

# Strong female portrayals eliminate negative effects of violent media

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Men and women are less likely to experience negative effects to sexual violent media when watching a positive portrayal of a strong female character, even when that character is a victim of sexual violence.

Christopher Ferguson, Assistant Professor at Texas A&M International University, surveyed 150 university students in a controlled environment in a recent study published in the *Journal of Communication*. Each participant screened a variety of TV shows that portrayed [women](#) in different lights when it came to [sexual violence](#). The results showed that men and women had less anxiety and negative reactions when viewing television shows that depicted a strong female character rather than a submissive one.

Past research has been inconsistent regarding the effects of sexually [violent media](#) on viewer's hostile attitudes toward women. Much of the previous literature has conflated possible variables such as sexually violent content with depictions of women as subservient

The submissive characters often reflect a negative gender bias that women and men find distasteful. This outweighed the sexual violence itself, giving credence to what Ferguson calls the "Buffy Effect"—named after the popular television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its strong lead female character.

"Although sexual and violent content tends to get a lot of attention, I was surprised by how little impact such content had on attitudes toward

women. Instead it seems to be portrayals of women themselves, positive or negative that have the most impact, irrespective of objectionable content. In focusing so much on violence and sex, we may have been focusing on the wrong things," Ferguson said.

"While it is commonly assumed that viewing sexually violent TV involving women causes men to think negatively of women, the results of this carefully designed study demonstrate that they do so only when women are portrayed as weak or submissive," added *Journal of Communication* editor and University of Washington Professor Malcolm Parks. "Positive depictions of women challenge negative stereotypes even when the content includes sexuality and violence. In this way Ferguson reminds us that viewers often process popular media portrayals in more subtle ways than critics of all political stripes give them credit for."

**More information:** Positive Female Role-Models Eliminate Negative Effects of Sexually Violent Media, By Christopher J. Ferguson; *Journal of Communication* [DOI: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01666.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01666.x)

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