

Are superheroes saving the world, or ruining it?

Is the portrayal of heroic characteristics and perfect bodies in the many superhero movies having a negative effect on children? **Chris Ferguson** explores this question

If you haven't seen a superhero movie in recent years, whether *X-Men*, *Avengers*, *Batman*, *Superman*, or even *Guardians of the Galaxy*, you can't be going to the cinema at all. Superhero movies (and the comic books and graphic novels on which they are based) have become a multi-billion-pound industry with massive, popular movie franchises. In the USA most such movies hit the lucrative 'sweet spot' of 12A rating. Many fans go to various comic and sci-fi conventions, some even doing cosplay (costume play) to dress up as their favourite heroes or villains. But is all of this focus on superheroes good for us? Or does it mask a sinister side in terms of negative effects on our behaviour?

Scare stories and the media

It turns out that this question is remarkably hard to answer. This is, in part, because there's

Signposts

aggression, body image, eating disorders

a tremendous history of politicians, activists and scholars making overblown statements about the supposed bad influences of various forms of media.

I can remember back when I was growing up and rock music was blamed for everything from suicides to Satanism (and some scholars are still trying to decry the evils of music from rock to rap). It was common to be told, by clueless older adults, that the names of some bands were sinister, such as AC/DC standing for 'Against Christ, Devil's Child' (it actually stands for Alternating Current/Direct Current).

Most infamous in the USA were US Senate hearings that decried the 'Filthy Fifteen',

musical acts that were supposedly ruining society that included everyone from Cyndi Lauper and Madonna to Def Leppard and the aforementioned AC/DC. Few people take the 'Filthy Fifteen' seriously any more, but it's a good case study in how fears of media can become unrestrained and how difficult it can

DESPITE DECADES OF RESEARCH INTO MEDIA VIOLENCE ISSUES, NO SCHOLARLY CONSENSUS EVER EMERGED ABOUT WHETHER SUCH EFFECTS EXIST OR NOT

Evidence suggests superhero movies aren't necessarily the cause of body-image worries

be to separate good science from immoderate fear-mongering.

The claims

With that in mind, there really are several negative issues that tend to pop up as getting a lot of attention regarding superhero culture:

1 The first of these is whether the violence in these movies causes mimicking of this violence by viewers in real life. Or, put another way, is violence in movies one cause of violence in society?

2 A second concern is whether the constant stream of athletic and beautiful physiques on both male and female actors in these movies causes issues of body dissatisfaction (i.e. feeling bad about your own looks) in viewers.

By contrast, other scholars have focused on viewers' motivations for watching superheroes. Is it possible that watching superheroes can help us to feel good about ourselves?

Superhero movies and violence

Back in 2013, several scholars published an article (Bushman et al. 2013) lamenting the alleged rise in violence in movies for the under-13s over the last few decades. The authors claimed (without providing any proof) that such increases in movie violence might give rise to more violence in society and that even simply looking at the image of a gun could make people more aggressive. Granted, we have a lot of gun violence in the USA (as opposed to the UK where you just beat each other up a lot).

Where's the evidence?

However, this article prompted a response by other scholars (Markey et al. 2015) who noted that violence in societies such as the USA and UK *decreased* rather than increased during the same period in which 12A movies became more prevalent and supposedly more violent. Markey and colleagues warned scholars to avoid making extreme claims of the harmfulness of movies, when evidence could not support these claims. Markey and colleagues noted that many scholars had been making exaggerated statements, such



as that the effects of movie violence were similar to those of smoking on lung cancer, or that movie violence could be tied to mass shootings and other serious acts of violence despite considerable evidence to the contrary.

From this exchange we can see that, despite decades of research into media violence issues, no scholarly consensus ever emerged about whether such effects exist or not. Other recent analyses have suggested that there's a general lack of correlation between media violence consumption in society and actual violence in society.

Is there a correlation?

What seems to have happened is that movie violence and societal violence *did* appear to rise together in the mid-twentieth century, but societal violence then began to drop again precipitously in the early 1990s, suggesting that this correlation was a false one. This temporary apparent agreement between movie and real-life violence probably cemented the idea in many people's minds that the two were related, an idea still influencing our discussions years later despite the evaporation of any correlation.



Boys' relationships with superheroes can have a positive impact on self-image

Figure 1 shows the relationship between movie violence and homicides in the US across the twentieth century. The per capita (per 100,000 citizens) homicide rate is represented on the left, and the frequency of movie violence on the right (this is a ratio of the number of minutes of a movie in which violent acts occur, divided between the total number of minutes in the movie). As can be seen, during the mid-twentieth century a correlation seemed to exist. But both prior to the 1940s and after 1990, movie violence and homicide rates went in opposite directions, demonstrating that no correlation, in fact, exists between the two variables.

IF WE KEEP WATCHING ATTRACTIVE PEOPLE IN SUPERHERO MOVIES ALL THE TIME, DO WE FEEL PUNY AND UNATTRACTIVE BY COMPARISON?

A range of reactions

This doesn't necessarily rule out the potential for small, individual reactions to specific movies. Maybe part of the problem is that some adults assumed that all kids would respond to the same movie in more or less the same way. But instead, it seems we all respond to media in different ways. So a superhero movie might make one kid a bit more rambunctious, but another teen might find the same movie calming.

There doesn't seem to be anything special about superhero movies in this regard. You may notice yourself getting angry when you watch or engage with certain media. For instance, a video game that's difficult to beat or move forward in may make you feel frustrated. Or you may notice you get irritated watching a movie you find to be particularly bad. This has nothing specific to do with violent content though. And this scenario

doesn't seem to be very different from folks who get angry when losing at cards and who toss the cards across the room. Ultimately, little evidence emerged that action-oriented superhero movies had 'harmed' youth.

Body image

Another interesting question is whether watching superheroes with athletic physiques or beautiful women with hourglass figures makes us mere mortal viewers anxious about our own appearances. If we keep watching attractive people in superhero movies all the time, do we feel puny and unattractive by comparison?

As with most issues related to media effects, the answer is complicated. There's really very little evidence, for instance, that attractive actresses in movies cause young women to develop full-blown clinical disorders like anorexia nervosa (in which

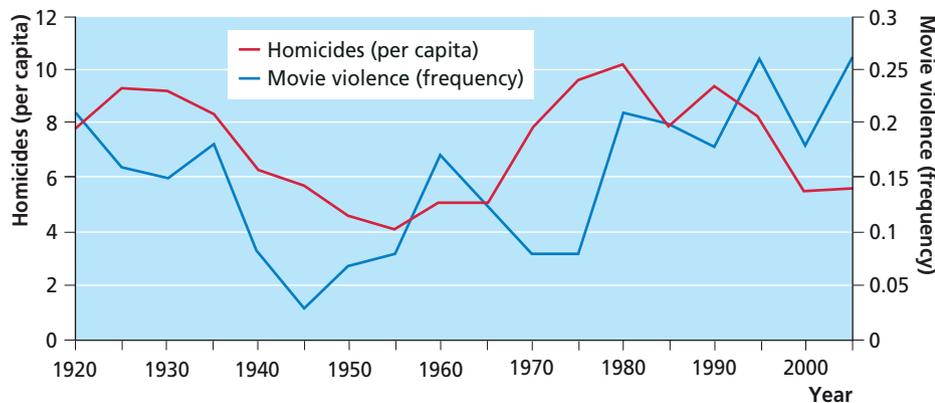


Figure 1 The (lack of) correspondence between movie violence and violence in society

people literally starve themselves to death to become thin).

Boys

For boys, exposure to muscular superheroes may result in slightly negative feelings about one's body. Curiously, however, if it's a superhero the boy really likes, the opposite happens and they actually feel slightly better about themselves (Young et al. 2013).

Girls

For girls, the issue is equally complex. Some people worry that superhero movies may emphasise traditional gender roles, in which women are 'damsels in distress'. However, a recent analysis suggested that this wasn't necessarily the case, with plenty of female superheroes in kick-ass roles (Baker and Raney 2007).

By contrast, research does not indicate that girls and women are the passive victims of their media experiences. Young girls, for instance, appear to be fairly resistant to media messages about beauty. The most that evidence can say is that girls and women who are already worried about their bodies might be reminded of these concerns by movies with attractive actresses, but that these movies did not cause these concerns in the first place.

Why do we watch superhero movies?

So overall, superhero movies don't seem to be the scourge of the planet. Such movies don't seem to be ruining childhood or

causing widespread behavioural problems in kids like some worrying adults might think. But superhero movies tap into some narratives about good versus evil, about people having the (super)power to make a difference in the world, and about being able to choose our own path in life. Superheroes, after all, are typically well-intentioned non-conformists.

Self-determination theory

In understanding their appeal, we can look to one psychological theory called self-determination theory (Przybylski et al. 2010). Self-determination theory suggests that we are drawn to media experiences that help us meet needs that we are having trouble meeting in real life. These typically involve social needs (wanting to hang out with friends), competence needs (feeling like you're good at stuff) or autonomy (feeling like you can make your own choices without other people telling you what to do).

If you think about it for a moment, these are things that can be tough to achieve on a day-to-day basis. Whether at school or work, much of our time is spent doing boring things that others tell us to do. We're not making important choices that have an impact on the world. By relating to the characters in a superhero movie we can feel as if we are getting those needs met vicariously. We can feel autonomous and powerful (i.e. competent) through relating to someone in that position.

Characters from Batman to Deadpool to the Black Widow are, in many respects, living the exciting, important lives we would like to live ourselves. Of course these movies are also just fun and exciting to watch, typically filled with danger, adventure and 'save the world' importance with perhaps a touch of romance along the way.

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Concluding thoughts

What's the overall impact of all this superhero fascination on the way we think? Probably not a whole heck of a lot, at least in the sense of the worry that such movies may be harmful to minors. But for some people, identification with superhero culture, whether just through the movies, or through conventions and cosplay can become an important and positive part of identity expression and socialisation opportunities. So if slithering into skin-tight rubber is your thing, the next time a convention comes to your town, go for it. The only thing at risk is your street cred.

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