

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

**Positive Female Role-Models Eliminate
Negative Effects of Sexually Violent Media**

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Much debate has focused on the potential negative role of sexualized violent media on viewer attitudes toward women. One potential issue in previous literature is that depictions of sexuality and violence were confounded with subordinate depictions of female characters. The current study addressed this by randomly assigning young adults to watch either neutral media or sexually violent media with either subordinate or strong female characters. Women who watched sexually violent media were more anxious, and males who watched sexually violent media had more negative attitudes toward women, but only when female characters were subordinate. Sexual and violent content had no influence on viewer attitudes when strong female characters were present, suggesting these are not the crucial influence variables.

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The issue of sexual and violent media impact on attitudes and violence toward women has been an issue of great concern, debate, and contention. Sexually violent media encapsulates a broad category of media in which sexual themes and violence are intermingled. For instance such media may depict physical aggression by males against females (or females against males or same-sex dyads) in the context of sexual scenarios or involving prurient (i.e., intended to be arousing) nudity. Sexual violence is not found only in pornography and may, in fact, be observed in adult-rated (R or TV-MA) movies or television shows as well as books. Much of the discussion has focused on pornography, whether violent or not, although some note that despite a virtual explosion in the availability of all forms of pornography, rape, and domestic violence rates in the United States and most other industrialized nations are at 40-year lows (D'Amato, 2006; Diamond, 2009; Diamond & Uchiyama, 1999; Ferguson & Hartley, 2009). Although this is only one piece of evidence and cannot be considered in isolation, several reviews of pornography and/or sexualized violence research have questioned the existence of causal links (Diamond, 2009; Fisher & Grenier, 1994; Garos, Beggan, Kluck, & Easton, 2004), although other researchers have found the

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evidence more convincing (Donnerstein & Malamuth, 1997; Vega & Malamuth, 2007). Nonetheless, sexually violent material may be found in nonpornographic media, although this issue is less often examined.

It is reasonable to hypothesize that sexually violent material may both increase male negative attitudes toward women, as well as women's negative mood, yet results have not always been consistent (Garos et al., 2004). It is difficult to isolate sexually violent content of media from other elements which may prime negative attitudes toward women. Media which include a high degree of sexually violent content may also tend to portray women as passive, submissive, and inferior. The current study seeks to address this gap in the literature by isolating the effects of sexually violent content in visual media from that of negative, passive portrayals of women.

Theoretical views of sexually violent media

The causal view of sexually violent media's influence on negative attitudes toward women posits that cultural and individual factors interact to promote beliefs and cognitions supportive of aggression toward women (Malamuth & Briere, 1986). By combining sexuality and violence together in mass media, it is thought to promote the linking of these phenomena, particularly in the minds of males, leading to acceptance of physical violence toward dating partners, increased adoption of rape myths, and increased aggressiveness. Most of the research and theorizing has addressed this in the context of heterosexual relationship with males as the potential perpetrator of violence toward women. Comparatively less research has examined this issue in the context of sexually violent media involving homosexual dyads or homosexual viewers despite that depictions of homosexual couples in the media may be susceptible to similar gendering effects (Holz Ivory, Gibson, & Ivory, 2009).

Thus, the interaction of sexuality and violence in combination in the same scenes is thought by some scholars (Malamuth & Briere, 1986) to promote aggressive sexual attitudes and behaviors among viewers. Whether the data is sufficient to support such theoretical claims has been a matter of intense debate. As noted above, some studies, often comparing hardcore, but nonviolent pornography to sexually violent but R-rated slasher films (e.g., Linz, Donnerstein, & Penrod, 1988), have been interpreted as lending support to this theoretical position (slasher films were used due to the extreme rarity of violent pornography, see Palys, 1986). Yet other studies have found that some forms of sexually violent media have little effect or even positive effects on viewer attitudes (Lee, Hust, Zhang, & Zhang, 2011). This raises the possibility that mere exposure is not a sufficient explanation for behavioral changes, but that context is an important issue to consider (Lee et al., 2011 used crime dramas, for instance, which may present sexualized violence less flippantly than slasher films).

Positive female role models in sexually violent media

Results from experimental studies of sexual violence have not been consistent. One possibility is that conditions comparing sexually violent media to control conditions may introduce differing variables between conditions other than just the level of

sexualized violence. For instance, in studies which compared hardcore pornography to slasher films (e.g., Linz et al., 1988), other variables aside from sexualized violent content may have been introduced. In many/most porn films, women are often portrayed as if sexually assertive and experiencing pleasure during sex (Palys, 1986), whereas slasher films have historically presented women characters as sexually and physically passive or, if they are sexually assertive, quickly punished for it through death (Ferguson & Hartley, 2009). This is not to imply that pornography necessarily presents positive portrayals of women (or men) in a more general sense, but rather that the differing portrayals of women between these two genres present an example of a contextual confound into experimental studies of sexually violent media.

The current theoretical perspective posits that it is the portrayal of women as assertive or passive, strong or weak, which is a more central variable to attitude toward woman than is the presence of sexualized violence in media. In other words, it is argued that the presence of strong, positive female characters in media will mitigate the purported effects of sexualized violence. This perspective is essentially a more highly contextualized approach in which violent or sexualized media portrayals are not all equal, but which are best understood in a larger framework of the overall message of a media event.

As noted above, much of the previous literature has focused on negative attitudes toward women. On the basis of this and the theoretical arguments of the current study, the following two relevant hypotheses are proposed. First, men (but not women) exposed to sexually violent media with negative portrayals of women will show increased negative attitudes toward women compared to neutral media (i.e., nonsexually violent). Second, men exposed to sexually violent media with positive portrayals of strong female leads will not show increased negative attitudes relative to a neutral control.

Relatively less research has focused on mood responses to sexually violent media. In one experiment, depictions of pornography were found to interact with pre-existing trait anxiety in provoking anxiety responses (Seiwa & Yokoyama, 1989). Explicit sexual films have also been found to increase anxiety in women (Wishnoff, 1978). Similarly, explicit sexual films have been found to promote depressed mood in women, but erotica with positive female representations reduced depressed mood (Laan, Everaerd, van Bellen, & Hanewald, 1994; Senn & Desmarais, 2004). Most of this work has been done with pornography or erotica, however, rather than sexual violence in mainstream media, and thus there is significant room for more data. Thus the following hypotheses will be examined regarding men's and women's mood responses to sexually violent media. As the third hypothesis, women (but not men) exposed to sexually violent media with negative portrayals of women will show increased negative mood (anxiety, depression) compared to neutral media (i.e., nonsexually violent). As the fourth hypothesis, women exposed to sexually violent media with positive portrayals of strong female leads will not show increased negative mood.

Methods

Participants

All data were collected in the United States. Participants in the current study included 150 students at a regional comprehensive university in the South. Students were about equal in gender distribution (50.7% male) and were primarily of Hispanic ethnicity (94.7%) consistent with the population of the university which is a Hispanic-serving institution. Their average age was 21.2 ($SD = 4.19$, range = 18–38).

Television shows

Three levels of the independent variable used are as follows: neutral shows containing neither sexual nor violent content, sexually violent shows with negative subordinate depictions of women, and sexually violent shows featuring strong independent female characters. Two exemplars were used for each category, *7th Heaven* and *Gilmore Girls* for the nonsexual, nonviolent shows (no sexual or violent content even of mild intensity was included in the specific episodes used); *The Tudors* and *Masters of Horror* for the sexually violent shows with negative/subordinate female characters; and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Law and Order: SVU* for the sexually violent shows featuring strong independent female characters. These shows were matched for the prevalence of female characters. The nonsexually violent exemplars both included positive depictions of strong female characters. All sexually violent shows included scenes that intermingled sexuality and violent content in the same scenes. Both the *Law and Order: SVU* and *Masters of Horror* episodes included scenes involving the sexual victimization of women. *Law and Order: SVU* is a crime drama which focuses on crimes of a sexual nature. The episode in question involved a female police officer going undercover to investigate rapes of women in prison and featured a graphic attempted rape scene. The episode includes graphic sexual violence, but also features a strong commanding female lead character. *Masters of Horror* is an anthology of horror stories, arguably closest to the slasher genre among the exemplars. The episode in question featured a global epidemic which caused men to become mad, attempting to rape and kill women when sexually aroused. The episode includes numerous scenes of male rage against women including in the context of sexual violence. *The Tudors*, a historical drama of 16th-century England, also included sexual aggression toward women coupled with a general environment in which women were largely objectified and dehumanized. The episode in question was an early one in which a young Henry VIII consolidates power. The episode includes graphic sexual scenes involving the denigration and disrespect of women who were roughly handled or insulted during or following sexual scenes. Female characters are typically displayed as passive, powerless, and at the mercy of male characters. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is less often known for sexual content than the other shows, but an episode was used in which a main female character (Willow) is transformed into a passive and sexualized servant of a vampire and, in turn, tortures a helpless male character while dressed in fetish attire, straddling him and licking him. However, the episode also features strong female characters who are able to fight back effectively against violence

directed at them. Neither of the episodes of *7th Heaven* and *Gilmore Girls* contained sex or violence, typically focusing on dramatic or humorous situations between family members. Given considerable heterogeneity in visual artistic representations finding “exact matches” between visual media conditions is historically very difficult (Adachi & Willoughby, 2010). In this study, the use of multiple exemplars in each condition was employed to reduce the potential for unintended confound variables. In each case participants watched the entire episode.

A manipulation check was used at the end of the study (so as not to introduce demand characteristics) to assess the violent and sexual manipulations as well as how enjoyable the show was. As expected, shows containing sexual violence were rated as both more violent ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.18$; $t(147) = 12.75$, $p = <.001$) and more sexually explicit ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.28$; $t(147) = 7.56$, $p = <.001$) than the neutral shows ($M = 1.18$, $SD = 0.49$ and $M = 1.61$, $SD = 0.84$ for violence and sex, respectively). No significant differences were found in estimations of the enjoyableness of the shows ($t(147) = 1.29$, $p = ns$), suggesting the shows were generally well matched on this level ($M = 13.27$, $SD = 2.86$ for sexually violent shows, $M = 12.55$, $SD = 3.87$ for neutral shows). The data were rerun using a 3×2 (Type of Show \times Gender) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA; violent content, sexual content, and enjoyableness as outcomes) to examine for any potential gender interaction effects. Aside from the type of show effects described above, no gender or gender by type of show interactions reached significance. Exemplars within each condition did not differ significantly on any of the outcomes, providing evidence that the categories were robust.

Measures

Negative attitudes towards women

The Attitudes Toward Women scale (Spence & Helmreich, 1978) is a 15-item Likert type scale that queries respondents in regards to their beliefs about the equal rights of women in multiple dimensions. Spence and Helmreich (1978) report good reliability and validity data for this instrument across multiple studies. In the current sample, a shortened version of the Attitudes Towards Women scale was used, eliminating outdated items, and focusing on items which conceptually related to the denigrating of women as less intelligent, capable, or deserving of societal freedoms. The resultant 6-item scale is presented in the Appendix and demonstrated an internal consistency ($\alpha = .71$).

Depression

The Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI) was utilized to assess for symptoms of depression. This measure is 21-item assessment of the severity of depression to be used in people ages 13 and over (Beck, 1996). Scores on each item range from 0 to 3. Scores ranging from 0 to 13 are indicative of *minimal depression*, 14 to 19 of *mild depression*, 20 to 28 of *moderate depression*, and 29 to 63 of *severe depression*. Coefficient alpha in the current sample was .92.

Anxiety

The Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI; Beck, 1990) is a 21-item, self-report measure of anxiety that has strong psychometric characteristics and is clinically validated. Coefficient alpha with the current sample was .93.

Procedure

Students were approached in a classroom setting and asked to participate in exchange for extra credit. Appointment times were made available at the university theater to view the exemplar shows. Students were randomly assigned to one of the appointment times and each exemplar show was randomly assigned to one of the appointment times. Each session included small groups of participants, approximately 5–10 in a large theater environment and, within that range, viewing group size was fairly homogeneous.

Prior to the show, students were presented with an informed consent form, which they were asked to read and sign and invited to ask any questions they might have. All students viewed a 45-minute presentation of the exemplar show. Following completion of the show, students were asked to fill out the study questionnaires. At the end of the session, participants were queried for suspicion/hypothesis guessing and invited to ask any questions. Total completion time for the show and questionnaire was approximately 1 hour. All study procedures were designed to conform to university IRB requirements and APA ethical standards for research with human subjects.

Results

Exemplar shows were collapsed across conditions (neutral, negative-women, positive-women), creating a 3 (Show Type) by 2 (Gender) between-subjects factorial design. All results were analyzed using analysis of variance (ANOVA). As show enjoyment did not differ between conditions, this was not used as a covariate as might otherwise have been done. Cell means are presented in Table 1.

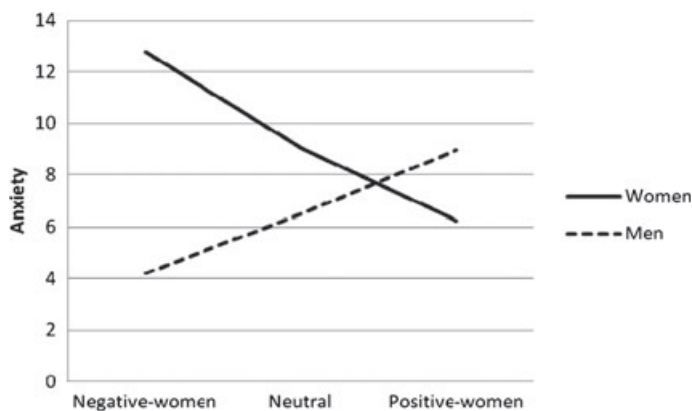
Results for depressive symptoms were nonsignificant for gender, $F(1, 144) = 2.66$, show type $F(2, 144) = 0.38$, as well as for their interaction, $F(2, 144) = 1.47$. As such, no appreciable effect of show type on depressive symptoms was discovered.

Results for anxiety symptoms likewise showed no main effects either for gender, $F(1, 143) = 2.94$, or show type, $F(1, 143) = 0.10$. However, results for anxiety showed an interaction between gender and show type $F(1, 143) = 3.38$, $p \leq .05$, $r = .15$, 95% CI = $-.01$ to $.31$. As shown in Figure 1, women who viewed the sexually violent show with negative portrayals of women showed higher anxiety ($M = 12.79$, $SD = 15.44$) in comparison to the group which portrayed positive female characters even when the material included sexual violence ($M = 6.23$, $SD = 5.53$), with the mean for the neutral shows between those two conditions ($M = 9.03$, $SD = 10.05$). Males showed an inverse effect, least anxiety with negative female depictions ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 8.87$) and most anxiety with positive female depictions ($M = 8.96$, $SD = 8.77$) with neutral shows once again in the middle ($M = 6.49$, $SD = 6.56$).

Table 1 Cell Means for Outcome Variables

Condition	Depression	Anxiety	Negative Attitude Women
Positive female/Sexually violent			
Males	8.39 (8.28)	8.96 (8.77)	6.17 (3.73)
Females	7.32 (7.39)	6.23 (5.53)	2.59 (2.67)
Negative female/Sexually violent			
Males	6.36 (8.15)	4.23 (8.87)	7.57 (3.94)
Females	11.89 (12.81)	12.79 (15.44)	2.00 (1.94)
Neural			
Males	7.82 (6.26)	6.49 (6.56)	5.23 (3.44)
Females	10.61 (9.12)	9.03 (10.05)	3.12 (2.75)

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

**Figure 1** Anxiety effects.

With regards to negative attitudes toward women, a main effect was seen for gender, $F(1, 144) = 47.96$, $p \leq .001$, $r = .50$, 95% CI = .37–.61, but no main effect was found for type of show, $F(2, 144) = 0.42$. However, the Gender \times Show interaction was significant, $F(2, 144) = 3.45$, $p \leq .05$, $r = .16$, 95% CI = .00 to .32. Men reported higher levels of negative beliefs when watching a sexually violent show with negative portrayals of women ($M = 7.57$, $SD = 3.94$) than when watching a sexually violent show with positive portrayals of strong women characters ($M = 6.17$, $SD = 3.73$), or compared to nonsexually violent shows ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 3.44$). Among women negative attitudes toward women were highest among viewers of the nonsexually violent ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 2.75$) shows in comparison with the negative portrayals ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.94$) or the positive portrayals of females ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 2.67$). The negative and positive portrayal shows did not differ in regards to their impact on female attitudes toward women. These results are shown in Figure 2.

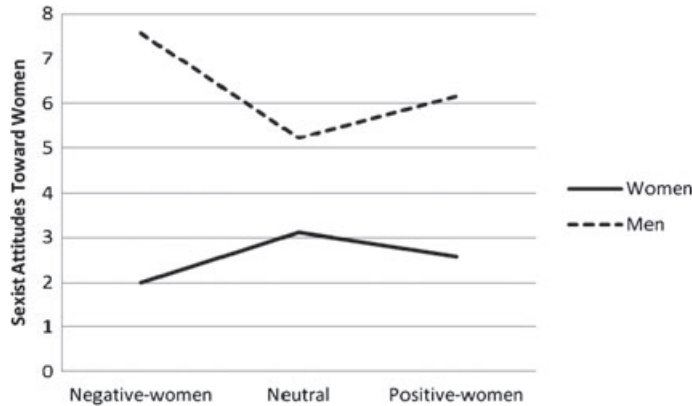


Figure 2 Sexist attitudes toward women effects.

Discussion

Hypothesis 1 predicted that men exposed to sexually violent shows with negative portrayals of females would show higher levels of negative attitudes toward women, but Hypothesis 2 predicted men exposed to sexually violent shows with strong positive female characters would not show this effect. These hypotheses were supported by the current data. Men who watched a sexually violent show with negative portrayals of females showed higher negative attitudes toward women, but this effect was not seen for sexually violent shows with positive depictions of females. It may be that negative depictions of women reawaken negative stereotypes that some men hold about women, whereas positive depictions challenge these stereotypes. Women's attitudes toward women in general did not change based upon media representations. Thus, women were made anxious by negative female portrayals, but did not reduce their esteem of females. In fact women's reported negative attitudes toward women were curiously highest among viewers of the nonsexually violent exemplars. Arguably women may have set opinions about the value of women, too much so to be influenced by media; negative portrayals of women may nonetheless remind them of sexism or stereotypes which may be threatening to their desire for equal esteem and treatment. Negative portrayals of women in sexually violent media may actually provoke a kind of mild "backlash" reaction at such negative portrayals, fostering a sense of female solidarity in the face of sexist or misogynistic portrayals.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that women exposed to sexually violent shows with negative portrayals of females would show more anxiety and depressive symptoms, but Hypothesis 4 predicted women exposed to sexually violent shows with strong positive female characters would not show this effect. These hypotheses were supported for anxiety, but not for depression. Women were most anxious following a sexually violent show with negative female portrayals than when watching neutral shows. Interestingly, women were least anxious after watching sexually violent shows with positive female portrayals. In contrast, and somewhat unexpected, males showed an

inverse pattern with greatest anxiety following sexually violent shows with positive female portrayals, and least anxious with negative female portrayals. From this it is concluded that women viewers tend to respond positively to strong female role models, even when otherwise paired with difficult material. More discouragingly, at least some males appear to respond negatively to strong female characters. The effect was small (equivalent in effect size to approximately $r = .25$), but of potential practical significance. It is possible that some males find the presentation of strong females to be threatening to traditional gender–role stereotypes, although this is speculative and warranting of further research. Particularly among Latino men, for whom machismo often remains an influential cultural phenomenon, the depiction of strong females may threaten traditional gender roles. This is not to say other ethnicities are necessarily immune, of course, but the culture of machismo in which females are seen as passive, may have been threatened by media portrayals of strong female characters, particularly those who are resisting violence by men.

Taken together these results provide some preliminary evidence that the salient variable regarding media effects on attitudes toward women may have little to do with violent or sexual content, but may have more to do simply with the ways in which women are depicted. Strong, independent female characters in television shows appear to negate the influence of sexual and violent content. Further research could explore these possibilities, examining differences in effects for shows without any sexual or violent content, for instance, but with positive or negative depictions of women. The influence of media portrayals of sexualized violence may be more nuanced and context specific, with both negative and positive (Lee et al., 2011) effects seen across differing contexts. The current results argue that the context of portrayals of women is of greater value than the presence or absence of sexualized violence in regards to attitudes toward women.

As with all studies, this one has its limitations. Although care was taken to match the television shows as closely as possible, matching media in experimental studies is well known to be difficult. The current study suggests that portrayals of women may have confounded previous research on sexually violent content, yet future research should be alert for other potential confounding variables. Media effects seen in the current study were small in effect size and should not be overinterpreted. Furthermore, a pre/post design was not employed, which could have tracked emotional changes over time. The current study employed a Hispanic majority sample. Given that it is possible, cultural factors such as machismo (see Cowan, 2000; Fischer, 1987) may distinguish male Hispanic attitudes about positive female portrayals in media from the attitudes of other cultural groups; it is inadvisable to generalize results from one ethnic group to others. It is worth noting that the main characters in all shows were Caucasian non-Hispanic, although locating shows with Hispanic lead characters that otherwise fit the study criteria would arguably have been difficult. The neutral nonsexually violent shows in this study employed shows that involved positive depictions of strong female characters. Future research may wish to consider the effect of negative portrayals of women in shows that lack sexual violence. Future

research should also consider extending the current research to positive and negative portrayals of homosexual characters as well as heterosexual characters. Finally, as is an issue with priming studies, it is possible that the experimental procedures here are priming existing cognitive and affective pathways, not necessarily causing new pathways to come into being. Therefore, great caution should be exercised in generalizing current results to the belief that depictions of women in the media are one (but not only) *root cause* of negative attitudes toward women.

Ultimately, replication is the key to science and it is advisable for other scholars to explore the current results using other genres and considering other potential confounding variables that may not have been considered in this study. Furthermore, by using clinical measures of anxiety and depression, this study was weighted more toward clinically relevant outcomes, and other scholars may wish to consider using more nuanced social measures (although taking care not to then generalize to clinically relevant outcomes). Thus, although the current study provides support for the mediating role of positive female role models in sexually violent media, we must remain open to the possibility that further studies will challenge these results. Future research may also wish to consider the application of the results found here to new media such as video games (Williams, Consalvo, Caplan, & Yee, 2009; Williams, Martins, Consalvo & Ivory, 2009).

The issue of sexualized violence in the media remains one which is societally relevant and hotly contested. The current results suggest that the influence of sexualized violence on viewers may be minimal, however, positive or negative portrayals of women may have greater effects. It is hoped that the current study will contribute positively to these ongoing debates and scholarly discussions.

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Appendix

- 1 It is insulting to women to have the “obey” clause remain in the marriage service (reverse scoring).
- 2 A woman should not expect to go to exactly the same places or to have quite the same freedom of action as a man.
- 3 The intellectual leadership of a community should be largely in the hands of men.
- 4 Sons in a family should be given more encouragement to go to college than daughters.
- 5 In general, the father should have greater authority than the mother in the bringing up of the children.
- 6 There are many jobs in which men should be given preference over women in being hired or promoted.