

Strong Female Characters Negate Violence

Eighteen years ago the television show "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" first appeared and graced us with its witty writing, great acting, and most importantly, its feminist message and representation of women. In recent years, the phenomenon dubbed "The Buffy Effect", named after the television show, has been a subject of debate and many studies. What The Buffy Effect essentially means is that shows that are sexually violent, or just violent, have little effect on viewers if there is a strong female character involved, even if she is the victim. Even though at first this theory wasn't completely accepted and taken seriously, it is now being proven by many studies and is becoming more well known and accepted. It is essential we have strong female characters because they negate the effects of violence on television and in movies.

To begin with, seeing strong female characters on television is essential because it makes women less anxious. Multiple studies done all prove the same point. Television shows with submissive female characters increase anxiety while television shows with strong female characters decrease it. When women in a study done by The University of Mississippi watched shows like "The Tudors" and "Masters of Horror" that are sexually violent and have submissive female characters the majority of the women reported higher levels of anxiety. Yet when they watched shows like "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Law and Order: SVU" that show stronger female characters, most of the women felt less anxious. The women were reporting more anxiety because they were afraid for the girls in the shows, which was only worsening their mental state. However, when they saw strong female characters their levels of anxiety decreased because they didn't have to worry about the character. This is why it is so important that we have strong female characters. When there are strong female characters, because they can stand up and fight for themselves, women have a more positive attitude towards the characters and can even be more confident themselves. "Women who watched weak characters in sexually violent situations became twice as anxious as women who watched SVU or Buffy, who in turn actually reported less anxiety than the control group"(Abrams). The increase in anxiety has been found in several studies, all of which used the different shows and different test subjects. This shows that it wasn't just one group of women, but several, that have had the same reaction,

regardless of their history. The studies show that women's anxiety levels double when there are submissive female characters, which is not the effect that shows are going for. An increase in strong female characters would help these shows achieve the effects they want and would allow for more violence with less effect.

Additionally, seeing strong female characters on television is essential because it can give men more positive attitudes towards women. This may not seem all that related, but it is. When men see women portrayed on television they tend to see them portrayed in one of two ways and each way has its own effect. When men see women represented as submissive they grow more negative attitudes toward women, which can eventually lead to more problems later in life. When the women are portrayed as strong, however, men are usually shown that they are actual people who deserve respect. "Ferguson postulates in the study that the negative depictions may be uncovering negative stereotypes some men may have about women, while the positive illustrations may be challenging those stereotypes"(Shroff). Strong female characters challenge the everyday stereotypes that men are taught about women, making them think more about how not all women are just the stereotypes you typically see on television. Although at first some men can feel challenged by strong female characters, researchers believe that this is because men may see the strong women as threatening to the stereotypes they have been taught about themselves. The positive attitudes that men can develop towards women will affect their stances on the violence shown in television shows.

In contrast, some people may try to argue that the portrayal of female characters really doesn't matter and that it doesn't have any effect on viewers. The fact is that isn't true. A study done as early as 1988 showed that "exposure to "slasher" films mixing sex and violence might result in reduced empathy to victims of rape among viewers"(Abrams). When women are portrayed as weak and submissive it can desensitize people towards sexual assault and make them think that it is the norm, which is an awful attitude to have towards a problem that affects many people. Desensitization towards rape is one of the many ways that the portrayal of female characters can affect viewers. While this effect is less common now it was one of the first effects proven by a study that television can have on people. As previously mentioned, the portrayal of female characters affects the level of anxiety that women feel while watching the show. When female characters are submissive women tend to feel more anxious, however, when female characters are portrayed as strong, women tend to feel less anxiety. The decreased levels of anxiety are caused by the lack of needing to worry about a character. To further prove that the

representation of female characters does have an effect on viewers, the study also showed that the inverse reaction occurred for men, when they watched shows with submissive female characters they felt less anxious and more in control. When they were watching shows with strong female characters they felt a little bit more anxiety because the stereotypical portrayal of women in television was being contradicted and they felt threatened by this. The representation of women in shows affects both genders differently, but it as a reaction caused by their portrayal nonetheless. "What I found was that it wasn't the combination of sex and violence — which is what we tend to focus on — that impacted male viewers' negative attitudes toward women or women viewers' anxiety, but rather whether women characters were presented as strong or submissive. Or put another way, sexually violent media doesn't increase negative attitudes or anxiety, so long as it is presented in the context of strong female characters "(Ferguson). Ferguson writes in his article about the different ways both depictions of women affect viewers. He like many other authors who have written on this subject agree that the depiction of women on television is what impacts the viewers emotions, not the violence. Every study done so far has further proved this. The reason that the different portrayals of women can affect the effects of violence on viewers is probably that when women are submissive there is more reason for anxiety and hate, but when they are strong there is less reason for anxiety and more reason for enjoyment instead of stress.

The evidence is there. The Buffy Effect has been proven by multiple studies and the reactions to violence on television we see everyday. The importance of having strong female characters can not be denied any longer. They are vital because they neutralize the effects of violence on television and in movies. If The Buffy Effect has been proven by so many studies and written about, why aren't more people recognizing it? Hopefully soon everyone will recognize the importance of the representation of female characters and realize that the amount of violence isn't the only thing that matters.

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