new light on their perceptions of issues surrounding G-rated animated films. Specifically, the study focused on parental views regarding the level of violence in G-rated animated movies and the appropriateness of these being viewed by young children. A great deal of media coverage was given to the results and viewpoints of a Harvard-based study (Yokota & Thompson, 2000). This coverage, with discussions of G-rated animated movies containing excessive levels of violence, extended to media outlets including the *Boston Globe*, *Boston Herald*, *Time Magazine*, *Harper's Magazine*, CNN, the *Washington Post* and CBS (KidsRisk, 2005; G-rated violence, 2000). Widespread media attention has also been given to George

Gerbner's long-running cultural indicators project which measures violence levels in media content (see for example Stossel, 1997). Given the media attention scrutinising such violence, the current study suggests that violence in children's movies is an issue waiting to be managed.

Issues management

Issues management is defined as the use of issues analysis and strategic responses so that organisations can adapt, respond and thereby proactively maintain mutually beneficial relationships with various constituencies (Heath, 1997). At its most basic, issues management is the public relations specialisation encompassing an organisation's efforts to monitor and communicate with various publics about a public issue. Baskin, Aronoff and Lattimore define a public issue as a problem or choice faced by a facet of society that involves real or potential legislation (1997). For the purposes of this study, the policies and self-regulation surrounding G-rated animated films are considered a public issue.

Research has shown that an organisation's ability to be ethically sound and socially responsive can contribute to profits, help internal and external publics see the company as legitimate, and even aid in overall competitive advantage (Litz, 1996). Responsiveness to constituent needs enhances companies' reputation capital in both the short and long terms. Knowing that media attention has been focused on the issue of violence in G-rated animated films, public relations practitioners from entertainment franchises such as Fox, Disney, Sony and others have the opportunity to be proactive.

Meng (1992) argues that early identification of challenges within the issues management model is crucial to reducing subsequent negative consequences. Mahon's (1989) three-step strategy for determining issue stage and appropriate response can be usefully applied to this issue. The first stage is containment of an emerging issue, in this case violence in G-rated animated films. (Containment should not be interpreted as a recommendation for information

suppression, but as a suggestion that the issue be contained by addressing its causes.) The issue of violence in G-rated animated films is now beyond early containment, given that violent content already exists, and has been reported in media outlets across the world in recent years. Step two involves shaping issues that have attracted media attention, perhaps by correcting misperceptions or inaccuracies in media coverage, or supplying an additional, factual viewpoint. There is potential for entertainment franchises to respond in this way by addressing misconceptions regarding ratings. Step three involves coping with issues facing potential legislative or regulatory intervention. Related to step three of this issue, activist groups are demanding more movie regulation and some form of accountability from movie studios (Edgerton & Jackson, 1996). As an example of how this can impact on organisations and ways in which they can demonstrate responsiveness, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee protested racist lyrics in the opening of *Aladdin* (Clements & Musker, 1992). Within six months, Disney altered the lines. Whether the entertainment giant would have altered the lines without the protest may be impossible to determine, but the outcry was negated regardless. A problem was identified, solutions explored, and ultimately an activist group's dissatisfaction was resolved by organisational responsiveness. Issues management theory suggests that while responsiveness is positive, early identification of such issues, and change made proactively, rather than reactively, are important to reputation.

In this study, activist groups are a targeted public. Hallahan's (2001) issues process model indicates that segmenting publics assists with determining how issues are created, and helps to identify specific responses that can be used to counter or defuse the issue. Hallahan's model contains four publics: 1) active publics who have high involvement and knowledge with the issue at hand; 2) aroused publics having high involvement but low knowledge on appropriate problem solving of the issue; 3) aware publics having knowledge but who are not personally involved in the issue; and 4) inactive publics

having low levels of involvement and knowledge.

In addition to activist groups, aroused publics were of interest to this study as it was this group that identified themselves as recognising a potential problem or issue, in this case violence in G-rated animated films, but were not inclined to move into an activist role. They acknowledged they were personally involved in the issue but had low knowledge in terms of resolving it. This constituency is important for issues management, as research shows that people for whom an issue has consequences are eventually more apt to become active (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Further, separate from knowledge, is the level of involvement, a motivation variable that can offer significant insight into an individual's predisposition to analyse an issue (Grunig, 1997).

Aroused publics can engage in numerous processes. For example, they may actively seek information regarding the issue, discuss the issue with family and friends, pay closer attention to media information on the issue, or move to take collective action to rectify the issue (Olson, 1982). This necessitates close attention by public relations practitioners, as aroused publics can align themselves with active publics, ultimately affecting the company's profits.

Hallahan (2001) suggests organisations can participate in several elementary response strategies. The first, monitoring, requires that issues such as violence in G-rated animated films are recognised as potentially damaging to organisations such as movie studios. The second step is effective inquiry handling. It is at this stage that action plans for change and responsiveness, and information correcting misconceptions, are created and shared with stakeholders (Resnick, 2004). In this case these stakeholders would include media violence advocacy groups and parents of preschool aged children. The third area, termed co-optation, involves constant and consistent assessment of stakeholder responses and attitudes. Finally, containment strategies and preparedness plans are created to contain damaging issues.

Within these four response strategies lie the goals of monitoring concerns, empowering

stakeholders so they have an opportunity to hear plans and voice opinions, and transitioning aroused publics to active supporters. Public relations practitioners working with management may choose to change the organisation's culture to meet societal expectations, to attempt to change external cultures to meet an organisation's needs, or both. Henderson (2005) shows that working with various publics to form consensus on "zones of meaning" and public policy in regard to issues management is proactive and useful, avoiding the costly and time-consuming agenda of changing external cultures.

The issue: Effects of viewing violence on young children

Studies have reported that violence in movies, including G-rated animated films, can be detrimental to young children's mental health (Gilula & Daniels, 1970; Media Violence, 2001). A study by the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis at the Harvard School of Public Health, as published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, showed violence in G-rated animated films had risen from six minutes per movie in 1940 to eleven minutes in 2000 (Morris, 2000; Yokota & Thompson, 2000). The American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Psychological Association have determined this violence to be detrimental for young audiences (Stern, 2000). The current study follows the practice of other scholars in focusing research on preschool children, in large part because they represent a distinct television/movie audience (Warren, 2003).

One theory as to why violence can be problematic is that violence in cartoons and G-rated animated films often results in little or no negative consequences. The three-year National Television Violence study (University of California, 1996, 1997, 1998) begun in June 1994 reported that almost 70% of children's cartoons showed no pain during violent actions, and many of these same programmes showed no negative consequence for violence. The NTV study results stated that if a character's violent

actions rarely have negative connotations, this sends out a message to children that this behaviour is an accepted practice, giving them an unrealistic view of how these same actions would be played out in real life. A related theoretical model, cue theory, focuses on how certain cues send out signals at various stages in life, having long-term effects on individuals. Berkowitz's (1984) study showed that violence in cartoons sends out cues that increase the chances that viewers will act similarly to cartoon characters when faced with the same cues in real life. A study by Josephson (1987) supported major elements of cue theory, finding it applicable regardless of the aggressive tendencies initially shown by respondents.

Still, the debate continues as to whether audiences are active or passive, with both sides having points of merit. Those associated with active audience theory argue that viewers distinguish between movies and reality. Carter (1960) and Dervin (1981) link programme selection with viewers' pre-existing and desired moods, reinforcing the idea of active and aware audiences.

The research for this article rests on passive audience theory, which argues that children viewing violent content are more likely to mimic such behaviour. Numerous studies have shown that preschoolers demonstrate increased aggressive attitudes and behaviours after watching cartoon characters engaged in violent behaviour (Paik & Comstock, 1994; Potts, Huston & Wright, 1986; Sanson & DiMuccio, 1993). Dickinson (2000) reports on violence in Disney's G-rated films and determines at what age children still need parental explanations. Animation characters can escalate confusion between fantasy and reality for preschoolers (Hayes & Casey, 1992).

Harvard's School of Public Health's published research on the topic of violence and G-rated animated films examined 74 different animated films released from 1937 to 1999 (Yokota & Thompson, 2000). The study recommended that a G rating on films such as *The Lion King* (Hahn, Allers & Minkoff, 1994) may not be satisfactory for young children. It suggested parents and guardians should not

assume that a G rating makes a film appropriate for young children to watch unsupervised.

Motion Picture Association of America and ratings

The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and the international Motion Picture Association (MPA) claim to "serve as the voice and advocate of the American motion picture...and home video" (MPAA, n.d., para. 1). According to a statement on MPAA's website by 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 to see. The entire rostrum of the rating program rests on the assumption of responsibility by parents. If parents don't care, or if they are languid in guiding their children's moviegoing, 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. Ratings are meant for parents, no one else (MPAA, n.d., n.p.).

The Rating Board began in 1968, a collaboration of individuals and businesses seeing the need for stricter rules than what was occurring through self-regulation. Between eight and 13 individuals comprise the board, ideally representing average American values (Roth, 2000). No specific qualifications exist for these board members, but they must have a "shared parenthood experience, an intelligent maturity, and be able to apply a rating that most parents would find suitable and helpful in terms of their child's viewing habits" (MPAA, n.d., n.p.). Each movie rating is decided by a majority vote, and each rating is voluntary.

While the names of the rating categories have undergone changes (from names such as 'X, no one under 17 admitted', and 'M, for mature audiences'), the overall ratings expectations have stayed consistent across G, PG, PG-13, NC-17, and R expectations (Roth, 2000). The G rating, which is the focus of this study, means

that the film is intended for general audiences and that all ages can be admitted to the film. It also, according to the MPAA web site (n.d.), means board members believe the film contains nothing in the way of theme, language, nudity, sex, or violence that would be offensive to parents whose young children view the film. However, MPAA points out that a G rating is not a sign of approval nor does it denote the film is intended for children.

This study asked whether this message actually reached parents and, therefore, whether entertainment franchises were conducting proactive issues management. Since perception of responsibility for movie content can directly affect the image and reputation of entertainment franchises, best practice issues management would suggest that it is important for a plan surrounding the issue and appropriate responses to be constructed. In order to make sure impressions by various publics complement organisational messages, the public relations function needs to take the lead in promoting the issue in a way that is in the best interest of both publics and the organisation (Kendall, 1996).

Method

Measures

Two methods are used in this study: an original quantitative survey, and a quadrant analysis. These were triangulated with a data set developed by the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis at the Harvard School of Public Health (Yokota & Thompson, 2000). The Harvard study analysed more than 70 G-rated animated films for total minutes of violence in each film, total percentage of violence versus the film's running time, and whether any deaths occurred in the film. The Harvard study used a definition for violence that included intentional acts in which the aggressor used potentially harmful physical contact (Yokota & Thompson, 2000). Accidental actions and natural disasters were not included in the definition.

The first method used for the current study involved the creation of a survey which netted over 800 responses from parents or caregivers of preschool aged children (aged from two to

five). Respondents offered their perceptions on 14 question areas. Twenty-two daycare institutions, both public and private, in five U.S. states, participated in the study. Surveys were sent home with parents/caregivers and requests for voluntary participation were announced. Of 1,500 surveys, 825 were completed and returned—a 55% response rate. This rate is high for mail questionnaires with no follow-up contacts (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000). The resulting sample in this study was 88% Caucasian and 81% female, slightly higher in both categories than a similar parental mediation study by Warren (2003). It should be noted that daycare institutions were chosen because of a captive-like audience and ease of distribution. A future study might consider broader representation such as geographic area and/or include parents or caregivers electing to not enrol their child in daycare.

The second method used in this study is quadrant analysis, which involves graphic representation of a target group's perceptions. The quadrant shows how well a product or service performs in terms of the group's satisfaction with a certain attribute versus how important they feel this attribute is to the overall product or service (Nason, 1989). Advanced quadrant analysis techniques, such as gap analysis, allow for strategic and management discussions. For this study, gap analysis serves as a measurement for public relations practitioners in comparing the characteristics of ideal and actual movies for children, as desired and perceived by parents and caregivers at the participating daycare centres.

Results and discussion

The study aimed firstly to establish levels of parental/guardian understanding and expectation of the issue (violence in children's movies).

The first area addressed in the questionnaire was whether parents of preschool aged children possessed an accurate image of the amount of violence contained in G-rated animated films. Several questions on the original survey instrument addressed this issue. Responses were compared with data from the Harvard study. The latter study showed that the violence in G-

rated animated films, from all movie studios, was six minutes per film in 1940 and eleven minutes in 2000 (Morris, 2000; Yokota & Thompson, 2000). No respondents possessed a realistic understanding of the minutes of violence that comprise G-rated animated movies. When parents were surveyed regarding the minutes of violence believed to exist in the average G-rated animated film produced in the late 1990s, no respondents chose the option of “10 + minutes,” the most accurate answer. Instead, 64% of respondents ranked the average minutes of violence as “1-3 minutes,” 24% chose “4-6 minutes,” and 8% chose “7-9 minutes.”

Only 20% of those surveyed said they would allow their children to watch an animated film if they knew it contained brief violence. In actuality, though, 98% of the parent/caregiver respondents reported allowing their children to watch G-rated animated films. It is also interesting that 96% of respondents said they would not allow their child to watch a G-rated animated film if one-quarter of the movie contained violent scenes, which the Harvard data indicated many do. Moreover, 100% of all G-rated animated films produced from 1937 to 1999 portrayed some violence, and levels of violence with intent to injure increased over that time (Yokota & Thompson, 2000).

Fifty-two percent of those surveyed accurately believed G-rated animated films released since the early 1990s contained more violence than films produced in the 1970s. However, 40% of those surveyed believed films from the different time spans contained the same amount of violence, 1% thought there was less violence, and 7% were unsure. Collectively, these statistics indicate that parents do not possess a realistic perception of the amount of violence in G-rated films.

The second research area addressed through surveys assessed whether respondents understood G ratings and the MPAA’s role in ratings, and specifically whether parents of preschool aged children understood what constitutes a G-rated animated film. Results indicated 93% of parents/caregivers held the misconception that a G rating by the MPAA serves as a stamp of approval for the film to be

watched by young children. Three percent stated they did not believe the G rating served as a stamp of approval and 4% were unsure. An overwhelming majority of parents felt the G rating implied MPAA felt the movie had appropriate content for preschool aged children.

In addition, 92% of survey respondents stated they themselves believed a G rating was suitable for preschool children, supporting the theory that what is suitable to them coincides with perceived MPAA approval. Four percent disagreed that a G rating indicates suitability for preschool children and four percent of respondents were unsure.

Given this misunderstanding of what constitutes a G rating, it is helpful to consider how many parents and caregivers of preschool aged children actually use the rating system when determining what films children can view. Over 90% of those surveyed said they used the MPAA ratings when making decisions on which videos to allow their preschool aged child or children to watch. Less than 10% of respondents stated they did not consider MPAA ratings.

The survey findings therefore support parental use of the ratings for making decisions on which films are watched. Relative to public relations and issues management, this means that proactive practitioners need to pay attention to public perceptions about who is held accountable for what children view. Particularly if media scrutiny of violent content intensifies, movie studio public relations practitioners need to be proactive in ensuring that various publics are not misinformed or under misconceptions as to what ratings provide. According to the survey results for this study, almost 65% of respondents view movie studios as the collective entity most responsible for ensuring appropriate content in G-rated films. Thirty-two percent felt MPAA was responsible for ensuring appropriate content, indicating MPAA may also need to consider managing the issue from its perspective. Only 4% ranked parents/caregivers as the responsible party.

These figures hold serious implications for entertainment franchise public relations practitioners. Even though ratings are voluntary and the MPAA chooses categories for films, most parents or caregivers of preschool aged

children hold movie studios responsible for film content. Given this level of perceived responsibility, and given the survey also indicated the majority of preschool aged parents and caregivers were in the aroused public category, a quadrant analysis was used to help determine what attributes are important to them in G-rated animated films but not currently delivered by films they have viewed with their preschool aged children.

What follows is a basic depiction of a quadrant analysis design (**Figure 1**). Computing the importance and performance medians by plotting the two means as coordinates allowed statistical comparison of ideals with actualities. For this study, seven attributes were used on 30 randomly selected parents/caregivers of preschool aged children who had participated in the survey. The attributes were based in part on data gleaned from the survey, then respondents were asked to fill out an additional Likert scale based on seven points.

Figure 1: Attribute: Perceived Characteristics Quadrant Analysis.

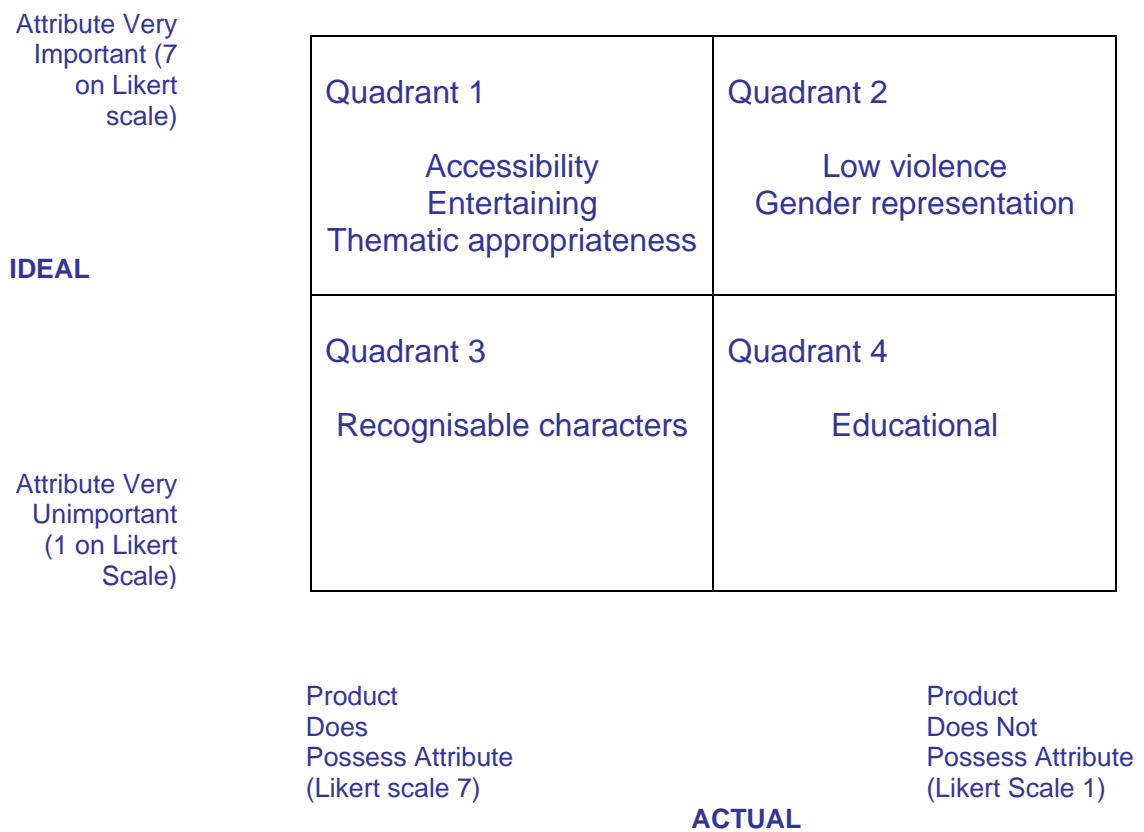


Table 1: Attribute Scores

Attribute	Ideal	Actual	Quadrant
Accessibility	5.1	6.0	Quad 1
Low Violence	5.5	3.9	Quad 2
Entertaining	6.5	6.3	Quad 1
Educational	3.9	3.7	Quad 4
Thematic Appropriateness	6.1	5.9	Quad 1
Recognisable Characters	3.8	6.2	Quad 3
Gender Representation (Roles)	5.0	3.8	Quad 2

Of the seven attributes, three were found in Quadrant 1. The analysis suggests that promotions for G-rated animated films should emphasise the features of being accessible/easily obtained, a good source of entertainment, and containing appropriate themes for young children. Quadrant 2 displays weaknesses that, if addressed appropriately, could turn into opportunities for improvement. Respondents stated they felt appropriate, equal gender role representation was important, but did not believe G-rated animated films were delivering on this attribute. Four respondents commented on lack of realistic occupations, such as doctor or teacher, versus fantasy titles, such as witch or princess, for women in the films.

In addition, respondents stated that a low level of violence in G-rated animated films was important for preschool aged viewing, but they believed there was room for improvement in this area. Proactive issues management would ensure that not only were public misconceptions about content responsibility addressed, but studios did make responsive efforts to adapt to public expectations.

The high parental concern about violence is particularly notable because parents actually were misinformed about violence levels in these films. They believed there was considerably less violence than was actually present, yet even so were concerned. If media scrutiny of the topic continues and parents and caregivers became more informed on the subject, concern

would likely dramatically increase among parental consumers of films and rentals.

While the addition of more attributes would lend more value to this quadrant analysis, this example serves to show how public relations practitioners can benefit from using this type of analysis with various publics. The overall usefulness of a quadrant analysis lies in using attributes that are appropriate and relevant to consumers (Lynch, Carver & Virgo, 1996). Given these attributes were generated from consumer surveys, they give a useful indication of parental/caregiver areas of concern. For future research, this type of analysis could be particularly interesting if the ideal and actual products were compared for specific movies produced by a specific studio, such as individualised gap analyses for Disney, Sony, and others. Quadrant analysis identifies ways not only in which public relations practitioners might address attitudes (particularly misconceptions) in target audiences, but also ways in which organisations might adapt to specific publics' expectations, i.e. ways in which the studios can make movies that better reflect consumer expectations and values.

Conclusions

This paper examined an issue that has the potential to influence movie studio reputations, and therefore should be addressed by the public relations practices of entertainment franchises around the world. Mutually beneficial

relationships are fundamental to public relations, and performance in the public interest means an organisation develops and strengthens mutually beneficial relationships with its constituents. This is a public relations issue not because it requires superficial attention to movie studios' public images or a denial of the importance of movie violence, but because it requires strategic, sustained, and responsive engagement with a growing issue in order to protect corporate reputation. Public relations practitioners are the appropriate personnel to respond, because the concept and management of corporate reputation are at the core of the research, teaching, and practice of contemporary public relations (Lee, 2004; Moffitt, 1994).

Violence in G-rated animated films has received mainstream media attention in recent years, including on TV programmes such as *CBS Evening News* (G-rated violence, 2000), in *Time* magazine (Dickinson, 2000), and in newspapers including the *Boston Herald* (Lawrence, 2000). Research has found a trend in children's movies toward greater violence, particularly those produced since the early 1990s, which contain more violent content than those produced in the 1970s (Yokota & Thompson, 2000). Survey results from this study indicate that parents and caregivers are aware of this trend, and seem to indicate that most parents believe violence in films viewed by preschool aged children is potentially detrimental.

Results found an overwhelming majority of parents would not allow their preschool aged children to watch films they believed to contain much violence. However, many of these same parents also reported allowing their child or children to watch the G-rated animated films which have been found to contain violence. Parents are using the films as a source of entertainment without accurately understanding, or refusing to pay attention to, actual film content. For entertainment franchises, this is an issue with potential to escalate into a crisis, when angry parents and caregivers become aware that children are not receiving the 'safe' content they expect from a G-rated film.

Survey data for this research found parents/caregivers of preschool aged children

were misinformed as to the MPAA rating system. In particular, most parents held the misperception that a G rating served as a stamp of approval of content for all children. This finding complements that of the American Academy of Pediatrics, which supports a friendlier, less confusing ratings system to help parents assess what is healthy for a child to watch according to their age (Media Violence, 2001).

Preschoolers will continue to be a well defined audience for entertainment franchises. This study suggests parents and caregivers of these children may see movie studios as the source most responsible for ensuring content is appropriate for children. In order to maintain legitimacy and a strong reputation, public relations practitioners working for entertainment franchises must be proactive in communicating with and responding to different constituencies, in particular parents and caregivers, when it comes to the public issue of violence in films. Issues management may become more critical to entertainment franchises if worldwide media coverage continues to increase on the topic. More negative media coverage will lead to even more advocacy groups calling for reforms and social responsiveness from the movie industry. Issue processes models can offer suggestions for communicating with and responding to the various publics, including not only active and aroused publics but also aware and inactive publics as influentials who broker activation and responses (Hallahan, 2001).

Issues management theory indicates proactively communicating messages of social responsibility makes good business sense, whereas working in a reactive manner to respond to a public outcry over a controversial issue can be devastating to an organisation's image. Public relations practitioners affected by the topic at hand may wish to heed the advice of business strategists (Resnick, 2004) and unite to plan an industry-specific response as opposed to a company-only response. Alone, even the entertainment giants may eventually have difficulty responding to what is increasingly becoming a recognised and highly emotive societal issue.

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