

Men's body image positively impacted by psychological bond with superheroes

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(Medical Xpress)—Batman's awesome power may come not only from his ability to defeat the likes of Mr. Freeze and the Joker, but from the fact that his mere presence makes his devoted fans feel strong and physically fit.

So says Ariana Young, University at Buffalo doctoral candidate in psychology and the principle author of a first-of its-kind study on men's relationships with their favorite superheroes.

Young and fellow UB researchers Shira Gabriel, PhD, associate professor of psychology, and Jordan Hollar, an undergraduate psychology major found that if a man has a parasocial relationship (a one-sided psychological bond) with a muscular superhero, it not only protects him from the typically negative effects of exposure to muscular media ideals, but actually makes him physically stronger.

The study, "Batman to the Rescue! The Protective Effects of Parasocial Relationships with Muscular Superheroes on Men's Body Image," is in press for an upcoming issue of the [Journal of Experimental Social Psychology](#). It is currently online at the journal's [web site](#).

Young points out that body dissatisfaction is a growing problem among men and suggests that this may be partly caused by hyper-muscular ideals rampant in the media.

"Studies show that exposure to muscular media figures contribute to

men's body dissatisfaction," she says. "Men tend to feel bad because, by comparison, their own bodies seem scrawny.

"Although the effects of muscular superheroes on men's [body image](#) had not yet been directly examined, it seemed reasonable to assume that superheroes, too, would provoke [body dissatisfaction](#)," says Young.

"However, we thought it would also be important to consider men's parasocial relationship status with these superheroes. Many people have parasocial bonds with media figures, either real celebrities or fictional characters, and we know from previous research in our lab that identification with these figures can favorably affect how we feel about ourselves," she says.

"People tend to take on the traits of their favorite media figures," Young says. "That is, a person may come to see himself as being more like a favored media figure following exposure. In this case, we thought men might feel stronger after being exposed to a muscular superhero.

"So we hypothesized that the negative effects of exposure to a muscular superhero might be attenuated, even flipped, if men had a parasocial relationship with that superhero," she says.

The researchers conducted two versions of the study—a Batman version and a Spider-Man version—to ensure outcomes were not specific to one particular superhero.

During a pre-testing session, potential participants indicated how much they liked and how familiar they were with Batman and Spiderman (separately). Their responses were then averaged and served as an indicator of their parasocial relationship status with each superhero. Participants with high scores (meaning they had a parasocial bond) and low scores (meaning they did not) for each superhero were recruited for

the study.

Ninety-eight male participants later came in to the lab and viewed a profile of Batman or Spider-Man as part of what they were told was a memory task. The profile included a general biography and a full-body picture of the superhero. The images were manipulated such that some participants saw a muscular version of the superhero and some saw a non-muscular version.

The participants were then asked to indicate their current satisfaction with their own body parts or functions (muscular strength, physical condition, chest, biceps, etc.). Finally, their physical strength was assessed using a hand-held dynamometer, which, when squeezed provides a digital reading of the maximum achieved grip power in pounds.

"Consistent with previous research, men exposed to a muscular superhero with whom they did not have a parasocial bond felt worse about their own bodies," Young says. "However, men exposed to a muscular superhero with whom they did have a parasocial bond not only experienced no harmful effects to their body satisfaction, but also displayed greater physical strength," she says.

Young says, "It would be unfortunate if, as previous research suggests, the thrill of watching a beloved superhero swoop in to save the day inevitably made men and boys feel bad about their own bodies.

"This study shows that this is not always the case, and suggests that the popularity of superheroes may come in part from men who identify with them, and thus experience the psychological benefits of exposure."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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