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## Film Classification Systems as Indicators of Cultural Values: An Exploratory Cross-National Study

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Virtually every country has developed some kind of a film classification system. In the United States the classification system is more commonly known as a film's "rating." The purposes of the classification are (1) to protect vulnerable audiences, especially young children and (2) to allow film makers to show their work in public theaters for the development of art in the country. These systems have evolved over time due to trends in media effects research and, more importantly, the cultural values and social mores of the societies where the classification systems are developed. Just as no group of people has precisely the same cultural values, no nation classifies films in precisely the same way.

I hypothesized that if I analyzed film ratings from three different countries in recent years, I would find that the ratings were significantly different and that the differences would correspond with differences in cultural values and social mores. For example, a country where sexuality was not as taboo would give a film with a more sexual theme a more expansive rating. I used the United States, Norway, and Great Britain as case countries for this cross-national research, though I could have used any number of countries who had classified the same group of films.

I compiled and gather information for a database of 65 popular films from the last five years that had played in public cinemas. I then created a scale where I could compare their associated ratings based on the age for which the classification system deemed them appropriate. For example, the PG-13 rating in the United States would get a 13 on my scale, and the 5 rating in Norway would get a 5 on the scale. I also compiled frequency statistics for the reasons that the classifiers cited a film to get a certain rating. The films in my database naturally fell into four subject-matter categories: blockbuster films, children films, niche audience films, and mid-range films (this last category included comedies and dramas that were not produced as block-busters). I also analyzed the film ratings in categories of the year they were made and the international box-office gross.

Then I cross-referenced my results with the results from the most recent World Values Survey and I looked for values where they might be correlation. I used the World Values Survey because it was an established survey for general national values, and it had a sample size that I could not have possibly achieved in private research. Finally, I watched four films that had gotten significantly different ratings in the different countries and qualitatively analyzed what may have spurred such a difference in the ratings.

The differences between the film ratings showed that there were significant differences between the ratings systems and that those differences hinged on cultural values, particularly attitudes toward violence, language, and sexuality. The United States tended to rate violent and frightening films much more expansively than the other two countries did. Norway tended to be much more restrictive with violence and frightening scenes, but more expansive with non-sexual nudity. The United Kingdom was more restrictive for all of the films in general, which is actually

quite typical, given the history of media censorship in the British Isles. A summary of my ratings frequency statistics is below:

US			UK			Norway		
Rating	N	Percent	Rating	N	Percent	Rating	N	Percent
G	7	10.8	U	9	13.8	A	6	09.2
PG	9	13.8	PG	14	21.5	7	10	10.8
PG-13	26	40.0	12	17	26.2	11	21	26.2
R	23	35.4	15	16	24.6	15	25	35.4
NC-17	0	0.0	18	9	13.8	18	3	4.6

As the table shows, the United States were more like than the other two countries to rate a film PG-13 or R, but very unlikely to rate it NC-17, the highest rating. In fact, between 1997 and 2003, no film in the United States has received an NC-17 rating. The ratings in the United Kingdom are the most symmetrical with the same number of “U” ratings as “18” ratings.

Differences in the frequency data were analyzed against results of the 1990 and 1995-1997 waves of the World Values Survey, and possible correlations are discussed. It was difficult to find any correlations because the World Values Survey tested attitudes and values in general, which are different from attitudes and values for the media. Were I to do this research again, I would find a different established cross-national values survey that centered around values in the media. The World Values Survey was very helpful, however, in explaining the establishment of the classification systems themselves. Citizens of the United States tended to value individual freedoms more highly than government-imposed regulation, and that may be the reason that the classification system in the United States is the only one that is self-imposed by an agency that is not affiliated with the government. Norway and the United Kingdom both showed a higher value for governmental regulation on the World Values Survey, and in both of those countries, the film classification boards are run by the government.

For the final part of my study, I chose four films that had received significantly different ratings across the countries. I watched them for possible reasons that the films were given the ratings that they were. The French film “L’emploi du Temps,” for example was rated PG-13 in the United States for “some sensuality,” PG in the United Kingdom for “coarse language,” and A in Norway for “no bothersome scenes.” I found it interesting that the three countries had given this film such different ratings and had all concentrated on different elements of the film. I hypothesized that this particular film was a prime example of my hypothesis: that there are significant differences between the film classifications in different countries, and those differences are the result of different cultural values. My analysis for the rest of the films can be found in my honor’s thesis, under the same title.

This research was exploratory, and one of my primary purposes for this work was to explore the possibilities of using film ratings as a vehicle to understand differences between cultures and nations. Further research may explore connections with these other phenomena with success, for example, using film classification systems as political indicators. This would be a particularly interesting avenue of research since the classification systems themselves are so often entrenched in political rules and procedures.