RSAJournal
2025, vol. 36
ISSN: 1592-4467

DOI: 10.13135/1592-4467/11779
rsa.aisna.net

Character and Choice

Abortion in American Teen Films

Michele Meek

Bridgewater State University
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9147-3270
Email: mmeek@bridgew.edu

Abstract

This essay summarizes the history of abortion in teen movies in the United States, emphasizing how, for over a century, teen abortion has often been censored, omitted, or depicted inaccurately. Even after the legalization of abortion via *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, a film like *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), which shows abortion as a simple and painless procedure, remained rare. However, soon before the US Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* via the *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision in 2022, several American teen movies such as *Grandma (*2015); *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020); *Unpregnant* (2020*; and Plan B* (2021) shifted the teen abortion narrative by depicting abortion itself as a valid and reasonable choice by the girl protagonist even as their access to abortion and emergency contraception becomes an ordeal necessitating a road trip. These sympathetic portrayals of girls who have a right to their abortion rewrite many of the stereotypes that had come to define abortion narratives for teens, instead showing abortion to be the safe and effective procedure that it is. In addition, these films highlight the difficulties for girls who need funds and parental consent for their abortions, predicting the actual circumstances that many adults as well as teens now find themselves in upon *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision.

At the same time, it hardly seems coincident that each film portraying an abortion depicts the girl in an abusive or harmful relationship. In doing so, the stories emphasize the girls' need for an abortion. However, such a pattern begs the question – is such a relationship deemed necessary within the story to give them the "right" to an abortion? In this essay,

I look to the history of abortion in teen films and examine the recent phenomenon of the abortion road trip teen film. Ultimately, I argue that aspects of these plots seem aimed toward appealing to a pro-choice fanbase while seeking to avoid ostracizing a more conservative audience who requires more justification for abortion.

KEYWORDS

Abortion, Film, Teenagers, Youth, Pro-choice, Girls, Pregnancy, Contraception, Censorship

In Amy Heckerling's 1982 teen film *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), the fifteen-year-old protagonist Stacy becomes pregnant after having sexual intercourse with her classmate Mike Damone. Without hesitation, she decides to have an abortion, asks him to pay half, and when he fails to do so, she goes to the clinic alone, has the abortion, and walks out. Stacy does not deliberate her decision. She does not experience obstacles in access to the procedure. She does not struggle to pay for it. The procedure does not cause medical complications. The abortion does not haunt her afterward. Watching this scene over forty years later, it seems almost shocking in its simplicity – her access to an abortion is unobstructed and her experience ordinary. *Fast Times*, it seems, was released during an all-too-brief moment in history, after abortion had become legalized nationally but before the onset of significant mainstream pushback. By 2019, writer Cameron Crowe believed that such an abortion plot would never stand up in the contemporary era because, as he put it, "It would be outrageously controversial, and it would be protested, and there would be a mess over it" (qtd. in Parker). After *Fast Times*, abortion practically disappeared from teen films for over thirty years.

In the last few years, however, abortion has made a surprising comeback in the genre – although, now, it is depicted as anything but easy. Films such as *Grandma* (2015), *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020), and *Unpregnant* (2020) all portray girls who must embark on a road trip to obtain an abortion. These sympathetic portrayals of girls who have a right to their abortion rewrite many of the stereotypes that had come to define abortion narratives. Furthermore, these films highlight the difficulties for girls who want abortions, predicting the actual circumstances that many adults

now even find themselves in upon the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022. At the same time, it hardly seems coincidental that each of them portrays the girl in an abusive or unfavorable relationship. In doing so, the stories reinforce the girls' need for an abortion. Such a pattern begs the question – is such a relationship deemed necessary within the story to give them the "right" to an abortion? In this essay, I look to the history of abortion in teen films and examine the recent phenomenon of the abortion road trip teen film. Ultimately, I argue that aspects of these plots seem aimed toward appealing to a pro-choice fanbase while seeking to avoid ostracizing a more conservative audience who requires more justification for abortion.

A Brief History of Abortion in US Teen Films

Abortion has always been a taboo topic for films in the US, and perhaps consequently it has been rare in films about youth. Abortion was banned nationwide in the US in 1910, so it is unsurprising that the first cinematic portrayals depict it as a transgressive and illegal act ("Abortion is Central"). Often cited as the first example, Lois Weber's 1916 film *Where Are My Children?* presents it as a "selfish" decision by married women who would rather party than have children. In the film, when the women encourage one of the maid's daughters to have an abortion, it leads to the girl's death. While *Where Are My Children?* led the way in establishing a long-standing narrative pattern of abortion resulting in death, it nonetheless is often cited as a groundbreaking representation of the "desire of women to remain voluntarily childfree," which in itself was unconventional at the time (Zigneli 39).

During the 1930s-1960s, Hollywood opted to self-censor topics like teen sexuality, pregnancy, and abortion via a Production Code managed by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). In the early part of this era, abortion, if depicted at all, only served as a warning of the dire consequences for sexually active girls. An apt example is Dorothy Davenport's *The Road to Ruin* (1934), a remake of a 1929 film, in which protagonist Ann becomes sexually active leading to a "road to ruin" which includes an illegal abortion that brings about her death. Although

it did not specifically mention abortion until its 1951 iteration, the Code's moral position clearly outlined that the "sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld." Consequently, abortion was generally avoided, and any depictions tended to be dramatically punished through the plot – usually resulting in death. Films that did not adhere to such rules were censored. For example, the 1948 film *Bob and Sally*, also known as *Tell Our Parents*, depicts Sally who becomes pregnant by her boyfriend, Bob, leading them to having an illegal abortion that nearly kills Sally and leaves her infertile. At the conclusion of the film, the couple gets married – a more upbeat ending for a teen abortion plot at the time. However, *Bob and Sally* was both condemned by the Legion of Decency and could not obtain approval from the MPPDA and hence, was not released in theaters.

As the power of the Code began to weaken in the 1950s, some of the more dramatic death-by-abortion plots also waned. However, they became replaced by plots with abortion presented as the wrong choice for a teen "in trouble" (Crowther). One example was *Blue Denim* (1959), based on a play in which high school student Janet becomes pregnant after having intercourse with her boyfriend Arthur. While in the play, Janet has an abortion and survives, the film instead depicts Janet as "rescued" from her abortion. She keeps the pregnancy and gets married instead. In films at the time, parenthood was clearly positioned as a preferable resolution to abortion – even for youth. By the 1960s, numerous legal, medical, and social changes marked a significant shift. In 1960, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved oral contraceptive pills which put women who could afford it in charge of their own fertility. Teen pregnancy rates, which peaked in 1957, began to decline ("Abortion Rates among Teens"). Also in the late 1960s, 11 states legalized abortion, and ultimately, in 1973, the US Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion throughout the country for the first time ("Abortion is Central"). Not surprisingly, these events corresponded with expanded depictions of abortion. As Gretchen Sisson and Katrina Kimport discovered in their comprehensive study of abortion representations from 1916 to 2013, storylines of abortion have increased every decade since *Roe v. Wade* by at least 31 percent. Of course, this fact does not mean that abortion was depicted compassionately or

accurately. Sisson and Kimport discovered an "inaccurately exaggerated" risk of death from abortion with nine percent of storylines leading to death despite an actual current risk of death from abortion as "statistically zero" ("Telling Stories"417).

In teen films, abortion remained a relatively rare topic even in the late twentieth century. Some films placed it in a past era when abortion was illegal and thus more dangerous – such as *To Find a Man* (1972), *Our Time* (1974), *Dirty Dancing* (1987), and *If These Walls Could Talk* (1996). Such films often emphasized hazards of reverting to a time when women and girls did not have access to safe, legal abortion. While many of these films might be understood as pro-choice, in setting the stories back in time, they dramatized both the difficulty in obtaining an abortion and its associated health risks. As such, a film like *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, which depicted abortion as a simple, safe, and effective procedure was rare indeed, despite it being more accurate for the time. Anti-abortion fervor mounted in this period. In 1983, a year after *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* was released, the first abortion doctor was targeted and murdered by an anti-abortion protester in the US (Stack). Deadly attacks on clinics and doctors across the country continued throughout the late twentieth century – from 1977 to 2022, there were 11 murders, 42 bombings, 200 arsons, 531 assaults, and thousands of other criminal acts directed at patients, providers, and volunteers, according to the National Abortion Federation ("Violence Against Abortion Providers"). The anti-abortion movement has aimed to depict the procedure as immoral and transgressive despite the reality that one in four women has an abortion ("One in Four Women") and in many ways, this movement succeeded in keeping abortion undercover.

Despite its legality, abortion was largely omitted from teen films in this era. In 2007, *Juno* reintroduced the choice of abortion in a teen film, but only to disavow it. Here, sixteen-year-old Juno discovers that she's pregnant after having intercourse with her friend Paulie. Initially, she seeks out an abortion. When she arrives at the clinic, she runs into her classmate Su-Chin who holds a sign that says, "NO BABIES LIKE MURDERING" and repeatedly chants the grammatically incorrect statement, "All babies want to get borned" (00:16:34-01:16:37). As Juno walks past her, Su-Chin yells after her, "Your baby probably has a beating

heart, you know! It can feel pain. And it has fingernails!" (00:17:32-01:17:41). This last comment causes Juno to stop in her tracks and say "Huh," but she nonetheless forges ahead into the clinic. However, as she's filling out the paperwork, Juno can't help noticing the fingernails of all the women in the clinic conveyed through a series of shots of finger tapping, scratching, and nail painting. Abruptly, Juno runs out of the clinic as Su-Chin yells after her, "God appreciates your miracle!" (00:19:20-00:19:23). Ultimately, Juno opts not to have the abortion, deciding to give the baby up for adoption. Her parents do not discourage her from this decision. When Juno comes to them, her mother says quietly, "Have you considered the alternative?" to which Juno replies, "No." Her mother smiles and says, "Well! You're a little Viking" (00:25:22-00:25:31), and then immediately outlines plans for her prenatal care. In this way, *Juno* simply updates the moralistic anti-abortion narrative – teen pregnancy is no longer punishable by death nor resolved by teen parenthood. Instead, Juno chooses a new compromise – pregnancy without parenthood. With such a dearth of abortion representations in teen films,[1] *Juno* becomes a problematic portrayal and, as a result, the film has suffered accusations of being anti-abortion. While more than one-third of all teenage pregnancies end in abortion, ("Abortion Rate Among Teens"), only a small fraction of teen pregnancies result in adoption ("The Myths of Pregnant Teens and Adoptions"). *Juno* not only minimizes the numerous reasons a teen like Juno might opt for abortion, but it also directly contributes to misinformation by providing her a false reason for avoiding abortion. Su-Chin's comment about fingernails remains uncontested – even though it is scientifically inaccurate (Munteanu et al.). Perhaps the "joke" implied here is that Su-Chin is misinformed, along with her poor grammar and spelling. However, due to a widespread lack of sex education in the US, many audience members might take Su-Chin's statement as fact. In this way, *Juno* perpetuates misinformation about abortion – unintentionally employing a tactic that has "fuel[ed] the anti-abortion agenda," for decades and created barriers for abortion (Pagoto et al.). Ironically, *Juno* demonstrates how anti-abortion rhetoric had largely won during this era

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[1] For a list of representations of abortion in teen films, see "Abortion Onscreen."

despite the fact that screenwriter Diablo Cody intended nothing of the sort. When interviewed about the film in 2022, she admits, "I can see how it could be perceived as anti-choice. And that horrifies me." She recalls soon after the film's release receiving a letter from an administrator at her Catholic high school praising her for "writing a movie that was in line with the school's values" to which her response was, "What have I done?" (qtd. in Brown). While there were a small handful of teen films in the era that depicted abortion, none approached the enormous popularity of *Juno* which presented it as the "wrong" choice. In the early twenty-first century, the US headed toward removing nationwide legal protections for abortion. Anti-abortion groups made substantial progress in states where the procedure was restricted in dozens of ways – through waiting periods, forced ultrasounds, bans on specific procedures, parental consent laws, and medically unwarranted requirements for abortion providers (Arons). Some states even mandated burials or cremation for fetal tissue, creating undue burdens and costs ("Fetal Burial Requirements"). Despite the majority of Americans being in favor of abortion in some or all cases, the anti-abortion movement won a national victory when *Roe v. Wade* was overturned in 2022 with the Supreme Court case *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. The turnaround came as a direct result of the first presidency of Donald Trump during which he nominated three conservative justices to the Supreme Court – all of whom voted to support Mississippi's right to ban abortion. As of 2025, 19 states currently ban or severely restrict abortion. At the same time, abortion remains legal in 30 states, many of which have enshrined the right to abortion in state constitutions or laws (McCann and Schoenfeld Walker). Currently, teen abortions comprise less than 10 percent of abortions in the US, and those by minors – under 18 – are even more rare (Diamant et al.). Nevertheless, the number of abortions in the US is not on the decline since the *Dobbs* decision. In fact, total abortions increased from 2022 to 2023 (Maddow-Zimet et al.). Since 2015, there have been several US films that depict teens opting for a legal abortion. Interestingly, even as momentum gained to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, abortion became more central to the plot and positively portrayed, particularly in several recent teen films.

The Teen Abortion Road Trip

In 2015, *Grandma* brought teen abortion back to the forefront and reasserted it as a reasonable and safe choice. It also launched what might be considered a new subgenre – the teen abortion road trip movie. In the film, eighteen-year-old Sage enlists her grandmother Elle (Lily Tomlin) to fund her procedure, but when she doesn't have the money, the two embark on a road trip across Los Angeles to find it. In 2020, two other films in genre emerged – *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* and *Unpregnant,* both of which highlight the magnitude of an all-too-real social, political, and health problem for young women – one that has only become more pervasive since the *Dobbs* decision. In *Never Rarely Sometimes Always,* seventeen-year-old Autumn discovers that she's pregnant and seeks out care in her state of Pennsylvania. She mistakenly finds her way to an anti-abortion clinic where the worker shows her an anti-abortion video. Autumn goes home and researches "abortion under 18 Pennsylvania" only to discover that she would need parental consent. She tries to take matters into her own hands by attempting to self-induce abortion through hitting her stomach and taking pills, but it doesn't work. When her cousin Skylar finds Autumn sick at work and learns of the pregnancy, Skylar springs into action – and the two of them get on a bus to New York City so Autumn can have an abortion. However, the trip which they expected to be a one-day journey turns into three because Autumn is sixteen weeks pregnant (not ten, as the anti-abortion clinic had told her), requiring her to go to another clinic for a procedure that takes two days. Due to their lack of sufficient funds, the length of their trip leaves them vulnerable and homeless in New York City for the duration of the weekend. After the abortion is complete, the girls borrow money from a man they meet to pay for the bus fare home. *Unpregnant* takes a more comedic approach to the topic. Veronica discovers that she's pregnant and immediately starts to do research on abortion in her state of Mississippi. However, she quickly learns that the closest clinic to obtain one without parental consent is nearly 1,000 miles away in Albuquerque, New Mexico. When she meets with her boyfriend Kevin to enlist his help, he instead proposes with a ring, causing her to suspect he knew. He admits that he was aware a condom had broken weeks earlier, which infuriates her, and she says, "I literally could have taken the morning

after pill. I could have avoided this whole situation" (00:13:08-00:13:11). Kevin, however, is gleeful about the pregnancy because he wants to keep Veronica with him in their town, rather than accept her leaving for Brown University to attend college the following year. In desperation, Veronica enlists the help of an estranged friend Bailey, who had discovered her pregnancy test at the beginning of the film, and the two embark on the trip together. In each of these films, young women are no longer weighing whether to terminate a pregnancy or worrying about the risks. Instead, the storylines dramatize "the immense barriers women face when seeking safe and legal abortion healthcare" (Zigneli 39). Each depicts a girl's journey as an ordeal – not because of the weighty deliberations or tragic outcomes, but rather due to the difficulty in accessing care due to parental consent requirements and costs. Another contemporaneous film, Rashaad Ernesto Green's *Premature* (2019) depicts the obtaining of an abortion as simple, but the consequences as more dire. Here, seventeen-year-old Ayanna has an abortion via medication which is dramatized by Ayanna's bleeding in the tub. When her boyfriend Isaiah finds her, he realizes what she's done without telling him, and consequently shuts her out. The abortion stance of this film is more ambiguous – Ayanna's reactions to her abortion are shown as severe, and she is punished through Isaiah's rejection of her choice. Nevertheless, the film represents an important portrayal of a young woman's making a choice for herself, even if the plot is not centered specifically around abortion – and no road trip to obtain one is necessary. In 2021, another film, *Plan B,* brought a new spin to the abortion road trip genre by depicting a teen's struggle to obtain emergency contraception, or the Plan B pill. The films depict girls of varying race, ethnicity, and class backgrounds. In *Plan B,* Sunny is Indian-American; in *Premature*, Ayanna is Black-American; and in *Unpregnant* and *Grandma*, Veronica and Sage are both white. Of the road trip films, the only one where race/ethnicity is emphasized is *Plan B*. When Sunny and her friend Lupe go to the pharmacy for the Plan B pill, Sunny sees the pharmacist is also Indian and declares "Indian Mafia!" to which Lupe says, "Sunny, there's no secret network of Indians reporting back to your mom" (00:28:33-00:28:40). In the film, Sunny and Lupe (who is Latinx) experience racist and sexist comments against which the girls fight back. For example, at a rest stop, two men sexually harass them calling them "hot tamales" and asking, "Do you think

these two Mexicans got spicy tacos?" (00:40:53-00:40:56) to which Sunny responds, "I'm South Asian so that metaphor doesn't track actually" (00:41:00-00:41:05). While all the girls appear to be middle-class, the road trip films depict them as lacking funds for their terminations. They also rely on the construct that the girl's mother is suspected of not being supportive of the procedure, perhaps because without that feature, there would be little plot. In *Plan B*, Sunny says, "My mom's going to kill me and then she's going to kill herself. It's going to be a murder suicide" (00:27:44-00:27:48) and in *Grandma*, Sage says, "She would have a stroke and then she would start strangling me, and then she would have a stroke" (00:06:09-00:06:15). In both *Unpregnant* and *Never Rarely Sometimes Always,* the girls hit a low point in their journey and call their mothers but ultimately decline to ask for their help. In the comedies, the mother is confided in by the end. In both *Plan B* and *Grandma*, the girls must ultimately resort to telling their mothers who become part of helping them obtain the care they need. Sunny's mother goes with her back to the pharmacy where they were initially refused the Plan B pill, and Sage's mother pays for the abortion. In *Unpregnant*, Veronica only informs her mother after she returns home from the trip – and although her mother does not agree with her decision, the scene unfolds in a touching way to show how her mother loves and supports her daughter despite their differing views. In the only drama of these films, *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* does not depict any resolution for the protagonist Autumn and her mother, emphasizing the fact that Autumn did not have parental support for her abortion. Nevertheless, in each of these films, the heroine succeeds in her goal of obtaining an abortion or contraception as a key part of the happy ending of the film. Even before the *Dobbs* decision when abortion was legal nationally, it was not always affordable or easily accessible. Due to a discrepancy between states restricting abortion and others legalizing it, many needed to travel great distances to access care. This reality was worse for teens who often faced parental consent laws in their own states. Unsurprisingly, this fact has worsened since the *Dobbs* decision. For instance, the Guttmacher Institute found that patients traveling to other states to obtain an abortion doubled between 2020 and 2023 (Forouzan). In many ways, these films seem prescient because it is now not only teens,

but also adults who often must travel hundreds of miles to obtain a clinical abortion in the US (Simmons-Duffin and Fung). While most abortions currently happen via medication, only *Premature* depicts that option. That said, medication abortion has also increased significantly in the last several years since these films released. The Guttmacher Institute found that medication abortions accounted for 63% of all US abortions in 2023, a 53% increase from 2020. The "abortion pill" has rarely been depicted in teen films, but when it has, it tends to be a smaller part of the plot. *Plan B*, for instance, rather than highlighting medication abortion, chronicles Sunny's adventure in obtaining emergency contraception.

Significantly, this spate of abortion road trip films generally depicts the procedure itself as painless and effective – and this fact in itself is groundbreaking. While *Grandma* does not explicitly depict the procedure, it shows Sage walking out fine, and when Sage's grandmother, recalling her own past abortion, expresses her concerns, the doctor assures her, "This isn't the Dark Ages – not here at least" (01:01:23-01:01:28). *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* shows a brief scene of the procedure itself – Autumn lying on the operating table as she's asked to recite her name, date of birth, and the procedure she's having. She's also asked if she has any questions, and when she answers no, they ask if she's ready to go to sleep to which she nods. When she wakes up, it's over – and she's sitting in a softly lit recovery room in a comfy chair alongside other women. After, she walks out to find her cousin Skylar who asks, "You ok?" to which she responds, "Yeah" (01:30:51-01:30:52). At lunch afterward, Skylar asks several questions including, "Did it hurt?" to which Autumn responds, "Just uncomfortable." Skylar then asks, "How do you feel now?" and Autumn answers, "Tired" (01:32:07-01:32:23). While characters like Autumn and Sage struggle to pay for their abortions, the relative ease with which these girls walk out of their abortions without adverse medical complications harkens back to the ease with which Stacey walks out of her abortion in *Fast Times*. Ultimately, these scenes help correct longstanding inaccuracies in the depiction of abortion – showing abortion to be the safe procedure that it is.

Perhaps ironically, the most accurate and thorough depiction occurs in the comedic *Unpregnant*. In a scene where a clinician narrates to Veronica

the steps of the procedure, we see Veronica changing into her gown; receiving a vaginal ultrasound which is "not fun but doesn't hurt"; getting hooked up to an IV; waiting in a room with other women; getting put to sleep (her choice) in the surgical suite so they can remove the fetus which takes "under ten minutes"; and finally waking up in recovery "safe and sound" (01:31:00-01:31:56). The entire set of shots is filmed with warm lighting and soft focus that highlight the comfort of the procedure. At the end of the scene, Veronica walks out into the warm sunlight to find Bailey waiting who jokes, "They wouldn't let me see you, so I just assumed you were dead." Veronica smiles and replies, "Nope I'm fine." Bailey asks, "How are you feeling?" to which Veronica pauses and then replies, "Relieved…. and hungry" (01:32:32-01:32:48). Here, the film pokes fun at the absurdity of dire results and instead shows the ease of abortion.

After decades of misinformation, it is refreshing that each of these films depict the procedure more accurately – particularly in that it does not cause medical complications or significant regret for the girl. Numerous scholars have noted a link between accurate media representations of abortion and support for those seeking abortion. For example, in their study "Exposure to Lived Representations of Abortion in Popular Television Program Plotlines on Abortion-Related Knowledge, Attitudes, and Support: An Exploratory Study," the authors found that while "medically accurate and realistic abortion depictions" of abortion did not impact "attitudes" about abortion (e.g. whether someone is pro-choice or not), they did find a correlation between accurate depictions and "higher abortion knowledge and higher willingness to support someone seeking an abortion" (Herold et al. 289). Other studies have shown how fictional representations of abortion can also help "normalize and destigmatize" abortion (Andreescu 135) – and these films do so by creating sympathetic characters who face an ordeal in obtaining the care they need.

The Right to an Abortion

Grandma, *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, and *Unpregnant* underscore that the girl protagonists have a right to their abortions – and as such, they

can be interpreted as pro-choice. While films from the 1940s and 1950s depicted abortion as a mistake, in these early twenty-first century films it is validated through well-articulated reasons. One is simply that the girls consider themselves too young to be mothers – and they believe, rightly so, according to the data (Fergusson et al.), that having a child as a teen would negatively impact their lives and careers. In *Unpregnant*, for example, Veronica has been accepted by Brown University, and she fears that having a child would derail her plans. While each film portrays an explicit moment where the girl is asked if she has carefully considered her decision, at no time is her right to make this choice independently called into question. Each of the protagonists are relatable and likeable – and one of the key ways their characters are rendered "good" is in direct contrast to the boy responsible for the pregnancy. In their essay "A Content Analysis of Abortion Storylines on US Streaming Services: Lessons from Narrative Persuasion," John J. Brooks et al. suggest that "a viewer's evaluation of a character is likely to depend on whether they judge the character's qualities and actions to be generally 'good' or 'bad'" (3). In a film about abortion, the character's reasons – such as "personal considerations (e.g., a character's goals or preferences), external constraints (e.g., financial circumstances, other responsibilities), or some combination of both" – for the procedure become important in this evaluation since, as they point out, "these reasons may shape how the audience processes the story. Similarly, the absence of reasons might play an inhibitory role by limiting the audience's ability to understand the character's perspective" (6). Perhaps in an effort to solidify the protagonist as "good" and her decision as "justified," each film highlights how "bad" their boyfriends are – all are depicted as absent or abusive. In *Grandma*, Sage's "loser" boyfriend fails to come through with funds or moral support. In *Unpregnant*, Veronica's "stalker" boyfriend tricks her into getting pregnant by failing to tell her about a broken condom weeks earlier. And in *Never Rarely Sometimes Always,* it is made clear that Autumn was in an abusive relationship where she was threatened, harmed, and sexually assaulted. In the two comedies – *Grandma* and *Unpregnant*, the boyfriend gets a humorous comeuppance. In *Grandma*, Cam becomes the punchline of a joke in an interaction with Sage's grandmother. Early in the story, Elle

asks her granddaughter if she became pregnant after "a one-night stand," to which Sage replies, "No ew. He's kind of my boyfriend" (00:12:26-00:12:30). Later when the two have trouble finding the funds for the procedure, Elle convinces her granddaughter to seek out Cam since he had promised to pay half. The scene results in a showdown between Elle and Cam where she repeatedly insists on him giving them money until he threatens Elle saying, "Get out of my home you crazy old fucking bitch. Get out of my home or I'll fuck you up. I'll fuck you up." Elle calmly asks, "You'll fuck me up?" and he responds, "I will fuck you up" (00:15:30-00:15:41). Elle then grabs his hockey stick and hits him in the crotch with it, after which he falls to the floor, pleads for mercy, and admits he has 50 dollars in his sock drawer which she takes. Here, the film emphasizes the boyfriend as the villain to be overcome. Similarly, in *Unpregnant*, Veronica's boyfriend Kevin is presented as the antagonist, once again eliciting sympathy for Veronica and her choice. When she's trying to pawn her engagement ring to pay for the procedure, Kevin appears suddenly, causing her friend Bailey to cry out, "Stalker!" He tells Veronica he brought a rose for "every single reason we should spend our lives together." After he's eventually cut off by Bailey, Kevin notices the ring on the counter and asks, "What is she doing with my ring?" to which Veronica says, "I'm sorry, Kevin, but I'm taking care of the situation." He insists, "You can't make this decision alone" (00:21:16-00:22:32). When she refuses to come around to his view, he begins getting angry saying, "You should be thankful and count your lucky stars that you have a guy that's so devoted to you that he would literally track you down to this skeezy dump." Veronica replies, "You tracked me here?" and when he says, "Kind of," she takes his phone and steps on it. He goes toward the counter and demands the shopkeeper, "Give me my ring back." The shopkeeper takes out a gun, points it at him, and says, "Consider your next move very carefully" (00:22:41-00:23:07). At first he balks, but she cocks the gun and he runs out. The woman, who had initially refused to purchase the ring, then offers Veronica $1,300 for it which is enough to fund their trip. In *Never Rarely Sometimes Always,* the abusive boyfriend gets a more muted comeuppance. The film opens with Autumn performing a song at a school talent show with the lyrics, "He makes me do

things I don't want to do. He makes me say things I don't want to say" (00:01:26-00:01:35) and "He's got the…. power of love over me" (00:01:37-00:01:53). Immediately after, Autumn is at a restaurant with her family, but she's not eating. When she looks across the restaurant, she sees a boy and when they make eye contact, he raises his eyebrows and makes a face at her, sticking his tongue in his cheek. At the same time, a family drama ensues where Autumn's mother asks her dad to tell her that she performed well to which her dad sarcastically replies, "Your mother wants me to tell you how great you are." Autumn replies, "Eat shit" (00:04:08-00:04:15), gets up from the table, walks over to the boy, throws a glass of water in his face, and walks out. Later, we learn the extent of her boyfriend's abuse – and how that abuse might have led to Autumn's pregnancy. The title of the film comes from the questionnaire that Autumn receives in the clinic. When Autumn is asked to respond to the statement, "In the past year, your partner has refused to wear a condom," Autumn responds, "Sometimes" (01:00:15-01:00:29), and when asked "Your partner made you have sex when you didn't want to" (01:01:58-01:02:02), Autumn begins to cry. She is then asked, "Has anyone forced you into a sexual act in your lifetime – yes or no" to which Autumn responds, "Um, yeah" (01:02:38-01:02:48). Each of these stories appear to conjure an abusive or lying boyfriend to make the girl protagonists more sympathetic and their actions more justifiable. Certainly, abuse can be a strong motivation for an abortion – and in fact, between 6 to 22 percent of women terminate a pregnancy due to intimate partner violence (IPV), including psychological aggression, rape, and physical violence. However, one of the issues with this narrative pattern of abusive, controlling, and unlikeable men is that it runs the risk of implying that only a girl with such a relationship has valid reasons for choosing abortion and keeping that decision to herself. As Melissa Hair notes, "public attitudes towards abortion in America have been shaped by [a] problematic discourse" specifically: "'Acceptable' reasons that a woman might have an abortion include if the woman's life is at risk, if the fetus has severe abnormalities, or if the pregnancy is a result of rape or incest, therefore rendering 'all other reasons for aborting questionable at best and frivolous at worst'" (381). Not surprisingly, the presence or

lack thereof of the "man responsible" in the narrative "is likely to influence viewers' ability to mentally represent the relationships between characters and situations" (Brooks et al. 8). Omitting him completely can raise questions for viewers. However, on the flip side, I would argue that relying narratively on depicting the boys responsible as "bad" represents an unnecessary constraint. Perhaps these characterizations do help validate the girls' decision in the plot, but together they represent a troubling pattern of a negative relationship being narratively essential in order to rationalize a teen's decision to have an abortion. Due to a dearth of sex education and even greater lack of abortion education, the media become a primary source of information for youth. Writers and filmmakers are often aware of this fact. For instance, in an interview, author and screenwriter Jenni Hendriks explains that the producers of *Unpregnant* purposefully maintained a PG-13 rating so "kids can see it with their parents and talk about it" (Meek). However, films are not ideal venues for education. In a comprehensive study of depictions of abortion in television between 2005-2014, the authors noted that, "fictional women who have abortions are most often teenagers, nulliparous and white" despite the fact that "women who obtain abortions in real life are most often between 20 and 29 years old, have given birth at least once and are nonwhite" (Sisson and Kimport, "Characters Seeking" 448). This "underrepresentation of populations" they suggest "could contribute to feelings of internalized stigma or isolation among real women who obtain abortions but do not see themselves or their experiences represented in popular culture" (449). Similarly, by featuring a character as a survivor of abuse or stalking, the films might offer an easier path in justifying the girl's right to an abortion as it reiterates how the decision is hers alone, not her boyfriend's. However, if perpetuated, such narrative devices could tacitly suggest that other, more common reasons for having an abortion are somehow less acceptable. Of course, since the *Dobbs* decision, we have even greater concerns. Since 2020, there has been no US teen film to depict a legal abortion ("Abortion Onscreen"), and as such, we remain quite a ways off from representing abortion authentically in mainstream media.

Author's bionote

Michele Meek is an Associate Professor at Bridgewater State University and the author of *Consent Culture and Teen Films: Adolescent Sexuality in US Movies* (Indiana University Press, 2023) and the editor of *Independent Female Filmmakers: A Chronicle through Interviews, Profiles, and Manifestos* (Routledge, 2019). She also gave the TEDx talk "Why We're Confused about Consent – Rewriting Our Stories of Seduction" (2018).

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