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Self-Presentation Symbols and Their Effect on Heroic and Villainous Drive

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The Effect of Costumes and Symbols on Heroic Drive

There is a significant body of research reflecting that human beings are drawn to hero stories. This fascination stems from a basic human need for hope and the inspiration to achieve greatness. Most hero stories, especially fictional ones, contain symbolically embedded information, which helps us to mentally represent particular heroes. For example, when asked to visualize Batman and Superman two distinct images come to mind: Batman's mask and Superman's cape. In the real world, these symbols are a little more obscure, like a Policeman's badge or a Fireman's hat. Symbols are important for the understanding of viewers, but they can also hold significance in another sense. What if these costumes, uniforms, symbols or cultural images are actually influencing the heroic behavior? In the words of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), "...the things with which people interact are not simply tools for survival, or for making survival easier and more comfortable. Things embody goals, make skills manifest, and shape the identities of their users." Humans interact with costumes and symbols daily, as they shape who we are and help us to achieve our goals. In the case of heroes and villains, this symbolic interaction could shape identities and potentially drive them to act accordingly.

The study of heroes and villains is a topic that has not always been on the forefront of social psychological research. Specifically relating to the definition of heroes and villains, there is a lot of deliberation and a minimal amount of concrete information. In one article relating to the definition of heroic behavior written by Lickerman (2010), the author defines heroic behavior as "the willingness to make a

personal sacrifice for the benefit of others.” The researcher goes on to say that a “special kind of nobility attaches itself to those who serve others at cost to themselves” (Lickerman, 2010). There are many different views of what qualifies someone as a hero, for example, the college football player who makes a game-winning touchdown. For Lickerman, this athlete is not a hero because in order to be a hero, one must put him or her self in jeopardy in some way (Lickerman, 2010).

Another view of heroism is theorized by Allison and Goethals (2013), who focus on the idea of heroic leadership. These researchers believe that heroism reflects two trait dimensions, which are morality and competence. They go on to explain that heroes are generally fictional characters and that most of their behavior includes some extent of morality or self-sacrifice. There are eight “great traits” of heroism, which include being caring, charismatic, inspiring, reliable, resilient, selfless, smart, and strong. Authors also say that people have schemas or mental pictures of heroes and these usually include characteristics that are similar to leaders. These traits include strength, activeness, and a sense of being good. As mentioned before, the topic of heroism has been considered for years, and is not a concept that has a concrete definition (Allison et al., 2013).

In another set of research conducted by Allison (2014), the author focuses specifically on heroes, as he suggests that there are several necessary functions. These functions help to explain why people desperately need these stories in their every day lives. Hero stories force people to go beyond reality to think about facts and trends of life. There are three ways that hero stories force us to think outside of what is physically possible, which include revealing deep truths, illuminating

paradox, and developing emotional intelligence. Revealing deep truths is a concept created by Joseph Campbell, which suggests that through deep time and deep roles, the audience experiences a sense of timelessness and familiarity with the stories. Using deep time allows the audience to understand ageless truths surrounding the subject of human existence. Deep roles help readers to understand characters in the narrative using archetypical family roles. Paradox is the second way that hero stories force people to think beyond reality. Most hero stories contain paradoxes, which are very hard for the audience to grasp. The third factor that helps the audience to think beyond reality is a heroes ability to enhance people's emotional intelligence. Within most hero stories, tragic, scary and sad things occur, and this helps children or readers to face and resolve feelings (Allison, 2014). Hero stories have the capacity to help people by forcing them to think beyond rational thought, and this shows why heroes and villains require further research.

Departing from the important research on heroes, many scientists have conducted research surrounding the idea of costumes and uniforms affecting attitudes and behavior. One of the first studies to focus on this area of research was conducted by scientists, Morse and Gergen (1970). These researchers created an experiment to see how interview dress and appearance can affect the attitudes and feelings of participants. In this experiment, researchers promoted a job interview in the school newspaper, while they hired women to dress as secretaries and to observe the potential job applicants. Applicants were asked to sit in a waiting room as they anticipated their interview. The other people or "competitors" in the room, who were actually confederates, were either asked to dress impressively, or to dress

in sloppy or less appealing clothing. Researchers then had participants take a survey, which included self-consistency test and a self-esteem measure. The unknowing participants were told that this was for screening in the job interview process. Researchers were looking to see if self-esteem in this case could be affected by these stimuli of clothing. It was discovered that self esteem was negatively affected when the confederates were dressed nicely and self esteem increased when confederates were dressed in an undesirable way. The results of this study show that observing the symbol of other people's clothing can negatively or positively effect emotion (Morse et al., 1970). This is important for the current research study because it shows that symbols can significantly affect attitudes. This means that in the case of heroes and villains, heroic or villainous symbols can affect the way they feel about themselves.

Similar to the experiment by Morse et al. (1970), Karl, Hall, and Peluchette (2013) conducted a study to observe the impact of appearance on work achievement. Researchers used self-perception theory in order to see if dressing casually, in business casual attire, or in formal business attire, affects a number of things such as perception of creativity and competence. Results of this study showed that when participants were dressed in formal business attire they experienced increased feelings of competence and felt more authority. When dressed in business casual attire, participants felt productive and when dressed in casual attire they felt uncreative. Researchers showed that the symbol of formal attire affected participants positively and made them act in a higher achieving manner, as compared to those dressed more casually. The results of this experiment confirm

the well-known slogan that “you are what you wear,” and that this can affect the way that someone both feels and acts in the work place. It is also important to note the way that people respond to other people’s clothing in the work place as well. Results of this study showed that people have a negative perception of tattoos, which makes customers respond poorly to workers. This is important for the current study because it could mean that if a hero or villain is wearing certain clothing, people could react in a way that possibly influences their behavior. Both the public perception of symbols and the individual’s ability to see them a certain way is very important (Karl et al., 2013). These ideas are significant because if people who are predisposed to heroic or villainous actions are wearing certain clothing, this could potentially have a large effect on behavior.

Relating to the effect of clothing on behavior, in a reflection on the infamous Stanford Prison experiment by researcher Philip Zimbardo (1973), author suggests that the power of the situation in this experiment was what lead people to act in certain ways. Very normal college students were chosen to participate in this study and they were randomly assigned as prisoners or guards. Both the prisoners and the prison guards began to act in ways that were unthinkable after only a few days. There was physical and verbal abuse, and even cases of sexual abuse. In the words of Zimbardo, “group pressures, authority symbols, dehumanization of others, imposed anonymity” are just a few of the things that influence behavior. The guards were wearing uniforms and so were the prisoners. This simple symbol of a prison helped these two groups of characters to internalize their positions in a much deeper sense (Zimbardo, 2007). This is significant to observe because as opposed to

the last experiment by Karl et al. (2013), Zimbardo demonstrates the actual physical effect of clothing on behavior as opposed to a self-report of the change in behavior. This kind of experiment could not be replicated because of the strict regulations of the IRB, but it showed that the combination of costumes along with the power of the situation could have a major effect on personality and behavior. The people in this experiment were said to be “normal” after taking personality tests, and the effect of this situation in combination with a simple uniform completely changed them into heartless and ruthless prison guards (Zimbardo, 2013).

Connected to this experiment pertaining to the power of the situation, Zimbardo (2008) performed a TED talk discussing the influence of uniforms during battle. Zimbardo (2008) discussed the significance of uniforms on actions of brutality during battle. He suggested that the anonymity that comes from wearing a uniform during battle affects the soldier’s ability to perform violent acts. The power of costumes in this case is very significant, as soldiers are more likely to attack or hurt their opponent when wearing a uniform. Though this is an extreme case, it connects with heroes and villains greatly. If the Joker or if other villains in history were not wearing costumes that masked their identity, would they not have participated in evil behavior? The power of costumes and symbols may influence heroic and villainous behavior, which is a frightening and powerful concept to consider (Zimbardo, 2008).

During the TED talk given by Zimbardo (2008) surrounding the power of costumes, the psychologist sites a researcher by the name of Watson (1973), who was a scientist interested in the powerful effect of deindividuation. Deindividuation

can be defined as the loss of self-awareness in a group setting. In Watson's cross cultural research, he found that if warriors change their appearance during battle, compared to those who do not change their appearance, 90% would kill, torture, or mutilate. He found that the loss of self-awareness in a group was positively correlated with aggressiveness, and therefore if someone is dressed in a uniform their behavior changes. Watson describes that "physical appearance may be a symbol to which an individual and others respond, or the expectations of other with regard to the individuals behavior or appearance may change" (Watson, 1973). Watson is describing in his research that costumes or uniforms may be a symbol that causes people to act either positively or negatively. This could be a result of others expecting the individual to act accordingly or just internalizing it themselves (Watson et al., 1973). Relating to the previous research, this is important for the present experiment because uniforms affect behavior, and this could also be the case for heroes and villains.

Moving away from the effect of costumes on feelings or behavior, symbols are also very important when looking at attitudes and performance. In an experiment by Bilewicz and Klebaniuk (2013), researchers looked at the effect of religious symbols on people's self-esteem and affect. Researchers wanted to see if these religious symbols potentially affect people on a daily basis, in public areas near churches or in other religious places. Participants were asked to take a survey on a computer, while half of the participants had a cross hanging over the computer and half did not. Researchers discovered that when a religious symbol is present in a room it minimizes negative affect of students who consider themselves to be

religious and participate in religious ceremonies. Specifically, people who viewed themselves as Roman Catholic had significantly less self-reported negative affect after participating in the experiment. This shows that self-identifying symbols bring out certain moods or feelings (Bilewicz et al., 2013). The results of this research are significant for this experiment because it shows that people predisposed to positive religious beliefs, specifically Catholics, will experience a positive change in mood. This could mean that people who are predisposed to heroic or villainous behaviors can have an attitude change when carrying certain symbols, and therefore identify with them more and take action.

The current study is an extension of the research listed above in many ways. It incorporates the ideas of Lickerman et al. (2010) in that heroes are very important to us and need to be further studied. It also incorporates the ideas of Csikszentmihalyi et al. (1981), Zimbardo (2007) and Bilewicz et al. (2013), that symbols and costumes have a major effect on human behavior because on a subconscious level they are central to us and we interact with them daily. The current research encompasses the works of Karl et al. (2013), that costumes and dress have an effect on behavior as well, based off of the idea that people see themselves differently in different clothing. The current research also ties into the works of Watson (1973) and Zimbardo (2008), showing that people or possibly heroes and villains wearing uniforms are more likely to perform certain behaviors because they are dressed with everyone in the group. This ties into the research of Morse et al. (1970) using his theory on deindividuation, because if heroes or villains wear a mask, they are able to conceal their identity and behave in ways they normally

would not. There has been no previous research on the combined topics of the effect of uniforms, costumes and symbols on heroic or villainous behavior, so this will be the first experiment uniting all of these subjects.

In this study a group of introductory level college psychology students at the University of Richmond were asked to take a survey regarding altruistic behavior after holding heroic, villainous, or neutral symbols while taking a simple geography quiz. It is hypothesized that participants holding the object symbolizing heroism will report an increased desire to participate in altruistic behaviors compared to those holding the villainous and neutral objects.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were students from the University of Richmond in an introductory psychology class. There were 50 participants in this study. The majority of participants in this study were 18 years old.

Procedure

Participants were first asked to sign a consent form. Subjects were informed that they would receive class credit for introductory courses and understood that they could leave the experiment if they wished and still receive credit. After this they were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions. They were told that the purpose of the experiment was to look at a person's ability to answer questions pertaining to geography when holding certain objects. Participants were informed that this exercise would be timed and that their scores would be viewed in the end.

In the first condition, 16 participants were asked to take this timed quiz and they held a stapler. This condition was considered the control group where the object should not have any effect on the way that participants feel or act. Initially participants were asked to look at the stapler for a minute and estimate the size and weight of the stapler. It was important that participants thoroughly looked at the object in order to instill it in their minds while they took the survey. Participants would then begin taking the quiz and they were asked to hold the object up at eye level so that it was still in their minds as they took this quiz. After two minutes went by they were asked to fill out a survey with 15 questions. These questions were primarily asking if participants reported themselves as acting heroically in hypothetical situations. These situations were masked by other questions to throw participants off as a part of the deception involved in this study. After the participants took this survey they were debriefed. The experimenter would then tell participants about heroes and villains and would tell them the purpose of the experiment. In the second condition, a second group of 17 random participants were asked to sign the consent form, observe an object, take the same two-minute quiz, take the survey and then were debriefed exactly the same way as the control group. The difference between these groups was that this one held a badge instead of a stapler. In the third condition, every step was repeated except that participants held a small symbol representing the face of a devil.

Results

After running a one way MANOVA with symbol as the independent variable with three levels, and five questions of helping behavior as the dependent variables, Wilk's Lambda suggests that there is no main effect of holding an object on reported behavior $f(10,80) = 1.30, p > .05$. When looking specifically at the dependent variable question three, it is clear that there was a significant effect of the independent variable on reported helping behavior $f(2) = 4.09, p < .05$. Participants holding the badge for this particular question reported significantly higher helping behaviors ($M = 3.81$) than participants holding the devil symbol ($M = 2.59$). Question three asked "would you be willing to spend a half an hour tutoring a child with their geography homework right now?"

In a second study, a group of introductory level college psychology students at the University of Richmond were asked to take a survey regarding altruistic behavior after wearing heroic or villainous masks while taking a simple geography quiz. It is hypothesized that participants wearing the mask symbolizing heroism will report an increased desire to participate in altruistic behaviors compared to those wearing the villainous mask.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were students from the University of Richmond in an introductory psychology class. There were 40 participants in this study and

participants were recruited using SONA. The majority of participants in this study were 18 years old.

Procedure

Participants were first asked to sign a consent form. Subjects were informed that they would receive class credit for introductory courses and understood that they could leave the experiment if they wished and still receive credit. After this they were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. They were told that the purpose of the experiment was to look at a person's ability to answer questions pertaining to geography when wearing certain masks. Participants were informed that this exercise would be timed and that their scores would be viewed in the end. In the first condition, 20 participants were asked to take this timed quiz and they wore a Batman mask. This condition was considered the heroic group where the mask should positively effect on the way that participants report their behavior. Initially participants were asked to wear the mask for a minute and look in a mirror as the adjusted it to their face. It was important that participants thoroughly looked in the mirror in order to instill it in their minds while they took the survey. Participants then began taking the quiz and they were asked to continue wearing the mask with the mirror in front of them. After two minutes went by they were asked to take off the mask and fill out a survey with 30 questions. These questions were primarily asking if participants reported themselves as acting heroically in hypothetical situations. These situations were masked by other questions to throw participants off as a part of the deception involved in this study. After the participants took this survey they were debriefed. The experimenter would then tell

participants about heroes and villains and would tell them the real purpose of the experiment. In the second condition, a second group of 20 random participants were asked to sign the consent form, fit a mask to their face, take the same two minute quiz, remove the mask from their face, take the survey and then were debriefed exactly the same way as the control group. The difference between these groups was that this one wore a villainous Darth Vader mask.

Results

After running a two way MANOVA, with mask and gender as the independent variables, and ten questions of helping behavior as the dependent variables, it is clear that there is a marginally significant interaction effect of condition and gender $f(10,27) = 2.10, p < .06$. Specifically, question one was marginally significant $f(1) = 3.59, p < .06$ and question seven was significant $f(1) = 4.44, p < .05$. Question one asked participants “if asked to volunteer your time to service right now, would you feel up for it?” Question seven asked participants “if you were in the Subway and someone fell onto the tracks would you jump down to save them?” Looking at question one, it is clear that females had much higher scores and much stronger desire to participate in helping behaviors when wearing a batman mask ($M = 3.64$) than males ($M = 2.4$) as seen in Figure 1. Looking at question seven, it is clear that again females had a much higher score and much stronger desire to participate in helping behaviors when wearing a batman mask ($M = 3.0$) than males ($M = 2.2$). It is also clear that on question seven that males had significantly greater desire to participate in helping behaviors when wearing the Darth Vader mask ($M = 3.7$) than

females ($M=2.7$), which is the opposite effect that we would expect to see, as shown in Figure 2. When looking at all of the questions combined in Figure 3, it is clear that females report more helping behaviors ($M=3.80$) than males ($M=3.38$).

Discussion

The results from these experiments suggest that the two hypotheses received mixed support. Results from experiment one showed that question three surrounding the idea of volunteering time to service was marginally significant, and that the hypothesis for this particular question was supported. Participants were significantly more likely to report helping behavior for this question when holding a heroic symbol, than when holding a villainous symbol. Results from experiment two showed that gender had an effect on the hypothesis as there was a marginally significant interaction effect between gender and type of mask on self reported helping behavior. Interestingly, question one was marginally significant and it mirrored the question from experiment one that was also marginally significant, as it asked if participants would volunteer their time to service. Question seven also supported the hypothesis that participants wearing the heroic mask would report higher helping behaviors than participants wearing the villainous mask, but was a question on the other end of the helping behavior spectrum as it asked if participants would risk their lives to save someone on a Subway track. Question seven had very interesting results, as it showed that males were more likely to participate in helping behaviors when wearing a villainous mask. This is the opposite effect that we would anticipate to find.

There are several limitations to this experiment. The first limitation is the fact that this experiment was an exploratory study and that there was no previous research or measures to base this study off of. There is not a lot of evidence surrounding the drive of heroes and villains in today's research and there is no previous research on the effect of heroic or villainous costumes on behavior. When looking at the measures of this experiment in both studies, researchers attempted to create a survey with a diverse range of questions of heroic behavior (See Appendix 1). It was important to have different levels of extremity in terms of heroic behavior in order to avoid bad questions.

A second limitation particularly pertains to the second experiment. The two masks were very similar in color in order to avoid any confounds, but the two masks were very different sizes. The Darth Vader mask covered the entire face of participants including their noses and mouths, and it was difficult to breath in this particular mask. Most participants expressed this difficulty at the end of the experiment, and this could have put participants in a bad mood and made them answer the survey in a way that was not true to the actual effect of the experiment. The Batman mask was much smaller and it did not cover the participant's mouth. This difference could have served as an explanation as to why the hypothesis was only marginally supported as opposed to significantly supported.

A third limitation within this research surrounds the particular methods of both experiment one and two. The participants were asked to put the objects down and take the masks off after they took the geography quiz and immediately before they took the survey about helping behaviors. The responses of the survey were

supposed to be effected by the masks as participants had a “new identity” as a super hero or as a villain. The fact that they took these masks off and placed the objects down could have significantly affected the results of the experiment. This could be a problem because the participants could be back to their “true identity” at the point that they filled out the survey, which was the vital point of the experiment where they needed to obtain a new identity.

A final limitation to this experiment relates to the second experiment and the choice of masks to represent heroism and villainy. There were several instances that participants asked the researcher which condition they were assigned to when they were being debriefed. This means that participants were not directly aware of the fact that Batman is heroic and Darth Vader is villainous, and these participants may not even be aware who these two characters are. This could be a very significant limitation to this study, as knowledge of the identity of masks is vital in order to internalize the heroic or villainous appearance. This could mean that the entire purpose of the study was altered. This is also significant because only several participants asked this question, which means that there were others who simply did not want to ask, and this could have a great effect on the results of experiment two.

In the future this experiment could take several different directions in order to get significant results and in order to test the hypotheses in new ways. First of all, the purpose of this experiment was never to specifically observe the effect of gender, and after running the second experiment looking at gender, it is clear that gender played a significant role in participant behavior and their decision-making.

In the future, there could be experiments looking very specifically at gender and making a point to observe the effect of gender with these masks. A second direction that this experiment could take would be to make the experiment more externally valid. Since the experiment was conducted in a very small laboratory in the Psychology department at the University of Richmond, and since this experiment incorporated masks that could not be generalized to the real world, a new study could be created that looks at every day behavior in order to be able to generalize the results outside of a lab setting.

There are several important implications that stem from the two experiments shown in this study. The first implication is that females may respond more severely to positive self-presentation symbols than males. There could be many explanations for this phenomenon, and further research needs to be conducted in order to explore this finding and see why females want to perform heroic behavior when presented with a heroic self-presentation symbol. A second implication that stems from this research is the fact that participants wanted to participate in higher levels of heroic behaviors in both experiments for questions consisting of volunteering. Something about volunteering and positive presentation symbols connected in both experiments, and this could be a result of the fact that many University of Richmond students simply like to volunteer in general. A final implication of this research is that males want to perform heroic behavior when presented with villainous self-presentation symbols. This could simply just have been the result of a confound in the experiment, or simply the fact that males liked this mask more and were in a better mood and reported that they wanted to help

more. All of these implications must be analyzed in future research because they all could have extremely interesting findings.

This study is important for many reasons. The first reason is the fact that heroic behavior is extremely under researched, and this study supports the idea that there needs to be more research surrounding heroes and villains and why they act in certain ways. This is a topic that needs more publicity and needs to be in the spotlight, and any contribution to this subject is positive. A second reason for the importance of this study stems from the fact that it is important to understand why bad people and good people do what they do. In a world where media plays a huge role in people's lives, and where dress and physical items are placed extreme value, it is important to see what effect these physical items have. Are good people and bad people influenced by certain symbols or styles of clothing, which make them embody positive and negative traits, and therefore lead them to act accordingly? This is an extremely important question, and this research attempts to begin to answer it.

Figure 1

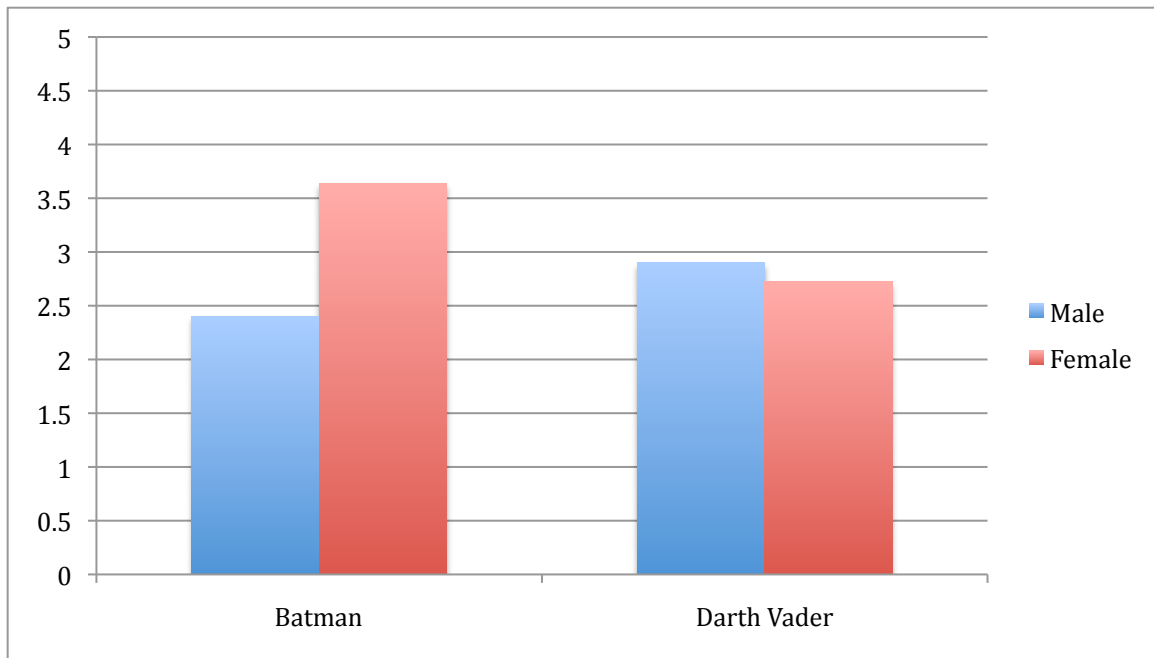


Figure 2

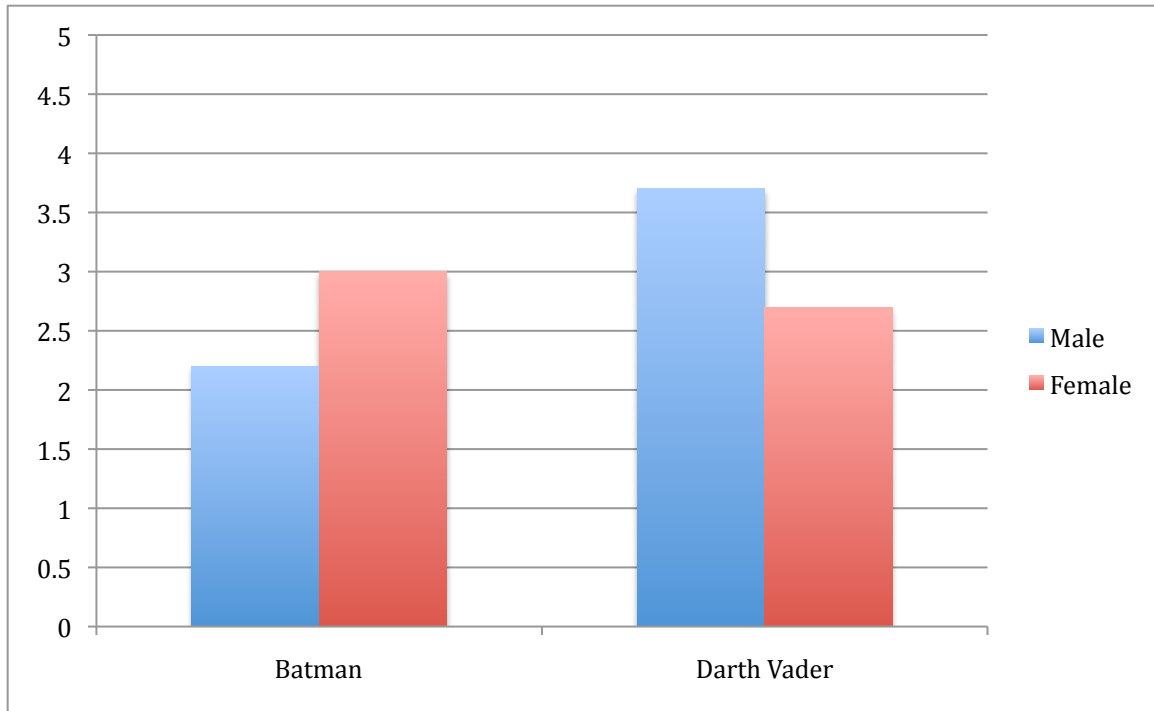
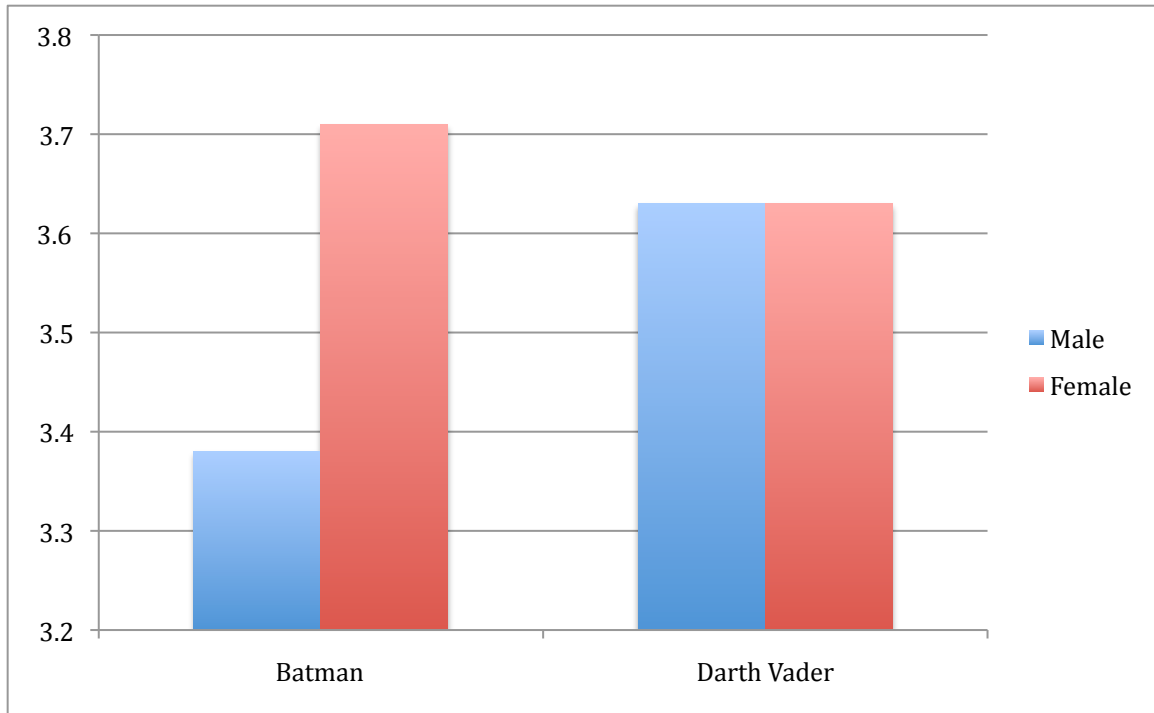


Figure 3



Appendix 1

Q1: If asked to volunteer your time to service right now, would you feel up for it?

Q2: If a stranger dropped several pencils nearby would you help them?

Q3: Would you be willing to spend a half an hour tutoring a child on their geography homework right now?

Q4: If an older woman or man needed help crossing the street would you help them?

Q5: If you drove by a car crash would you stop to call the police?

Q6: If you were asked to edit your roommate's paper right now would you be willing?

Q7: If you were in the Subway and someone fell onto the tracks would you jump down to save them?

Q8: If several people were bullying someone and no one else was around would you stand up to a group of strangers?

Q9: If money were not a factor would you rather be a businessman or a fireman?

Q10: If you saw a man physically violate a woman would you call the police?

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