Age Difference Between Actors and Characters in a Selection of Teen Television Shows from 2000 to 2021

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Data Source

The data for this project came from a Kaggle data set titled: "Age of Characters and Actors in Teen TV Shows" created by Mohamadreza Momeni.

As per the documentation, this data set was created "to gain a better understanding of the age differences between teen characters in TV shows and the actors who portray them." The data was collected manually from actors' IMDB pages and fan sites for the shows.

Limitations   There are several limitations to this data set that should be considered when considering these findings.

1. The data being manually collected means that it is prone to errors in data entry
2. Some of the actors in this data set do not have publicly listed birthdays
3. Some of the character's ages were assumed based on other details in the shows (e.g. grade in school; see documentation for the author's method)
4. This data set includes 33 television shows that released between 2000 and 2021. This data set does not include:

- Movies
- Shows from Disney Channel, Nickelodeon, or from other networks that target a younger demographic.
- an exhaustive list of all the television shows that meet the inclusion criteria.

With these limitations in mind, I will be looking at the average age difference between actors and the characters they portray.

Average Age Difference

I first became interested in the age difference between actors and the characters they portray in teen centered media as an undergrad while in an adolescent development course. When learning about body image issues that many teens experience, we discussed how older actors in their 20's portraying teens might create a distorted view of what a teenager should expect their body to look like.

From these data, we can see that the average age gap between an actor and the character they play is nearly six and a half years with a maximum age difference of 17 years (that particular case involved a 31-year-old woman portraying a 14-year-old girl). Interestingly, there are a few examples of actors being younger than the character they portray. In those cases it is a 14-year-old girl portraying a 15- or 16-year-old girl.

Table 1: Summary statistics for the age gap between actors and the characters they portray.

Count	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max
243	6.45	6	3.31	-2	17

Gender

I was curious if there was a larger age gap for either males or females but when you divide the data by gender, there is no statistical difference in the average age gap between males and females.

Table 2: Summary statistics for the age gap between actors and the characters they portray by gender.

Gender	Count	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max
F	129	6.34	6	3.43	-2	17
M	112	6.54	6	3.07	0	13

Table 3: T-test results comparing the age gap between actors and the characters they portray by gender.

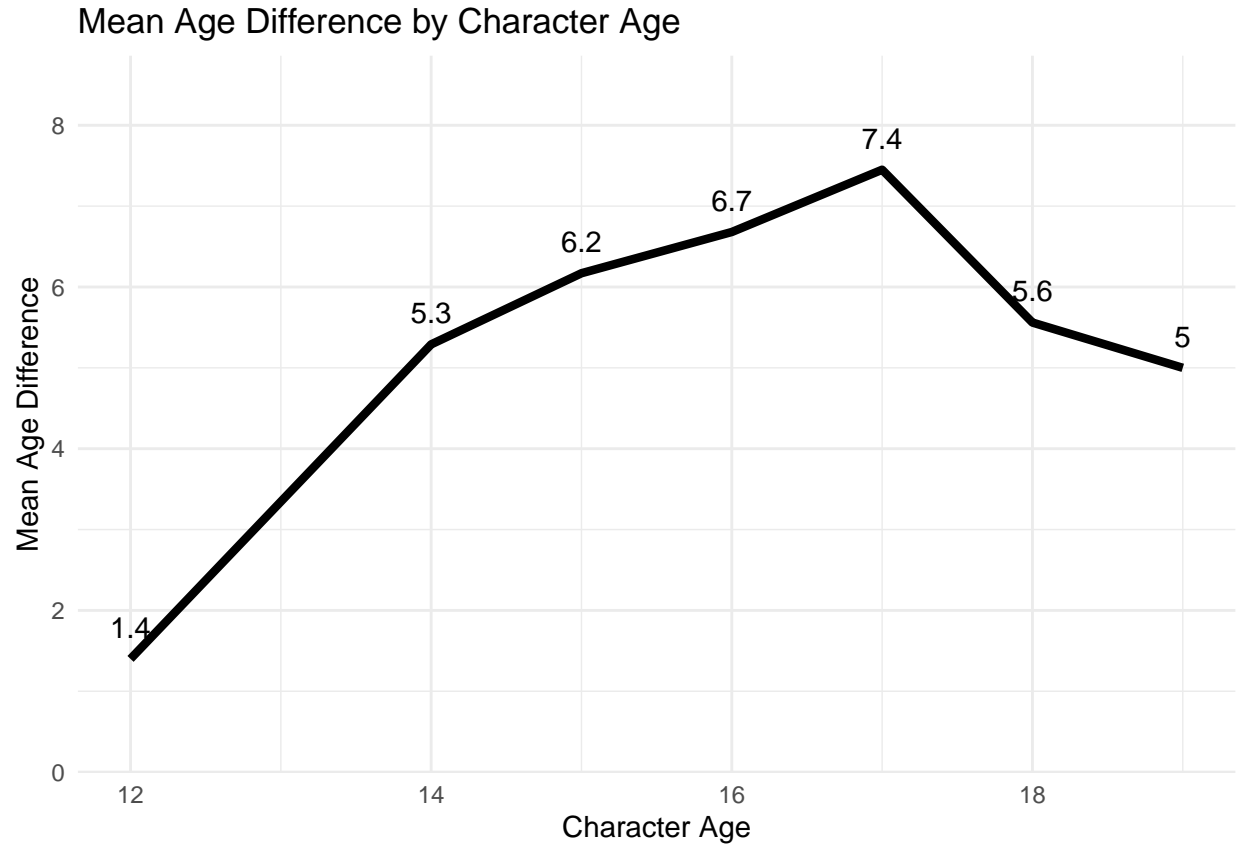| t	df	p_value
-0.46	224.632	0.6457

Age of the Character

Conducting the same analyses for the age of the character reveals some interesting patterns. For characters who are supposed to be 12 years old, the average age gap is only 1.4 years with a maximum of 3 years. Presumably for characters who are supposed to be pre- or early puberty, it is more important to find an actor to match their development.

For a character who is supposed to be age 14 or older, we see a steady increase in the average age gap starting at 5.3 years for a 14-year-old and increasing to 7.4 years for a 17-year-old character before dropping to 5.6 and 5 years for 18- and 19-year-old characters. One reason this might be the case is that directors and producers are incentivized to higher actors who are at least 18 years old to avoid child labor laws. At 14, a director or producer might justify the choice that the character just looks "old for their age."

Table 4: Summary statistics for the age gap between actors and the characters they portray by age of the character.

Age	Count	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max
12	5	1.4	2	1.34	0	3
13	0	–	–	–	–	–
14	17	5.29	5	4.12	0	17
15	48	6.17	6	3.18	-1	12
16	77	6.68	6	3.06	-2	16
17	76	7.45	7	3.19	2	15
18	10	5.56	6	2.55	2	10
19	3	5	5	2	3	7

Mean Age Difference by Character Age

Age of Character & Gender

Breaking the data out further shows that the pattern for character age is similar when comparing males and females.

Table 5: Summary statistics for the age gap between actors and the characters they portray (Males).

Age	Count	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max
12	4	1.75	2	1.26	0	3
13	0	–	–	–	–	–
14	8	4.5	5.5	3.34	0	8
15	17	6.94	6	3.23	3	12
16	34	7	7	2.93	1	13
17	37	7.35	8	2.67	2	12
18	7	5.83	6	2.56	2	10
19	1	7	7	NA	7	7

Table 6: Summary statistics for the age gap between actors and the characters they portray (Females).

Age	Count	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max
12	1	0	0	NA	0	0
13	0	–	–	–	–	–
14	9	6	5	4.8	0	17
15	31	5.74	6	3.13	-1	12
16	42	6.56	6	3.13	-2	16
17	38	7.32	6.5	3.48	2	14
18	3	5	5	3	2	8
19	2	4	4	1.41	3	5

Mean Age Difference by Character Age