

Sex and Violence in Slasher Films: Reexamining the Assumptions

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Abstract

A content analysis of popular 1990s slasher films found such films contain more acts of violence than similar films from the 1980s. Recent slasher films rarely mix scenes of sex and violence. This finding calls into question claims that slasher films portray eroticized violence that may blunt males' emotional reactions to film violence. Slasher films feature males more often as victims of violence. However, the ratio of female victims is higher in slasher films than in commercially successful action-adventure films of the 1990s. Finally, females are shown in fear for longer periods of time.

Horror films of the 1960s and 1970s were often gory thrillers featuring grisly slaughter and dismemberment.¹ In an effort to attract larger audiences of young filmgoers, movies featured ever more vivid images of blood-letting and gruesome death. The success of films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Halloween* (1978) demonstrated the commercial potential of extremely violent "horror teenpics." By the early 1980s a new form of horror -- slasher movies -- was born. This genre is recognized as containing suspense-evoking scenes in which an antagonist, who is usually a male acting alone, attacks one or more victims.² Scenes dwell on victims' fear and the central focus of such films is the vicious attack. The dramatic tension in slasher films is, according to Tudor, "Who will the central villain get next and by what method?"³ Critics and researchers have claimed that movies such as *Friday the 13th*, *He Knows You're Alone*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, and *Prom Night* feature: (1) acts of extreme violence portrayed in graphic detail⁴ (2) women singled out for injury and death - hence the label "women-in-danger" or "violence-to-women" films,⁵ and (3) scenes of explicit violence juxtaposed with sexual or erotic images.⁶

The assumption that violence often occurs during or after sexual activity is important for theoretical reasons. It has been argued that through a process of classical conditioning slasher films have a desensitizing effect. Exposure to scenes of explicit violence juxtaposed with sexual images is believed to blunt males' emotional reactions to film violence and lead males to be less disturbed by scenes of extreme violence and degradation directed at women.⁷ Accordingly, desensitization may undermine viewers' feelings of concern or empathy for female victims of violence in other settings.⁸ Several studies have examined this and other assumptions regarding the content of slasher films.

Cowan and O'Brien, Weaver and Molitor and Sapolsky⁹ examined a total of eighty-three different slasher films. Their findings call into question key assumptions made about slasher movies. First, the three studies consistently found no significant difference in the number of male and female victims. Contrary to popular belief, females were not singled out for attack in slasher films. For example, Molitor and Sapolsky reported that fewer than half of innocent victims were females. Second, the various content analyses found that the juxtaposition of violence and sex occurred rarely (e.g., only about three times per film).¹⁰ Molitor and Sapolsky did find that the assumption regarding graphic, brutal violence is valid: One in four violent acts exhibited extreme brutality or sadistic victimization.¹¹ In addition, Molitor and Sapolsky noted that the amount of time characters were shown in terror (fear or threat of violent attack) was significantly greater for females than males. Finally, Molitor and Sapolsky reported that the number of violent acts against males increased across the 1980s, but tended to decrease for females. Apparently, producers criticized for the depiction of women as victims in slasher films toned down such attacks.

By the early 1990s it appeared that the slasher film phenomenon had run its course.¹² But a resurgence in popularity has been fueled by the release of such films as *Scream* (1997), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997), and *Urban Legend* (1998).¹³ A new generation of teenagers is being offered movies graphically detailing the "systematic slaughter of attractive young people."¹⁴ Does this latest crop of films differ from the slasher films of the 1980s? The present study was conducted to determine the degree to which popular 1990s slasher films feature violence directed at women and link sexual and violent images.

Linz and Donnerstein maintain that slasher films disproportionately single out women for attack.¹⁵ They argue that the female body count in slasher films should be examined in the

context of other film genres. Linz and Donnerstein assert that "across most television and film content females are less often murdered and brutalized than males by a very large margin."¹⁶ However, these researchers do not specify the genres they intend to compare to slasher films for the level of aggression against women. The present study is an attempt to test this assertion of Linz and Donnerstein. The comparison genre selected for analysis is popular action/adventure films containing violence.

In sum, the present study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- R1: Do slasher films of the 1990s contain more acts of violence than those appearing in the 1980s?
- R2: Are there a greater number of violent acts directed at females in 1990s slasher films?
- R3: Does the ratio of female-to-male victimization in 1990s slasher films differ from that of 1980s films?
- R4: Do slasher films appearing in the 1990s feature a greater number of victims of violence than action/adventure movies released in the same decade?
- R5: Are females portrayed as victims of violence more often than males in slasher films of the 1990s compared to action/adventure films of the same period?
- R6: Are women shown in fear longer than males in 1990s slasher films?
- R7: To what degree do slasher films of the 1990s link images of sex and violence?
- R8: Do 1990s slasher movies contain more scenes of sex commingled with violence than slasher movies of the 1980s?

Method

The ten most commercially successful slasher films of the 1990s were selected by first reviewing each weekly "Top 50 Grossing Films" list published in *Variety*. From this review, fifty-five potential slasher films were identified by title and rank-ordered on the basis of box

office revenues. Fifteen of the top 25 films from this list were subsequently excluded because they did not meet the definition of slasher films: commercially-released, feature-length films containing suspense-evoking scenes in which an antagonist, who is usually a male acting alone, attacks one or more victims. The accentuation is on the victim's fear and terror as well as extreme, graphic violence and its aftermath.¹⁷ Films in which the antagonist is nonhuman, an animal or a zombie were excluded. A listing of the ten slasher films analyzed in the present study appears in Table 1. Five of the titles are sequels to films examined in earlier research.¹⁸

Action/adventure films were selected from the list, "Top 100 Movies of the 1990s Ranked By Total U.S. Box Office Gross."¹⁹ Period pieces (e.g., *The Patriot*), science fiction (e.g., *Independence Day*; *Men In Black*), animated films and comedy films were excluded. The final list of ten action/adventure films included in the analysis appears in Table 1.

The unit of analysis is an act of violence including beating, kicking, choking, drowning, burning, electrocuting, poisoning, beheading, dismemberment, bludgeoning, hanging, stabbing, and shooting. For each act of violence the following was coded: (a) the sex of the perpetrator and victim, (b) the portrayal of the perpetrator and victim as "bad" (the central villain or cruel bully) or "good" (an innocent victim), (c) whether sexual behavior or partial/full nudity immediately preceded or was present during the violence, and (d) the outcome of the violence (minor injury, major injury, death, escape, or unknown). "Minor" was distinguished from "major" injury by observing whether the violent act would or would not require hospitalization. A character who suffered violence was coded only once, regardless of how many acts of violence were perpetrated against him/her. The number of seconds male and female characters were depicted in fear or threat of violence was coded.

Sexual behavior included female characters shown in undergarments, partially or completely nude, or teasing or enticing male characters in a sensual manner. Couples seen kissing, fondling, or involved in sexual intercourse were also coded as acts of sex. Sexual behavior was considered linked to violence when one of three types of circumstances occurred. In some instances, violent acts and sexual images were shown together. For example, a partially nude female was shown being tortured by the central villain. In other cases, violence immediately followed, or “interrupted,” a sexual act, such as when a couple was shown kissing passionately and the central villain then attacked one or both characters. The third type of circumstance consisted of continuous cuts between two scenes, one sexual and one violent. This third type of sex and violence juxtaposition occurred to a lesser extent than the other two.

The coding scheme is identical to that used in a previous content analysis of slasher films.²⁰ Molitor and Sapolsky found 1980s slasher films contained an average of 3.1 incidents per film in which a sexual display or behavior occurred immediately preceding or at the time of violence. Only a small proportion (13.6%) of these sexual incidents were linked to the death of a female. Of the 396 innocent victims portrayed in the films, 44.4% were females (there was no significant sex difference in victimization). When the number of violent attacks on innocent victims is considered, males suffered significantly more attacks resulting in death or injury. Finally, females were shown in fear significantly longer (566 seconds per film vs. 114 seconds for males).

Three coders analyzed the current study's sample of slasher and action/adventure films. Overall intercoder reliability yielded Scott's pi values ranging from .79 to .94.

Differences among group means were analyzed using linear regression.²¹ For these factorial analysis of variance, the dependent measures contained outliers or violated the

assumption of homogeneity of variance. As a remedy, these analyses were computed with log transformations of the dependent measures.

Results

RQ1 asked if slasher films of the 1990s contain more violent acts than those of the 1980s. The most popular slasher films released in the 1990s contained a significantly greater number of acts of violence perpetrated against innocent victims than the most successful slasher films of the 1980s. As can be seen in Table 2, 1990s slasher films featured an average of 37.4 violent acts or 23 per hour, well above the average for 1980s top releases which averaged 26.0 acts per film or 17 per hour ($F = [1, 76] = 6.94, p < .05$).

Next, we asked if more violent acts are directed at females in 1990s slasher films compared to films of the previous decade. The most popular slasher films of the 1980s featured significantly more violent acts against males (Table 2). However, while innocent males suffered more violent acts ($M = 23.6$) than females ($M=13.8$) in 1990s films, the difference did not reach significance ($F = [1, 76] = 1.46, p > .05$).

RQ3 addresses male and female victimization rates in films from the 1980s and 1990s. The average number of male and female victims in slasher films of the 1980s and 1990s is shown in Table 3. Both 1980s and 1990s films portrayed males slightly more often as victims. Slasher movies released in the 1990s featured an average of 8.2 males and 5.2 females as victims of violence ($F = [1, 94] = 3.48, p > .05$).

It has been asserted that slasher films victimize females more than other film genres, and that female victimization should be looked at in the context of those genres. We asked if the more recent crop of slasher films feature a greater number of victims of violence than action/adventure films of the 1990s (RQ4). Table 3 displays the average number of victims in

this genre. Action/adventure movies contain significantly more victims of violence ($M = 54.9$) than slasher movies of the 1990s ($M = 13.4$; $F [1, 94] = 7.77, p <.05$) and films of the 1980s ($M = 13.2$; $F [1, 94] = 15.15, p <.05$).

RQ5 asked if females are victimized more often in 1990s slasher films as compared to action/adventure films. It was found that action/adventure movies feature males as victims of violence significantly more often than females ($F [1, 94] = 76.50, p <.05$). More importantly, the ratio of male-to-female victims in action/adventure films of the 1990s is 13.1 to 1, well above the ratio in slasher films of the same period (1.6 to 1).

The sixth research question examined the length of time females and males are shown in fear in 1990s slasher films. The latest generation of slasher films contains more acts of violence, and it focuses on victims in terror for longer periods of screen time. As can be seen in Table 4, slasher films released in the 1990s included a significantly greater number of seconds of victims seen in fear (i.e., an additional three and one half minutes per film) than slasher movies of the 1980s ($F [1, 76] = 7.58, p <.05$). An average of nearly 11 minutes of footage in 1990s slasher movies was devoted to displays of women in terror, compared with male characters shown in fear an average of four minutes per film ($F [1, 76] = 5.67, p <.05$). In the earlier decade, females were also shown in fear significantly longer than were males.

The next research question asks to what degree are images of sex and violence linked in the latest sample of slasher films. Slasher movies appearing in the 1990s contained an average of 9.1 sexual behaviors or displays of nudity. However, there was less than one incident per film in which sexual imagery was juxtaposed with violence (see Table 5). In fact, the nine instances in which sex appeared in conjunction with violence occurred in just two films (*Scream 2* and *Bride of Chucky*).

The final research question looked at the mixture of sex and violence in films of the 1980s versus those of the 1990s. Films from the 1980s contained an average of 9.3 instances of sexuality and 3.1 of these were linked to violence. Due to the low number of instances of sex commingled with violence appearing in 1990s movies, a test of difference was not conducted between the 1980 and 1990 samples. The data do suggest that while the amount of sexual content in the most popular slasher films of the past two decades has remained constant, sexual displays immediately before or during acts of violence have been reduced to a rare event in slasher films released in the 1990s.

Discussion

The most popular slasher films of the 1990s are significantly more violent than the most commercially successful slasher movies released in the 1980s. Specifically, there was a 44% increase in the number of violent acts suffered by innocent victims in the 1990s crop of slasher films. Slasher films of the 1990s portray an act of brutal violence an average of once every two and one-half minutes. In addition, characters are shown in terror an average of three and one half minutes longer in slasher films appearing in the 1990s.

The present study examines two long-held assumptions regarding slasher films. First, a number of researchers have repeatedly claimed that slasher films depict violence during or juxtaposed to sexually arousing scenes. The present findings do not support this assumption. While the amount of sexuality portrayed in slasher films remained unchanged from the 1980s to the 1990s, the occurrence of sex immediately prior to or during scenes of violence declined to fewer than one incident per film. Moreover, two films accounted for nearly all of the instances of sex commingled with violence in 1990s slasher films. Thus, the examination of 83 of the most popular slasher films of the 1980s²² and a content analysis of the 10 most-watched slasher films

of the 1990s consistently show that the genre rarely links sex and violence and calls into question the frequent claim that slasher films mix sex and violence.

A second widely held assumption is that slasher films single out females for victimization. The present study found that males suffer nearly twice as many violent acts as do females. While there were more male than female victims in slasher films of the 1980s and 1990s, the differences did not reach significance.

The degree of female victimization in slasher films was compared to that in popular action/adventure films. It has been argued that females are more frequently the targets of violence in slasher films than in other entertainment genres.²³ The proportion of female victims is substantially higher in slasher films. In the 1980s females comprised 45% of the victims of violence; in the 1990s their share declined to 39%. In strong contrast, females accounted for only 7% of the victims in the most popular action/adventure films of the 1990s. This is largely the result, however, of the vastly greater number of male characters featured in these action/adventure films. The question remains: If a sample of films (containing violence) outside the slasher genre can be found in which the proportion of female characters is comparable to that in slasher movies, will the comparison genre feature the same degree of female victimization documented for slasher films?

The present study revealed that screen time devoted to females in fear was significantly longer than that for males. Slasher films in the 1990s feature females in terror more than two-and-one-half times longer than males. By comparison, in 1980s slasher films, females were depicted in fear five times longer than males. Thus, while females continue to endure fear of attack for longer periods than males, the disparity was reduced in the 1990s.

While it is evident from these findings that violence is not uniquely targeted at females in slasher films, it is also clear that innocent victims, including females, suffer terror, injury and death in those films most popular with the public. The present study does not diminish the seriousness of such violence. Rather, the results call into question the validity of key assumptions that have been made regarding slasher films. Most importantly, slasher films should not be presumed to contain "eroticized or sexualized violence".²⁴

Table 1
Films Selected for Analysis

Slasher		Action/Adventure	
Film	Year of Release	Film	Year of Release
Child's Play II*	1990	The Silence of the Lambs	1991
Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare*	1991	Lethal Weapon 3	1992
Wes Craven's New Nightmare*	1994	The Fugitive	1993
I Know What You Did Last Summer	1997	True Lies	1994
Scream	1997	Mission: Impossible	1996
Scream 2	1997	Ransom	1996
Bride of Chucky*	1998	The Rock	1996
Halloween H2O*	1998	Air Force One	1997
I Still Know What You Did Last Summer	1998	Tomorrow Never Dies	1997
Urban Legend	1998	Lethal Weapon 4	1998

* Sequels to slasher films coded in previous research on slasher films.

Table 2
Average Number of Violent Acts Committed Against Innocent Victims Compared by Sex and Year

	Top Slasher Films Released in the 1980s (n=30)	Top Slasher Films Released in the 1990s (n=10)	Combined
Males	16.2 _b	23.6 _a	18.5 _b
Females	9.8 _a	13.8 _a	10.8 _a
Combined	26.0 _A	37.4 _B	

Note. Means with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$. Comparisons of lower case subscripts should be made vertically. Data for 1980s films derived from Molitor and Sapolsky (1993).

Table 3
Average Number of Victims of Violence Compared by Sex and Film Type

	Top Slasher Films Released in the 1980s (n=30)	Top Slasher Films Released in the 1990s (n=10)	Top Action/ Adventure Films Released in the 1990s (n=10)	Combined
Males	7.3 _a	8.2 _a	51.0 _b	16.2 _b
Females	5.9 _a	5.2 _a	3.9 _a	5.3 _a
Combined	13.2 _A	13.4 _A	54.9 _B	
Male:Female	1.2 : 1	1.6 : 1	13.1 : 1	
<i>Note.</i> Means with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$. Comparisons of lower case subscripts should be made vertically.				

Table 4
Average Duration in Seconds of Victims Seen in Fear Compared by Sex and Year

	Top Slasher Films Released in the 1980s (n=30)	Top Slasher Films Released in the 1990s (n=10)	Combined
Males	113.7 _a	238.5 _a	144.9 _a
Females	566.1 _b	648.8 _b	586.8 _b
Combined	679.8 _A	887.3 _B	
<i>Note.</i> Means with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$. Comparisons of lower case subscripts should be made vertically.			

Table 5
Average Number of Sexual Behaviors Appearing in Slasher Films

	Top Slasher Films Released in the 1980s (n=30)	Top Slasher Films Released in the 1990s (n=10)
Sexual Behaviors Overall	9.3	9.1
Sexual Behaviors Juxtaposed With Violence	3.1	0.9

NOTES

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⁷ Linz, Donnerstein and Adams, 1989; Linz, Donnerstein and Penrod, 1984, 1988.

⁸ Mullin and, 1995.

⁹ Gloria Cowan and Margaret O'Brien, "Gender and Survival vs. Death in Slasher Films: A Content Analysis", *Sex Roles* 23 (August 1990): 187-196; James B. Weaver, "Are 'Slasher' Horror Films Sexually Violent? A Content Analysis", *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 35 (Summer 1991): 385-392; Molitor and Sapolsky, 1993.

¹⁰ Sapolsky and Molitor, 1996.

¹¹ Molitor and Sapolsky, 1993.

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¹⁶ Daniel Linz and Edward Donnerstein, 243.

¹⁷ Molitor and Sapolsky, 1993.

¹⁸ Cowan and O'Brien, 1990; Molitor and Sapolsky, 1993; Weaver, 1991.

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