

## **Young Adults' Perceptions and Memories of a Televised Woman Hero<sup>1</sup>**

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*One hundred and thirty-nine young adults viewed one of three episodes of a television program about a female action hero titled Xena: Warrior Princess. Programs varied in portrayals of Xena's shadow, the dark but also life-preserving facet of the personality. Participants of both genders who had higher levels of traditionally masculine personality characteristics were most likely to perceive Xena as a role model. Men were more likely than women to perceive Xena as a role model when she was portrayed with very little male shadow. Story themes describing women's heroic roles involved using your mind, not the sword, as well as the value of compassion during conflicts, themes that are in keeping with traditional feminine values. The results suggest that viewer acceptance of heroic qualities in women depends on viewer characteristics as well as program themes that include valued feminine qualities. Implications for portrayals of heroic women characters are discussed.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Television portrayals of men and women have traditionally portrayed stereotypes of men and women, in terms of the roles portrayed and the kinds of personality characteristics displayed (Calvert, 1999). Although recent portrayals of women have become less traditional, an infrequent portrayal of women continues to be that of the hero (Calvert, 1999).

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The hero, an ancient archetype (Hall & Nordby, 1973; Jung, 1954, 1959), embodies traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics of power and nurturance, respectively, by rescuing those who are in danger. Power and nurturance are two characteristics of effective social models (Bandura, 1997). Specifically, characters who display power and nurturance are likely to be admired and imitated by others. These qualities, which are often found in heroes, may promote a sense of self-efficacy in viewers, thereby empowering viewers to believe that they can control the events in their lives. The implication is that it is important to provide female as well as male heroes to serve as models for girls and women.

In spite of the potential of female heroes to expand the options available to women, obstacles remain. Heroes must be aggressive and daring in the face of danger. Although women can be assertive in the feminist age, aggression remains a personality characteristic that has remained off bounds for women (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). This boundary places limits on women's access to portray and to see other women act as heroes.

Nonetheless, a new genre of heroic imagery has been emerging in television fiction. Women are aggressive warriors in television programs such as *Xena Warrior Princess*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *La Femme Nikita*. In contrast to earlier male action heroes, this new breed of warrior presents mixed ambivalent messages about female heroes (Ventura, 1998). Classic lines between good and evil are often blurred with female heroes portraying a dark side to their personalities, known as the male shadow (Jung, 1959).

The purpose of this study was to examine how young adult males and females perceive and remember televised depictions of a female action hero, *Xena Warrior Princess*, who has a dark side to her personality. We were particularly interested in viewer perceptions of Xena that led them to like her and to perceive her as a role model, particularly when she was portrayed with dark personality qualities. We were also interested in the kinds of heroic portrayals that would be memorable to viewers.

### **Masculinity and Femininity**

Traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity portrayed personality characteristics as one single dimension (Huston, 1983). That is, a person was either masculine or feminine, making it important for boys and men to display only traditionally masculine characteristics and for girls and women to display only traditionally feminine characteristics. These bipolar conceptualizations fostered constructions of gender in which men are tough and unemotional whereas women avoid aggression and try to please others (Hofstede, 1998). By the 1970s, researchers demonstrated that masculinity

and femininity are two independent dimensions (Huston, 1983). For example, one can be both assertive, a traditionally masculine characteristic, and yet still be sensitive to the feelings of others, a traditionally feminine characteristic. In fact, having only one side of the personality developed may be maladaptive, for masculinity without femininity is cold and ruthless (i.e., Jung's male shadow) whereas femininity without masculinity is passive and ineffectual (i.e., Jung's female shadow).

The inclusion of traditionally masculine characteristics appears to be particularly important for the development of females. Women with more masculine personality characteristics are more likely to participate in nontraditional roles such as being a scientist or athlete (Spence & Helmrich, 1978), and they report more self-esteem (Bem, 1981). Some early feminists put forth androgyny, a blending of masculine and feminine personality characteristics, as an ideal personality style for both men and women (Bem, 1981).

Other theoretical conceptions have also addressed the integration of masculine and feminine principles. Jung (1959) theorized that men and women have the opposing masculine and feminine archetypal images embedded in their collective unconscious, the shared images of our species that have been passed from one generation to the next. The anima archetypal image, found in men, represents the feminine side of men; the mother archetype is the initial prototype for this aspect of men's personalities. The animus archetypal image, found in women, represents the masculine side of women; the father archetype is the initial prototype for this aspect of women's personalities. These latent images lay dormant in the collective unconscious, ready to be developed by our individual experiences (Hall & Nordby, 1973). Jung believed that these two aspects of the self had to be integrated to create a healthy, functioning individual, but it did not happen until individuals were middle-aged. This integration of the anima or the animus into the personality is not unlike the concept of androgyny.

### **The Shadow**

The extremes of masculinity and femininity reflect the shadow, a key archetypal personality structure (Jung, 1954). According to Jung, the shadow is an instinctual, life giving yet also destructive personality structure that is a potential source of evil (Hall & Nordby, 1973).

For Jung,

... the shadow [is] that hidden, repressed, for the most part inferior and guilt-laden personality whose ultimate ramifications reach back into the realm of our animal ancestors and so compromise the whole historical aspect of the unconscious. . . . If it has been believed hitherto that the human shadow was the source of all evil, it can now be ascertained on closer investigation that the unconscious man, that is, his

shadow, does not consist only of morally reprehensible tendencies, but also displays a number of good qualities, such as normal instincts, appropriate reactions, realistic insights, creative impulses, etc. (Jung, 1968, p. 266).

The implication of Jung's writings is that the male shadow is protective and constructive when people fight to protect themselves and others, but it turns dark, evil, and ruthless when people seek revenge and retribution. Based on a bipolar conception of masculinity and femininity, the dark side of the shadow for men consists of conflict, aggression, domination, and war (Hall & Nordby, 1973). By contrast, the dark side of the shadow for women consists of social conformity and strict obedience to traditional norms of femininity (Pratt, 1985). It is interesting that many contemporary female heroes embody the male rather than female shadow.

For Jung, the integration of the shadow allows the development of a full-bodied personality, rather than one that is flat and devoid of passion. However, the dark side of the shadow is projected onto member's of one's own gender, manifesting itself for men (and female action heroes) in conflict, domination, aggression, and war (Hall & Nordby, 1973). The shadow is the stuff that action adventure television programs are made of.

### **Who Can Be a Hero?**

The imagery of television programs, particularly action programs, relies on archetypal images such as the hero and the shadow to keep us interested and attentive. The ancient formula of "Good always triumphs over evil" was repeated time and again as bards told stories, writers wrote stories, and producers created television programs and movies with that same recurring theme. Put another way, good triumphs over the dark side of human nature, the shadow. Men are overwhelmingly the heroes of these tales, and boys are more interested in action-adventure television programs with heroic themes than girls are (Huston, Wright, Rice, Kerkman, & St. Peters, 1990). The prevalence of such tales in movies and television programs helps to maintain traditional gender role constructions and stereotypes (Inness, 1999).

In the classic journey of the hero, the white knight confronts and integrates the feminine principles of his identity, which results in an androgynous personality. By contrast, women who make this journey must confront and integrate the antisocial aspects of masculine personalities, which results in being an outcast as she moves further away from social mores (Pratt, 1985).

The very definition of hero suggests a gender-linked concept. Consider the following definition of hero:

1. Legend- a man of great strength and courage, favored by the gods, and in part descended from them, often regarded as half god and worshiped after his death;

2. Any man admired for his courage, nobility, or exploits, especially in war; 3. Any man admired for his qualities and achievements and regarded as an ideal and model; 4. The central male character in a novel, play, poem, etc. with whom the reader or audience is supposed to sympathize; protagonist; 5. The central figure in an important event or period, honored for outstanding qualities. (To watch over, protect). (New World Dictionary, 2nd College ed).

By contrast, when the term heroine is defined, it is often linked to a relationship with a male hero. Compare the definition of heroine to that of a hero.

1. A girl or woman of outstanding courage, nobility, etc., or of heroic achievements; 2. The central figure in a novel, play, etc., or the one with whom the hero is in love (New World Dictionary, 2nd College ed).

The second definition suggests an interpersonal relational focus for a female heroine that is not central to the definition of a male hero. Not surprisingly, women's heroic acts are often dismissed as atypical. A woman hero can display "masculine bravery" or "courage above her gender," reflecting cultural stereotypes about the proper behavior for each gender and the particular talents of each (Polster, 1992).

Historically, victory for women heroes has also depended more on persuasion and argument than on their physical strength (Polster, 1992), suggesting their inability to compete with men when physical aggression is required. In the Chinese legend of *Mulan*, for example, Disney portrays a female hero who uses her head to save her country. In this story, a girl, who goes to war in place of her disabled father, portrays a clever, brave, capable, and kind hero (Chang, 1998). Similarly, Shu Lien, from the Chinese movie, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, uses her head rather than her sword to bring about the return of an ancient sword that has been stolen by Jen Lu, a young female aristocrat skilled in martial arts. These portrayals embody both masculine and feminine characteristics that lay out an acceptable formula for being a female hero. Although the character Xena is a physically strong character who often uses force to vanquish her enemies, she too is skilled at using her mind to win victories. It is through Gabrielle, Xena's side kick and companion, that feminine principles such as nurturance and compassion are introduced as heroic qualities.

For most male heroes, the struggle between good and evil is an external battle. Our fictional male heroes are white knights who are victorious over evil villains, typically saving a woman in the process (Calvert, 1999). These classic portrayals are changing, but still often portray evil as an external force. Consider, for example, the epic heroic journey of Luke Skywalker beginning in *Star Wars*. Luke Skywalker is the white knight who must triumph over the dark side of the force. Ultimately, Luke does prevail as the hero of the tale. His sister, Princess Leah, is a hero as well, but evil forces are always

outside of Luke and Princess Leah. Interestingly, one of the evil characters of the dark side of the force, Darth Vader, is eventually shown to be Luke's and Leah's father. Darth Vader tries to pull Luke to the dark side, but the light side of the force triumphs. Darth Vader sacrifices his life for his son, and in so doing, regains his humanity and an esteemed place in the after life. Once again, good triumphs over evil. But in this struggle, good and evil also take on an internal struggle within the father archetypal character, Darth Vader.

The new genre of female hero, such as *Xena Warrior Princess*, pushed this formula even further. In *Xena*, the battle of good versus evil is continually portrayed as an internal as well as an external struggle as she battles for justice. *Xena* embodies the masculine principle, and she periodically struggles with the dark, masculine, warlike shadow within her. Her companion Gabrielle provides balance to *Xena's* masculine side by embodying the opposing feminine force in most episodes. Interestingly, *Xena* often saves Gabrielle, a slight twist from the classic story of the male hero rescuing the female damsel in distress. This portrayal violates traditional gender schemas. Frequent viewers of this kind of nontraditional portrayal should rewrite and update the archetypal heroic images and create more elaborated and differentiated gender schemas about heroes that include women, and that include a better understanding of the complexity of this battle that humans face as they struggle with their darker impulses.

### **Memory of Stereotypical and Counterstereotypical Gender-Linked Content**

In schematic processing, people tend to remember the events that they expect to happen rather than what actually occurred (Calvert, 1999). This type of processing occurs, in part, because of constant exposure to certain kinds of stories and legends. Because archetypal images tend to be repeated over time in our stories, schematic processing of heroic imagery should be activated when viewing a television program about a hero.

Memory of television information that is consistent with gender schemas tends to be recalled accurately, but content that violates gender schemas tends to be ignored, forgotten, or distorted (Calvert & Huston, 1987; Ruble & Martin, 1998). Yet schematic processing can be altered in certain conditions. Specifically, memory becomes more consistent with the actual presentation if sufficient time is available to process discrepancies in the presentation, if the presentation is particularly salient, and if one calls attention to those discrepancies (Calvert & Huston, 1987). However, as time passes, memory increasingly fits the original schema rather than what was actually seen (Calvert & Huston, 1987). Therefore, although a program such as *Xena* may

be memorable to viewers, what is remembered over time should increasingly reflect the viewer's expectations.

Characteristics of individuals impact their expectations and their memories of content that violate gender schemas. Individuals who abide by traditional gender stereotypes tend to have relatively rigid gender schemas whereas nontraditional individuals are more flexible (Bem, 1981). For example, nontraditional individuals remember both genderstereotyped and nongenderstereotyped television content whereas traditional individuals remember the genderstereotyped content and forget the nongenderstereotyped content (Renn & Calvert, 1993). Because males have more to lose and less to gain by changing their gender schemas, they may be more resistant to change and more prone to think in traditional ways than females are (Ruble & Martin, 1998).

### **The Present Study**

The purpose of the present study was to examine how young adult males and females perceived and remembered a female action hero, *Xena Warrior Princess*, as a function of the amount of shadow portrayed in a given episode. We were particularly interested in viewer characteristics, such as gender and masculine and feminine personality styles, that might influence viewer perceptions and memories. Our main hypothesis was that women with nontraditional gender roles would be more likely to perceive Xena as a role model. We also expected Xena to be liked less and to be less attractive as a role model when the program presented her with a ruthless male shadow. Finally, we were interested in the kinds of heroic themes that viewers remembered over time.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

One hundred and thirty-nine college students ( $M = 20$  years, 2 months) participated in the study. There were 97 women and 42 men. Participants were from predominantly middle or upper-middle income groups. The ethnic background of participants was approximately 85% Caucasian, 1% African American, 6% Latino, and 8% Asian American. Within gender, participants were randomly assigned to one of three viewing conditions. Because of subject error in coming to their assigned viewing time, Condition 1 had 46 participants, Condition 2 had 50 participants, and Condition 3 had 43 participants.

### Television Program: Treatment Condition

Three episodes of *Xena: Warrior Princess* were selected based on the amount and kind of shadow imagery in the episode. All episodes were approximately 43 min long.

The ruthless shadow program, *The Price*, portrayed Xena with an evil shadow that sought to defeat the enemy at all costs. She killed her enemy, a primitive tribe called the Horde, in a ruthless and calculated way, and did not even provide food or water to her own wounded soldiers because their supplies were low and needed for victory by the fighting troops. By contrast, her friend Gabrielle is compassionate to all, caring for the wounded and even giving water to the wounded enemy outside the safety of the fortress. Gabrielle's compassion eventually impacts Xena's behavior. When Xena challenges the leader of the Horde to a one-on-one fight, she wins the battle, but does not kill him, leading to the end of the confrontation and a restoration of her humanity. In this episode, Xena allows the dark side of her shadow to emerge to save them from destruction, but becomes inhuman in the process. Through Gabrielle's feminine attributes, specifically her compassion, Xena realizes the error in her blind quest for victory. Xena regains her inner balance and fights to save them all, but not in a vengeful way. The theme of a competent female hero is highlighted, but the price is her humanity. Compassion, the feminine principle shown by Gabrielle, is put forth for Xena to find the way to be a true hero.

In the integrated shadow condition, *The Dreamworker*, Xena must confront her former dark self in order to rescue her friend Gabrielle. Gabrielle wants to become a fighter like Xena, but Xena tries to dissuade her, insisting that killing people changes you forever. The Mystics capture Gabrielle and they try to get her to kill another person, but Gabrielle tricks her attackers into killing each other. Meanwhile, Xena travels through a dream passage to save Gabrielle. During her journey, she meets the victims of her past and must confront and accept the killer in herself, literally portrayed as her shadow. Xena ultimately triumphs over her past and saves Gabrielle. In this episode, Xena dislikes her past and the person she was, but eventually accepts who she was and integrates her shadow into her personality. The acceptable feminine heroic theme of using your mind, not your sword, is a program message.

In the low shadow episode, *Daughter of Polmira*, the Horde had kidnapped a girl who Xena and Gabrielle rescue. The girl, however, now prefers to stay with her adoptive Horde family, who she calls Polmira, rather than return to her former family and life, which she no longer remembers. With the girl as an ally, Xena ultimately forges a peace between the two groups of people. However, she must fight a member of the village who tries to disrupt



the peace process. Xena clearly shows remorse when she has to kill him. In this episode, Xena displays the traditional heroic theme of good triumphs over evil but with no evil or dark side of her personality shown. Although she kills one person, she does so only to save others. Feminine themes about accepting and understanding others and the value of family are the focus with heroic themes playing a less central role.

### Procedure

#### *Bem Sex-Role Inventory*

Before viewing a program, participants completed the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI), a self-descriptive measure of traditionally masculine and feminine personality characteristics. Each individual rates himself or herself on a 9-point Likert scale on adjectives that have been traditionally defined as masculine, feminine, or neutral. The masculine characteristics of the BSRI are self-reliant, defends own beliefs, independent, athletic, assertive, strong personality, forceful, analytical, has leadership abilities, willing to take risks, makes decisions easily, self-sufficient, masculine, dominant, willing to take a stand, aggressive, acts as a leader, individualistic, competitive, and ambitious. The feminine characteristics of the BSRI are yielding, cheerful, shy, affectionate, flatterable, loyal, feminine, sympathetic, sensitive to the needs of others, understanding, compassionate, eager to soothe hurt feelings, soft-spoken, warm, tender, gullible, childlike, does not use harsh language, loves children, and gentle. There are also filler items that are neither masculine or feminine. It took approximately 20 min for each person to complete the BSRI.

#### *Perceptions About the Woman Hero*

A few days after completing the BSRI, participants viewed one of the 43-min episodes of *Xena Warrior Princess* in groups of about 20 people. After viewing the program, participants answered a 4-point Likert questionnaire assessing their perceptions of Xena and Gabrielle on the following dimensions: (1) likeability; (2) role model; (3) physical attractiveness; (4) nurturance; (5) power; and (6) control over their lives (i.e., self-efficacy). Response options for these questions were as follows: *not very much*, *a little bit*, *a lot*, or *a whole lot*, scored as 1–4 respectively. Participants were also asked if they had ever seen the Xena series, if they had ever viewed this particular episode, and if they were likely to view the program again. Then participants rated Xena and Gabrielle on the BSRI for their perceptions of the characters' masculine and feminine personality characteristics.

### *Delayed Recall*

Within one week of viewing the program, participants wrote about the story that they had viewed. The directions were as follows: "Pretend that you are writing a letter to a friend who hasn't seen this episode of Xena. Write the story so that your friend will understand what happened." Participants were also asked to write the point or moral of the story. Stories were submitted on computer disk or by e-mail.

### *Identification of Archetypal Images*

After completing the free recall task, participants answered the final questionnaire which asked them to identify examples of archetypal images and other symbols that were presented in the program. The list of archetypal images included Mother, Child, Father, Hero, Trickster, God, Demon, Wise Old Man, Religious Symbols, Horse, Chariot, Wind, Ocean, Fire, Storms, Earth, Magic, Power, Giant, Birth, Rebirth, Death, Sun, Moon, Weapons, Mandala, Shadow (defined as the primitive, animal side of human nature). Participants were asked to provide examples of any of these symbols that they could remember. The mother, hero, and shadow archetypal images were the focus of our study.

### **Scoring Story Content and Themes: Heroic, Aggressive, Shadow, and Feminine Material**

#### *Story Content*

Participants' stories were analyzed for three types of imagery: the hero, the shadow, and aggressiveness. A summary score was computed for each type of imagery with the actual words and synonyms for the hero, shadow, and aggression each counting as one instance of that form of imagery. The synonyms were derived from three sources: (1) a dictionary; (2) synonyms for root words, such as hero or aggressiveness, in the Microsoft and Word Perfect thesaurus; and (3) synonyms of the synonyms. Words that were counted as heroic imagery included brave, courageous, powerful, daring, strong, noble, defender, and champion. Words that were scored as aggressive imagery included fought, killed, ambushed, battled, attacked, and defeated. Negative shadow imagery included the words betrayal, revenge, treachery, evil, hate, ruthlessness, emotionally hardened, vengeful, wicked, destructive, orders the death of another, lack of remorse, anger, corrupt, no conscience, and deceptive.

Reliability was computed on each type of imagery for 34 randomly selected stories using the formula of  $2 \times$  the number of agreements divided by the total number of scores for Scorer 1 and Scorer 2. Reliability was 87% for Xena's shadow imagery, 87% for her heroic imagery, and 71% for her aggression.

### *Story Themes*

The key program themes were constructed by examining the story content and the themes written by study participants. For the integrated shadow condition, the two main themes were that you could overcome your past and that the mind was mightier than the sword. For the ruthless shadow condition, the key themes were that women can lead just as men can and that compassion is needed for real heroic behavior, lest the victor be consumed by the shadow. For the no shadow condition, the key themes were that family is important, that accepting and understanding of others are important human virtues, and that good triumphs over evil.

Reliability was computed on each type of story theme for 34 randomly selected participants using the formula of  $2 \times$  the number of agreements divided by the total number of scores for Scorer 1 and Scorer 2. Reliability was 82% for Xena's shadow themes, 85% for her heroic themes, 71% for her antiviolence themes, and 76% for feminine interpersonal themes.

## **RESULTS**

### **Participants' Masculinity and Femininity Scores**

A 2 (gender) by 3 (condition) multivariate ANOVA was conducted with participants' masculinity and femininity scores as dependent variables. The men and women in this sample were genderstereotyped. Specifically, men scored significantly higher on masculinity than women did,  $F(1, 134) = 15.98$ ,  $p < .001$  ( $M = 102.93$  vs.  $92.97$ ), respectively, and women scored significantly higher on femininity than men did,  $F(1, 134) = 4.88$ ,  $p = .029$  ( $M = 100.95$  vs.  $95.61$ , respectively).

### **Perceptions of Xena's and Gabrielle's Masculinity and Femininity**

A 2 (gender) by 3 (condition) between-subjects ANOVA was conducted with Xena's and Gabrielle's masculinity and femininity scores, in turn, as dependent variables. The 2 factor ANOVA computed on perceptions of Xena's masculinity scores yielded no significant differences. Xena's masculinity scores were 131.37 in the ruthless shadow condition, 130 in

the no shadow condition, and 128.37 in the integrated shadow condition. By contrast, there were significant differences in Xena's femininity scores by condition,  $F(2, 133) = 4.50, p = .01$ . Xena was seen as less feminine in the ruthless shadow condition ( $M = 58.32, SD = 2.51$ ) than in either the integrated shadow ( $M = 66.79, SD = 2.67$ ) or the no shadow conditions ( $M = 67.89, SD = 2.30$ ). When condition was controlled, partial correlations revealed that feminine individuals perceived Xena as more feminine,  $\sigma = .19, p = .034$ .

The 2 factor ANOVA computed on Gabrielle's masculinity and femininity scores yielded significant effects. Gabrielle was perceived as being more masculine in the ruthless shadow ( $M = 89.99, SD = 3.03$ ) than in the integrated shadow ( $M = 78.21, SD = 3.21$ ) or the no shadow ( $M = 79.35, SD = 2.78$ ) conditions,  $F(2, 133) = 4.604, p = .012$ . Gabrielle was seen as less feminine in the integrated shadow ( $M = 100.98, SD = 1.78$ ) than in the ruthless shadow ( $M = 110.60, SD = 1.68$ ) or the no shadow ( $M = 111.88, SD = 1.54$ ) conditions,  $F(2, 133) = 12.107, p < .001$ .

A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted with Xena and Gabrielle's masculinity and femininity scores as dependent variables. Even though there were condition differences in perceptions of Xena's and Gabrielle's masculinity and femininity, Xena was clearly the more masculine character ( $M = 130.27$  vs.  $83.27$ , respectively), Wilks's Lambda (1, 138) = 779.771,  $p < .001$ , and Gabrielle the more feminine character ( $M = 107.70$  vs.  $64.68$ , respectively), Wilks's Lambda (1, 138) = 705.143,  $p < .001$ . Thus, Xena did represent the masculine principle and Gabrielle the feminine principle.

### Perceptions of Xena as a Role Model

The overall design for the perception analyses was a 2 (gender) by 3 (condition) between-subjects analysis of variance design with perceptions of Xena as a role model and as a likeable person as dependent variables. LSD follow-up tests were used to determine significant differences between means, given a significant  $F$  ratio. Correlational and regression analyses were also used to examine characteristics of Xena and of viewers that made her a role model or a likeable character or both.

#### *Xena as a Role Model*

We hypothesized that participants who saw the ruthless portrayal of Xena's shadow would find her the least attractive as a role model. The 2 factor ANOVA computed on how much viewers perceived Xena as a role model yielded a condition by gender interaction,  $F(2, 133) = 5.17, p = .007$ .

**Table I.** Mean Condition Differences by Gender for Perceptions of Xena as a Role Model

Condition	Men	Women
Low shadow	2.12 <sup>a</sup> (.86)	1.52 <sup>c</sup> (.62)
Ruthless shadow	1.50 <sup>bc</sup> (.65)	1.69 <sup>bc</sup> (.71)
Integrated shadow	1.64 <sup>bc</sup> (.50)	1.89 <sup>b</sup> (.63)

*Note.* Within gender, means with different letter superscripts are significantly different at  $p < .05$ . Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.

As seen in Table I, men perceived Xena as a role model the most when Xena was presented with very little male shadow rather than with a male shadow. By contrast, women were most likely to perceive Xena as a role model when she was presented with an integrated shadow rather than with very little shadow. When the genders were contrasted, men perceived Xena as a role model more often than women did in the low shadow condition, but there were no gender differences for either shadow condition. Overall, however, most participants perceived Xena as a role model only a little bit.

Regression analyses were used to examine the relation between personality styles and the perception of Xena as a role model. As predicted, individuals with more masculine personality styles were more likely to perceive Xena as a role model than were those with less masculine personality styles,  $F(1, 134) = 4.61, p < .05$ .

Regression analyses revealed that the qualities that predicted the selection of Xena as a role model were perceptions that she was in control of her life,  $t = 2.18, p = .03$ , and that she was nurturant,  $t = 3.73, p < .001$ . When these analyses were run separately by gender, the findings revealed that there was a mixture of traditionally valued masculine and feminine personality characteristics that made her a role model. Specifically, women who saw Xena as a role model perceived her to be in control of her life,  $t = 2.73, p = .008$ , to be physically attractive,  $t = 3.16, p = .002$ , to be nurturant,  $t = 2.47, p = .016$ , and perceived her to be a mother archetypal figure,  $t = 2.12, p = .037$ . Men who saw Xena as a potential role model saw her as less physically attractive,  $t = -2.21, p = .035$ , as nurturant,  $t = 2.87, p = .008$ , and tended not to see her as a mother archetypal image,  $t = -1.20, p = .056$ .

### *Liking Xena*

The 2 factor ANOVA computed on how much viewers liked Xena yielded no effects of condition or gender. As was found in the role model analysis, the regression analysis revealed that people with more masculine

personality styles liked Xena more,  $F(1, 134) = 4.29, p < .05$ . Overall, they liked Xena midway between *somewhat* and *a lot*. Regression analyses also revealed that those who liked Xena the most perceived her to be more physically attractive,  $t = 4.48, p < .001$ , to have control of her life,  $t = 2.12, p = .036$ , and to be a mother archetypal figure,  $t = 2.08, p = .04$ . There was also a trend for those who liked her to perceive her as being more nurturant,  $t = 1.93, p = .056$ . When analyzed separately by gender, women continued to like Xena the most when she was perceived to be physically attractive,  $t = 3.31, p = .001$ , and when they saw her as a mother archetypal figure,  $t = 2.80, p = .006$ . For men, only perceptions of physical attractiveness predicted how much they liked Xena,  $t = 2.44, p = .02$ . Pearson correlations revealed that those who liked Xena were also more likely to perceive her as a role model,  $\sigma = .47, p < .001$ . The relation between liking Xena and perceiving her as a role model was true for both men,  $\sigma = .34, p = .03$ , and women,  $\sigma = .53, p < .001$ .

### Story Analyses

The overall design for the story analysis was a 3 (condition) by 2 (gender) between-subjects ANOVA with the frequency of words about Xena's heroic acts, aggression, and shadow as dependent variables. LSD post hoc comparisons were made, given a significant  $F$  ratio. The two-factor ANOVA computed on all three dependent variables yielded only a main effect of condition. As seen in Table II, those who saw any shadow content wrote stories with more heroic,  $F(2, 124) = 24.81, p < .001$ ; aggressive,  $F(2, 124) = 12.63, p < .001$ ; and shadow imagery about Xena,  $F(2, 126) = 20.64, p < .001$ .

There were also significant positive Pearson correlations between story imagery about Xena's heroism and her aggression,  $\sigma = .68, p < .001$ , Xena's heroism and her shadow,  $\sigma = .40, p < .001$ , and Xena's aggression and her shadow,  $\sigma = .53, p < .001$ . Perceiving Xena as a role model or liking her was

**Table II.** Mean Levels of Heroic, Aggressive, and Shadow Story Imagery About Xena by Condition

Condition	Heroic imagery about Xena	Aggressive imagery about Xena	Shadow imagery about Xena
No shadow	2.04 <sup>a</sup>	5.49 <sup>a</sup>	.40 <sup>a</sup>
Ruthless shadow	6.44 <sup>b</sup>	11.83 <sup>b</sup>	2.45 <sup>b</sup>
Integrated shadow	5.56 <sup>b</sup>	10.22 <sup>b</sup>	3.04 <sup>b</sup>

*Note.* For each type of imagery, means with different letter superscripts are significantly different at  $p < .001$ .

unrelated to the frequency of story imagery about her heroism, her shadow, or her aggression.

### Thematic Analyses

#### *Heroic Story Themes*

We were particularly interested in the degree to which participants identified heroic story themes as they discussed the point of their stories. We included masculine hero themes (i.e., good triumphs over evil; women can be heroes, just like men), feminine hero themes (use your mind, not physical force, to solve conflicts), and another feminine hero theme (compassion, not physical force, resolves conflicts). There was also a category where no heroic themes were mentioned.

As seen in Table III, 51% of the participants in the integrated shadow condition reported heroic themes compared to 66% in the ruthless shadow condition, and 12% in the no shadow condition,  $\chi^2_{(6)} = 62.478, p < .001$ . The feminine heroic theme of using the mind rather than the sword was reported most by participants in the integrated shadow condition. The theme of compassion over force was reported the most in the ruthless shadow condition. The theme that good conquers evil was reported least of the heroic themes, but it occurred most often by those in the ruthless shadow condition.

#### *Shadow Story Themes*

We examined the use of shadow story themes such as you can't escape from your past versus themes that spoke of accepting the past and changing, the latter representing an integration of the shadow. Shadow story themes were scored as not mentioned, as the character being trapped by the past, and as the character transcending past mistakes.

As seen in Table IV, participants in the integrated shadow condition were more likely to write that you can transcend your past than those in

**Table III.** Frequency of Different Kinds of Heroic Themes by Condition

	Heroic theme			Total
	Absent	Compassion over force	Mind over sword	
Condition				
No shadow	37	4	0	42
Ruthless shadow	13	16	4	38
Integrated shadow	17	1	17	35
<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>115</b>

**Table IV.** Frequency of Shadow Themes by Condition

Condition	Shadow theme			Total
	Absent	Trapped by the past	Transcend the past	
No shadow	39	2	1	42
Ruthless shadow	29	9	0	38
Integrated shadow	21	5	9	35
Total	89	16	10	115

the ruthless or no shadow conditions,  $\chi^2_{(4)} = 24.699$ ,  $p < .001$ . By contrast, participants in the ruthless shadow condition were more likely to write that you cannot escape your past than those in the integrated or no shadow conditions. Interestingly, most participants did not even write about shadow themes, even though they were a focus of two of the three programs.

#### *Antiviolence Themes*

The male shadow is often associated with excessive violence. Therefore, we examined the prevalence of antiviolence themes. As seen in Table V, antiviolence themes were more prevalent in both shadow conditions than in the no shadow condition,  $\chi^2_{(2)} = 28.818$ ,  $p < .001$ . In other words, most participants in shadow conditions did write about antiviolence themes.

#### *Feminine Themes*

Positive interpersonal themes were identified in the Xena programs, particularly the low shadow condition. These themes, which are often considered to be feminine, included the importance of family, acceptance and understanding toward others, and compassion.

As seen in Table VI, feminine themes were most often mentioned by those who viewed the no shadow condition,  $\chi^2_{(6)} = 69.947$ ,  $p < .001$ . Those

**Table V.** Frequency of Antiviolence Themes by Condition

Condition	Antiviolence theme		Total
	Absent	Present	
No shadow	28	14	42
Ruthless shadow	10	28	38
Integrated shadow	4	31	35
Total	42	73	115



**Table VI.** Feminine Themes by Condition

Condition	Feminine themes				Total
	Absent	Compassion	Acceptance	Family	
No shadow	9	5	18	10	42
Ruthless shadow	19	14	5	0	38
Integrated shadow	34	1	0	0	35
Total	62	20	23	10	115

who saw the no shadow condition frequently mentioned themes about accepting others and about the value of family. Those who saw the ruthless shadow condition wrote about themes of compassion. Those in the integrated shadow condition rarely wrote about feminine themes. The integrated shadow condition was also where participants found Gabrielle, who represents the feminine principle, to be least feminine.

### Predictors of Future Xena Viewing

Only 15 participants had viewed Xena prior to the study. Past viewing was associated with liking Xena,  $\sigma = .24, p = .005$ , with perceiving her as being physically attractive,  $\sigma = .29, p = .001$ , with perceiving her as a mother archetypal figure,  $\sigma = .18, p = .046$ , and with trends to perceive Xena as a role model,  $\sigma = .14, p = .095$ , and as nurturant,  $\sigma = .15, p = .078$ .

Regression analyses were conducted on all participants to predict the likelihood of future viewing. Perceptions about Xena’s physical attractiveness,  $t = 2.43, p = .016$  predicted viewers’ future likelihood of viewing the series. When analyzed separately by gender, it was the women who were most influenced by Xena’s physical attractiveness,  $t = 2.70, p = .008$ ; there was no relation between perceptions of physical attractiveness and future viewing for men. Instead, there was a trend for perceptions of Xena’s nurturance to lead to men’s future viewing,  $t = 1.92, p = .065$ . Perceptions of Xena as a role model, as powerful, as having control over her life, as a mother archetype, or as a hero were unrelated to predicted future viewing of the series.

We then returned to a 2 (gender) by 3 (condition) between-subjects ANOVA design to determine if there were condition differences in perceptions of Xena’s physical attractiveness since this was the primary determinant of future viewing. Xena was perceived to be more physically attractive in the integrated shadow program ( $M = 2.52, SD = .16$ ) than in the ruthless shadow ( $M = 2.28, SD = .15$ ) or the low shadow programs ( $M = 1.95, SD = .14$ ).

### Summary of Findings

In summary, people with masculine personality styles were more likely to like Xena and to see her as a role model. Men perceived Xena as a role model the most when there was very little of her shadow presented in the story whereas women preferred her as a role model when she was presented with an integrated shadow. Nurturance positively predicted both men's and women's perceptions of Xena as a role model. Women also saw Xena as a role model when she was perceived to be in control of her life, physically attractive, and a mother figure. By contrast, men saw Xena as a potential role model when she was perceived to be less physically attractive and not a mother figure. Overall, Xena was liked the most when she was perceived to be in control of her life, physically attractive, and a mother archetypal figure. Both men and women liked Xena when she was perceived to be physically attractive. Interestingly, men liked Xena when they perceived her as physically attractive, but were less likely to see her as a role model when she was perceived as physically attractive. Nonetheless, liking Xena and perceiving Xena as a role model were positively correlated for men. Women liked her when they perceived her as a mother archetypal figure.

Future viewing of the series was predicted primarily by the perception that Xena was physically attractive, particularly for women. Men tended to be more likely to view the series again when they perceived Xena to be nurturant.

The stories written about specific Xena episodes had little relation to perceptions of Xena. Heroic imagery clustered with aggressive and shadow story imagery. Heroic themes generally focused on feminine ways of saving others such as using your mind and being compassionate.

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how men and women perceived a female televised hero, particularly when the degree of her male shadow varied. Our main hypothesis was that women with nontraditional gender roles would perceive the female hero to be a role model. As expected, women with higher masculinity scores were more likely to see Xena as a role model. However, men with higher masculinity scores were also more likely to see Xena as a role model. Put another way, individuals of both genders with masculine personality styles, like that of Xena, were more likely to see her as a role model. As found in the modeling literature, people want to be like those who they perceive as similar to themselves (Bandura, 1997). Interestingly, personality characteristics were more important than gender when people made similarity decisions. Nevertheless, absolute choices to perceive

Xena as a role model were only at *a little bit*, indicating that she was not a preferred role model for either gender.

Women who were more likely to see Xena as a potential role model also perceived her as having a mixture of feminine and masculine personality characteristics such as physical attractiveness, being a mother figure, nurturance, and being in control of her life. Perceiving Xena as powerful, however, was not important to women for role model status. Put another way, the classic formula for successful models comprised of power and nurturance (Bandura, 1997), seems to take the form of power over one's own destiny (i.e., self-efficacy), rather than power over others (a more masculine style), plus nurturance in women's choices.

In feminist archetypal theory, the female hero's quest often involves an encounter with a powerful integrative mother figure who can offer regeneration (Pratt, 1985). Women who saw the integrated shadow episode of Xena did, in fact, see Xena portrayed as a mother figure, the motherly heroic protector of Gabrielle. By being a mother and a hero, Xena is regenerated and able to integrate and go beyond the former dark male shadow that consumed her life. For women, the findings suggest the value of portraying female heroes with traditionally feminine qualities and archetypal images as well as the value of portraying self-efficacy, the sense of personal control in one's life (Bandura, 1997). For men, role model status is generally achieved when women heroes are not perceived as potential sex objects or mothers. However, men did value the traditionally feminine quality of nurturance in female roles models.

Individuals who liked Xena were also likely to perceive her as a role model. Both men and women liked Xena when they thought she was physically attractive. This finding was particularly interesting for men who liked Xena when they perceived her as attractive, but who did not perceive her as a role model then. Similarly, men perceive women who succeed in managerial positions as being less physically attractive, perhaps because attractive women are generally perceived as feminine, and femininity is often perceived as being less competent than is masculinity (Heilman & Stopeck, 1985). Consistent with the role model findings, women also liked Xena when they perceived her to be a mother figure.

When the amount of Xena's shadow was varied, men were most likely to find Xena to be a role model when virtually no male shadow was present, suggesting that they found a nontraditional presentation with ruthless masculine characteristics unappealing in women heroic depictions. Women, by contrast, saw Xena as a role model most when she had an integrated shadow, that is, she accepted her dark impulses and integrated them into her current personality. The shadow themes remembered by both men and women revealed that those who saw the integrated shadow program were more likely

to discuss Xena as being able to transcend her past and change than did those in the ruthless shadow or the no shadow conditions.

Interestingly, almost all the heroic themes identified were those that are socially acceptable for women. The most remembered heroic themes remembered involved the use of traditionally valued feminine qualities, such as using argument and persuasion rather than the sword (Polster, 1992). The theme that the mind is more important than physical force in battle was voiced by 49% of those in the integrated shadow condition and 11% of those in the ruthless shadow condition, but by no one in the no shadow condition.

The importance of using feminine principles is supported by another formula we found for female heroes: the importance of compassion and understanding in solving conflicts. In the ruthless shadow condition, where Xena initially used brute force in combat, 42% of the participants voiced the value of compassion and understanding compared to 10% in the no shadow condition and 3% in the integrated shadow condition. Compassion and understanding are both traditionally valued feminine qualities (Bem, 1981) that appear to temper the more ruthless male qualities brought about by war (Hall & Nordby, 1973). In the ruthless shadow condition, Gabrielle, who typically represents the feminine principle in most episodes, taught Xena this heroic lesson. By contrast, rarely did participants discuss program themes such as men and women could be equals as leaders, that women could be as physically strong as men, or that good always triumphs over evil.

Overall, then, formulas of using the mind or the heart rather than force to win battles emerge as acceptable ways for presenting female action heroes, even those like Xena who do have the physical strength to use brute force for victory. Characters like Disney's Mulan and Shu Lien from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, who use the mind to achieve victory and show compassion to others including their enemies, provide valuable templates for integrating female heroes into mainstream fiction and culture. A female hero only fights as a last resort, when all other methods have failed.

Taken together, the findings suggest the importance of having women's heroic roles include the portrayal of traditionally valued feminine qualities. Antiviolence and positive "feminine" interpersonal themes were often remembered. The results suggest that gradual rather than major changes in gender portrayals seem likely to be acceptable and memorable to viewers, findings that also are in keeping with gender schema theory (Ruble & Martin, 1998). For the stories written about the program, heroic, aggressive, and shadow imagery was correlated, particularly in those programs that portrayed Xena's shadow. However, perceiving Xena as a role model was unrelated to telling stories or writing themes with heroic imagery or heroic themes about her.

The results highlight the challenges that remain when presenting women in nontraditional heroic roles, particularly when the dark side of the male shadow is shown. Although women and men who were masculine were more likely to see Xena as a role model, the stereotyped norms of gender roles still held considerable power over most of these young adult viewers as overall interest in being like her was relatively low. Both men and women liked the hero Xena best when they perceived her as being somewhat feminine. Although Xena's physical attractiveness was valued by both men and women, it was particularly valued by women. Xena's sexy appearance does reflect cultural stereotypes about women (Ruble & Martin, 1998), but male heroes are also physically attractive. Future research should include participants who regularly view nontraditional portrayals like Xena to determine what they are learning from female action heroes as well as examine both male and female heroes to see what, if any, differences may exist in viewers' perceptions of them; how these perceptions vary depending on the portrayal in a specific episode; messages taken away, but not readily conveyed, because of gender biases in memory; potential unconscious memories of events; and if possible, how these perceptions and memories vary when a female or a male hero perform similar actions. It would also be interesting to examine when children come to understand that people can be both good and evil, and that heroes struggle with the same inner conflicts that we all do. This understanding, in turn, could potentially moderate the impact that cartoon heroes have on the aggressive behaviors of child viewers.

In conclusion, the most effective formula for presenting heroic female portrayals is one in which female characters embody traditionally valued feminine characteristics, such as physical attractiveness, nurturance, compassion, and using the mind over the sword. Using your mind and being compassionate are integral cultural expectations for female heroes, and perhaps should be emphasized more in our male heroes as well.

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