

How Following Your Dreams is Depicted in Film

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Abstract

This project investigates how the pursuit of dreams, aspirations, goals, and passions is portrayed in media, more specifically in film. It also looks at the impact this portrayal may have on its viewers' desire to pursue their own dreams. It is important to examine this topic because film is a medium that can leave a profound impact on its audience. Young people, especially, can be influenced by what they see on the silver screen. They are also the ones who are trying to figure out their future the most. Therefore, what is presented to them through film, whether good or bad, may alter their future choices.

Introduction

Young people across the world struggle with knowing what they will do later in life. While growing up, they are often asked what career they want to pursue. The world around them influences their answer, firstly, by the people in their lives who might tell them to follow their dreams or to be more realistic (2025). Studies have shown that children with higher aspirations achieve bigger things in the future (Lekfuangfu & Odermatt, 2022). However, the same studies find that adults who fail to follow through on their goals are more likely to be unhappy.

Rationale

Examining the impact the media has on these aspirations is significant. The framing theory posits that the way information is presented to the audience influences how people process it (Sunday, 2017). Studies have shown that films can have a major impact on society (Hada, 2023). More importantly, children can be influenced by what they see on the screen (de Leeuw, 2024). Therefore, studying how movies can impact the goals of the young is important. This study will examine how pursuing aspirations is depicted in film and what impact that may have on society.

Context

Life before college is uncertain for teens. In fact, many will not even attend college. According to the Pew Research Center, only around 50% of teens in the United States believe they will go to college (2025). And one in five do not know what they will do when they leave high school.

A recent report from UCLA found that 57% of teens say they watch more films and TV than adults think, and that 53% prefer discussing movies to social media with their friends

(Puretz et al., 2025). This study reveals that teens are still heavily impacted by films. This, combined with the fact that many teens don't know what they will do later in life, makes it important to examine the impact films are having on this decision.

Theoretical Framework

The framing theory is a communications theory that posits that the manner in which information is framed, meaning presented, to the audience influences how they understand it (Sunday, 2017). The theory has its roots in the works of Bateson (1972), particularly in his *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychology, Evolution, and Epistemology*, as well as in Goffman's *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (1974). This study will use this theory in an attempt to answer the following questions regarding dreams in film.

RQ1: How are dreams/aspirations/goals/passions depicted in movies?

RQ2: What societal expectations do films create in the pursuit of passion?

Literature Review

How Movies Transport Us

Throughout time, many studies have shown the power of cinema. Studies have shown that even when people are given a task to focus on, the narrative can sweep up an audience. Cohen, Shavalian, and Rube (2015) investigated this phenomenon by analyzing an experiment in which participants were required to count the number of times the word gun was said in the film "Bang You're Dead" (1961). Those who watched the normal version of the film had more trouble keeping up with the task than those who saw a version out of order. These results confirm the

power cinema has over humans. Narratives have a way of impacting the viewer even when they don't want it to.

Impact of Film on Society and the Young

However, that is not the only way film can have an impact on society. Hada researched how films had impacted society since their inception over a century ago (2023). They state that films impact the economy as well as employment. But beyond that, films can bring cultures together. They cross borders and continents. Hada also points out that films have the power to be used for propaganda, but also to inspire humans to better themselves. Movies can also help raise awareness for subjects the viewer isn't necessarily familiar with.

Mughal (2020) examined similar issues, raising the positive impact, like helping fight against discrimination, as well as negative impacts, like a rise in violence. They go further and point out that young people can be particularly affected by the medium

Kubrak delved further into this observation and looked at how films can influence young people. In their research, they found that the perception of the elderly changed after watching "The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel" (2020). These observations make it clear that the way people think can be altered by watching movies. This change can be for the better or the worse, but it is undeniable that cinema can have that power.

Smith, Mazurik, and Gelech (2025) look specifically at how films have impacted young adult "coresidence." This is a term used to describe young adults who still live with their parents. They point to the fact that it is largely portrayed negatively, and that can impact people in the world.

Going back to Mughal (2020), they claimed that films can create unrealistic ambitions in the youth. These studies support the fact that the youth are impacted by films in a real way.

How Children Perceive Their Future

However, it is important to realize that studies have shown that having big dreams can actually be healthy. Lekfuangfu and Odermatt (2022) looked at this phenomenon by using the British 1958 NCDS data that followed multiple individuals over 60 years. The study found that children with high aspirations tend to do better in life than those with lower goals. The life of children can also be heavily influenced by their role models.

A study was also done to examine the impact of role models and their importance on children (Atif et al., 2022). The study found that who a child looks up to can say a lot about them. In the study, they found that several children listed celebrities as role models, which shows another way films can impact children.

In their paper, Forrester, Hudson, Rowley, and Pugh (2024) seem to support this research. The study looked at what elements shape children's aspirations. The study, however, points out that there are other factors at play that will impact a child's chance of fulfilling their dream. One of those is the economic situation of their family. Big dreams can be healthy, but it is also important to note that there are other factors at play that can impact the pursuit of goals.

Hierarchy of Needs

This type of thinking was taken into account by Maslow with his hierarchy of needs. This theory forms a pyramid that states that for a human to self-actualize, they first need to meet their physiological needs, then their safety needs, followed by love and belonging, then esteem, and finally self-actualization (McLeod, 2025).

Ghatak and Singh (2019) examined this theory in line with social media. They found a link between the search for love, esteem, and self-actualization and social media.

While Yurdakul and Arar (2023) look at whether the hierarchy of needs is still relevant today. Their research suggested that some more nuance was needed when using this model. The hierarchy of needs can go some way to explaining the obstacles people face when trying to achieve something. However, the theory isn't perfect.

Sailboat Theory

An idea expanded upon by Kaufman (2026). He believes that Maslow's ideas have been misinterpreted. Instead of focusing on a pyramid, Kaufman uses a sailboat as a metaphor. In this sailboat, safety, connection, and self-esteem form the hull, while exploration, love, and purpose form the sail. Without that base, you will sink. But the sail will help you move towards a destination. Certain moments of your life might cause you to close the sail. While in others, you will gather momentum. Many factors can impact a person on their journey.

Film in Relation to the Pursuit of Dreams

When it comes to the specific goal of this research paper, there is a lack of literature on the subject. However, Adriani (2021) looked at a similar concept in relation specifically to the film "The Pursuit of Happyness" (2006). The conclusion is that the film promotes a "message of self-reliance, optimism, and self-confidence." However, in general, there is little research that correlates film with the impact it can have on the pursuit of dreams. But based on the presented literature, it is safe to assume that film can impact aspirations in a significant way.

Method

Project Goals

The goal of this capstone project is to expand the current knowledge regarding the effect film can have on the pursuit of dreams, especially in younger people.

Deliverables

As part of that process, six deliverables were assigned to look at the subject from a variety of viewpoints. The first deliverable was this research paper.

This project will also include a script and a short film on the subject. The purpose of this film was to represent these themes within a new narrative. The short attempts to convey that it is important to try to follow your dreams while at the same time showcasing that it is possible for your goals to change over the course of your life. These goals can change, and that is natural. One shouldn't get stuck in the past and should be allowed to let go of their original dream in order to pursue a new one. But on the other hand, it also suggests that it is important to try to follow your dreams and not let fear get in the way of that. The outcome may not be what was intended, but it is better to try than to live with regret.

Another set of deliverables consisted of six narrative podcast scripts along with the podcasts themselves. The deliverable's purpose was to showcase that the themes of reaching for your goals can be present in all forms of narrative media. By creating a narrative podcast in the fantasy genre, the goal was to showcase that these themes are not merely restricted to the medium of film nor to simply real-world examples. But that, instead, it is possible to find these themes in all sorts of ways, no matter the genre or medium. With six podcast episodes set in a fantasy world, the goal was to challenge the hero's dream in different ways throughout each

episode. Ideas like the fact that there will be challenges in the pursuit of a dream, that it doesn't have to be done alone, that the dream may not be what you thought it was, that it is normal to feel inadequate in the face of your goals, and that in the end, it is better to try than to sit back.

The final deliverable will be a website to host the research paper, film, and podcast in one location, so that the full project can be experienced in one location. All the facets can be consumed in one area and compared.

Technologies

To create these deliverables, a variety of technologies will be used. The movie will be filmed on the FX-3 camera, and it will then be edited using Adobe Premiere Pro; additional work may be done using the Adobe After Effects software. The podcast shall be recorded using Adobe Audition, while a promo will be made with the help of Sound Forge. For the website, Wix will be the software used in its creation. Canva will be used as well to create any logos or posters for each step of the project.

Capstone Project Management

Timeline

The genesis of this project began in December 2024 when the script for "A Dream Too Far" began. Many revisions to the script were made during the following year. At the end of 2025, the research topics were decided for this paper, and a capstone contract was signed with Dr. Dale Van Cantfort to confirm all the deliverables. In December of 2025, the idea for the podcast came about, and the first script was written. In January of 2026, 5 additional scripts were written. Along with the creation of storyboards for the film. The principal photography began on January 29th and will continue into February and March. The research paper began in January

and was finalized in February. The podcasts are due to come out in March and April. While the website will be created in March.

Challenges

In the process of this capstone, one of the biggest challenges was the research topic. The idea for the short film came first, which forced the topic to fit in thematically with the film rather than the other way around. It was also challenging to find research on the subject. Another challenge was casting the film and figuring out how to organize a shooting schedule that would allow all the actors to be present along with the crew. It was also challenging to deal with unfortunate setbacks like the weather. For the podcast, the challenge was to come up with a compelling narrative with only audio. It was also challenging to create a narrative in a fantasy setting, which could still tie into the same themes.

Successes

The successes of this project came about with the creation of a script for the short film. After many revisions, the script turned out into a solid piece of storytelling. The creation of storyboards was also a success, as was assembling a crew to film the project. For the narrative podcast, it was successful once the structure for the podcast was figured out, and then the narrative started coming more easily. The research paper also came together after a lot of work and research, which finally led to the realization that it wasn't necessary to have articles that talked about the exact subject that was covered, but that through related articles a picture of the situation could be painted.

Conclusion

Future Research

Future research should delve into the subject even further with a content analysis by watching a set number of movies over a period of time and, in each film, seeing what the characters' dreams are, how ambitious these dreams are, what challenges they face on the journey to their goal, and if they reach their ambitions in the end. Another way to expand on the research would be to conduct a survey in the population that looks at what impact film may have had on career choices or aspirations.

Future Plans

The deliverables for this capstone will be used on the website and as part of my portfolio. The hope is that the film and podcast will be of the highest quality possible and that they could open the doors for future opportunities. The research conducted will also help me understand the power of shooting for my dreams.

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