

Using a Live-Action Disney Movie –
Beauty and the Beast – to Promote
Improved Gender Role Awareness, Body
Image, and Self-Confidence in Elementary
School Children: A Media Literacy
Parental Intervention Workshop

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### **ABSTRACT**

Americans are bombarded with media messages, whether they are playing with their cell phones, tablets, streaming from their laptop, or watching television. There is no escaping the messages of mass media, and children are being exposed earlier than ever before. Media literacy skills are a necessary part of life, and there is a lack of media education in public school systems, which leaves it up to parents to teach their own children. The purpose of this research study is to gauge the behavioral intent of parents to speak with their child about media literacy with and without receiving a media literacy intervention workshop.

Participants volunteered to participate in the questionnaire through online platforms, and a randomizer was used to determine who would receive the media literacy intervention workshop. The data analysis shows that parents who received the media literacy intervention workshop do not have a higher likelihood to use their increased awareness in conversations about media with their children than those who did not receive the workshop. Parents who did receive the workshop do not believe that schools adequately teach media literacy and now know to hold schools accountable, while supplementing with conversations about media at home.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Media consumption has been on the rise for years, due to the increase of mobile technologies as media can now follow people anywhere. And while the United States is the top country for exporting media, it has never developed a media literacy curriculum to go along with it (Kubey, 1998, p. 58). Being a large nation with 50 different states and different governments that regulate education makes imposing such a curriculum harder, but it does not make it any less important (Kubey, 1998, p. 59). If schools are not teaching the nation's children about media and the impacts it can have, it falls on parents to teach their children media literacy in order to protect them from the potential harms of media saturation (Jiow et al., 2016).

Among the United States population, there is a lack of trust in the media. Of Americans between the ages of 18 and 49, only 26% trust the media, which is about 1 in 4 Americans in the age range (Swift, 2016). The amount of distrust that the population places in media, science, and government, has been exacerbated in recent years (Pearce & Baran, 2018).

The low levels of trust in the media have not stopped most people from watching the news or viewing the most recent Disney/Pixar movie. We can look at this latter content, Disney/Pixar movies, to see how increased media literacy might have made a difference with audiences. For many years, Disney has been considered an unobjectionable favorite by children and adults alike, offering some of the culture's most heartwarming films (Hefner et al., 2017). But the same Disney films that have long been perceived as innocent and unthreatening to those who view them, have been researched and found to present messages that may be adjusting young people's perceptions of reality (Hefner et al., 2017).

More effective, more personally beneficial "readings" of these popular movies, as well as all other media content, can be achieved through media literacy education. But because our educational systems are not teaching children how to think critically about the media they view each day (Kubey, 1998), it is left to parents to ensure their children's psychological and emotional safety (Jiow et al., 2016).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Mass Media Exposure

The average American spends a lot of time watching television each day. Between live programming, on-demand, and recorded viewing, Americans watch 27 hours per week of traditional television in their own home (Epstein, 2020). Watching online videos adds another 100 minutes a day (Brooks, 2020). Approximately ninety-three percent of Americans listen to the radio each week, averaging 102 minutes per day listening (Watson, 2020). Movie theaters sell over a billion-and-a-quarter tickets a year, which means that the population spends over \$11 billion each year on movie tickets (McNary, 2020). There is at least one person in seventy-five percent of American households that plays video games for a minimum of three hours a week and of the American adult population, sixty-five percent of them play video games (Entertainment Software Association, 2020).

The media content people spend so much time consuming is not a reflection of reality but tends to be a pushed agenda from corporate executives; in many cases that agenda includes gender bias and stereotypes. For example, programming that targets young males has often shown mostly traditional gender role examples, compared to programming that targets young females, which sometimes showed the opposite of gender-stereotypical roles (Northup & Liebler, 2010; Daalmans et al., 2017, p. 368). On major television channels whose target demographic are largely male-based, there is an underrepresentation of women in their programming. One possible explanation would be viewers desire to see a representation of themselves in the programming. In contradiction, channels that list women as their targeted demographic do not underrepresent men in order to provide representation for the desired viewer (Daalmans et al., 2017, p. 373).

The gender differences go beyond simple representation; they may be cultivating the differences in education performance as well. Male students tend to be unprepared, experience disciplinary action more often, and are more often diagnosed with learning disabilities when compared to their female counterparts (Hunting et al., 2018). Many of the biases and gender stereotypes seen in the media stemmed from a patriarchal society; they persist due to the pressures of the patriarchal corporations that are in charge of the major

media channels (Murnen et al., 2015, p. 78). Due to the continued bias and stereotypes in mass media, there is a chance that viewers could develop a view of gender roles that is limited and could constrict people's understandings of gender roles in reality (Daalmans et al., 2017, p. 375). As such, women have been working to advance the ideals of gender equality for decades, and media has yet to represent that even through the multiple women's movements (Stover, 2013, p. 8).

The lack of proper gender representation has a direct impact on impressionable children who consume media. Children as young as 4 years old are impacted by the media they consume. Interestingly, actions and behaviors that are linked to mass media characters in children are usually occurring when they are in costume. Depending on how children are dressed or what costume they are wearing, they will exhibit different behaviors (Golden & Jacoby, 2017; Murnen et al., 2015). In 2017, over 30 three-to-five-year old's with a diverse range of backgrounds and different social classes were observed playing and were interviewed. This study revealed that the behaviors of characters in mass media are linked to the costumes, not adopted by the child itself, the young boys in this firsthand account from the study are dressed as power rangers.

As the boys kicked their legs and jabbed their arms towards her, Bianca silently backed into a corner of the dramatic play section. When she could no longer move backwards, she stopped and looked at the boys with a blank expression. "You're not a princess," she suddenly announced to them. At that, the boys put down their arms and stopped kicking. One boy rushed to Bianca's side and placed his hand on the middle of her back. He then guided her back to the play kitchen table. Bianca, still silent, picked up a pink stuffed animal dog and, cradling it, began to pet the dog's head... Dressed as a princess, Bianca refused to engage in superhero play with the boys and solidified the distinction between her and them by declaring that they were not princesses. (Golden & Jacoby, 2017)

And kids are conscious of the role limitations they often face. Children in the third grade, at eight and nine years old, were frustrated with the way women were

represented in television programming. Eight- and nine-year-old girls want to play outside and go on adventures, but their favorite character never get to do those things. Media women are shown as helpless, attention seeking, and only caring about their beauty. This teaches young women that they must look beautiful and be thin to be successful/desirable in their future (Steiner-Adair & Vorenberg, 1999). The media messages regarding gender roles are striving to perpetuate, rather than counter stereotypes.

For example, the average model seen on television is one hundred and twenty pounds and stands at 5 foot eleven inches tall, compared to the actual average women in America who stands 5 feet four inches tall and weighs one hundred and forty pounds (Holmstrom, 2004). Media is offering children and adults alike an unrealistic and unattainable body ideal. Many programs targeting children stress thinness and beauty as a direct measure of future success in attracting the opposite gender (Rousseau & Eggermont, 2018; Northup & Liebler, 2010). In fairness, however, the research has been inconsistent about a negative correlation between media consumption and impacts on body image. There are studies that say the two variables are related (Grabe et al., 2008; Fuller et al., 2004), some that say there is little relation between the variables (Holmstrom, 2004), and others that cannot say definitively either way (Rowe, 2019).

Over one thousand girls between the ages of eight and eighteen reported feeling societal pressures to look or act a certain way because of their gender. There was a large number of girls who had resigned themselves to accepting the traditional gender expectations associated with being female. There was also a feeling of pressure to be "thin, kind, caring, please everyone, speak softly, and not cause trouble" (Golden & Jacoby, 2017). Holding young people to the ideals set in media is unattainable and will cause self-doubt in addition to other negative impacts thought their lives. It has been demonstrated that children who are confident do better in their education, try new things more often, cope with failure better, and they try their best more often than children without confidence (Lyness, 2018)

#### Theoretical Bases for this Study

The operation of social comparison becomes evident among children around the age of six as they begin developing awareness of themselves (Northup & Liebler, 2010). With that self-awareness, many people, including children, compare themselves to those around them and those viewed in media who are deemed to be attractive (Northup & Liebler, 2010; Holmstrom, 2004). Social comparison theory has been used to explain the potential negative effects of media on body image (Holmstrom, 2004).

In addition, cultivation theory suggests that how often an individual watched fantasized media is directly related to a skewed sense of reality (Hefner et al., 2017; Holmstrom, 2004). This theory states that women see thin models and animated characters as attractive and "normal", so they would like to imitate in order to be attractive themselves (Holmstrom, 2004). The impact patterns of media on children are aligned with the social comparison theory and cultivation theory (Holmstrom, 2004).

#### Media Literacy

Media literacy has many different definitions as it does so many things. It is the learned ability to read, interpret, critically assess, and productively use media texts (Silverblatt, 2014, p. 324). It is also centered around skills and knowledge that allow individuals to think about, understand, and use the media to better serve themselves (Jeong et al., 2012). In order to be media literate, one must be able to:

understand who the characters in a show are, how they look, move, talk, and dress and to be aware of stereotypes; to understand the setting (what historical period is emphasized and what geographic location is involved); to understand the major conflicts; to identify the plot and any subplots; to integrate major themes; to understand whether a story is logical and if it is realistic or a fantasy; and to understand how our emotions, positive and negative, are influenced by the content of the programs and to be aware of what in the program is causing such feelings. (Singer & Singer, 1998, p. 168-169)

Media literacy is the first solution in order to help children navigate the current world saturated with media (Jiow et al., 2016).

#### Media Literacy Interventions

In order to teach children, parents must learn how to discuss media in casual conversations with their family through workshops (Olson et al., 2019). These workshops could be any of the programs designed around media literacy education to increase knowledge in the youth population (Scull et al., 2017). The more research there is on media literacy, there is a better chance of identify media literacy interventions that are effective compared to different types of interventions (Byrne, 2005).

The purpose of a workshop or program is to educate parents so that they will be able to perform an intervention with their children. A media literacy intervention is an effort "to reduce harmful effects of the media by informing the audience about one or more aspects of the media, thereby influencing media-related beliefs and attitudes, and ultimately preventing risky behaviors" (Jeong et al., 2012, p. 454). The expectation of these interventions is that they decrease the negative impact on media viewers (Jeong et al., 2012). An obstacle for interventions is the third-person effect or the feeling of invincibility (Byrne, 2005). In one study, young women said that they believe daytime soap operas have a negative influence on other viewers but not themselves (Byrne, 2005), as people tend to think they are less susceptible to influence than their peers.

#### Parents, Children, and Media

Depending on age, children cannot distinguish what they watch on TV versus their own reality (Committee on Public Education, 2001). This does not mean that children should not consume media until they can make this distinction on their own because media has saturated the lives of Americans. In many cases, it is parents who introduce media to their children for the first time. Parents also are in control of the media effects on their children as it is up to parents to show children the proper way to react to the content of media (Nathanson, 2015). Parents show their children how to understand and interact with mass media as well as their content, starting from when the child is very young (Coyne et al., 2016). Children emulate a lot of their parents' actions and how they relate/respond to media is no different.

Due to children mimicking adult behaviors, many people look to parents to teach their children about mass media, which can be accomplished through mediation. Parental

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mediation is a strategy that helps reduce the impacts and increase the benefits of media influence (Jiow et al., 2016). There are three dominant approaches to mediation: restrictive mediation, co-use, and active mediation (Jiow et al., 2016). Restrictive mediation, also known as cocooning (Padilla-Walker & Coyne, 2011), is when parents create house rules that regulate when children can use media and what kind of media they can consume (Jiow et al., 2016). Co-Use, also known as co-viewing (Padilla-Walker & Coyne, 2011), is when parents sit with the child and experience media together allowing for explanation of content while it is on screen (Jiow et al., 2016). Finally, active mediation, also known as pre-arming (Padilla-Walker & Coyne, 2011), is when parents discuss the media content and messages present in a way that allows for interpretation and a deeper understanding (Jiow et al., 2016). Many parents understand these concepts and the issues surrounding media influence, but how do parents take this information from intent to set limits and have discussions to actually regulating their child's consumption of media and conversing about it together. In the United States, parents find the last step, moving from intent to action, to be the most difficult (Pearce & Baran, 2018).

# **RESEARCH QUESTION**

The main question of this research project is: Will parents who received a media literacy intervention workshop have a higher likelihood to speak with their children about media than those who did not receive the workshop, that is, to engage in actual media literacy intervention with their children?

This research is timely and important as it has the ability to change the way adults view media and interact with young people's viewing of mass media for the rest of their lives. If the media literacy intervention workshop has the hypothesized effect on participants, it will teach them how to show their children to be critical of mass media and distinguish what is a fair emulation of life from what is not. The participants who receive the intervention workshop will have a heightened sense of media literacy compared to those participants who do not receive the media literacy intervention workshop and will be more motivated to be involved with their children's media use.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

Participants in this study opted in through a volunteer sample. The call for participants was posted in multiple online forums using social media websites such as Facebook. One hundred and forty-three parents of children between the ages of six and ten took part in the questionnaire to address the research questions. The average age of respondents was 39.4 and there was a 140:3 female to male ratio (2.1% males; 97.1% female).

#### <u>Procedure</u>

After the respondent had agreed to the informed consent, they were randomly assigned to receive the media literacy intervention workshop or not. Those who were given the workshop were shown a two-and-a-half-minute video explaining media literacy and the impacts that media messages can have on a child. After the video, participants were asked to return to the questionnaire. Those who were not given the workshop were asked to take the questionnaire without watching any videos. The questionnaire contained general media literacy questions, perceived willingness to act, and demographic questions.

#### **Intervention Condition**

The intervention workshop mentioned above was created in PowerPoint and uploaded to YouTube for viewing (<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hvaZr\_JDnyw">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hvaZr\_JDnyw</a>). The presentation consisted of fourteen slides, two introducing and closing the topic, two posing questions to the viewer, and twelve slides of content related to media literacy, including examples. All examples were clips taken from *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), with images of characters from other Disney content to hold the viewers' attention. *Beauty and the Beast* was used as a classic story that is trusted by the majority of the American population as they know it quite well, but it has messages of unconventionality, mob mentality (Will, 2017), ignoring consent, forgiving inappropriate behavior, and removing responsibility (Valentine, 2020) in addition to the traditional gender roles, unattainable beauty ideals, and confidence issues. The PowerPoint presentation, used as the intervention workshop, can be viewed in Appendix A.

#### RESULTS

The hypothesis predicted that the parents who received the media literacy intervention workshop would be more willing and likely to discuss media with their children compared to those who did not receive the intervention workshop. There was a grand total of 36 participants who did not receive the intervention workshop and 31 participants who watched the workshop and then received the questionnaire, in Appendix B; they will be referred to, respectively, as no treatment (control group) and treatment (intervention workshop group). A large majority of participants are Caucasian/White (86.6%), females (83.6%) and the average age is 39 years old, with a minimum age of 25 and a maximum age of 56 (Appendix C).

The raw data were analyzed using a two-tailed t-test and the results can be viewed in Appendix D. After reviewing the data, there were no statistically significant results regarding whether parents who received the media literacy intervention workshop would be more likely or willing to speak with their child to discuss their media activity. The last two rows of the table in Appendix D, show the analysis of participants willingness to talk about mass media with their child and their likelihood to talk about the effects of mass media with their child. For all four rows (willingness: treatment and no treatment, likeliness: treatment and no treatment) the Sig. (2-tailed) is above a .05, which deems the data not statistically significant.

The data that had a large enough difference between the two groups to be statistically significant was when participants were asked if schools adequately taught media literacy. Both the control group and intervention workshop group had a Sig. (2-tailed) of exactly 0.00, which is below .05. This became a key finding as it was the only statistically significant result. While it does not fit under the initial research question, it was clear in the data that parents who received the intervention felt schools did not adequately teach media literacy to their children.

### **DISCUSSION**

#### Gender Roles

Of the research participants approximately thirty percent (21 non-traditional responses divided by 70 total responses) exhibit non-traditional gender roles inside the home. Homes

were deemed to have non-tradition gender roles due to single parents, mothers being the breadwinner, or if the father was listed to be the one who does the nurturing duties of the household. Of the responses regarding gender roles and perceptions inside the household, two were concerning. The first did not receive the intervention variable and was considered living in a traditional household; this parent responded "strongly agree" when asked if gender roles are important and the child has denied tasks because they are for the opposite gender. The other is also from a household that was deemed traditional, but this respondent did receive the intervention condition; the parent responded "agreed" when asked if gender roles are important and does not want their child playing with toys that are targeted toward the opposite gender. That respondent's child has also denied tasks because they are for the opposite gender. There were twenty-one responses that said the respondent's child has denied tasks due to it stereotypically being for the opposite gender. Of those twenty-one responses, fewer than a quarter (five) were from homes that have been deemed non-traditional.

On the other end of the discussion, about twelve percent (nine) of respondents said they strongly disagreed with the statement that gender roles are important. All nine of these responses reported that their child can play with whatever toy they want regardless of the gender it was originally marketed toward. Of those responses, eight of these parents have never heard their child deny a task because it is stereotypically completed by the opposite gender. From these findings, we can assume that the parents' perception of gender role importance impacts the children's gender role perceptions more than the traditional or non-traditional role displayed within the household.

#### Media Monitoring

From the data collected there is little evidence that would link a child's perception of body image to the way parents monitor media. Almost all respondents reported that their child has sometimes or never spoken negatively about their own body or commented on someone else's body. One parent reported that their child comments on other people's bodies about half of the time. That parent also reported monitoring their child's media most of the time and the child does not have a cell phone or tablet that is theirs to use freely. Of the responses, approximately twenty-eight percent (20 always/70 total responses) always monitor their

child's media usage. Only four parents responded that they sometimes monitor media usage, which is one step up from never monitoring.

### General Media Literacy

One of the first questions respondents were prompted with was asking what media literacy meant, seventy-four percent (52 out of 70 responses) of responses showed a limited to good understanding of media literacy. Twenty-eight responses mentioned understating media and/or the impacts of media. Three participants who received the intervention workshop condition mentioned how media differs from reality. Only eight participants responded to the question with "I don't know" or did not respond. Over eighty percent of the participants who received the intervention condition had a decent/good response when asked what media literacy means, compared to the sixty-nine percent of respondents who did not receive the intervention condition. That level of variance in quality responses between the groups was expected due to the intervention workshop teaching participants about media literacy.

#### Limitations

It is important to note that there were many limitations to the study. The major limitation to the current study was its sample size (70). With a larger sample size, the data, which showed results in the direction of support for the research question might well have shown significant differences. Limited distribution and the low response rate on social media where the questionnaire was posted impacted the number of participants who completed the questionnaire. There were one hundred and forty-six participants that started the questionnaire who did not complete it. Unfortunately, the sixty-seven percent incompletion rate cannot be attributed to any one factor at this time. It can be speculated that due to the current global pandemic, parents are busier than ever. Between working from home, taking care of kids, and maintaining personal sanity, there is little time left to complete a media literacy intervention workshop and questionnaire.

For those parents who did find the time to respond, there is no way to distinguish if their responses reflect the truth of each situation; many people report one thing and do another in their daily lives. We were unable to observe how the parents interacted with their children through ethnographic research, which would have produced valuable qualitative data.

Finally, due to the nature of this research study we were unable to assess specific parents' knowledge of media literacy and behaviors before and after the media literacy intervention workshop. Data were collected from each participant at one time only, which does not allow for a change over time to be calculated. If participants who received the intervention workshop had time to adjust their habits between viewing the workshop and completing the questionnaire, the results may have been more drastic between the control group and intervention workshop group.

#### Recommendations for Future Research

Future research might focus on the change over time after parents receive a media literacy intervention workshop. This will allow the direct impacts of the media literacy intervention workshop to be viewed and for changes, such as different monitoring or mediation strategies, to be accounted for. It would also be valuable to speak directly with children about their perceptions and views regarding body image, gender stereotypes, and self-confidence after viewing popular media clips. In addition, a similar study to this one should be conducted with a larger sample size and a different intervention to see if the findings would change based on a larger number of responses.

# **APPENDICES**

# Appendix A – (Media Literacy Intervention Workshop PowerPoint Content)







Your child might not understand the media!

• Animated media made differentiating reality from fantasy easier for children.

• Before age 8, children cannot understand the concept of reality.

• By age 8, children begin understanding abstract concepts like reality and fantasy, but live-action media makes it harder to differentiate.

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# Appendix B- Raw Data Analysis

**Group Statistics** 

Croup Ctatistics	7				
				Std.	
	Condition	N	Mean	Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Media Literacy Important	no treatment	36	5.28	1.921	.320
	treat	31	5.81	1.195	.215
School Adequate Teach ML	no treatment	36	3.86	1.268	.211
	treat	31	2.81	1.014	.182
Willing to Learn ML	no treatment	36	5.83	1.342	.224
	treat	31	5.58	1.119	.201
Disney Positive	no treatment	36	3.31	2.278	.380
	treat	31	3.65	2.244	.403
Nick Positive	no treatment	36	3.94	2.838	.473
	treat	31	4.52	2.719	.488
Fairytale Positive	no treatment	36	4.03	2.741	.457
	treat	31	4.48	2.669	.479
Willing to talk about Mass	no treatment	36	15.86	1.268	.211
Media	treat	31	15.87	.957	.172
Likely to talk about Mass	no treatment	36	16.86	1.175	.196
Media	treat	31	17.23	1.023	.184

# Appendix C- Demographic Data

# **Descriptive Statistics**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	
What is your age?	62	25	56	39.48	5.830	
Valid N (listwise)	62					

# Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	
Valid	Male	6	9.0	9.7	9.7	
	Female	56	83.6	90.3	100.0	
	Total	62	92.5	100.0		
Missing	System	5	7.5			
Total		67	100.0			

### Race

					Cumulative
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Percent
Valid	Hispanic or Latino	3	4.5	4.8	4.8
	Caucasian/ White	58	86.6	93.5	98.4
	Other (e.g.,multiracial)	1	1.5	1.6	100.0
	Total	62	92.5	100.0	
Missing	System	5	7.5		
Total		67	100.0		_

## **Number of Children**

					Cumulative
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Percent
Valid	1-2	45	67.2	72.6	72.6
	3-4	15	22.4	24.2	96.8
	5 or more	2	3.0	3.2	100.0
	Total	62	92.5	100.0	
Missing	System	5	7.5		
Total		67	100.0		

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# Appendix D- 2 Tailed T- Test Analysis

#### Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test f								
		Variar	nces			Sig. (2-	t-test for Equalit	sy of Means Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	tailed)	Difference	Difference	Lower	Upper
Media Literacy Important	Equal variances assumed	8.654	.005	-1.326	65	.189	529	.399	-1.325	.267
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.371	59.498	.175	529	.386	-1.300	.243
School Adequate Teach ML	Equal variances assumed	1.510	.224	3.717	65	.000	1.055	.284	.488	1.621
	Equal variances not assumed			3.780	64.671	.000	1.055	.279	.497	1.612
Willing to Learn ML	Equal variances assumed	1.119	.294	.829	65	.410	.253	.305	356	.861
	Equal variances not assumed			.841	64.943	.404	.253	.301	348	.853
Disney Positive	Equal variances assumed	.078	.781	613	65	.542	340	.554	-1.447	.768
	Equal variances not assumed			613	63.802	.542	340	.554	-1.446	.767
Nick Positive	Equal variances assumed	.016	.900	838	65	.405	572	.682	-1.934	.790
	Equal variances not assumed			841	64.236	.404	572	.680	-1.930	.786
Fairytale Positive	Equal variances assumed	.000	.992	687	65	.494	456	.664	-1.781	.869
	Equal variances not assumed			689	63.993	.493	456	.662	-1.779	.867
Willing to talk about Mass Media	Equal variances assumed	1.492	.226	035	65	.972	010	.278	565	.548
	Equal variances not assumed			036	63.963	.971	010	.272	554	.534
Likely to talk about Mass Media	Equal variances assumed	.001	.975	-1.344	65	.184	365	.271	907	.177
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.358	64.988	.179	365	.269	901	.172

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