

Extended Essay

English B: Category 2

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Stereotypes among teenagers

How does communication help seeing beyond American teenagers' stereotypes by allowing the development of their identity in the film *The Breakfast Club*?

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Introduction

This Extended Essay is going to analyze how communication among teenagers helps them to see beyond the stereotypes that label their identities utilizing the film *The Breakfast Club* by John Hughes as the cultural artifact. The film has connotations mainly in dialogue and acting that portray American teenagers' stereotypes. Certain scenes of the film will be described to analyze these and the resolution of the film, when the characters communicate and become able to see beyond their stereotypes. It can be said that the film is based on the 80's American society. However, research about it shows how stereotypes are still a problem many have to face not only in America but worldwide. Stereotypes have plenty of definitions because the context of the object or person that is being labeled is considered. In order to explore the research question, stereotypes are going to be discussed and investigated in a social manner. According to a Harvard University Study, "the sociological approach to stereotyping pertains only to social groups. It views stereotypes as fundamentally incorrect and derogatory generalizations of group traits..." (Bordalo, Coffman, Gennaioli, & Shleifer, 2015). The analysis and research based on the scenes shows the stereotypes of each character, as well as the importance of developing an identity for teenagers and the significant role communication has on their lives.

Adolescence is a time of questioning. According to Eveline A. Crone and Ronald E. Dahl, "adolescence, which is defined as the transition phase between childhood and adulthood, is a natural time of learning and adjustment, particularly in the setting of long-

term goals and personal aspirations." (Crone & Dahl, 2012). To find a group and fit in is a way to find others that share the same interests, although teenagers' groups tend to be labeled according to a stereotype. Even teenagers and their parents share the over-generalized belief that Richard Vernon, vice principal of Shermer High School, has about particular teenagers' social groups. This is portrayed in many scenes, and for their analysis a: superficial stereotypes, b: exploration of each stereotype, and c: parents' stereotype acceptance. Film's five principal characters are teenagers, and they are immersed in themselves until they communicate with each other at a Saturday detention and realize that none of them is just, as it is stated in the first scene a:1) "a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess and a criminal." (Hughes, 1985). The secret to John Hughes's success was looking at the world the way teenagers do. That is reflected in the empathy and understanding shown between the characters, and it is what helped *The Breakfast Club* be the classic it is today.

The upcoming investigation is based on American culture. Besides, the investigation may induce the audience to reflect about their actions towards teenagers or as teenagers. This is why it is relevant, it creates awareness about stereotypes even if they are not so visible like the ones portrayed in the film. Also, communication among teenagers as a relevant factor for knowing others and not judging based on the people they hang out with or how it seems they are is intended to reflect that teenagers are not just immature people in a development process to adulthood. Regarding this development, identity is essential for this transition as it is, according to the American Psychological Association, "an individual's sense of self defined by a set of physical, psychological, and interpersonal characteristics that is not wholly shared with any other person and a range of affiliations (e.g., ethnicity) and social role." (American Psychological Association, 2018)

In order to answer the research question, I will divide it into two chapters: The first one is going to be about the stereotypes and the reasons why teenagers have to accept them, and the second about teenagers' identity and how communication portraying themselves and their identity breaks those stereotypes. Also, the principal criticism *The Breakfast Club* has, about reinforcing the stereotypes because of a predictable and romantic ending, will be discussed. The analysis shows that the topics discussed are relevant to American society nowadays, as well as relatable to everyone's lives.

Chapter 1: Teenagers disguise.

Like all human beings, teenagers have to deal with situations that are not in their control. Some of those situations might turn into problems, and they might not be evident at first. For them to sensitize or communicate on a deeper level with others is hard, but still, they have to deal with them. The reason behind their situation cannot adequately express themselves with others is stereotypes. Although the film is set in the 80s, there are still teenagers' stereotypes affecting American society. Nowadays, social media has made it more difficult for teenagers to be themselves or create real relationships. The Guardian published an article about it by interviewing teenagers that chose to quit social media "I was presenting this dishonest version of myself, on a platform where most people were presenting dishonest versions of themselves." (Kale, 2018). There are five scenes in the film in which teenagers' dialogue connotes that stereotypes affect how they see and treat each other, and as well as they see themselves.

The first one b:1) is where they are all together in detention, and Bender wants to close the door, but Andrew says that there are four other people, so Bender replies with:

"God, you can count. See! I knew you had to be smart to be a... a wrestler." (Hughes, 1985).

This phrase reflects how society only considers intelligent students that look studious, and they become supportive of their academic achievements. Therefore, the motivational climate of the "intelligent student" is educational.

On the other hand, an athlete's motivational climate is in sports, and it could define their failure or success. Athletes need to believe in themselves academically because society believes more in their development in sports; therefore, they motivate them in that aspect.

"Do athletes feel that others have lower expectations of them academically? This is important because previous research in education has shown that expectations play a role in academic achievement." (Wininger & White, 2013). The answer is yes, they are aware of the different levels of expectations, both academically and in sports. In contrast, it can be said that athletes can benefit from their success in sports and gain opportunities as in higher education as in jobs like nutrition, coaching, and professional trainers. (Ames, 2012).

The second scene b:2) is where Andrew talks back to Bender: "You know, Bender...you don't even count. I mean if you disappeared forever, it wouldn't make any difference. You may as well not even exist at this school." (Hughes, 1985). This shows how Andrew's perspective is intended to be everyone's perspective and how troublemakers like Bender are excluded. Why is Bender considered the only troublemaker throughout the film? All of them, except Allison, did something in order to be in detention. Not only Bender is impulsive and risk-taking, teenagers' brain changes and has more rapid development of some areas and functions. However, it is a common thought that kids are either calm or hyper; there is not an in-between range that explains a moderate impulsive person. That is why, as they

grow up, the ones that believe they are restless remain active and edgy when they reach adolescence. (Kazdin, 2017).

The third scene b:3) is where Bender imitates Brian's life by presenting a regular conversation between him and his dad: "How's your day, pal? / Great Dad, how's yours? / Super, say son, how'd you like to go fishing this weekend? / Great Dad, but I've got homework to do!" (Hughes, 1985). This interpretation of Brian's life reflects a "perfect" scenario of an academically responsible teenager that enjoys spending free time with his dad. Has the "nerd" stereotype changed? It can be said that it still represents teenagers with good grades that want to be accepted but are not very sociable with others their age that don't have the same academic interests, for example Brian who is a member of the math club, Latin club and physics club only hangs out with other members, and, according to Claire, academic clubs aren't the same as other kinds of clubs. However, being a nerd nowadays can be seen as a proud identity because popular culture made the stereotype acceptable and comfortable for themselves and the society around them. (Nugent, 2007)

The fourth scene, b:4), is where Claire out of nowhere, speaks up: "Do you know how popular I am? I am so popular; everybody loves me so much at this school..." (Hughes, 1985). Claire's stereotype of "princess" can be explained as a popular rich girl that boys fall in love with and is still often represented in American teen comedy films. Furthermore, there is a typical social event at high school called prom, which is an icon of American culture, and the coronation of the queen is its principal matter. Along with high school graduation, prom is often portrayed as one of the most important experiences in high school. It can be inferred that this stereotype is the perfect match to be the prom queen, the girl that has more votes to win the crown. (Best, 2013)

Also, not just in America but worldwide, there is an easy way for a girl to portray this stereotype: social media. This makes it difficult for teenage girls to find their own space without being judged by others with distinct interests; an external pressure to change their identity is created in order to be like the rest, and that can deteriorate both mental health and physical health. Self-harm and anorexia have increased because of thin airbrushed influencers, models, and celebrities that portray perfection both in their appearance and the luxurious things they do or buy. On the other hand, social media has helped teenage girls to have power over their bodies and choices that in the 1950s, they could only dream of. (Furniss, 2017)

The fifth scene b:5) is where Brian makes a speculation about Allison's future because of what he infers seeing all the unnecessary stuff in her bag: "Are you gonna be like a shopping bag lady? You know like, sit in alleyways and like talk to buildings and wear men's shoes and that kinda thing?" (Hughes, 1985). This specific questions can be seen as a stereotyped graphic description of Allison's future. However, it is further than that; they reflect her situation of solitude as concerning as it should be because of the distance she keeps from others and the lack of representing any form of high school typical group. Her attitude is more reserved and distinctive compared to the other characters and their pronounced stereotypes, making her the awkward one. People that act like they know her make her feel like they know her better than she knows herself, and that sensation is disempowering.

Allison states that her home life is unsatisfying in order to explain the look like a runaway, although it is not a complete answer for Brian and Andrew because they know that

she is still not being honest with them. While it may be true, it can be said that is because she is not their friend; therefore, there is no trust. It is understandable that they question her realizing they share the same feeling, but they do not act like her. However, it can be because they are aware that even she does not know herself. They think that she is too weird to have friends and that is the reason why she thinks the same. Lack of interpersonal relationships can lead to severe mood illnesses like depression, dysthymic disorder, and bipolar disorder, which are the third most common cause of hospitalization in the U.S. for both youth and adults aged 18–44. (The Department of Health & Human Services, 2009)

The alienation she feels can contribute to the risk of depression, a treatable mental illness that sometimes is portrayed as just a sad mood, although it is more severe than that. According to Ralph E. Cash, school psychologist in Orlando, FL, and co-chair of the National Association of School Psychologists' Government and Professional Relations Committee and Health Care Initiative, statistically, in a school of 1,000 students, 100 may be experiencing depression severe enough to warrant a psychiatric diagnosis and 13 of them will attempt suicide in a single year. Due to the fact that "basket case" students, like Allison, feel that no one cares, seeing beyond other stereotypes and their own is essential for them and their well-being. (Cash, 2003)

Moreover, the first scenes of the film and teenagers' experiences shown at further conversations between them reflect how the stereotypes deprive their parents of understanding them and taking better care of their actions. Vicki Hoefle, author of the book *Duct Tape Parenting* said that when parents show they are not afraid to tackle any subject and are willing to showcase their own vulnerabilities, teenagers take notice. (Wallace, 2014)

For example, in scene c:1) when Claire is in the car with her father before entering detention, and she tells him that she does not want to be there, her father's answer is: "I'll make it up to you...Honey, ditching class to go shopping doesn't make you a defective". (Hughes, 1985). This reflects how parents adjust themselves and reinforce the stereotype, but also the stereotype that all teenagers have: being "bad". According to neuroscientist Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, author of the book *Inventing Ourselves: The Secret Life of the Teenage Brain*, teenagers forever have had a bad reputation. They accept many negative stereotypes society has created for them in order to be part of a group that is either seen as good or bad. It is possible to go back as far as Socrates, who said they have "bad manners, contempt for authority, show disrespect for elders and love chatter in the place of exercise." Additionally, Richard Vernon, high school's vice principal who stays in charge of them, has a conversation with the janitor, Carl Reed, and this depicts him as an angry adult that thinks that teenagers are against him and wants to exercise control over them. (Blakemore, 2018)

It can be said that the characters reason for bonding is their common enemy, Richard Vernon, because it is proven in the two occasions Claire, Allison, Andrew and Brian covered for Bender even if he molested them: when he closes the library doors and when he sneaks back in from solitary confinement. These reflect teamwork, and, in order to achieve it, they show mutual understanding and coordination of their viewpoints. They are aware that they can help Bender, only if they work together. (Perry, 2013)

Nevertheless, when they sit in a circle and start speaking about their problems, they develop a connection that is deeper than the one they have with their stereotyped group of similar friends. In that moment their divisions are set aside. Although there is a division that is not so wide between Claire and Andrew, it can be inferred that their groups, "athletes" and

"princesses", get along. That is why their relationship is different from the others, although, it does not mean they are friends. Still, none of the others would even speak to one another under normal circumstances.

The Breakfast Club presents five American teenagers' stereotypes in order to show that the social pressure affects teenagers' personal and their attitude within others. They hide behind their disguise at first, but through communication, they acknowledge that they are not the only ones with problems or that feel alone and uncomfortable and start shattering the stereotypes society has impregnated on them.

Chapter 2: Overwhelming truth.

Communication is essential for creating interpersonal relationships through language, and being able to communicate with others through verbally speaking and listening is a condition that not all people have. Although this communication is not always sincere, as reflected in the first chapter, it can achieve a real connection like the film shows in one of its last scenes where the five principal characters sit in a circle and communicate their truth. The one that facilitates the sharing of each character's personal knowledge is language, as it is a way of knowing and a way of being known. For instance, it can be said that interpersonal relationships are created when productive and receptive skills help listening about the others and, vice versa, revealing their true selves to them. On the contrary, that can also be a way of destroying interpersonal relationships since truth is not always likable and accepted. In addition, there are many scenes where the characters see beyond their stereotypes as the film goes on, and it is because they started communicating with each other; it began when they

started getting to know each other individually, but later they created an elaborated real dialogue where they exposed their identity. (DeVito, 2004)

Therefore, for communication to create a real dialogue, it must never be only a superficial exchange of words because the knowledge that provides language requires inner reflection. Consequently, it can be said that consciousness and integrity are what give any dialogue its depth and truth and makes it understandable. More than that, those aptitudes give meaningfulness to a dialogue because they make it come to life. Teenagers' language reflects their creativity for expression; that is why, by analyzing it, their social and cultural contexts can be inferred as well as the generation they belong to. It has always been of interest to linguists mainly because it is a transition stage that coincides with being in high school, where teenagers strive to construct their own identity. (Sällström, 1991)

Identity is a big part of their lives; that is why feeling like they belong by being themselves is very hard. Communication is a way they can explore their social and cultural contexts, as well as their personal knowledge. Although, differences among teenagers are probably far more significant than differences among persons of any other age group, being receptive in order to create a real interpersonal relationship can reflect their joint participation in a life stage that brings out difference. The Breakfast Club shows how teenagers can set their differences apart by communicating them, yet, being truthful with themselves and with others does not necessarily mean that they are going to keep the relationship in another time and place than that Saturday detention.

On the contrary, the characters can be inferred as just members of different high school groups that started to talk with each other in order to spend time in a more exciting

way than sitting by themselves. On top of that, it can be said that the film reinforces the stereotypes because it portrays them trivialized, and viewers are led to think that the characters are just the stereotype. Resulting from this, the fact that at the end of the film is implicit that Bender and Claire, and Andy and Allison have started feeling attracted to each other can be analyzed as a route the film takes of not breaking the stereotypes and, like many teenager films, have a happy ending where opposites fall in love. Lynn McCutcheon, founder and editor of the North American Journal of Psychology, found that 77% of undergraduates believe that opposites attract in relationships. Hence, American teenagers might have the perception that *The Breakfast Club* is just like any typical film in which the turn out is very predictable as they adulate that portrayed adolescence. (McCutcheon, 2016)

Moreover, the love myth Americans have of finding the right mate for the rest of their lives has been portrayed in films as the end of freedom. This is a romantic type of love that has been portrayed in American popular culture since the early 80's and is still affecting the decisions American teenagers make. Also, there is a cultural rejection of adulthood because of love being like a "trap" and in order to avoid it, they reject relationships as they explore their individuality. *The Breakfast Club* might be influenced by this love myth, although it is not the main topic neither as relevant as the development of each character. This development can be seen in the last scenes, when they communicate with seriousness and truth because they have already explored each stereotype and now can open about their real problems and thoughts. (Kile, 1992)

That is how they develop their identity. Teenagers' being themselves and expressing it can be achieved through communication. The confidence that may surround it can be the critical factor for them to open, but it is not as simple as that. More than confidence, a

compromise among the participants, and a reciprocating way of talking is needed.

Developing an identity is a formative process every person should have in their adolescence period, the right time. In order to solve several social problems, American society has identity maintenance that helps identify harmful behaviors. (Bracher, 2018)

All the above demonstrates how American teenagers' identity can be visible by seeing beyond the stereotypes, and communication is key to achieve that. Also, the feeling of uncertainty that surrounds adolescence as the stage of everyone's lives where important decisions are made reflects similar pressure in every character. However, the five teenagers discover their identities throughout their exposure, and that makes the pressure disappear for them to start creating real connections among their true selves. (Nelson, 2019)

Conclusion

To conclude, American teenagers face many misconceptions because of bad reputation. Therefore, it is understandable that they feel the necessity to join a group, and that is why the American society has been misinterpreting the stereotypes as a safe place for teenagers to develop an accepted identity. The conformism of being socially active and a member of a group are what make some teenagers keep toxic friendships or relationships in order to feel like an essential part of something.

Above all their differences, there is something that connects them by the end of that Saturday detention, and it is not love. Communication is the cable that connects them and begins to spark in just a few hours of speaking. It is well known that they always

communicate with their group of peers but is not the same to express yourself as other than as your true self. They get to feel confident around each other, and they do not feel pressured anymore for acting like everything is okay.

These aspects were analyzed with the help of the cultural artifact and the investigation, divided into two chapters: teenagers' disguise and overwhelming truth. The first one about the effect stereotypes have on teenagers, how they enhance miscommunication and the fact that they are still seen in American society nowadays, and the second one about the importance of teenagers' identity, how communication helps them develop themselves and create genuine interpersonal relationships.

Also, it is important to mention that throughout the analysis and research, American society has been displayed as the culture, which is the context of this extended essay. However, I have realized how it has been an eye-opening experience for me, as a teenager, obtaining and reflecting knowledge about a social problem targeting my age that has affected the perception I have had of many classmates because of their stereotyped groups.

After all, the topics discussed have been considered in more than one perspective. Additionally, *The Breakfast Club* is a film that has much criticism regarding its true meaning and what it portrays. Teenagers' are part of societies worldwide, and still, nowadays, we can feel related to an 80's film that reflects stereotypes as well as how to see beyond them.

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Annexes

The following table summarizes the chosen scenes to be analyzed in the Extended Essay:

Title	Scene	Time	Description
a:1) Stereotypes portrayed in the film	Brian's monologue to Mr. Vernon about what happened in Saturday detention.	02:51	The explanation of how society sees teenagers as simple divided groups of people.
b:1) "Athlete" stereotype	Bender tells Andrew he is surprised that an athlete can count.	12:16	Lack of intelligence of teenagers stereotyped as "athletes".
b:2) "Criminal" stereotype	Andrew's response to Bender mocking him that states how Bender is not important in their school.	12:23	A connotation of how society ignores "criminal" teenagers' because they are problematic and not needed.
b:3) "Nerd" stereotype	Bender recreates a typical scene from Brian's life, which turns out to reflect how he is perfect as a son.	40:06	How "nerds" represent responsibility and accomplishments for teenagers.
b:4) "Princess" stereotype	Claire sits with Brian and Bender and she is very popular and that everyone in school loves her.	56:30	Being a "princess" and having people's attention at all time.
b:5) "Basket case" stereotype	Allison is with Andrew and Brian and she shows them the stuff inside her bag, and they comment about the quantity of random objects.	61:35	Alludes an example of the future of a "basket case" teenager due to being judged by what others see.
c:1) Parents accepting teenagers' masks	Claire's dad drives her to Saturday detention and his response for her complaining about it is that he will give her something as an apology.	03:35	Parenting is portrayed as weak and meaningless.