

# Study: 'Superwomen' in movies affect real women

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An Angelina Jolie character who crushes a robot in “Tomb Raider” is perceived by young women as a better role model than a mouthy Kathy Bates character who carries a gun in “Primary Colors,” a UC Davis study has found.

The study, using recorded perceptions of movie clips viewed by 122 undergraduate UC Davis students, found that movies reinforce and shape gender roles that expect [women](#) to be attractive and aggressive but also nurturing.

“The media content we watch affects what we expect of others, and probably of ourselves,” said study co-author Laramie D. Taylor, an assistant professor of communications at UC Davis. “When it comes to gender roles, watching these women who can effortlessly do it all leads us to believe, at some level, not only that women can do it all, but that they should.”

The study, “Watching Aggressive, Attractive Female Protagonists Shapes General Roles for Women among Male and Female Undergraduate Viewers,” was published in the journal “Sex Roles.” It was co-authored by Taylor and Tiffany Setters, who was an undergraduate student at the time they collected the data.

Both women and men perceive attractive female leads in movies as better role models than less attractive leads, the study said.

In the experiment, students — both male and female — viewed clips of films featuring “stereotypically attractive” actor Jolie, as well as Bates, in two violent films (“Tomb Raider” and “Primary Colors”). Students also looked at two non-violent films, “Changeling” and “Fried Green Tomatoes,” also featuring female protagonists.

Attractive heroines, regardless of whether they were violent, were seen as better role models for girls and women than less attractive heroines. However, aggressive protagonists were considered better role models than less-aggressive [role models](#) regardless of whether the character was also considered attractive, the study found. The study found that women as well as men — represented equally in the experiment — had increased expectations of women after watching movies in which female leads fulfill both feminine and masculine roles.

“Exposure to attractive, aggressive female characters actually increases expectations on women, including potentially inconsistent roles — after viewing, women were expected to be both more independent and ambitious and more socially connected and nurturing,” the study says.

**More information:** A full copy of the study is available at [www.springerlink.com/content/1...v4g3853/fulltext.pdf](http://www.springerlink.com/content/1...v4g3853/fulltext.pdf)

Provided by UC Davis

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