



# Pop Culture Characters as Role Models and Their Effects on Self-Esteem

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## Abstract

This study will examine how self-esteem of college students is impacted due to the role models that they had growing up. For this study, these role models are operationally defined based on the characters that the participants watched as they were growing up. The most popular characters of this generation of are thought to be superheroes, villains, and Disney princesses. The study looks at how the masculinity, femininity, and the character's gender had effects on the self-esteem of these developing adults.

## Introduction

Research has examined how prolonged television exposure has impacted the self-esteem on children.

- “We found that television exposure predicted a decrease in self-esteem for all children except white boys” (Martins and Harrison, 351, 2012).

A study also examined the effects that sexualized images of women in superhero films has on women's gender beliefs and the effects on body image.

- The study found that there was no significant link to gender role beliefs. But the study suggests that this can endorse traditional gender beliefs (Pennell and Behm-Morawitz, 2015).
- This study also found that the sexualization of women in the superhero films had a negative effect on a woman's body self-esteem (Pennell and Behm-Morawitz, 2015).



## Methods

Twenty-four Marshall University students volunteered to take a survey on the SONA system through Qualtrics. The hypothesis is that highly popular characters can be role models and this can impact the self-esteem of the people who look up to them. The survey examines different characters from popular pop culture media and how those characters effect the self-esteem of their fans.

## Results

In this study, 29% were male, 67% were female, and 5% reported other for their gender. In addition, 68% of the participants were Freshman, 14% Sophomore, 14% Juniors, and 5% Seniors. The most favorable princesses were Tiana, *Princess in the Frog*, and Merida, *Brave*. The least favorable princesses were Anna and Elsa from *Frozen*. The most favorable superheroes/villains were Aquaman, Black Panther, and Cyborg. The least favorable superheroes/villains were Thanos, Loki, and the Joker. The majority of the participants, 79%, endorsed that they had grown up and still enjoy the characters used in the study. When examining the characters' physical physiques, 35% of participants stated that the physical physique of the characters make them question their own physiques. Also, 58% of participants agreed that the pop culture industry uses stereotypes for their characters, and 41% of the participants had neutral results when asked if the stereotypes in the pop culture industry had positive or negative effects. When asked about the actions and the moral codes of the characters, 69% stated that the characters' moral code drew them to the character, and 70% agreed with the actions of the characters.

## Discussion

Starting this study, I believed that pop culture characters would have some effect on the self-esteem of the audience/fan of that particular media. When looking at the higher morals of the characters, participants would have higher levels of positive self-esteem. But the self-esteem when it came to the masculinity and femininity of the characters would had negative effects on the self-esteem due to the over-sexualization of female characters and over-masculine male characters. When looking at the characters effects on self-esteem for gender identities, it would be a mix of both negative and positive effects depending on the characters the participant would identify with and the gender stereotypes that are used for the characters. The results demonstrate that the participants feel that the characters have few effect on gender or sexual identity. The results also demonstrate that the participants liked the characters due to the morals that the characters stand by, and the characters that were found to be most favorable were a very diverse group of characters. The study found that overall that the participants deemed that the characters have a positive effect on their self-esteem. There were limitations to this study due to the limited number of participants that took part in the study.

References available upon request.

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