

Gender and Survival vs. Death in Slasher Films: A Content Analysis¹

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The content of slasher films was examined, focusing on what portion of the violence is directed toward and committed by women vs. men and the survival rates, the juxtaposition of sex and violence for male and female victims, and differences between male and female survivors vs. nonsurvivors. Five student coders analyzed 56 slasher films (474 victims). Female and male victims were portrayed equally frequently in these films. Male characters were as likely to die as female characters as a result of the attack; however, more female than male characters survived the attacks. The slashers were primarily men. Sexiness was paired with nonsurvival of female victims, whereas male nonsurvivors were portrayed as possessing negative masculine traits. The reinforcement of the good vs. bad woman dichotomy and the portrayed cost of unmitigated extreme masculinity in men in slasher films are discussed.

Slasher films have been defined as movies that contain scenes of explicit violence primarily directed toward women, with the violence frequently occurring during or immediately following mildly erotic scenes (Linz, Donnerstein, & Penrod, 1988). Whether, in fact, the explicit violence in these movies is directed primarily toward women and occurs often in close connection with mildly erotic scenes is an empirical question. It is also possible that the fusion of mild sex and explicit violence toward women is overestimated; i.e., subject to illusory correlation effects. Women murdered in a sexualized context may be simply more noticeable (salient and memorable) than men getting killed and noneroticized killings.

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Experimental studies of the effects of viewing R-rated violent films have found increased acceptance of interpersonal violence and rape mythology (Malamuth & Check, 1981); these studies have also found desensitization with carry-over attitudinal effects toward victims of violence (Linz et al., 1984, 1988). For example, after viewing slasher films, college male have less sympathy for a rape victim, see her as less injured, and are more likely to endorse the myth that women enjoy rape.

In light of the negative effects of these R-rated violent movies demonstrated so far and the ready availability of these films to people of all ages, it becomes especially important to empirically investigate the content of these films and their social message. The messages or "interpretive legal texts" (West, 1989) may provide legitimating power to specific gender-related roles. Until the message these films convey has been more precisely deciphered, it will be difficult to gauge the effects of repeated exposure to this genre of films. It would seem particularly important to determine what types of people survive vs. do not survive the typically crazed and seemingly unprovoked assaults of the slasher(s), and if survival qualities vary with gender of victim. Thus, this study examined the context of explicitly violent "slasher" films, focusing on what portion of the violence is directed toward and by women, the extent to which sex is combined with violence toward male and female characters, and how male and female nonsurvivors and survivors are portrayed.

METHOD

Sample of Films

Catalogs from five local video outlets were examined. Only those movies that appeared in four of five catalogs in the "horror" category, eliminating films depicting violence by nonhuman or supernatural forces, from the initial list of 100 movies were included. From these movies, 56 films were randomly selected and assigned to five coders. In the event that coders could not find the particular movies, additional substitution films also were randomly assigned. These films included the popular series: *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Friday the 13th*, and *Halloween*. Table I lists the slasher films coded.

The Coders

Five students enrolled in an upper division psychology research course served as coders and continued with the project after the course had ended. All were women, but varied in age, marital status, religion, and ethnicity.

Table I. Slasher Films Analyzed

Alice Sweet Alice	I Spit on Your Grave
American Gothic	Killer Workout
Anguish	Last House on the Left
April Fool's Day	New Year's Evil
Bloody Birthday	Nightmare on Elm Street I
Chainsaw Massacre II	Nightmare on Elm Street II
Cheerleader Camp	Nightmare on Elm Street III
Chopping Mall	Nightmare on Elm Street IV
Class Reunion Massacre	Prom Night
Color Me Blood Red	Psycho II
Death House	Psycho III
Dream No Evil	Rock and Roll Nightmare
Drive in Massacre	Silent Night, Deadly Night
Fatal Pulse	Silent Night, Deadly Night II
Friday the 13th I	Silent Scream
Friday 13th III	Slaughter High
Friday the 13th IV	Sleepaway Camp
Friday the 13th V	Sleepaway Camp II
Friday the 13th VI	Slumber Party Massacre
Frightmare	Slumber Party Massacre II
Girl's Nite	The Black Room
Halloween	The Burning
Halloween II	The Deadly Intruder
Happy Birthday to Me	To All a Good Night
Hell Night	Toolbox Murders
Hello Mary Lou	Unsane
I Dismember Mama	Friday 13th VII

Coding Categories

Material coded included sexual categories: provocative clothing, revealing clothing, nudity, use of sexual and/or obscene language, undressing behavior, initiation of sexual contact, and promiscuity. Revealing clothing was coded present when sexual body areas were exposed. A nonrevealing garment was coded as revealing when the struggle or attack caused exposure. Provocative clothing was defined as clothing designed to elicit a sexual response. Promiscuity was defined as the indication or portrayal that the victim had engaged in sex with more than one partner. The category "undressing" indicated disrobing whether the context was sexual or not (e.g., changing clothes, preparing to bathe). Obscene language was defined as profane verbalizations (or language deemed unsuitable for usual social conduct), including derogatory or abusing language. Sexual language was indicated by statements referring to sex or sexual activities. Certain statements were coded in both the obscene and sexual language categories. Nonnormative behavior was limited to illegal activities (e.g., use of drugs or alcohol by adolescents) or activities that violate commonly shared norms for social conduct (e.g., eating pizza using a cadaver as the table top).

A "sex present" category indicated the direct juxtaposition of sex and violence, i.e., the engaging in sexual activity immediately preceding the slashing, whereas a "sex prior" category coded sexual activity in scenes prior to the attack. Present sex was further broken down into the following behaviors: flirting, kissing, petting, exposed breasts or genitalia, masturbation, intercourse, or forced sex. Provocation by the victim was coded if the victim had provoked the attacker in any way prior to the attack, such as name calling or taunting. In addition to the coding of sexual indicators, victims were categorized on general characteristics or traits. The victims' sex and whether they survived the slashing were coded, as well as survival promotive traits, including intelligent, heroic, resourceful, and levelheaded. For victims to be coded as intelligent, they had to display a behavior that indicated intelligence, such as know the identity of the slasher through subtle cues. Victims were coded as resourceful when they utilized other than typical methods of self-protection, such as devising a plan to trap the slasher, and levelheaded when they remained calm in dangerous situations. Heroic was coded when victims put themselves in danger to help another person.

Positive and negative gender-typed traits were assessed including the masculine traits of assertive, independent, egotistical, dictatorial, and cynical, and the feminine traits of empathic, passive, inane, and expressive. Assertive was coded when the victims showed the ability to take charge of the situation and independent when displaying a reliance on self instead of others. Empathic was coded when the victims displayed understanding for the feelings or ideas of another and expressive when they displayed the ability to communicate feelings openly. Egotistical was coded when the victims displayed an exaggerated sense of self-importance, dictatorial when the victims told others what to do in an overbearing way, and cynical when the victim displayed a negative and selfish attitude. Victims were coded as inane when they acted silly or foolish in a serious situation, and passive when they refused to fight back or allowed themselves to be led by others. Physical attractiveness was noted as well. These categories were observed and noted on a present/absent basis. The overall intercoder reliability, based on coding of two films, was 87% agreement, with percent agreements ranging from .75 to 1.00.

RESULTS

Two by two chi-squares were run to determine statistical significance of gender and survivor/nonsurvivor differences in the presence of the specified indicators, using a $p < .05$ critical probability. Then four analyses were run for each indicator: female nonsurvivors vs. male nonsurvivors, female

Table II. Percent Presence of Sexuality Indicators Among Female and Male Nonsurvivors and Survivors in Slasher Films^a

Category	% Nonsurvivors ^b		% Survivors ^c	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Revealing clothing	46	8 _a	23	4 _a
Provocative clothing	46	6 _a	20	0 _a
Nude	19	6 _a	7 _b	4 _{ab}
Undressing	35	10 _{ab}	16 _{bc}	16 _{ac}
Promiscuous	21	4 _a	0 _b	4 _{ab}
Sexual language	32 _a	33 _a	11 _b	4 _b
Initiated sex	21 _{ab}	32	14 _{ac}	28 _{bc}
Sex prior	33 _{ab}	26 _a	9 _b	28
Sex at slashing	35	21 _a	9	32 _a

^aPercents having the same subscripts are not significantly different at $p < .05$.

^b $n = 188$ females, 217 males.

^c $n = 44$ females, 25 males.

survivors vs. male survivors, female nonsurvivors vs. female survivors, and male nonsurvivors vs. male survivors.

The total number of victims, survivors and nonsurvivors, was 474, with 232 female (49%) and 242 male victims (51%). Of the victims who did not survive the attack, 188 were female and 217 male; thus, 81% of the female victims and 90% of the male victims did not survive. The two by two (gender of victim and survival/death) chi-square was significant [$\chi^2 (1, N = 474) = 7.10, p < .008$].

No difference was found between either the number of male and female victims in general, or between the male and female nonsurvivors ($p > .05$). A significantly greater number of females (44) than males (25) survived the slashing ($\chi^2 = 5.28, p = .02$). Of the 63 slashers, 45 or 71% were male and 18 or 29% were female ($\chi^2 = 11.57, p = .001$). Thus, female characters were no more likely to be victims or nonsurvivors than male characters; however, more female than male victims survived the slashings.

Sexuality Indicators

Gender differences were found on a number of sexual indicators comparing female and male nonsurvivors ($N = 405$). As seen in Table II, female nonsurvivors wore revealing ($\chi^2 = 70.78, p = .000$) and provocative clothing ($\chi^2 = 90.55, p = .000$), were nude ($\chi^2 = 16.82, p = .000$), were shown undressing ($\chi^2 = 36.92, P = .000$), and were presented as promiscuous ($\chi^2 = 7.90, p = .005$) more frequently than male nonsurvivors. Nonsurviving males initiated sexual contact more frequently ($\chi^2 = 5.67, p = .016$), but

did not use sexual language more frequently than female nonsurvivors ($\chi^2 = .025$, ns). No difference was found in sexual behavior of male and female nonsurvivors prior to the slashing scene ($\chi^2 = 2.19$, $p = .14$), but female nonsurvivors were more frequently engaged in sexual behavior immediately preceding the slashing ($\chi^2 = 9.75$, $p = .002$). Fifteen instances of forced sex occurred, with 14 of the 15 committed by or toward nonsurvivors. Twenty-three instances of voluntary intercourse were coded, with most by nonsurvivors (21), and were not related to gender.

A few sexuality differences were found between male and female survivors ($n = 69$): revealing clothing ($\chi^2 = 4.17$, $p = .038$), and provocative clothing ($\chi^2 = 5.88$, $p = .015$), with surviving females wearing more revealing and provocative clothing. In terms of the presence of sexual behavior juxtaposed with the slashing ($\chi^2 = 5.82$, $p = .015$) and sexual activity at some time prior to the slashing ($\chi^2 = 4.25$, $p = .037$), more male survivors displayed sexual behavior than female survivors.

When the nonsurviving females were compared to the surviving females ($p = 232$), consistent differences were found in expressed sexuality between the two sets of female characters. As seen in Table II, the nonsurviving females wore revealing ($\chi^2 = 7.13$, $p = .008$) and provocative clothing ($\chi^2 = 9.80$, $p = .002$), appeared nude ($\chi^2 = 3.62$, $p = .05$), used sexual language ($\chi^2 = 7.79$, $p = .006$), were shown undressing ($\chi^2 = 6.09$, $p = .013$), were shown engaging in sexual activity at the time of the slashing ($\chi^2 = 11.08$, $p = .001$), and were rated as promiscuous more often than the surviving females ($\chi^2 = 11.31$, $p = .001$). The nonsurviving females were also seen engaging in more nonnormative behavior than the surviving females ($\chi^2 = 4.82$, $p = .026$).

Only one significant difference between male nonsurvivors and male survivors was found: sexual language was used more frequently by the nonsurviving male than by the surviving male [$\chi^2(1, N = 242) = 9.06$, $p = .003$].

Traits

Do certain qualities distinguish between male survivors and nonsurvivors, and other qualities between female survivors and nonsurvivors? With respect to the kind of qualities related to survival per se, both female and male survivors were rated more intelligent, heroic, resourceful, and level-headed than their nonsurviving counterparts (see Table III): female survivors vs. female nonsurvivors χ^2 s = 42.00, 79.55, and 79.32, 59.15 respectively, $ps = .000$; male survivors vs. male nonsurvivors, χ^2 s = 19.71, 27.96, 11.44, 11.84, respectively, $ps = .001$ or lower. The female nonsurvivors were rated

Table III. Percent Rated Traits and Behaviors of Female and Male Nonsurvivors in Slasher Films^a

Trait category	% Nonsurvivors ^b		% Survivors ^c	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Attractive	92	67	75 _a	88 _a
Intelligent	14 _a	15 _a	59 _b	52 _b
Heroic	4	10	54 _a	48 _a
Resourceful	10 _a	13 _a	70 _b	48 _b
Levelheaded	9 _a	11 _a	59 _b	36 _b
Independent	13	26 _a	59 _b	40 _{ab}
Assertive	28 _a	36 _{ab}	57 _c	44 _{bc}
Empathic	16 _a	12 _a	57 _b	40 _b
Expressive	17 _a	12 _a	48 _b	28 _b
Egotistical	10 _a	24 _b	9 _{ac}	12 _{bc}
Dictatorial	10 _a	19 _b	11 _{ac}	8 _{bc}
Cynical	13 _a	26	7 _{ab}	4 _b
Passive	15 _a	9	9 _{ab}	24 _b
Inane	30	8 _a	0 _b	0 _{ab}
Provoked attack	4	14 _a	14 _b	4 _{ab}
Obscene language	18 _{ab}	30	16 _{ac}	16 _{bc}
Nonnormative behavior	27	46 _a	11 _b	28 _{ab}

^aPercents having the same subscripts are not significantly different at $p < .05$.

^b $n = 188$ females, 217 males.

^c $n = 44$ females, 25 males.

more physically attractive than the female survivors ($\chi^2 = 36.86, p = .000$), whereas the male nonsurvivors were rated less attractive than the male survivors ($\chi^2 = 4.53, p = .031$).

A greater percent of female survivors were rated as having both the positive expressive and instrumental (sex-typed) traits than the female nonsurvivors ($n = 232$), including assertive, empathic, independent, and expressive (χ^2 s = 13.98, $p = .006$; $\chi^2 = 32.91, p = .000$; $\chi^2 = 43.60, p = .000$; and $\chi^2 = 19.07, p = .000$, respectively). The female survivor was more likely to have provoked the slasher than the female nonsurvivor ($\chi^2 = 11.31, p = .001$). Differences in silliness or inanity were found, with no female survivors seen as inane ($\chi^2 = 17.69, p = .000$). No significant differences were found between female survivors and nonsurvivors on the negative masculine traits (cynical, dictatorial, egotistical) or on the female negative trait of passivity.

The comparison of male survivors and nonsurvivors ($n = 242$) suggested that male survivors demonstrated more positive feminine qualities, with male survivors more frequently rated empathic and expressive and less frequently rated cynical than the male nonsurvivors (χ^2 s = 13.89, $p = .004$; $\chi^2 = 4.88, p = .025$; and $\chi^2 = 6.10, p = .01$, respectively). No significant differences on any traits were found between male and female survivors.

The trait differences found between male and female nonsurvivors were on the negative sex-typed traits. The female nonsurvivors was less likely to be rated egotistical, dictatorial, and cynical, and more likely to be rated passive and inane, although physically attractive (χ^2 s = 14.13, $p = .000$; $\chi^2 = 7.54$, $p = .006$; $\chi^2 = 11.48$, $p = .001$; $\chi^2 = 4.29$, $p = .06$; and $\chi^2 = 32.38$, $p = .000$, respectively). The male nonsurvivors were more likely to have provoked the slasher than their female counterparts ($\chi^2 = 10.85$, $p = .001$), used obscene language ($\chi^2 = 7.15$, $p = .008$), and also engaged in nonnormative behavior more frequently ($\chi^2 = 14.77$, $p = .000$).

DISCUSSION

Women were not more likely to be victims of slashers nor were they less likely to survive when victimized. In fact, they were more likely to survive than male victims. These data are clearly inconsistent with the definition of slasher films offered by Donnerstein et al. (1987), who assert that these films show violence directed primarily toward female characters. One explanation for the perception that women are the more frequent victims in slasher films may be that the most memorable films and/or scenes have female victims, especially when sex is involved. Also, the rules of chivalry and women's seemingly protected status may make instances of the murder of females more salient and, hence, more memorable. Possibly, the most well-known slasher films have a preponderance of female victims. Certainly, films vary in the sex of victim and to a lesser extent, the sex of the slasher.

Donnerstein et al. (1987) were correct in speculating that "slasher" films are characterized by the pairing of sex and violence for both men and women. A relatively large percent of the nonsurviving victims were engaging in some sexual activity either prior to the attack or immediately preceding it (33–35%). Therefore, these films could be described as pairing sex and violence both within the larger context of the film and the smaller context of the scene.

On almost every measure on sexual appearance or sexuality, the nonsurviving females were more frequently sexual than both the surviving females and the nonsurviving males. More important, surviving as a female slasher victim was strongly associated with the relative absence of sexual behavior. This message about female sexuality is somewhat different from that of pornography, which supports the rape myths that women enjoy and elicit sexual abuse (Cowan, Lee, Levy, & Snyder, 1988). In slasher films, sexual abuse by the male partner appears to be relatively rare and the implication that women desire and enjoy rape is not the message. In slasher films, the message appears to be that sexual women get killed and only the pure wom-

en survive. This message that the good woman is asexual and the bad (and therefore dead) woman is sexual, however, may be almost as pernicious as the message conveyed in pornography that violence can be fun for women. Given the high level exposure of young people to this message—those who are in sexually formative years, coupled with the sex equals death message surrounding AIDS, this message is particularly problematic. Slasher films reinforce the idea that female sexuality is costly . . . at least for females. Janet Matlin, a film critic for the *New York Times*, has interpreted the pairing of mild erotic scenes with explicit violence as intended to lull the viewer, thereby heightening the effects of the violence (cited in Donnerstein et al., 1987). If mainly female nonsurvivors are portrayed as sexual, the selective pairing of erotic female images with killing is more meaningful than a sedative effect with regard to the social messages contained in slasher films.

Aside from sexuality, the largest differences were between the survivors and nonsurvivors, regardless of gender, but the patterning and therefore meaning varied with gender when within-gender comparisons were made. Both the male and female survivors were seen as having the types of traits that would enable them to survive. Few differences, and none in character traits, were found between the male and female survivors. The female survivors were not only the “good” girls, but also more androgynous, less inane, and less physically attractive than the nonsurviving females. Aside from sexuality, the social message about women has some positive elements, emphasizing that survival for women depends on competence and instrumentality, but not at the expense of the feminine-valued traits.

In contrast, the outstanding features of male nonsurvivors were negative behavior and attitudes, with more obvious character flaws—cynical, using obscenities, behaving in illegal and counternormative ways, and in comparison to female nonsurvivors, egotistical and dictatorial. The strength associated with the male role serves female characters well but is a detriment to male characters when extreme. Perhaps the social message about men is that they need to shed the excesses of masculinity to survive and unmitigated masculinity ends in death, an historically modern message. The message about women has been in existence as far back as the story of Adam and Eve—that there is something inherently evil about female sexuality. Thus, the effects of reduced sympathy toward rape victims by viewers of slasher films (Linz et al., 1988) is not surprising, given the sexual objectification of women and denigration of female sexuality in slasher films. The portrayal of female nonsurvivors in essentially sexual terms may contribute to the finding that men enjoy graphic depictions of horror more than women (Mundorf, Weaver, & Zillmann, 1989). Interestingly, gender roles are involved in the expectations that female viewers will be more frightened when watching horror movies than male viewers (Mundorf et al., 1989). Future work

on whether the viewers of slasher films are receiving, comprehending, and persuaded by the gender-specific messages in these films is needed.

Two limitations of this study are notable. First, the sample size of survivors, particularly male survivors, is small, and consequently significant differences are more likely in the comparisons involving nonsurvivors than that between male and female survivors. Second, the potential observer bias in ratings, despite adequate reliability, is difficult to control because it was not possible to disguise the sex of the victims.

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