Effects of Humorous Heroes and Villains in Violent Action Films

By Cynthia M. King

This experimental investigation explores the use of humor in violent action films, focusing on the effects of wisecracking heroes and villains on audience distress. An action film was edited to create control film versions without wisecracking dialogue. The research revealed contrast effects. Among female viewers, hero wisecracks in an action film increased distress reactions to the film, but lessened distressful reactions to subsequent televised depictions of real, nonhumorous violence. Conversely, males exposed to hero humor found the film marginally less distressing, but rated depictions of real violence more distressing. For all viewers, effects of villain wisecracks tended to parallel females' reactions to hero wisecracks. Disposition theory is offered as a plausible explanation of study findings.

For if we fail to analyze closely, cruelty and comedy seem to have little in common: one causes pain, the other pleasure: one causes moans, the other laughter: one causes sorrow, the other joy. Yet, empirically they must have something in common, for cruelty and brutality have frequently been used as an occasion for comedy, as a source of laughter. (Blistein, 1964, p. 44)

By adding a strong dose of wit, contemporary filmmakers have turned typical action thrillers into even greater blockbuster hits, or so it seems. This admixture of humor and violence, however, is not new to the silver screen, as humor has been a traditional weapon of choice among Hollywood’s greatest heroes. In classic action dramas, stars, including John Wayne and, later, Clint Eastwood and Chuck Norris, fire off as many sarcastic one-liners as they do bullets. In today’s films,

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both the violence and the jokes appear to come harder and heavier than ever before. Movies such as *Natural Born Killers*, in which nearly 100 killings are shown in graphic detail, are marketed as “delirious, daredevil fun” (Easterbrook, 1994, p. 1). A quote from a movie review reads, “WANTED: summer action heroes. Must be able to dodge fireballs and type on cutting-edge computer toys. Must have cool way with no-brainer one-liners” (Maslin, 1997, p. C1).

The incorporation of humor into violent action films has become so prevalent that some critics now acknowledge the humor-violence combination as a unique film genre (Hunter, 1992; Tookey, 1992). Clearly, there are many ways humor can be, and has been, incorporated into action films. This investigation, however, focuses on the jokes and sarcastic one-liners that directly accompany film characters’ aggressive acts. Humor theorists agree that many forms of humor rely on hostile elements. Freud (1905/1958) differentiated between nontendentious and tendentious humor. Nontendentious humor relies on joke work (innocuous plays on words, etc.) that does not victimize, humiliate, or disparage. In contrast, the humor found in action films tends to be tendentious, emphasizing the victimization of one party by another. This humor, called disparagement humor (Zillmann, 1983; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976), is hostile by definition. “It is the kind of humor that produces victors and victims, winners and losers, disparagers and disparagees” (Zillmann & Bryant, 1991, p. 275).

Examples of films containing this form of humor include *Indiana Jones, Die Hard*, and the *Lethal Weapon* series. In the *Lethal Weapon* films, actor Mel Gibson plays a police officer “whose hallmark is volatile and reckless behavior” (Tryster, 1992). In one scene, for instance, we find Gibson leaping from truck to truck in an armored-car chase. After he has tied the criminal to the fender of his vehicle, Gibson lifts the villain’s head and asks, “You okay?” before smashing him back into unconsciousness, quipping, “You have the right to remain unconscious.” Hollywood’s new combination of wit and brutality dominates the big-money action films. It has been suggested, in fact, that the “wisecracking persona” was a defining characteristic of the “tough guy” in action cinema of the 1990s (Tasker, 1993).

The dialogue in one movie suggests that filmmakers embrace this assessment. At the end of *The Last Boy Scout*, Joe Hallenbeck (actor Bruce Willis) jokes to his partner Jimmy Dix (actor Damon Wayans) that, this being the 1990s, a hero can’t just take out bad guys; he also has to give them a one-liner. “Like ‘I’ll be back?” asks Dix, with reference to Schwarzenegger’s trademark line from the film, *Terminator*. Tasker (1993) described *The Last Boy Scout* as “an exercise in wordplay, with the heroes and the villains trading complex insults, challenges and comebacks as well as commenting on each other’s verbal performance” (p. 87).

That audiences find the combination of comedy and brutality entertaining may be curious, but it should not be particularly surprising. Comic brutality has entertained audiences for centuries. Many forms of cruelty inspire laughter, and many forms of comedy contain violence. Classic literature, including Molière’s satire and even Shakespearean tragedies, has often revolved around the coupling of cruel and comedic elements. Violence was also a prominent theme in the early cinematic humor of Charlie Chaplin, the Marx Brothers, and the Three Stooges. Potter and Warren (1998) found that the rate of violence is also high in contemporary
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comedic television programs. Brutality can create high comedy and farce, sophistication and slapstick. There are several possible explanations for the enduring success of the seemingly paradoxical union of humor and aggression. Curiously, although comic brutality has a rich theatrical and cinematic history, little research has attempted to unravel its mysteries.

Drama theorists maintain that humor is included in serious drama and tragedy to provide comic relief. It is believed that humor can help relieve stress created by tense and tragic moments. Some film critiques contend that the humor found in action films may provide similar comic relief (Tookey, 1992). It is arguable, however, that all of the jokes and wisecracks that punctuate film violence are perceived or even intended to be humorous. In fact, this type of humor is often quite insulting and aggressive. If the wisecracks are interpreted to be insulting or hostile, instead of relieving audience stress, they may intensify it. Thus, action film humor might be differently predicted to either increase or decrease audience distress. The challenge of the present investigation, therefore, was to identify key factors that might help determine when each of these divergent effects may occur.

Perhaps more importantly, many critics are concerned that exposure to humorous depictions of excessive violence may have more far-reaching effects on viewers' perceptions. In reviewing the movie, Lethal Weapon 3, film critic Christopher Tookey (1992) commented that “We are invited to think it’s funny when [Mel] Gibson [who plays a police officer] terrorizes a jaywalker for fun, or cheerfully punches the face of a villain who’s reviving from unconsciousness: no wonder the real LA police feel aggrieved when they are put on trial for knocking about the occasional suspect” (p. 114). A disgruntled moviegoer lamented, “And we wonder why America has become such a violent country” (cited in “Eavesdropping,” 1994, p. A46). Another objective, therefore, was to determine if and how action film humor might influence reactions to real acts of violence.

Distress Relief and the Trivialization of Violence

The enjoyment of comic brutality, even in its traditional forms, poses interesting questions. The incorporation of humor into modern-day action thrillers is particularly intriguing. In explaining the enjoyment of more traditional productions, Blistein (1964) suggested that “we laugh at cruelty if the pain that results from it is limited: it may hurt, but not maim, abuse, but not kill” (p. 62). The violence in action dramas, however, is typically more lifelike and brutal. In a letter to the editor, one baffled moviegoer commented on the film, Pulp Fiction, “I cannot believe that blowing someone’s head off in the back seat of a car would actually cause people to laugh, not only characters on the screen, but patrons in the theater as well” (Stringham, 1994, p. 2). It appears that audiences sometimes need only the subtlest humorous cue to find amusement in even the most graphic depictions of death and destruction.

Sorell (1972), a theater historian, noted that comic relief has been used to varying degrees by most dramatists, including Shakespeare. In his treatise, Poetics, the Greek philosopher Aristotle suggested that humor might facilitate the release of strong emotions, such as those induced by exposure to tragedy or other negative events. Unfortunately, the traditional formula for comic relief does not seem
to adequately describe the wisecracking dialogue in most action films, where much of the humor is not compartmentalized into separate lighthearted scenes, but rather is directly injected into distressing violent activity. It is still possible, however, that such humor may similarly help relieve or minimize audience distress.

**The signaling function of humor.** Cognitive theories suggest that placing a media presentation within a humorous context may alter the meaning of certain behaviors, including acts of violence. Humorous cues are said to signal that the events toward which the humor is directed should not be taken overly seriously (Freud, 1928; Giles, Bourhis, Gadfield, Davies, & Davies, 1976; Kane, Suls, & Tedeschi, 1977). Kane et al. (1977) contended that “laughter can be used to initiate a cognitive transformation of a situation into a non-serious one” (p. 16). McGhee (1972) similarly argues that humor can function as a “play cue.”

In the context of a misattribution theory of humor (Zillmann & Bryant, 1980), it was demonstrated that onlookers were distressed when a person was victimized, even when the person was deeply resented. The injection of trivial humorous cues, however, changed this situation to a point where onlookers responded to the same victimization with highly intense amusement. Evidence also reveals that aggressive acts are seen as less violent and disturbing when they are viewed in cartoons than when they occur in sober dramas (Howitt & Cumberbatch, 1974).

Priming models entertained by Jo and Berkowitz (1994) and others suggest that pairing amusing elements with violent fare may simply activate related amusing thoughts and reactions regarding the violence. Bandura’s (1994) social cognitive theory of mass communication might suggest more of a learning process where humor linked with violence informs respondents that the perpetration of violence can be a laughing matter. Individuals may learn that this information signals there is nothing to worry about and that anger or distress would be inappropriate reactions under the circumstances. Humorous cues in action films may thus invite audience members to discount the violent events in the film.

**A sense of mastery.** Humor is also thought to both reflect and stimulate feelings of mastery. Laughter has often been said to indicate a sense of well-being, confidence, and safety. According to Freud (1928), humor is a reflection of a sense of ease and confidence in the ability to reduce stressors to manageable challenges. Hayworth (1928) contended that “if [an] organism is in an aggressive, conquering attitude it will exult with a feeling of safety over threatened obstructions [and] it will communicate this to the rest of the group through the conditioned response of laughter” (p. 373).

Research on horror films suggests that watching distressing films may function as a test of bravery. Zillmann, Weaver, Mundorf, and Aust (1986) advanced the idea that distressing films provide adolescent males with the opportunity to demonstrate their fearlessness to others. Tamborini (1991) explained that by appearing to be bored or even amused by the mayhem on screen, an adolescent can show his peers that he is truly a brave man. His male friends will be impressed by his courage, and the young woman he is trying to impress should find comfort in his mastery of the threat. (p. 310)

Humorous cues thus may help facilitate this sense of mastery.
Empirical support for the notion that humor in violent films may ameliorate distress was found in an initial investigation of action and horror film wisecrackers (King-Jablonksi & Zillmann, 1995). In this study, viewers shown one violent action film clip and one horror film clip that contained wisecracking dialogue rated the clips as less distressing than did viewers who watched versions of the same clips in which the humorous comments had been carefully deleted. Exposure to clips including wisecracking dialogue also resulted in lower distress evaluations of a subsequent nonhumorous action-film clip. The stimulus material in this study, however, included only extremely brief film clips of isolated violent encounters from different films. It is unclear whether these effects would be sustained for wisecracks dispersed within the context of a longer film, particularly given the speculation that, under certain conditions, this humor might actually increase audience distress.

**Humor and Hostility**

Wisecracks may be witty, but they are not always friendly and innocent. Zillmann and Bryant (1991) explained that much comedy “can be construed as an aggregation of miniature plots in which some persons or groups triumph over others, and in which these others are debased, demeaned, disparaged, ridiculed, humiliated, or otherwise subjected to undesirable experiences” (p. 270). They also suggest that such acts stop “short of truly grievous harm” (p. 270). This limitation, however, clearly does not apply to the humor-violence combination found in contemporary action thrillers.

Drama theorists maintain that characters may use humor as a weapon to intensify or defend against aggressive acts. Charney (1978) explained that the comic character “often faces overwhelming odds, with ridiculously inadequate equipment” (p. 167). He maintained that “wit is a weapon with which to protect yourself” (p. 167). Blistein (1964) noted that adding comic elements to acts of brutality may compound the hostility by adding insult to injury. In fact, Gruner (1978) suggested that humor and laughter are “immediate and direct descendant[s] of primordial man’s roar of triumph in battle” (p. 58). If the humor itself is viewed as a hostile action or reaction, it may make the violence it accompanies even more distressing. Thus, although there is both theoretical and empirical corroboration for the distress-relieving effect of action film humor, there is equally compelling theoretical and anecdotal support for distress-intensifying effects. What, then, might account for these differences? To answer this question, one must explore characteristics of both humor and audience.

**Character Type**

Theory suggests that whether we find disparaging remarks humorous or hostile largely depends on our dispositions toward the individuals involved. Disposition theory maintains that empathic responses to the same events will be entirely different for liked and disliked protagonists (see Zillmann, 1991, for review). These theories suggest that people enjoy it when good things happen to good people and when bad things happen to bad people. Gutman and Priest (1969) found that a good person’s hostile act was perceived as less hostile and more humorous than
was a bad person’s hostile act. In fact, they found that a bad person’s humorous hostility evoked resentment and anger. They also found that when the victim appeared to “deserve” the hostility he received, the humor elicited more amusement than when the victim appeared undeserving. Similarly, resentment toward a victimized protagonist has been found to increase humor appreciation (Cantor & Zillmann, 1973). Disposition theory, therefore, suggests that audiences should be amused by the wisecracks issued by heroic or likable film characters, particularly when such comments disparage a dislikable character or film villain. The resulting amusement may then serve to minimize audience distress. This logic forms the basis for the first hypothesis:

H1a: Hero wisecracks accompanying violent actions in a fictional action film will decrease audience distress reactions to the film.

This explanation may account for the distress-relieving effects uncovered in King-Jablonski and Zillmann’s (1995) investigation, given that all of the wisecracking dialogue was issued by heroic characters disparaging villainous characters. Such wisecracking, however, is no longer the sole province of heroes. In traditional entertainment productions, it was the hero who issued taunts and barbs toward only the most heinous of villains (Charney, 1978). In more recent films, however, the villains also use humorous put-downs in connection with violence. For example, in Lethal Weapon 3, the leader of the scoundrels is a psychopathic property tycoon who buries “loose mouths” in liquid concrete. “Now we’ve got a relationship we can build on,” he cracks as the victim gurgles his last breath.

Disposition theory, however, suggests that a film villain’s disparagement may be less amusing. According to this theory, audiences should be negatively disposed toward the villain and thus should resent villainous wisecracks. If this is the case, although a hero’s wisecracks may decrease audience distress, a villain’s barbs may actually increase distress reactions to the film. The possible influence of villain humor is reflected in the following hypothesis:

H1b: Villain wisecracks accompanying violent actions in a fictional action film will increase audience distress reactions to the film.

Gender
Reactions to violence-linked humor may also be influenced by gender. Women tend to be less hostile and aggressive (Eagly & Steffen, 1986) and more empathic than men are (de Wied, Zillmann, & Ordman, 1994). Women may find violent behavior to be less acceptable and thus more distressing than do their more aggressive counterparts. As a result, the distress-intensifying effects of villain humor and distress-relieving effects of hero humor may be more pronounced for women than for men.

Women, however, may not find a hero’s wisecracks as amusing as men do. Joking and humor appreciation have traditionally been considered an essentially masculine preserve in Western culture, particularly in the realms of sexual and aggressive humor (Fine, 1976; Freud, 1905/1958; Grotjahn, 1957), and studies
have found gender differences in preferences for sexual and aggressive humor (see Stocking & Zillmann, 1988, and Wilson & Molleston, 1981, for review). If women do not appreciate aggressive humor, they may resent action film wisecracks, regardless of character type. Among women, therefore, hero humor may also increase rather than relieve distress. These considerations are reflected in the hypotheses that follow; however, because hero humor may be predicted to cause either greater or less distress among women, the effects for hero humor are unspecified.

H2a: The effects specified in H1a will be influenced by respondent gender.

H2b: The effects specified in H1b will be greater among women.

Perceptions of Societal Violence
Beyond analyzing the effects of humor within the film itself, the impact of the comedic elements found in violent action films has broad implications for perceptions of violence in other contexts. Studies suggest that screen violence can and does have an impact on perceptions of real-life violence and interpersonal aggression (see Comstock, 1985; Felson, 1996; Gunter, 1994). For many people, experience with nonfictional or “real” violence is largely limited to media portrayals. News broadcasts and documentaries have been the traditional purveyors of nonfictional violence; however, nonfictional violence has also started to permeate entertainment media as reality-based programs become increasingly popular. These programs often depict actual film footage of violent crimes and emergency situations. Crews are allowed to accompany law enforcement agencies as they perform their duties, and video surveillance systems record holdups and hostage situations. Reality-based shows often depict surprisingly graphic coverage of violent acts and their aftermath, including bloodied bodies and grieving victims. Furthermore, when serendipity allows camera crews to tape particularly brutal acts of violence, the film footage may be used in feature-length films that consist of nothing but graphic depictions of death and destruction.

Assimilation effects. Research suggests that even limited exposure to fictional violent stimuli can influence viewer reactions to violence encountered in other contexts (see Felson, 1996, and Gunter, 1994, for review). These effects are often explained as the result of mood setting and priming. A congruency or assimilation effect is said to exist when a judgment reflects a positive (direct) relationship between the judgment and a primed thought or mood state (Jo & Berkowitz, 1994). In this case, an assimilation effect would occur if action film humor made the violent film appear either more or less distressing and then influenced reactions to subsequent depictions of actual violence in a similar manner.

A growing body of research provides evidence that mediated observations of aggression can prime aggression-related ideas in viewers’ minds and influence subsequent thoughts and judgments (Berkowitz, 1970; Bushman & Geen, 1990; Carver, Ganellen, Fromming, & Chambers, 1983). Evidence suggests that exposure to hostile humor can similarly affect perceptions (Berkowitz, 1970). If humorous cues trivialize the violence in action films, or at least make them appear more legitimate, then it may be these perceptions that become primed in viewers’ minds.
If so, then humor may act as a discounting cue that makes violence appear less distressing. After witnessing the repeated association between humor and violence, any depictions of violence may cause viewers to generate discounting cues of their own so that they react to even the most sober depictions as though humorous discounting cues were actually present.

Evidence for an assimilation effect for action film wisecracks was found by King-Jablonski and Zillmann (1995) where the distress-relieving effect of humorous comments in brief action and horror film clips extended to perceptions of a subsequent nonhumorous action film clip. The implications of an assimilation effect of film humor on brief, fictional film stimuli, however, are limited. It is unclear whether these effects would extend to perceptions of real violence.

Contrast effects. Research indicates that some primed associations may result in a contrast effect in which a judgment reflects a negative (inverse) relationship between the implications of the judgment and the primed stimulus (Schwarz & Bess, 1992). The logic here is very simple. Exposure to humorous action films primes the association between humor and violence in the minds of the viewers. In this case, however, viewers do not generate these cues on their own. If the humor makes the violence appear more hostile and distressing, then subsequent nonhumorous depictions of violence lacking these cues may appear comparatively less hostile and distressing. Conversely, if the wisecracks in action films signal to viewers that film violence should not be taken too seriously, then, by contrast, the sober nature of realistic violence may signal that it should be taken seriously. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1994) might be interpreted to predict similar findings. If viewers learn that humorous cues legitimize violent acts, then nonhumorous acts of aggression may be perceived as less legitimate.

Categorization. According to the inclusion-exclusion model (Schwarz & Bess, 1992), whether key information such as a primed stimulus results in assimilation or contrast effects depends on how it is categorized. Assimilation effects are predicted to emerge when the primed stimulus is perceived to be a part of the target category. Contrast effects are anticipated when the primed stimulus is excluded from the target category. According to this logic, the reason humorous comments in the action film should influence judgments of the entire film in a consistent manner is because viewers perceive the entire film as a single target category. This rationale also dictates, however, that when primed information, in this case a humorous cue, is excluded from stimulus and that stimulus is perceived as a separate target category (i.e., later depictions of real violence), contrast effects may emerge.

This reasoning suggests that contrast effects might be expected for subsequent depictions of nonhumorous violence almost by definition. King-Jablonski and Zillmann’s (1995) findings may seem to undermine this logic. In that investigation, however, the film clips all depicted similar scenes of fictional violence. It is possible, therefore, that the manipulated humorous clips and the subsequent nonhumorous clip were interpreted as part of the same fictional film genre or target category. Contrast effects, however, still may be found for perceptions of more realistic violence if viewers make clearer distinctions between fictional and nonfictional contexts.
As with audience reactions to the film, it may be that factors such as character type and gender mediate the influences of action film humor in different ways. The following general hypotheses reflect the various factors that might influence audience reactions to nonfictional violence.

H3a: Humorous comments associated with violence in a fictional action film will influence distress reactions to nonfictional, violent video footage.

H3b: The effects specified in H3a will be influenced by character type.

H3c: The effects specified in H3a and H3b will be influenced by respondent gender.

**Method**

*Overview*

Respondents were exposed to one of four edited versions of a violent film manipulated to differ in terms of humorous content: (a) no humor, (b) hero humor only, (c) villain humor only, and (d) hero and villain humor. After viewing the film, respondents rated the film itself on a variety of scales. Respondents then viewed and evaluated video clips that depicted real acts of violence within the context of “reality-based” television programs.

*Respondents*

Respondents were 80 male and 80 female undergraduates from communication courses who participated for extra credit.

*Procedure*

The experiment was conducted in eight sessions (two for each of the four film versions) in a 22-seat theater with a 6 ft. by 8 ft. movie screen. Respondents signed up for session times, and film versions were randomly assigned to the sessions. Each session lasted approximately 1 3/4 hours. Respondents were told that they would watch and evaluate three videos that “may or may not contain some graphic violence and adult language as might be seen in R-rated movies.” They were given the opportunity to withdraw their participation without penalty. There were no refusals. Prior to viewing the film, respondents were asked to read and sign informed-consent forms and to complete a brief personality inventory (included for disguise purposes).

To prevent respondents from unduly influencing each other’s opinions, we asked them not to talk during the film. Such requests are common practice at many theaters. Although it was still possible that viewers might influence other audience members reactions during the film (by laughing, etc.), this influence was perceived to be no greater than it might be under real viewing conditions. After the film, the participants completed a film evaluation questionnaire. To encourage honest, self-reported opinions, we told respondents, “there are no right or wrong answers, we are only interested in your personal opinions.” The respondents watched and evaluated two nonfictional film clips in the same manner. After
evaluating the second, nonfictional video clip, the respondents were thanked for participating, debriefed, and dismissed.

**Manipulated Action Drama Film Stimulus**
The film employed was an edited version of the action film, *The Hitman*. This film is about a vice cop who discovers his partner’s illegal drug trade. His ex-partner served as the primary villainous character. To insure that the entire session lasted no longer than 2 hours, the film was first edited in such a manner that a complete story was conveyed in less than 1 hour.

We then edited the film a second time to create four film versions: (a) no humor, (b) hero humor only, (c) villain humor only, and (d) hero and villain humor. Violent scenes including wisecracking dialogue were abundant throughout the film. Audio-video frames containing the humorous comments in these scenes were deleted to create the nonhumorous counterparts (versions 1–3) of the same 48-minute film. Because of the humor manipulations, the duration of each version of the film ranged between 45–48 minutes. The following dialogue includes examples of just a few of the humor-involvement manipulations. The bracketed text indicates humorous deletions in the no-humor versions:

*Hero humor manipulation.* The hero approaches a member of an Iranian drug operation in a restaurant. The Iranian is peacefully dining with a group of cronies.

Iranian, somewhat irritated: “Who are you?”

Hero: “That doesn’t matter. What does matter is that Mr. La Comb sent me here to give you boys some advice.”

Iranian, enraged: “You are <expletive> dead!”

Hero: “I’m not afraid to die, are you?”

Iranian: “No, Allah protects us.”

[Hero, calmly: “Then this shouldn’t hurt!”] The hero punches the Iranian in the face.

Hero: “Or this!” The hero bashes the Iranian’s head against the wall and otherwise brutalizes him. Eventually, he picks the beaten man off the floor.

Iranian, furiously: “You are <expletive> dead!”

[Hero: “You already said that.”] The hero throws the Iranian into a set of shelves that collapses and falls on top of him. Another Iranian enters the restaurant and sees what the hero has done.

He angrily confronts the hero: “<expletive>.” The hero fatally shoots the Iranian, who staggers backwards and crashes through a glass window.

[Hero quips: “Drop dead!”]

*Villain humor manipulation.* The villain and another film character, Mr. Lugani, meet together in a large warehouse. The villain opens a van door to reveal the bodies of several Italians.

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1 The time differences are negligible because most wisecracks could be removed by deleting only a few seconds of film time.
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Villain: “Did you think I was so <expletive> stupid that I wouldn’t find these greasers hanging out in here?” He turns back and points his gun at Mr. Lugani.

Villain: [“Arrivederci, <expletive>”!] He shoots the gun but Mr. Lugani’s assistant throws his body in front of his boss and takes the bullet.

Villain: [“<Expletive>. Now that’s what I call dedication, wouldn’t you?”] Mr. Lugani exclaims something in Italian and charges the villain. The villain shoots Mr. Lugani, who gasps his last breath and falls to the floor.

[Villain: “Out with a bang and a whimper!”]

Unmanipulated Nonfictional Film Stimulus

Respondents in each condition viewed the same two nonfictional film clips after they watched the edited film. The first nonfictional clip was taken from an episode of the television show, Cops, that featured a violent and bloody altercation between two young men.

The second nonfictional clip was taken from the film, Faces of Death, a feature-length film compilation of live footage of death and destruction. The excerpted clip featured a shoot-out between the police and a man who had taken a young woman hostage in his eighth-story apartment.

Measures

Demographics. At the beginning of a short personality inventory administered as a disguise, we asked respondent gender. After each video, respondents also indicated whether or not they had seen the film or program from which the clips had been taken.

Film evaluations. The respondents rated both the action film they had viewed and the two nonfictional video clips on 18 adjective scales: disturbing, arousing, entertaining, involving, boring, depressing, distressing, violent, serious, exciting, humorous, tragic, enjoyable, upbeat, suspenseful, interesting, predictable, and upsetting. For the action film only, respondents were also asked a single question: “How distressed did this video clip make you feel?” This question was included because it was speculated that the “distressing” film evaluation scale might not reflect personal distress reactions to the film. Similarly, because the humor might have influenced perceptions of the violence for all three clips, even if it did not affect perceptions of the overall film, respondents were asked to evaluate the violence depicted or discussed in the clip on six adjective scales: severe, justified, graphic, distressing, serious, and brutal. Respondents evaluated all the above items on 11-point integer scales ranging from not at all (0) to extremely (10).

As part of a related investigation, respondents were asked to evaluate three primary individuals in the film and two individuals in the first nonfictional clip. A still video frame displayed on the screen indicated each individual to be evaluated. Because respondents might recognize the wisecracks without finding them particularly funny, we included this final item: “Characters in action films sometimes make humorous and sarcastic comments or ‘one-liners.’ How often, if ever, did this individual make comments of this type?” Respondents similarly evaluated this item on 11-point integer scales ranging from not at all (0) to extremely often (10).
Results

Data Reduction
The film evaluations (18 adjective scales, averaged across the three clips) were subjected to principle component analysis followed by orthogonal rotation. Only scales that loaded > .66 for the factor in question and loaded < .50 for all other factors were retained. Three factors emerged for the evaluation of the films. Factor 1, labeled Enjoyment, was characterized by high loadings on the scales entertaining (.77), interesting (.86), exciting (.84), and enjoyable (.89). The combination of these scales yielded high interitem consistency: Cronbach’s $\alpha = .90$ and accounted for 15% of the variance. The adjectives depressing (.69), distressing (.86), disturbing (.89), and upsetting (.88) formed Factor 2, labeled Distress ($\alpha = .83$), which accounted for 20.9% of the variance. Predictable (.79) loaded highly on Factor 3, labeled Predictability, accounting for 2.0% of the variance.

An analysis of the violence evaluations (five adjective scales, each averaged across the three clips) resulted in one factor, labeled Intensity. Serious (.85), severe (.86), graphic (.84), and brutal (.69) loaded together with $\alpha = .80$, accounting for 94.2% of the variance. It was decided a priori that the distressing violence item would be analyzed separately because of its theoretical importance.

Manipulation Check
Analysis of the single “humorous comments” survey items provided evidence of successful humor manipulations. Analysis of the hero comments scale revealed a main effect of hero humor as the only significant effect, $F(1, 152) = 79.24$, $p < .001$, with respondents exposed to hero humor indicating that the hero made more humorous comments ($M = 7.20$) than did those who viewed the clip devoid of hero humor ($M = 3.40$). Analysis of the villain comments scale yielded a main effect of villain humor as the only significant effect, $F(1, 152) = 20.70$, $p < .001$, with $M = 3.74$ when villain humor was absent and $M = 5.80$ when villain humor was present.

As further evidence of a successful humor manipulation, hero humor also significantly influenced humorous adjective scale ratings of the hero: $F(1,151) = 47.14$, $p < .001$. Those who saw the film version including hero humor rated the hero as more humorous ($M = 5.95$) than those who viewed the no hero humor version ($M = 3.81$). A significant main effect of villain humor similarly influenced respondents’ humorous adjective scale ratings of the villain, $F(1, 151) = 7.21$, $p < .008$, with $M = 3.91$ when villain humor was absent and $M = 4.78$ when villain humor was present.

Evaluations of the Manipulated Action Film Clip
Evaluations were subjected to the Hero Humor Involvement (absent, present) x Villain Humor Involvement (absent, present) x Respondent Gender (male, female) analysis of variance. The analysis of Distress yielded a significant main effect of gender, $F(1, 148) = 44.63$, $p < .001$, with male respondents reporting less distress ($M = 3.07$) than did female respondents ($M = 5.67$). An interaction be-

2 Because the influence of gender alone was not the focus of this analysis, additional significant main effects and interactions reflecting only simple effects of gender are not reported here.
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between hero humor involvement and gender, $R(1, 148) = 3.40, p < .050$, also was found. Analysis of the simple effects of hero humor revealed that women found the film significantly more distressing when hero humor was present, whereas men found the film marginally less distressing when hero humor was present. Significant interactions between hero humor and gender were also found for the single-item distress measure, “How distressed did this video clip make you feel?,” $R(1, 152) = 5.05, p < .026$, and evaluations of the violence as distressing (as queried by the single adjective scale), $R(1, 152) = 7.21, p < .008$ (see Table 1).3

To determine how much power there was in the design to detect such effects, power analysis for the 2 x 2 interaction between gender and hero humor was conducted according to Lipsey’s (1990) recommendations for ANOVA designs. Based on Cohen’s (1988) guidelines for effect size, power estimates were .15, .60, and .94 for detecting small (.20), medium (.50), and large standardized effects (.80), respectively, with alpha set at $p < .05$ for two-tailed effects. Most significant effects fell within the small to medium effect size range. Standardized percentage estimates of variance, calculated as eta squared, are also reported in Table 1.

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Table 1. Means of Distress Evaluations Concerning the Action Film and the First Nonfictional Film Clip as a Function of Hero Humor Involvement and Respondent Gender

| Distress Measure | Male Humor Involvement | | | | | | 
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Absent | Present | Absent | Present | Eta Squared |
| Film distress factor | | | | | |
| Action drama clip | $3.60^a$ | $2.81^a$ | $5.03^b$ | $6.33^c$ | .23 |
| First nonfictional clip | $4.16^{a,b}$ | $4.60^b$ | $5.41^c$ | $3.93^a$ | .15 |
| Reported “felt” distress item | | | | | |
| Action drama clip | $3.12^a$ | $2.46^a$ | $5.10^{b,*}$ | $6.37^{b,*}$ | .17 |
| First nonfictional clip | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Violence distress scale item | | | | | |
| Action drama clip | $3.95^a$ | $3.00^a$ | $5.90^b$ | $7.30^c$ | .27 |
| First nonfictional clip | $3.78^a$ | $4.89^b$ | $5.83^c$ | $4.25^{a,b}$ | .08 |

Note. Means lacking a shared letter superscript differ at $p < .05$ by both Scheffé and Newman-Keuls procedures for post hoc comparisons. Comparisons are made only within each distress variable (horizontally). Mean pairs (within each gender) marked by asterisks only differ significantly at $p < .05$ with Newman-Keuls.

3 Post hoc analysis for mean differences was initially conducted using the more conservative Scheffé procedure. However, because the analysis of interest was limited to mean pair comparisons and because these comparisons reflected consistent patterns across all measures, differences approaching significance with Scheffé were also analyzed using the Newman-Keuls procedure.
Analysis of the film’s Enjoyment and Predictability factors failed to yield any relevant significant findings. Analysis of the violence Intensity factor revealed a main effect of villain humor: $F(1, 151) = 4.50, p < .036$. Respondents exposed to villain humor rated the violence as more intense ($M = 7.87$) than those exposed to the film absent villain humor ($M = 6.99$).

**Evaluation of the Unmanipulated Nonfictional Video Clips**

The effects of the action drama humor manipulations and gender on the two subsequent nonfictional video clips were examined similarly for each clip in the same factorial design.

An interaction between hero humor involvement and gender was found for the first clip Distress factor: $F(1, 150) = 6.44, p < .012$. Diverging from the evaluations of the manipulated, fictional film, females exposed to hero humor found the realistic clip to be less distressing. Hero humor did not significantly affect male distress, although hero humor did produce a slightly higher average Distress score. Consistent with these findings, an interaction between hero humor and gender significantly influenced how distressing respondents found the violence in the first nonfictional clip to be: $F(1, 151) = 8.86, p < .003$. (see Table 1). Neither the humor manipulations nor gender significantly influenced film distress or film violence Distress evaluations of the second real violence clip.

As with the fictional film, analysis of film Enjoyment and Predictability evaluations of the first nonfictional violence clip failed to yield any significant findings. Analysis of the Predictability factor for the second clip, however, revealed another significant two-way interaction between hero humor and gender, $F(1, 152) = 4.80, p < .030$, with males exposed to hero humor reporting less predictability ($M = 3.28$) than males in the no hero humor condition ($M = 4.54$).

Analysis of the violence Intensity factor for the first nonfictional clip revealed a three-way interaction among gender, hero humor, and villain humor, $F(1, 150) = 4.88, p < .029$. Among men not exposed to hero humor, villain humor resulted in lower violence intensity ratings ($M = 5.28$) than did the absence of villain humor ($M = 7.59$). Analysis of the violence Intensity factor for the second film revealed that violence intensity ratings were significantly higher when hero humor was present ($M = 7.72$) than when it was absent ($M = 6.99$).

**Character Evaluations**

Because character evaluations are not the primary focus of this investigation, detailed analysis of these measures is not reported here; however, in light of the gender differences associated with more general study findings, certain effects are worth noting. A main effect of gender on a character likability scale approached significance, $F(1, 152) = 3.51, p < .060$. Males perceived the hero to be more likable ($M = 5.00$) than did females ($M = 4.33$). An analysis of character cruelty scale ratings similarly revealed a significant main effect of gender alone, $F(1, 152) =$

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1 For a detailed account of these findings, see King (1995), *The influence of humor in violent action films on audience distress: Effects of hero humor, villain humor and respondent gender on evaluations of fictional and nonfictional violence*, unpublished dissertation, University of Alabama.
14.70, \( p < .001 \), indicating that females perceived the hero to be crueler (\( M = 6.20 \)) than did males (\( M = 5.03 \)).

**Discussion**

*Evaluations of the Manipulated Action Film*

As projected in H1a, respondents’ distress reactions to the action drama were influenced by the presence of wisecracks issued by the action hero. As anticipated by H2a, these effects were qualified by gender. The presence of hero humor appeared to increase distress reactions among female respondents. However, the hero’s humor was associated with marginally lower levels of distress among male viewers. These effects remained fairly constant over two self-reported distress measures. Perceptions of the violent acts depicted in the action drama were similarly influenced by the hero’s humor, with females perceiving the violent actions featured in the clip to be more distressing when hero humor was present, and men finding the violence less stressful when the comments were included.

The villain’s use of humor did not influence distress reactions to the film as proposed in H1b, but it did influence perceptions of film violence. Although it was anticipated in H2b that the effects for villain humor might be greater for women than men, results revealed that both men and women rated film violence as more intense when villain humor was present. These findings are consistent with the notion that humor may be perceived as a hostile act.

This logic is further corroborated by dispositional theories of humor appreciation. We may appreciate humorous comments that berate our enemies, but not find such comments amusing when they target our allies. If a hero’s wisecracks are simply perceived as humor, they might relieve distress without directly influencing perceptions of the violence. A villain’s wisecracks, however, may not even be seen as an attempt to be funny, but instead intended to add insult to injury, thus making film violence appear more intense. The villain played a primary role in the film, yet his actions did not dominate the screen. Consequently, the villain’s behavior may have succeeded in influencing specific perceptions of the film, without affecting the audience’s more general reactions.

It is also possible that the villain’s use of humor encountered a ceiling effect. In contrast to the hero, the villain had virtually no redeeming qualities. Audiences may have been so negatively disposed toward the villain that their distress in reaction to his violent actions and the film overall may have already reached its maximum threshold, even absent the presence of wisecracks. Effects may also have been somewhat camouflaged by the counterbalancing influences of villain and hero humor.

Neither hero nor villain humor significantly influenced film enjoyment; however, these results are not surprising. For action film fans, the distressing elements of action films, including the violence and threats of violence, should foster suspense and thus increase film enjoyment. Conversely, for viewers who do not generally enjoy these films, or for viewers who are trying to master their emotions, added distress might only further reduce the film’s appeal. Thus, increased dis-
tress might result in more enjoyment for some viewers and less enjoyment for others.

Gender differences. As anticipated in H2a, women and men did respond differently to hero humor. Interestingly, no gender differences were uncovered for villain humor as proposed in H2b. A more detailed analysis of the data, however, reveals that these results are still quite consistent with disposition theories of humor. It is typically assumed that viewers maintain favorable dispositions toward action heroes. Viewers, therefore, are expected to respond favorably to the hero’s use of humor. Conforming to these expectations, in the King-Jablonski and Zillmann (1995) investigation, hero humor decreased distress among all viewers.

In this investigation, however, females generally reported the hero to be crueler and less likable than did male respondents. It would seem that women did not consider the hero in this film to be much of a hero at all. Because females were less favorably, perhaps even negatively, disposed toward the hero, his use of humor may have actually exacerbated their distress. In contrast, because males were more favorably disposed toward the hero, they may have responded more favorably to his humor, relieving some of their distress.

Even males, however, did not express the high levels of favor toward the hero that might be expected. This may explain why the hero’s use of humor did not have a particularly strong distress-ameliorating effect even among men. To help insure that participants would not hold preconceived opinions about the film stimulus, a less popular film was used. It is possible, therefore, that a more popular action hero might relieve more distress for both men and women. Nonetheless, these results suggest that character type and audience dispositions toward film characters may play a crucial role in determining how viewers will react to action film wisecrackers.

Evaluations of the Unmanipulated Nonfictional Video Clips

As proposed by H3a, action film humor also influenced distress reactions to mediated depictions of nonfictional violence. Consistent with expectations of H3b, hero and villain humor affected viewer perceptions very differently. Similar to evaluations of the film itself, the effects of hero humor were more prevalent.

As speculated, film wisecracks influenced evaluations of the nonfictional clips in a manner that sharply contrasted with audience reactions to the film itself. These effects were also mediated by gender as anticipated by Hypothesis H3c. Hero humor intensified female distress reactions to the action film, but it decreased their distress evaluations of the first nonfictional video clip. Conversely, humor decreased male distress reactions to the action film, but it increased distress caused by the first nonfictional clip. Contrast effects were also uncovered for villain humor that increased violence intensity ratings for the film while lowering intensity ratings for the first nonfictional clip. This difference, however, was significant only for males not exposed to hero humor. Given the counterbalancing influence of hero humor, which was more dominant in action film, it is not surprising that these effects were revealed only when hero humor was absent. It is more curious that females were not equally affected, although results did approach significance.
The influence of action film wisecracks on the second nonfictional clip was less pervasive. In fact, film humor had no effect on distress reactions to the second nonfictional clip. Given the brief exposure to the action film stimulus, however, it is not surprising that its influence might have begun to decay by the time the second clip was viewed. The violence, though, in the second nonfictional clip did appear more intense to respondents exposed to hero humor.

This supports the logic that humorous comments or wisecracks may become cues to help audiences predict when violence will occur. Subsequently, when the violent actions depicted in the second nonfictional clip were not preceded by humorous cues, the violence may have appeared more intense because these viewers were not as prepared for it. In support of this reasoning, males exposed to hero humor gave the clip lower predictability ratings. Hero humor did not affect these ratings for the first nonfictional clip; however, this may be because of the nature of the clips. The first clip shows police officers arriving on the scene to break up a violent altercation. Respondents could make judgments regarding the events that had transpired, but, because the violence was concluding, viewers may have felt that there was very little left for them to predict.

**Contrast effects.** Although film humor influenced perceptions of specific aspects of nonfictional violence in different ways, the results consistently contrasted with those found for perceptions of the action film. It would seem that popular wisecracking heroes may actually sensitize viewers' reactions to realistic violence. At least among men, hero wisecracks may enable viewers to enjoy levels of brutality in fictional films that would normally cause shock and outrage. Consequently, however, somber depictions of real violence may become more distressing. Previous research suggests that women may respond in a similar fashion when they are positively disposed toward the action hero. If this is the case, the emergence of amusing action heroes may prove to be a socially responsible film strategy. As depictions of violence become more lighthearted and amusing, the line between fantasy and reality may become more distinct. Film buffs may find it difficult to make real-world assessments based on the fantastic events they witness in the theater.

Although less conclusive, it would seem that the villainous humor found in many action films may actually cause moviegoers to discount the seriousness and intensity of depictions of real violence they may later encounter. Because audiences may be angered rather than amused by a villain’s disparagement, his actions may appear even more despicable. As a result, however, nonfictional violence lacking wisecracks may appear tame by comparison.

**Implications**

The results of the present investigation combined with those of King-Jablonski and Zillmann (1995) suggest that action film wisecracks can influence perceptions of the film itself and depictions of nonhumorous aggression, including real violent events such as those found in reality-based programs or news broadcasts. It should be noted that these findings suggest only a transitory influence of film humor. The effects found in this study appeared to be extremely short-lived; most did not even endure beyond the first nonfictional clip. Nonetheless, it is possible that
prolonged and repeated exposure to humorous violence may generate more enduring effects. Furthermore, even short-term effects may have notable societal implications for televised violence, where feature-length action programs often directly precede news broadcasts. In fact, given that networks now frequently interrupt programs with news updates and previews, there may be ample opportunity for this priming to take effect.

In the present investigation, it was speculated that contrast effects might emerge because the fictional and nonfictional clips might be judged as separate categories. In fact, every effort was made to insure this would be the case. Viewers were specifically informed about the different program contexts (fictional, nonfictional) from which the clips were taken. It may be that alerting viewers to the differences in film contexts is what caused the contrast effects to emerge. If clear distinctions between contiguous fictional and nonfictional viewing contexts are not made, however, assimilation effects such as those uncovered by King-Jablonski and Zillmann (1995) may occur.

In view of the social significance of the issue, it would seem imperative to further investigate the influence of the admixture of humor and violence on perceptions of social reality. Future investigations should attempt to establish greater generalizability for the results found here by examining various films, audiences, and types of humor. All of these factors provide ripe opportunities for research that would help clarify the relationship between humor and violence.

References


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