

Relationships between U.S. Social and Economic Hard Times and Popular Motion Picture Actor Gender, Actor Age, and Movie Genre Preferences

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Relationships between the social and economic condition in the United States and actor gender preferences, actor age preferences, and motion picture genre classification preferences between the years 1939-1995 were investigated using archival data. Based on the *Environmental Security Hypothesis*, older actors, male actors, and dramas were predicted to be preferred during social and economic hard times. Overall, audiences showed preferences for young actors, male actors, and comedies during social and economical hard times. These outcomes partially support predictions from the *Environmental Security Hypothesis*, and reasons for discrepancies are discussed.

Archival motion picture data provides a useful medium for studying the preferences of Americans across time. Past research (Pettijohn & Tesser, 1999) has found a relationship between facial feature preferences for popular American female actors (but not for popular male actors, Pettijohn & Tesser, under review) and social and economic conditions. However, other motion picture preferences and their relationship to social and economic hard times have not been considered.

According to the *Environmental Security Hypothesis* (Pettijohn & Tesser, 1999), during social and economic hard times, people prefer mature qualities in others to a relatively greater extent than during social and economic good times. These mature features may have communicated attributes such as strength, control, and independence (e.g., Keating, Mazur, & Segall, 1981) during a period when these qualities would have been most desired. Other variables such as actor sex, actor age, and the type of movie may also be preferred during threatening times because these factors may communicate strength, experience, and a focus on serious issues. Consistent with the *Environmental Security Hypothesis*, the current investigation predicted that during social and economic hard times, male actors would be more popular than female

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actors, older actors would be more popular than younger actors, fewer comedies would be popular, and more dramas would be popular, as compared to social and economic good times.

METHOD

Social and Economic Data Collection

United States unemployment rate, disposable personal income, consumer price index, death rate, birth rate, marriage rate, divorce rate, suicide rate, and homicide rate between 1939 and 1995 were collected.¹ Since a measure of general, societal hard times was desired, a single standardized average of all the social and economic indices collected was most appropriate. Each of the indicators was standardized and the annual percentage change in consumer price index, annual percentage change in disposable personal income, birth rate, and marriage rate were multiplied by negative one so that positive scores on all measures would reflect hard times. All of the standardized scores were then averaged for each year to provide a single *General Hard Times Measure* (as used in Pettijohn & Tesser, 1999). Large *General Hard Times Measure* values therefore represent hard times and small *General Hard Times Measure* values represent good times.

Movie Actor Age and Gender Preference Data Collection

Continuously since 1932, the Quigley Publishing Company has conducted an extensive poll of movie exhibitors, asking for the biggest box-office draws. The results of this poll are published in the annual edition of the *International Motion Picture Almanac* (Quigley Publishing Company). This poll offers a reflection of the popularity of stars with moviegoers and was determined to be the best, uninterrupted source of this measure. Based on the results of the Annual Quigley Publications Poll, the top 5 most popular American actors for each year between 1939 and 1995 were identified.² The age of each of these actors at the time they appeared in the poll and their sex were then determined.

Movie Genre Preference Data Collection

Using *People Entertainment Almanac's* (1997) list of the top 5 most popular motion pictures for each year, movie title results from 1939-1995 were identified. These lists were constructed based on the total amount of money (in dollars) the studio collected from movie theater rentals, rather than box-office grosses.

Next, these titles were classified using *The Internet Movie Database's* <<http://www.imdb.com>> classification system and counts for the categories of "Comedy" and "Drama" were made for each year.³ The two genres of interest in the current investigation were "Comedy" and

“Drama,” since these categories were directly related to the current predictions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pearson product-moment correlations between the *General Hard Times Measure* and actor gender preferences (number of female actors appearing in the top 5 each year), actor age preferences (average age of top 5 actors each year), and motion picture genre classification preferences for comedies and dramas (counts of each classification in the top 5 each year) between the years 1939-1995 were computed. Results are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Correlations of Annual Preferences and the *General Hard Times Measure*

	<i>General Hard Times Measure</i>
Average annual actor age	-.25*
Annual number of female actors appearing in the top 5 of the Annual Quigley Publications Poll	-.24*
Annual number of comedies appearing in the top 5 of <i>People Entertainment Almanac's</i> box-office listings	.40**
Annual number of dramas appearing in the top 5 of <i>People Entertainment Almanac's</i> box-office listings	-.13

Note: Large values on the *General Hard Times Measure* indicate poor social and economic conditions. $N = 57$. * $p < .08$ ** $p < .01$. All tests were two-tailed.

As predicted, fewer popular female actors appeared in the top 5 of the Annual Quigley Publications Poll when the social and economic times were poor. In opposition to the prediction, younger actors appeared in the top 5 of the Annual Quigley Publications Poll when the social and economic times were poor. In addition, more motion picture comedies appeared in *People Entertainment Almanac's* (1997) listing of the top 5 motion pictures during social and economic hard times. There was no relationship between the number of motion picture dramas appearing in *People Entertainment Almanac's* (1997) listing of the top 5 motion pictures and the *General Hard Times Measure*. In summary, when societal social and economic conditions were rough, audiences preferred to see movies featuring male actors, people preferred to see movies

featuring younger actors, and people preferred to buy tickets to see comedies.

During social and economic hard times, the age preference for younger movie actors and the film genre preference for comedies may be reflections of a desire for more jovial, prosperous themes. During tough times, people may wish to escape the harsh reality of their environmental and psychological conditions by watching a funny film with youthful actors. However, during poor social and economic conditions, people also prefer male actors and past research has determined that audiences prefer mature facial features (relatively small eyes, large chins, thin cheeks) in female actors during these hard times (Pettijohn & Tesser, 1999). Mature qualities, such as stability, competence, and independence, and a strong male figure may comfort people during particularly difficult periods of time, and would therefore be preferred to a relatively greater extent over persons without these features.

These results are not completely inconsistent with the *Environmental Security Hypothesis*. Although movie audiences may have preferred young actors, male actors, and comedies during social and economic poor periods, the stars in these movies may still have possessed mature facial features and mature qualities. For example, the particular roles actors played in these films were not considered in the current investigation. Perhaps these roles may have required actors to play characters more mature than their actual age and undertake mature roles that communicated feelings of security, strength, and experience.

Although there are limitations to archival research, further studies may continue to explore preferences for motion picture genres and actor characteristics. The presence of significant correlations in this investigation offers some evidence of changing preferences across time. These preferences may indicate societal preferences with important implications for interpersonal relationships and a greater understanding of human attribute preferences and environmental influences.

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Notes

1 Unemployment rate was recorded as the percentage of the work-force unemployed. Disposable personal income was recorded as the annual percentage change in the per capita dollar amount of disposable personal income. Consumer price index was recorded as the annual percentage change in consumer price index, or inflation. Death rate was recorded as the number of deaths per 1,000 of the population. Birth rate was recorded as the number of births per 1,000 of the population. Marriage rate was recorded as the number of marriages per 1,000 of the population. Divorce rate was recorded as the number of divorces per 1,000 of the population. Suicide rate was recorded as the number of suicides per 100,000 of the population. Homicide rate was recorded as the number of homicides per 100,000 of the population. Data were taken from *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1977-1996), *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975), *International Historical Statistics: The Americas 1750-1988* (1993), *Information Please Almanac* (1993-1996), and the *World Almanac and Book of Facts* (1993-1996).

2 Results of the Annual Quigley Publications Poll were found in the *International Motion Picture Almanac* (1933-1963, 1968-1997), the *Motion Picture Herald* (1970-1972), *People Entertainment Almanac* (1995-1997), the *Guinness Book of Movie Facts and Feats* (1993), and *Film Facts* (1980).

3 *The Internet Movie Database* classified motion pictures as “Action”, “Adventure,” “Animation,” “Comedy,” “Crime,” “Documentary,” “Drama,” “Family,” “Fantasy,” “Film-Noir,” “Horror,” “Musical,” “Mystery,” “Romance,” “Sci-Fi,” “Short,” “Thriller,” “War,” and “Western.”