Lady and the Vamp: Roles, Sexualization, and Brutalization of Women in Slasher Films

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Abstract

Slasher films are known for their graphic depictions of sex, brutalization and death. Many argue that these films sexualize and punish female characters. A content analysis of 48 influential slasher films from the 1960s to 2010s was conducted to evaluate the presentation of women in these films. Sexualization (measured via specific acts and total sexualization), strength, flaws, brutalization, and fate were coded for 252 female characters. Results indicate that purity was significantly related to lower brutalization and lower rates of death for all women. Within each role (hero, killer, and potential/actual victim), unique portrayals of sexuality and related repercussions emerge. Female killers were most commonly portrayed having sex, heroes were most sexually dressed, and actual/potential victims were brutalized and killed most for their sexualization. These messages reinforce ideas of gender roles, stereotypes, and relationship expectations by punishing female sexualization and demonizing female sex. Issues of violence against women, toxic masculinity, rape culture, and the normalization of combining violence and sex are discussed as significant concerns.

Keywords Sexuality · Sexualization · Violence · Women · Slashers · Film

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Introduction

"There are certain rules that one must abide by in order to successfully survive a horror movie! For instance, Number 1: You can never have sex. Sex equals death, OK?".
—Randy, *Scream* (Craven 1996).
"I always believe in following the advice of the playwright Sardou. He said, 'Torture the women!' The trouble today is that we don't torture women enough."
—Alfred Hitchcock (Spoto 1983, p. 483).
"I like women, especially beautiful ones. If they have a good face and figure, I would much prefer to watch them being murdered than an ugly girl or a man".
—Dario Argento (Schoell 1985, p. 54).

Of all film genres, the relationship between women and horror/slashers may be the most complicated. In terms of onscreen camera time and speaking roles, horror films feature women more predominately than men (Smith 2020; Google 2017). Within these movies, some of the most iconic and powerful female characters emerge. In terms of fan favorite killers, women like Pamela Voorhees in *Friday the 13th* (1980) and Jill Roberts of *Scream 4* (2011) top the list. These films are also remembered for iconic heroines, Dana Polk of *Cabin in the Woods* (2012) and Sally Hardesty in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) exhibit ultimate strength and power.

However, the quotes above capture the way in which these films simultaneously cast women in stereotypical and degrading manners. From brutal death scenes and sexualization, for all the genre does to advance female characters, it equally or more so damages perceptions of the gender. From the classic scene of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* where Marion is killed while nude in the shower to Casey Becker's gruesome killing after a flirtatious phone call with her killer in *Scream*, sexualized or sexual women are punished severely across the genre.

Literature Review

Western culture assigns feminine qualities such as emotional expression, purity, style, virtue, and motherhood to women (Laurie et al. 1999). Women are viewed as lacking traditional male traits such as strength and intelligence, thus creating a reliance on men. Despite a cultural requirement to exhibit aesthetic attractiveness, women must also present as pure and obedient (Laurie et al. 1999). Those in Western society subscribe to a dichotomous view of females as good girls or bad girls. These traditional definitions of virtue and femininity define sexual activity as damaging to women and require that women place restrictions on sexuality and sexual activity (Byers 1995). Consistent with Freud's Madona-Whore Complex, women who subscribe to these gender roles are known as "good girls," "virgins," or "Madonas" while those who do not are "vamps," "whores," or "bad girls." The "vamp,"

uses her sexuality to attract attention and get her way, existing both because of and for men. She often lures male characters into deadly traps (Byers 1995; Johnston 2009). In slasher films, a woman's highly sexual nature extends risk to all characters including herself (i.e. Welsh 2010). While many of Freud's theories seem outdated and sexist, the Madona-Whore Complex is quite pervasive in modern gender roles, relationship expectations and culture. Women are shamed for sexuality, but expected to stay thin, attractive and youthful to achieve a needed sexual prestige in society (Hartmann 2009).

Female sexuality often results in extreme consequences. Women who do not conform to societal demands for purity are deemed whores and responsible for any transgressions committed against them (Lacombe 2002). This victim-blaming comes from the devaluing of sexual women. She is not only deserving of the assault but actually instigated it with her dress or behavior (Lacombe 2002). For example, Schuller and Hastings (2002) found that when participants were aware of a female victim's sexual history, they were considered more blameworthy and less credible than those without a sexual history. If able to reposition the blame to the victim, it is possible for others to deny suffering and explain away sexual abuse and assault (Beck et al. 2012; Sinclair and Bourne 1998). This victim-blaming attitude contributes to deeply engrained rape myths, including beliefs such as a woman's dress invites sexual assault, women ask to be raped, men cannot control their desires, and rape is a widely held fantasy of women (Beck et al. 2012). By assuming a victim is responsible for their own victimization as a result of "bad behaviors" such as sex, there is comfort in the idea that bad things only happen to bad people in our "just" world (Sinclair and Bourne 1998).

Slasher films also contribute to the emphasis on traditional Western expectations for men, known as toxic masculinity, by reinforcing gender roles. Entitlement to sex, infantilization of women, glorification of violence, hyper-competitiveness, misogyny, and heteronormativity are, therefore, normalized (Sculos 2017). Toxic masculinity can lead to physical health risks, mental health disorders and higher rates of substance abuse in men (APA 2008). It also has the potential to skew males' sexual relationships and views of their own partners, creating unrealistic definitions of beauty and unhealthy expectations for sex (Byers 1995; Hartmann 2009).

Portrayals in film reinforce these stereotypes and the way we view gender. Female characters are not seen on screen as frequently as males. In an analysis of 1200 popular films (Smith et al. 2019), only 12.3% had a balance cast, and males were cast in roles more than twice as often as females. In the top 100 films of 2018, 39 films had a female lead or co-lead character, and of these female leads, most were Caucasian and under the age of 45. When exploring how women are portrayed in these top films, they are far more sexualized and objectified than their male counterparts. Females were presented in sexy attire nearly 30% of the time compared to 7.4% in males, nude 27.3% compared to 8.5%, and referred to as attractive 10.2% of the time compared to 2.7%. Perhaps most disturbing is that young female characters ages 13–20 were sexualized at the same rates as 21–39-year-old female actresses.

Several studies have explored gender portrayals in slasher films. Compared to other genres, slasher films often have a higher ratio of female to male characters (Sapolsky et al. 2003), yet the treatment applied to each gender is distinct. Male

characters often provide direction for the female characters, who present as less intelligent, less resourceful, weaker and more anxious (Brewer 2009; Keisner 2008). In slasher films specifically, violence against female characters tends to be more frequent (Donnerstein et al. 1987), longer (Sapolsky et al. 2003), and more torturous both physically and mentally (Brewer 2009). Clover (1992) argues that the brutalization in slasher films mirrors that of abuse in real life, with women victimized more frequently and more aggressively than men. When an attack ended with death, female characters also had longer deaths than the male characters (Weaver 1991).

Scholars have often focused on the ways in which sex, sexualization, violence and gender are related in these films. Traditional gender roles, the Madona-Whore Complex, and victim-blaming attitudes extend to the slasher genre. In many of these movies, violence occurs during or shortly after an erotic scene (Linz et al. 1988). Welsh (2010) found that sexualized female characters are tortured and attacked longer than non-sexualized females. Sexualized females may also be more likely to die, while the good girls, who appeared as more masculine and less attractive, were more likely to live (Cowan and O'Brien 1990). Not all scholars agree. Menard et al. (2019), argue that sex itself does not lead to an increased chance of death among female characters, but that nudity, provocative dress, character flaws and failure to defend oneself were significant predictor of death. Similarly, Sapolsky et al. (2003), found no significant relationship between sexual imagery and the death of female characters.

Beyond the stereotypical victim role, female heroes and killers are also presented within these films. Despite the fact that females have gained more protagonist roles in slasher films since the 1970s, they are frequently portrayed as pure and worthy of survival, finding the strength to conquer the killer (Clover 1992). The trope of the "Final Girl" includes the valuable female who is left to tell the horrific tale. She serves to move the narrative forward with her intelligence, vigilance, and curiosity. "Final Girls" are often presented as physically attractive yet androgynous, not sexually active and more prosocial than other characters (Weaver et al. 2015). In the end, the once pure "Final Girl" begins to exhibit masculine traits by demonstrating significant strength and/or utilizing a weapon (Clover 1992). Similarly, the female killers in these films are often asexual, androgynous, or more masculine than feminine (Clover 1992; Rockoff 2011).

The current study explores 48 influential slasher films to measure how female characters are portrayed and the impact of their sexualization and sexual behaviors in regard to fate and brutalization. In addition to overall female portrayal, the goal is to explore various character roles (hero, killer, other potential/actual victim) to measure the way in which females are presented within each.

Methodology

Film Sample Frame

This study focuses on influential slasher films from the 1960s to 2010s. To select which films would be included for analysis, 13 lists of slasher films noted as being

"the best," "the greatest," "top" or "most influential" in this genre were compiled (Barone 2017; Bonner and Tannenbaum 2019; Esquire Editors 2018; Gursky 2016; Harris 2018; Murrian 2020; Navarro 2018; Ranker 2018; Ricard 2019; Top Ten 2019; Vorel 2019; Wales 2014; Wilson 2017). Researchers believe that by analyzing the most critically recognized and culturally influential films, results will be most indicative of the nature of these films, character portrayal and the larger societal influence of such movies. While these lists varied in length (from 10 to 100 titles), there was significant overlap in the top 10–30 films across these lists. As the lists grew longer there was variance in titles, given that each creator had their own definition of what constitutes a slasher film (Barone 2017; Navarro 2018; Vorel 2019). From these lists, an initial sampling frame of 91 films was developed, noting where the film ranked on each of the lists and on how many lists the film appeared.

To narrow the frame, two criteria were used. Any film that received a top 10 recognition on any of the lists was included, and any film that was in the frame and appeared on seven or more of the 13 lists remained in the sample. 43 films were identified using this selection criteria.

The researchers wanted a minimum of five films per decade to ensure representation over time, and this original list contained five or more films per decade with the exception of 1960s and the 2010s. After a careful review of the original top slasher films yielded no more 1960s films, a specific list of 1960s slasher films (Ranker 2018) was used to add two more titles to the list. In the decade starting with 2010, only one film was identified for inclusion using our primary criteria for selection. To bring that total up to five, four more slasher films made in that decade were added to the sample. Each of these four films were close to inclusion and were simply the highest-ranking selection possible after the exhausted use of our first two criteria. The highest ranked films on this list that were not already on the list were newly included. Given the additions in the 1960s and 2010s our total sample is 48. See Table 1 for the complete list of films included in the analysis.

Measures and Unit of Analysis

The individual characters played in the selected films served as our unit of analysis. While each film had more characters than were coded (even beyond the "extras" used to populate specific scenes), all characters meeting the following two criterion thresholds were included in the completed statistical analysis. (1) Any character who had singular contact with the killer was included. If, however, the slasher was moving through a crowd it became impossible to track characters and account for contacts. (2) Any character who did not have singular contact with the killer but appeared in more than one scene with a talking part was also included. The significance of the role made it seen at least possible that the slasher would eventually contact that player as a potential victim. In total, across the 48 films that were selected, 578 characters (male and female) were coded. The current study specifically examines the 252 female characters in the dataset, excluding male characters from the analysis.

Table 1 Complete sample film list by title and year

Film title	Year	Film title	Year
Peeping Tom	1960	Tenebrae	1982
Psycho	1960	Sleepaway Camp	1983
Blood Feast[a]	1963	A Nightmare on Elm Street	1984
Dementia 13[a]	1963	Friday the 13th: killer cut—Part 4	1984
Blood and Black Lace	1964	Friday the 13th Part 6: Jason Lives	1986
A Bay of Blood	1971	A Nightmare on Elm Street 3	1987
Torso	1973	The Stepfather	1987
Black Christmas	1974	Child's Play	1988
Texas Chainsaw Massacre	1974	Evil Dead Trap	1988
Deep Red	1975	Silence of the Lambs	1991
Alice Sweet Alice	1976	Candyman	1992
The Hills Have Eyes	1977	Scream	1996
Halloween	1978	I Know What You Did Last Summer	1997
Alien	1979	Scream 2	1998
Friday the 13th	1980	Final Destination	2000
Maniac	1980	Texas Chainsaw Massacre-Remake	2003
Prom Night	1980	Freddy v Jason	2003
The Burning	1981	Saw	2004
The Prowler	1981	Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon	2006
My Bloody Valentine	1981	You're Next	2011
Friday the 13th Part 2	1981	Scream 4[a]	2011
The Funhouse	1981	Silent Night[a]	2012
Halloween 3	1982	Cabin in the Woods[a]	2012
Alone in The Dark	1982	Suspiria[a]	2018

[a]Movie not in original list. Added as the result of being listed as a top slasher film in a given decade to provide a minimum of 5 films per decade

In total, nine specific factors were measured for each coded character. Two of these constructs were clear: race and gender. Seven of the constructs merit full elaboration. Further explanations about the construct and its coding process are provided for character role, sexualization, strength, personal fate, personal flaws, and brutalization and impact on the killer's fate.

Character role was coded one of the three ways: killer, hero, or other. The hero character displayed heroic acts to protect others, themselves and/or the community in these films by confronting the killer, killing the killer, saving others, and various selfless acts. Unique to this study, killers were included in the sample to measure how this specific role influenced the portrayal of the female character. "Other" referred to potential or actual victim characters in the films that were at risk of being in contact with the killer, attacked, or killed.

Sexualization was first measured along four specific dimensions in a dichotomous manner: present or absent. Therefore, if a sexualization factor was ever present for

the character, they were coded as having that characteristic "present," while those who did not were coded as "absent." These factors include dress (revealing clothes, swimwear), attitude (discussions of sex and attempts to engage in it), sex/foreplay (manifest sexual behavior including kissing passionately and fondling) and nudity (buttocks, chest [men or women] or genitals). These individual items were then tallied to give each character a total sexualization score ranging from 0 to 4. A final category was created for the current paper to reflect character purity. Characters who scored a 0 on the total sexualization score were coded as "pure" while characters who exhibited 1–4 of the individual sexualization factors was considered "not pure."

Character strength was measured as strong, neither or weak. The strength of the character was evaluated in moments of stress or immediate threat and was a reflection of physical and/or emotional strength exhibited. Strong characters tended to lead threatened groups, attack the attacker and sacrifice themselves for others. There is clear indication of purpose and plan in their behaviors. Weak characters ran from danger, were prone to hysterics, or behaved in a way that contributed to their death. Those who received a "neither" showed no clear inclination in purpose in relation to dealing with their situation, the attacker, or group safety.

A character's personal fate in relation to the slasher was recorded as "killed," "survived," or "no contact". It is important to note that it was only the character's actual outcome that was used for analysis. Several of the films had dreams sequences or character premonitions that were acted out in the film but were fictions in the contexts the story's depicted world. These were ignored in analysis.

The slasher's fate in relation to a particular character was also identified in one of three ways. These fates were categorized as "killed by the character", "captured by the character" or "neither." While the ultimate fate of the slasher was often brought into question as a viewer manipulation or a dramatic device (e.g. the body disappears after the slasher is presumed dead or you hear the slasher's voice somehow back from the dead), if the potential victim survived, the slasher should have been reasonably killed, and the attack was ultimately stopped, it was counted as a kill for the character. For the purposes of this study, characters who had captured or killed the killer and they themselves were not a killer too were deemed heroes.

Presence of personal flaws was a binary assessment; the character had one (or more) issue written into their current behaviors and back-story or they did not. These flaws demonstrated a moral or behavioral lapse or condition in the character. There were a variety of flaws apparent, but the most common types were: (1) stereotypical "mean girl" (2) drug/excessive alcohol use; (3) criminal behavior and; (4) marital infidelity.

Brutalization was measured on a nine-point scale. A score of 1 suggested only a mild visual presentation of a personal attack while a score of 9 suggested an extremely visceral visual gory attack. See "Appendix" for the full scale.

Procedure

Before the content analysis could begin, it was necessary to identify and define research questions and variables that would be measurable across films. Each

researcher viewed a sub-sample of six films, recording which variables they observed consistently across their movies. Once this preliminary viewing was complete, the researchers compiled a list of final variables, carefully operationalized the construct, and added the measure to the master code sheet. With the master code sheet, each research simultaneously coded the first six films to insure consistency and agreement. Cronbach's alpha = 0.91, indicating high internal consistency and reliability among the researchers' coding (Krippendorff 2018). A full content analysis was then performed on the complete film sample, limiting each researcher to a maximum of two films in a single sitting to prevent fatigue.

Results

This study focuses on the presentation of female characters in slasher films. The results are divided into five parts: Part I explores the presentation of all female characters and the impact of purity within the films; Part II–IV explore the portrayals, stereotypes, and significant factors impacting the character by role (potential victim/ victim, hero, killer); Part V compares the three roles for similarities and differences.

Part 1 includes an analysis of all 252 female characters. Table 2 details the overall demographics of the entire sample of females coded for analysis.

To test whether virgins are brutalized less than sexualized characters, an independent sample t-test was conducted. Results indicated that there were significant differences in the mean brutalization of "pure" characters and "sexualized" female characters (t(204) = − 2.761, p = 0.006). The average brutalization for the pure characters was 4.23 (SD = 2.341) compared to 5.25 for "sexualized" females. See Table 3.

To further explore character treatment based on level of sexualization, a chi-square test was performed to see if significant difference existed between pure female characters (N = 92) to sexualized female characters (N = 160) in regard to their fate (lived vs. died). The difference was significant, with pure characters being significantly less likely to die than sexualized characters (X^2(1) = 11.059, p = 0.001).

Table 2 Demographics of all female characters (N = 252)

Race	W = 238 (94.4)		NW = 14 (5.6)
Dress	Yes = 142 (56.3)		No = 110 (43.7)
Attitude	Yes = 115 (45.6)		No = 137 (54.4)
Sex	Yes = 89 (35.3)		No = 163 (64.7)
Nudity	Yes = 80 (31.7)		No = 172 (68.3)
Pure	Yes = 92 (36.5)		No = 160 (63.5)
Flawed	Yes = 109 (42.5)		No = 143 (57.5)
Fate	Lived = 96 (37.7)		Died = 156 (62.3)
Strength	S = 93 (36.9)	N = 61 (24.2)	W = 98 (38.9)
Total sexualization	Mean = 1.67; SD = 1.558		
Total brutalization	Mean = 4.94; SD = 2.491 (N = 206)		

Table 3 Independent *t* test results all female characters

	N	M	SD	T	p
Brutalization				− 2.761	.006**
Pure	64	4.23	2.314		
Not pure	142	5.25	2.511		

** Significant .01

Table 4 Chi-square results testing fate of all female characters

Variables	Overall	Lived	Died	Chi square test of independence
Pure				
Yes	92	47 (49.5)	45 (28.7)	$X^2(1)=11.059$
No	160	48 (50.5)	112 (71.3)	$p=.001$**

** Significant .01

Table 5 Demographics of potential/actual victim characters (N=204)

Race	W=191 (93.6)		NW=13 (6.4)
Dress	Yes=112 (54.9)		No=92 (45.1)
Attitude	Yes=97 (47.5)		No=107 (52.5)
Sex	Yes=74 (36.3)		No=130 (63.7)
Nudity	Yes=66 (32.4)		No=138 (67.6)
Pure	Yes=76 (37.3)		No=128 (62.7)
Flawed	Yes=86 (42.2)		No=118 (57.8)
Fate	Lived=57 (27.9)		Died=147 (72.1)
Strength	S=55 (27)	N=59 (28.9)	W=90 (44.1)
Total sexualization	Mean=1.71; SD=1.585		
Total brutalization	Mean=5.07; SD=2.511 (N=174)		

Of those who died, 28.7% were pure compared to 71.3% being sexualized in one of more ways. Table 4 displays these results.

These results indicate that among the 252 female characters in slasher films their purity was significantly linked to their level of brutalization and their risk of death. The brutalization of pure characters was more than a point lower (on a nine-point scale). When measuring fate of characters, those females who lived were equally divided as pure vs. not pure (49.5% vs. 50.5%). However, most females who were killed were not pure, confirming that sexualized women were more likely to die than non-sexualized women.

Part 2 isolates the characters that were not killers or heroes, and instead served as potential or actual female victims in the films. Table 5 details the demographics of this first group of female characters. These characters are predominately white. For the various factors measuring sexualization, more than half the women were

dressed is a sexual manner, 47.5% were portrayed with a flirtatious attitude, 36.6% were engaged in foreplay or sex, and 32.4% were nude in the film. Only 37.3% of the females in this group were pure or not sexualized, and the average sexualization of these women was 1.71 (scale of 0–4). Death occurred for 72.1% of the women and when attacked or killed, the average brutalization was 5.07 (on a scale of 9). When exploring the strength of this group, the women were most commonly portrayed as weak (44.1%), with only 27% presenting as strong characters.

These potential or actual female victims face one of three fates: no contact with the killer, attacked but survived, or killed. Those who are attacked or killed (N=174) are therefore brutalized to some extent. To better understand how females' characterization and behavior impact mean levels of brutalization, an independent t-tests were performed on multiple factors. See Table 6 for full results. Results indicate that a significant mean difference exists for pure versus nonpure characters (t(110.511)=−3.009, p=0.003). Average brutalization of pure characters was 4.26 while those who were not pure averaged a 5.43 brutalization score. A significant mean difference also occurred between characters who were dressed sexually and those who were not (t(172)=−2.563, p=0.011). The mean brutalization of those sexually dressed was 5.44 compared to 4.45 for those who were not dressed sexually. Other sexualization factors, including sexual attitude, sex or foreplay, and nudity, were not significant nor was the presentation of character flaws. Race neared

Table 6 Independent *t* test results for brutalization of potential/actual victims (N=174)

	N	M	SD	T	p
Brutalization				1.869	.063 (*df* 172)
Nonwhite	10	6.5	2.121		
White	164	4.98	2.512		
Brutalization				−3.009	.003** (*df* 110.511)
Pure yes	54	4.26	2.316		
Pure no	120	5.43	2.520		
Brutalization				−2.563	.011* (*df* 172)
Dress yes	108	5.44	2.566		
Dress no	66	4.45	2.308		
Brutalization				.077	.939
Attitude yes	91	5.05	2.605		
Attitude no	83	5.08	2.605		
Brutalization				−.129	.898
Sex yes	71	5.10	2.450		
Sex no	103	5.05	2.564		
Brutalization				−1.737	.084
Nudity yes	64	5.50	2.649		
Nudity no	110	4.82	2.405		
Brutalization				.686	.493
Flawed yes	77	4.92	2.338		
Flawed no	97	5.19	2.647		

**Significant .01; *significant .05

significance, and while not significant at the 0.05 level, it is of interest that nonwhite females were brutalized on average 1.5 points more than their white counterparts.

To test the factors that significantly predict death among the potential or actual female victims in slasher films, a chi-square analysis was performed (See Table 7). Significant differences existed for all sexualization factors, indicating that sexualized characters are more likely to die than those who are not sexualized. When testing purity and fate, those who were pure only accounted for 27.8% of those killed, while sexualized characters accounted for 72.2% of fatalities ($X^2(1) = 19.734$, $p = 0.000$). Sexual dress was also significant ($X^2(1) = 17.378$, $p = 0.000$), with 63.9% of those killed dressing provocatively. Those with flirtatious attitudes were significantly more likely to die ($X^2(1) = 8.089$, $p = 0.004$), with 53.7% of those killed expressing a sexual attitude. Engaging in sexual foreplay or sex made one more likely to die ($X^2(1) = 9.682$, $p = 0.002$), with sexually active females accounting for 57.1% of those killed. Finally, a significant difference existed based on nudity ($X^2(1) = 9.916$, $p = 0.002$), with 61.2% of those killed appearing nude at least once in the film. Flaws and strength were not

Table 7 Chi-square results measuring fate of potential/actual victim

Variables	Overall	Lived	Died	Chi square test of independence
Pure				
Yes	76	35 (61.4)	41 (27.8)	X2 (1) = 19.734
No	128	22 (38.6)	106 (72.2)	p = .000**
Sexual dress				
Yes	112 (54.9)	18 (31.1)	94 (63.9)	X2(1) = 17.378
No	92 (45.1)	39 (68.4)	53 (36.1)	p = .000**
Sexual attitude				
Yes	97 (47.5)	18 (31.6)	79 (53.7)	X2(1) = 8.089
No	107 (52.5)	39 (68.4)	68 (46.3)	p = .004**
Sex/foreplay				
Yes	74 (36.3)	11 (19.3)	63 (42.9)	X2(1) = 9.682
No	130 (63.7)	46 (80.7)	84 (57.1)	p = .002**
Nudity				
Yes	66 (32.4)	9 (15.8)	57 (38.8)	X2(1) = 9.916
No	138 (67.6)	48 (84.2)	90 (61.2)	p = .002**
Strength				
Weak	90 (44.1)	20 (35.1)	70 (47.6)	X2(2) = 3.422
Neutral	59 (28.9)	17 (29.8)	42 (28.6)	p = .181
Strong	55 (27)	20 (35.1)	35 (23.8)	
Flawed				
Yes	86 (42.2)	23 (40.4)	63 (42.9)	X2(1) = .106
No	118 (57.8)	34 (59.6)	85 (57.1)	p = .745

**Significant at .01; *significant at .05

Table 8 Demographics of hero characters (N = 34)

Race	White = 33 (97.1)		Nonwhite = 1 (2.9)
Dress	Yes = 23 (67.6)		No = 11 (32.4)
Attitude	Yes = 12 (35.5)		No = 22 (64.7)
Sex	Yes = 9 (26.5)		No = 25 (77.5)
Nudity	Yes = 9 (26.5)		No = 25 (77.5)
Pure	Yes = 9 (26.5)		No = 25 (73.5)
Flawed	Yes = 9 (26.5)		No = 25 (77.5)
Fate	Lived = 30 (88.2)		Died = 4 (11.8)
Strength	Strong = 29 (85.3)	Neutral = 1 (2.9)	Weak = 4 (11.8)
Total sexualization	Mean = 1.56; SD = 1.307		
Total brutalization	Mean = 4.0; SD = 2.195 (N = 23)		

Table 9 Demographics of killer characters (N = 13)

Race	White = 13 (100)		Nonwhite = 0 (0)
Dress	Yes = 6 (46.2)		No = 7 (53.8)
Attitude	Yes = 5 (38.5)		No = 8 (61.5)
Sex	Yes = 5 (38.5)		No = 8 (61.5)
Nudity	Yes = 4 (30.8)		No = 9 (69.2)
Pure	Yes = 6 (46.2)		No = 7 (53.8)
Flawed	Yes = 13 (100)		No = 0 (0)
Fate	Lived = 8 (61.5)		Died = 5 (38.5)
Strength	Strong = 8 (61.5)	Neutral = 1 (7.7)	Weak = 4 (30.8)
Total sexualization	Mean = 1.53; SD = 1.808		
Total brutalization	Mean = 4.5; SD = 2.563 (N = 8)		

significant factors. The sample was limited in nonwhite characters; thus, a chi-square test could not be performed between race and fate. However, similar rates of death occurred between nonwhite (69.2%) and white characters (72.3%).

Part III measures the demographic characteristics of the female hero characters (N = 34). See Table 8. These hero characters were rarely pure (only 26.5%), averaged a sexualization of 1.56 (out of 4), and were most commonly portrayed as sexually dressed (67.6%). Ironically, while they are not likely to be pure and are commonly dressed provocatively, when it comes to sexual behaviors, heroes are not likely to exhibit these factors. In the heroes a sexual attitude was present in 35.5% of characters, 26.5% engaged in foreplay or sex, and 26.5% appeared nude in at least one scene. Unlike to die (11.8%), these characters were also minimally flawed (26.5%) and more commonly presented as strong (85.3%). When attacked, the average brutalization of hero characters was 4.0 (out of 9).

Part IV explores the female killers (N = 13) in the sample. Due to the limited number of killer characters, few tests could be run on these characters

individually. Table 9 displays the demographic and character portrayals of the 13 female killers that appeared in the sample.

The killer characters were more likely to live than die, most commonly portrayed as strong, and completely flawed due to their violent behavior. In terms of sexualization, 46.2% were pure and the average sexualization of these characters was 1.53 out of 4. When measuring specific sexual factors, 64.2% dressed sexually, 38.5% had flirtatious attitudes, 38.5% engaged in foreplay or sex, and 30.8% were nude at least once in the film. In terms of brutalization, the killers had an average brutalization score of 4.5 (out of 9).

Part V presents the comparisons between these three groups (killers, heroes, and potential/actual victims). Due to small sample sizes of killers and heroes, options for statistical analyses when comparing these groups was limited. A one-way ANOVA was performed to test for significant differences in the mean brutalization and mean sexualization scores for the three roles (killers, heroes, and potential/actual victims). No significant difference of means between these roles existed for brutalization ($p=0.137$) or sexualization ($p=0.823$).

Chi-square tests were performed to measure for significant differences between hero and potential/actual female victims. No significant differences existed for the individual sexualization measures (dress, attitude, sex, and nudity) or flaws. Race could not be measured due to the limited number of nonwhite hero characters. There was a significant difference in strength ($X^2(2)=42.63$, $p=0.000$), with 85% of heroes presented as strong compared to 27% of potential/actual victims. There was no significant difference in the mean sexualization ($p=0.546$) or mean brutalization ($p=0.053$) of hero characters and potential/actual victim characters. However, the brutalization difference neared significance, with heroes (M=4.00; SD=2.195) brutalized less than potential/actual victims (M=5.07; SD=2.511).

While advance statistics could not be performed on the three groups of characters, a comparison of the demographics of these character roles (see Table 10) revealed interesting, unique trends and presentations of each role.

Compared to hero and killer characters, the potential/actual victim characters were most likely to be portrayed as weak, most likely to die, and suffered most with the highest brutalization score of the three roles (M=5.07). In terms of sexualization, these characters also had the highest mean sexualization (M=1.71) and were portrayed as most flirtatious/possessing a sexual attitude.

When compared to the potential/actual victims and killer characters, heroes were least likely to die, least likely to exhibit character flaws and most likely to be portrayed as strong. They presented with the lowest average brutalization (M=4.0). When it comes to sexualization, they were least likely to be pure. They were most likely to be dressed provocatively but were the least likely role to present any of the sexualized behaviors (flirtatious attitude, engagement in sex or foreplay, and/or nudity).

Killer characters, when contrasted with the heroes and potential/actual victims, were the purest of the three categories and were least sexualized (M=1.53). When they were sexualized, killer characters were least likely to be dressed provocatively and most likely to be engaged in foreplay or sex. For all other categories, killers fell in between the heroes and potential/actual victims.

Table 10 Demographic comparison of characters by role

	Killers (N=13)			Heroes (N=34)			P/A victims (N=204)		
Race	W=13 (100)	NW=0 (0)		W=33 (97.1)	NW=1 (2.9)		W=191 (93.6)	NW=13 (6.4)	
Dress	Yes=6 (46.2)	No=7 (53.8)		Yes=23 (67.6)	No=11 (32.4)		Yes=112 (54.9)	No=92 (45.1)	
Attitude	Yes=5 (38.5)	No=8 (61.5)		Yes=12 (35.5)	No=22 (64.7)		Yes=97 (47.5)	No=107 (52.5)	
Sex	Yes=5 (38.5)	No=8 (61.5)		Yes=9 (26.5)	No=25 (77.5)		Yes=74 (36.3)	No=130 (63.7)	
Nudity	Yes=4 (30.8)	No=9 (69.2)		Yes=9 (26.5)	No=25 (77.5)		Yes=66 (32.4)	No=138 (67.6)	
Pure	Yes=6 (46.2)	No=7 (53.8)		Yes=9 (26.5)	No=25 (73.5)		Yes=76 (37.3)	No=128 (62.7)	
Flawed	Yes=13 (100)	No=0 (0)		Yes=9 (26.5)	No=25 (77.5)		Yes=86 (42.2)	No=118 (57.8)	
Fate	Lived=8(61.5)	Died=5(38.5)		Lived=30(88.2)	Died=4 (11.8)		Lived=57(27.9)	Died=147(72.1)	
Strength	S=8 (61.5)	N=1 (7.7)	W=4 (30.8)	S=29 (85.3)	N=1 (2.9)	W=4 (11.8)	S=55 (27)	N=59 (28.9)	W=90 (44.1)
Total sexualization	Mean=1.53; SD=1.808			Mean=1.56; SD=1.307			Mean=1.71; SD=1.585		
Total brutalization	Mean=4.5; SD=2.563 (N=8)			Mean=4.0; SD=2.195 (N=23)			Mean=5.07; SD=2.511 (N=174)		

Discussion

The results of this study confirm the age-old slasher film trope that females engaging in sex are likely to die and suffer extreme brutalization (Brewer 2009; Clover 1992; Sapolsky et al. 2003; Weaver 1991). However, distinct findings emerged from each character role and across the three categories. This indicates the role itself, and not just being female, may dictate the way in which women are portrayed, act, and treated in these films.

Potential/actual victims were significantly more likely to die when they were sexualized on all levels. Purity, sexual dress, sexual attitude, engaging in foreplay or sex, and nudity each resulted in a significant difference of whether the character lived or died. Additionally, the brutalization of characters who were sexual and were scantily dressed was significantly higher than those who were not. The behavior and subsequent fate of attractive female characters provide visual illustration of the widely held belief that they were deserving of their fates because of their sexuality.

This dangerous link between violence and sex is both intentional and purposeful. Men's pleasure is believed to drive these films as the directors and viewers are predominately male. Similar torture, pain, and female domination themes emerge in pornographic films, resulting in hyperarousal of its viewers by linking pain and death to sex (Gartside 2013). Traditionally held beliefs that sexual women are promiscuous vamps/whores allow for their torture, brutalization, and death to be viewed more as entertainment and less as grotesque treatment (Hartmann 2009; Mulvey 1989). Following this just world premise and traditional gender roles, viewers accept that sexual females deserve to be punished and incite the very abuse and violence they suffer (Byers 1995; Lacombe 2002; Schuller and Hastings 2002).

Heroes were more likely to be dressed sexually than potential/actual victim females, but they were least likely to exhibit flaws or sexual behaviors (flirting, nudity, or sexual acts), a finding consistent with Weaver et al. (2015). They were also the least brutalized and least likely to die of the three character roles. It appears that female heroes are visually sexualized for the male viewer just enough to maintain their purity to embody the "good girl" reality, thus avoiding punishment. Byers (1995) notes that by dressing in a sexy nature but refraining from sexual behavior, the female hero protects her worth by restricting sex while still appealing to the male need for physical attraction.

The female hero character rejects the traditional female script of weakness and reliance on males and subscribes to the masculine script of strength and ability to protect oneself and others. She serves a gender-bender, able to confront fear, stay level-headed, outperform male characters, and often kill the killer (Clover 1992; Weaver et al. 2015). Frequently referred to as the "Final Girl," these heroes embody many masculine qualities. Clover (1992) argues that the Final Girl may be the embodiment of an adolescent male. She is just feminine enough in a way to challenge traditional male roles, able to enjoy the horror and masochistic pleasures, and yet is not so feminine that she challenges male sexuality and ability. The

androgyny of this character may allow the young male viewer to relate to her, safely able to play out their fantasies of female roleplaying, masochism, and terror without any threat to their own masculinity.

Killers were the least sexualized, least sexually dressed, but, had sex the most. Unlike heroes, they did not express powerful sexual imagery in form of sexual dress. Their wickedness may be extended to and illustrated by the physical act of sex. This portrayal follows the societal view that female sexuality and sexual behavior is in and of itself evil (Byers 1995; Hartmann 2009; Lacombe 2002; Laurie et al. 1999).

Slasher films are crafted to allow the presumed male viewer to gaze at characters designed to be visually attractive and are narrated in active and passive ways. Thus, male viewers are able to identify with the male or masculine characters while they fulfill a deep fetish of sadistic treatment of women through torture, potential rescue, and/or punishment for sexual desires (Mulvey 1989). Instead of solely focusing on the characters' genders, viewers may focus on the characters' masculine and feminine qualities (Rieser 2001). Clover (1996) argues that male viewers identify with the killer who inflicts pain and death on sexualized women, but when the killer is a female or shows weakness as a male, the traditional gender scripts are flipped. Once identifying with a killer who is revealed to be female or feminine, the male viewer now switches their identity and focus to the more masculine female hero character, who embodies strength and power and thus becomes relatable to the viewer. Clover makes a bold argument that these films replace powerful females with masculinized women allowing the viewer to engage in "cinematic transvestism" by temporarily feeling like a woman (Clover 1996; Rieser 2001).

Despite being deemed low-quality by film critics, slasher films have a wide and deep reaching fanbase, carrying with them the ability to significantly impact the viewers and society with the messages they send. In addition to reinforcing ideas, the media has the ability to instill and confirm behaviors in viewers, often resulting in modeling (Bandura 1986). Given the results of this and previous studies, there is a specific concern that viewing violence, sexualization of women, and stereotypical portrayals of gender roles in films risks increased levels of aggression against women (Neuendorf et al. 2010).

For male viewers, slasher films reinforce the characteristics that embody toxic masculinity. These films also depict a very homogeneous portrayal of attractive women with purity or sexualized behaviors. The way in which slasher films presents women helps men determine what is "beautiful," while reinforcing what constitutes a valuable, appropriate partner (Byers 1995; Hartmann 2009). Future partners are likely to develop an unrealistic, limit view of what is beautiful, finding only women who are tall, thin, and dressed in just the right amount of visual appeal to be attractive (Hartmann 2009). They are also likely to develop Freud's Madona-Whore Complex, seeking a pure, valuable woman as his partner while craving the attractive, sexual vamp for pleasure (Byers 1995). Additionally, the normalization of sex and violence, is likely to be a dangerous combination for viewers (Gartside 2013). These films may encourage fans to interpret violence as an acceptable component of a healthy sexual relationship. Frequent consumption of violence and sex is likely to increase aggression, antisocial behavior, irresponsible sexual behavior, and unhealthy relationship tools (APA 2008; Gartside 2013).

While it is believed young males are the primary viewers of slasher films, females also watch these movies. The blatant sexualization of the female characters has the potential to effect female viewers both mentally and physically. Research links sexualization of women to severe mental health consequences including eating disorders, depression, and low-self-esteem among females (Mills et al. 2002; Ward 2003). Women and girls who consume media that sexualizes and objectives the female form are more likely to endorse gender/sexual stereotypes and the role of women as sexual objects (Ward 2002), while defining their attractiveness as the center of their value (APA 2008).

Thin, attractive and sexualized women are aplenty in slasher films (Spoto 1983). The lack of representation of realistic body types and looks has a significant impact on the body image of the female viewer (APA 2008). Self-objectification and body image concerns result in lower cognitive performance (ex. Fredrickson et al. 1998), shame (Slater and Tiggermann 2002), and a struggle to conform to unachievable beauty standards via extreme methods such as eating disorders and plastic surgery (APA 2008).

Sexualization of females also has a significant impact on women's sexual health. Studies have found that women who self-objectify are less likely to develop a healthy sexuality, less likely to use condoms, more likely to strive for unrealistic beauty standards and more likely to suffer from sexual problems into adulthood (APA 2008; Schooler and Ward 2006; Ward 2002). For a sexually active female or one who desires sexual expression, the treatment of sexualized women in slasher films confirms to her that sexual women are less worthy (i.e. are attack and killed at higher rates) and deserving of whatever punishment they receive (Lacombre 2002; Schuller and Hastings 2002). Beyond males, parents and other female peers continue to place judgement on fellow women's beauty and sexual behavior as well (Clayton and Trafimow 2007), again contributing to a lower body-image and lower self-worth among women.

Conclusion

Slasher films broadly continue to share the narrative that sexualized women are devalued, and yet simultaneously use the sexualization of girls and women as a key element of the genre. Across all female characters, sexuality and sexual behaviors were directly linked to a higher risk of dying and higher levels of brutalization. When studying female characters based on role, potential/actual victims had the highest mean sexualization and brutalization of all female characters. They were most likely to be portrayed as weak, display a flirtatious attitude, to be shown nude and to die. Female heroes were most likely to be dressed sexually, but least likely to engage in sexual acts and behaviors. They exuded the greatest strength and highest rate of survival. Killer characters were most likely to be engaged in sex, potentially alluding to the wickedness of female sex itself. Therefore, slasher films disseminate messages that equate femininity with purity and female sexuality with sin that is punishable with horrific violence. These movies are likely to contribute to the way that society continues to reinforce stereotypical gender roles, a limited view of

beauty, maltreatment of sexual women, violence as a punishment for female sexuality, and the coupling of violence with sex as an acceptable, healthy pairing.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Appendix

Brutalization Scale

1. Implied. The attack is presumed but not seen.
2. Conventional attack with a gun resulting in little body damage; pushed from height; burned in house fire (victim unseen)
3. Conventional attack with knife; single wound with little blood
4. Gun shot with visible body damage; strangled
5. Knifing with multiple stab wounds; prolonged beating with hands
6. Singular non-conventional weapon (e.g. drill, hammer, saw, hatchet, axe, scythes, barbed wire etc.) with apparent body damage and close-up imagery
7. Multiple conventional and/or non-conventional weapons; severe body damage and close-up visualization
8. Prolonged attack; multiple conventional and/or non-conventional weapons; severe body damage and close-up visualization
9. Specific tortures; prolonged attack; multiple conventional and/or non-conventional weapons; severe body damage, dismemberment and close-up visualization; body used as prompt in further attacks.

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