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Hulk Smash! Violence in *The Incredible Hulk* Comics

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Abstract

“Hulk smash!” is one of the most iconic phrases uttered in the pages of comic books. The Incredible Hulk is one of comics’ most violent characters as the Hulk smashes first and asks questions later. The popularity of the comic book genre has exploded within past decades and the interest in comics has increased. But exactly how violent is The Incredible Hulk and what does that mean for readers? This research examines the occurrence of violence in the Incredible Hulk comics through a thematic content analysis of 248 issues. Specifically, such themes as violence against men and women, unpunished violence, formal punishments of violence, interventions to stop violence and the justification provided for violence were assessed. The goal of the research was to determine the amount and level of violence within the comic and in what context it occurred. Results indicate that there is a large amount of violence occurring within the pages of the Incredible Hulk, but that this violence is often justified and committed by the Hulk to protect himself and others. A discussion is provided regarding the potential impact this may have on a reader and their view of violence, crime and justice.

Keywords: Incredible Hulk, violence, cultural criminology

Introduction

Since the debut of *The Incredible Hulk* comics in May of 1962 by Marvel comics, audiences have been captivated by the raw and violent nature of the *Incredible Hulk*. The origin story of the Hulk starts with a mild-mannered scientist, Dr. Banner. Dr. Banner is working to test a gamma bomb and spots a young man by the name of Rick Jones who had wandered into the nuclear testing site. Banner pushes Jones out of the way, getting hit with the full extent of the gamma rays. This event leads to Banner transforming into the Hulk. In the early days of the comic, Banner would only become the Hulk at night, but as the story evolved, Banner would change into the Hulk as result of stress, anger, fear or sometimes at will. The Hulk is best known for his catchphrases of “Hulk smash!” and “Hulk is the strongest there is!” The Hulk is the opposite of Banner in most every way. He is physically strong where Banner is physically weak and forceful and aggressive where Banner is mild mannered and timid.

The Hulk is arguably one of the most violent characters in comic history. When Banner is the Hulk, he smashes, fights, and destroys. As the Hulk, Banner’s personality, intelligence and reasoning ability is mostly lost and the Hulk acts on pure emotions. Stan Lee, the Hulk’s creator, has said that his inspiration for the character the Hulk was Frankenstein’s monster and the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (DeFalco, 2003). This is evident in the dual nature of the Hulk and Banner. When one is in charge, the other is mostly absent, but sometimes they can sense each other or communicate. The Hulk is the primal and violent side of Bruce Banner set free and completely able to lash out in the violent ways that Bruce does not. Fans of the Hulk often cite his violent nature and destruction as the reason that they love the character and the comic. The Hulk’s violence is also portrayed in the Marvel films as well as in the comic.

This present study examines violence in the *Incredible Hulk* comics. Specifically, the current study assesses how often the Hulk engages in violent acts and if those acts are punished by law enforcement. In addition, any justification for acts of violence committed by the Hulk, were also included in the final analyses. Violence committed by other individuals, such as other super heroes and villains within the *Incredible Hulk* comics, as well as if they were punished for their actions, was also examined. In order to achieve this, two researchers read independently 248 issues of the *Incredible Hulk* comics and performed a content analysis of each issue using a predetermined coding key. These issues were read in order of appearance starting with issue #1. The relevant literature to this research will be presented, along with the methods, results and a discussion pertaining to the extent of violence in the *Incredible Hulk* comics, and the implication that this can have on the reader.

Literature Review

Cultural Criminology

In order to assess the violence in the *Incredible Hulk* comics, the lens of cultural criminology was utilized. Cultural criminology examines crime within a culture, including criminal subcultures and how the mass media portrays crime (Ferrell & Sanders, 1995; Reyns & Henson, 2010). Cultural criminology suggests that the ways in which the contemporary media portrays the criminal justice system and/or criminological issues, such as crime and offenders, will affect a person’s perceptions and attitudes (Reyns & Henson, 2010). The way media frames crime and justice is important to evaluate as the portrayal can influence individuals (Phillips & Strobl, 2006). Lazarsfeld (1944) explains that media should not be assessed as a separate entity from the rest of society as the media plays a vital role in influencing thinking, attitudes, and personality of individuals, as well as their emotions and daily lives. Although Lazarsfeld was directly involved with researching political campaigns and how individuals vote in relation to the media, this same concept can be

applied to the influence that the portrayal of the criminal justice system has and in certain media, such as comic books, which often has a devoted following. Comic book readers often immerse themselves within the genre, and their exposure to comics may be higher than other forms of media.

It has been reported that members of society gain knowledge about the criminal justice system through four avenues: (a) personal experiences, (b) significant others, (c) groups and institutions, and (d) the mass media (Surette, 1992). The emphasis on mass media and how it portrays the criminal justice system to the public through comic books is an application of cultural criminology and can be used to understand how people view the world, but also crime (Phillips & Strobl, 2006). Scholars have examined how the public acquires knowledge of the criminal justice system. If an individual is immersed in the world of comics or is an avid reader of a specific comic, the person may be influenced in terms of their beliefs about crime or morality (Adkinson, 2008). If individuals use media, such as comic books, as their main reference for crime, their perceptions of the criminal justice system could be skewed. This may be extremely salient for comic books as there is an overabundance of violence and vigilante justice.

The Social Influence of Comic Books

Comic books are seen as a rare form of media because of the impact they have had on society. Most individuals have never opened a comic book, yet they know of the superheroes contained within its pages. Characters such as Spider-Man, Captain America, Batman, and Wonder Woman are widely known to a diverse group of individuals worldwide and are household names (Phillips & Strobl, 2006), but most fans have not read the comic from which those characters originate. Due to the robust growth in popularity towards superheroes, academic research involving comic books has grown. Although some critics may argue that comic books only influence a subgroup of individuals, comic books have influenced some of the most successful movies within the last decade resulting in the expansion of individuals exposed to comic book characters and stories and imbedding these stories into our culture (Phillips & Strobl, 2006). Between 1990 and 2002 comic book related movies were released on an average of two per year (Phillips & Strobl, 2006). Not only have movies been created based on comic books, but commercials and video games have been produced as well. In 2017, out of the top 10 grossing domestic films, 6 were based off comic books (Star Wars: The Last Jedi, Wonder Woman, Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2, Spider-Man: Homecoming, and Thor: Ragnarok (Box Office Mojo, 2017). With the popularity of the recent Avengers movies, the characters, especially the Hulk, have become household names with people easily being able to identify the Hulk and his catch phrase “Hulk smash!”

While today comic books, movies and characters are mainstream and appeal widely to many as they are deemed “family friendly,” that was not always the case. A psychiatrist, Fredric Wertham, was the first to dissect comic book crime as a response to their growing popularity. In his 1954 book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, he warned parents that comic books were a negative influence that directly caused juvenile delinquency (Wertham, 1954). Wertham argued that Wonder Woman’s strength and independence made her a lesbian and Superman was both un-American and a fascist. Wertham (1954) used his platform to speak publicly about the damaging effects of violence that appeared in comic books. He argued that it halted and harmed children’s ethical development. Wertham (1954) asserted that children would get a false sense of right and wrong, which would lead to delinquent behavior. Due to Wertham being such a distinguished and well respected psychiatrist, parents took his notions very seriously.

On December 20th, 1948, *Time* magazine printed a photo of a house to house collection that resulted in comic books being burned while children in the background watched. This illustrates how literally parents took Wertham’s message that if children read comic books they would turn delinquent. Wertham’s writing also resulted in a congressional hearing and subsequent laws banning and restricting the sale of certain comic books to individuals (Hadju, 2009). Never before in the United States had there been so much attention paid to what

type of media children were consuming and the subsequent consequences. As comics grew in popularity, so did the regulation of them.

Wertham's work also influenced the establishment of what was known as the *Comic Code*. The Comic Code was established in response to an emerging fear of comic books delegitimizing the criminal justice system and increasing crime. Many feared that crimes and violence children (and adults) saw in these books would be reenacted. The Comic Code regulated how comics were able to portray crime, criminals, and the criminal justice system (Adkinson, 2008). The standards that major publishing companies of comics had to follow defended the legitimacy of the overall criminal justice system, meaning that the criminal justice system authority or righteousness was never to be questioned or criticized within the pages of comic book. During the time of the Comic Code, most stores would not sell comics that did not have the seal of approval from the Comics Code of Authority (CCA). These rules were put into place to condemn any content that inspired criminal behavior, or disrespected any form of legal authority (Adkinson, 2008). As a result of the Comic Code, the censorship of crime, law enforcement, and drugs were heavily implemented. Stories in the comics when in the code was in effect reflect the rules and restrictions of the Code. This was Wertham's lasting social influence on comics. Today the Comic Code has been revoked and publishers have freedom to print stories as they please. However, a lot of the cultural ideals from the Code are still remaining in many of the larger publishing houses' stories and serve a reminder that the government can shape the popular media's construction of the criminal justice system as it did for decades with the CCA (Adkinson, 2008).

Evaluating Comic Books

Although comic books have not received the same attention as other forms of media such as violent video games, television programs or films in the realm of academia, there are still scholars who have examined the relationship between comic books and violence as well as the criminal justice system. Comic books are unique as they are a form of media that allows for more than one possible interpretation to be created based off the combination of words used and the pictures seen by readers (Phillips & Strobl, 2006). One way that researchers have been able to study comic books in reference to the multiple interpretations that readers may have, is through the use of an ethnographic content analysis. An ethnographic content analysis is a framework in which an individual uses the culture around them as the social artifacts that are studied or are used as the researcher's population (Kane, 2004). Such artifacts can include TV, radio, comic books, books, newspapers, Internet searches, and advertisements.

Vollum and Adkinson (2003) evaluated the superhero themes present within both Batman and Superman comics and examined how the criminal justice system was portrayed in both comic series. The scholars evaluated their findings into three different constructs: the society that each superhero was in (Superman in metropolis and Batman in Gotham City), the types of crime and criminals that each hero was faced with, and the overall evaluation of each superhero as they both carry out different motives to fight crime. Superman quite often carries the message that the law should be respected and obeyed, whereas Batman believes that the law should be feared (Vollum & Adkinson, 2003). Although both superheroes hold different mythos, it was reported that both carried a conservative criminal justice focus that pressed the idea that the status quo should be maintained and not deviated from.

Although not directly discussing comic books representation of the criminal justice system, Stoddart (2006) examined 52 traditional comic books by the two dominant comic book companies, Marvel and DC Comics. Stoddart (2006) assessed the portrayal of drugs, drug users, and drug dealers in comics by using discourse analysis. The first theme that was discussed was that drugs were inherently bad. There was no dichotomy established between illegal and legal drug use, but rather that drug use was all the same. The comics followed the anti-drug promotion that is most often heard from law enforcement agencies. The second theme

the author identifies was the difference in emphasis of “hard” versus “soft” drugs. Hard drugs were classified as heroin, cocaine, and angel dust, whereas soft drugs were classified as marijuana and psychedelics. Comics were more likely to focus a narrative around the negative effects of hard drugs while leaving the discussion of soft drugs almost absent (Stoddart, 2006). The third theme that Stoddart (2006) reported was that comic books created a narrative that established the clear difference between drug users and drug dealers. Drug users were written as “victims of predatory drug dealers” (Stoddart, 2006, p. 82) thereby portraying the drug dealers as “bad” people and the users as hapless victims. The final theme that was discussed was the clear gender discrepancy between women and men sharing the role as drug users or drug dealers. Gender was seen as the easiest demographic to aid in distinguishing between who was a drug user (women) and who was a drug dealer (men). Stoddart (2006) reported findings that the criminal justice system was represented as being very conservative and driven to maintain the status quo, which was also consistent with Vollum and Adkinson’s (2003) findings.

Reyns and Henson (2010) evaluated 166 Batman and Superman comic books to look at themes such as crime control, victimization, crime prevention, and portrayal of criminal justice officials. The most prominent theme that was reported to be present most often was crime control. Out of the entire sample of 166, the presence of some sort of crime control model or implement was found in 122 comic books. 86.9% showed a crime control attitude and acceptance of this theme, whereas only 13.1% showed themes of due process (Reyns & Henson, 2010). Consistent with Phillip and Strobl (2006), it was also found that violence or vigilantism was justified more so when the criminal justice system was seen to be inadequate and/or unable to stop the crime or criminals themselves.

Progressing with the expansion of Cultural Criminology within comic books, Phillip and Strobl (2006) used an ethnographic content analysis in an attempt to understand the crime and justice themes that were present in a random sample of 20 comic books that were on the 210 best-selling comic books list released in December of 2003. The themes that were depicted within the sample were organized crime, government corruption, terrorism, violent street crime, domestic violence, and war crimes. It was argued that due to authorities lacking the ability to combat the crime on their own, the force and violence portrayed by the superheroes was then seen as acceptable within the comic book world (Reyns & Henson, 2006; Phillip and Strobl, 2006).

Researchers have also conducted content analyses on comic book television shows, as their popularity has been growing. Most recently, Carroll (2017) examined *Supergirl* and *The Flash*. Carroll (2017) looked at four different research questions related to gender depictions. Specifically, the research examined with female representation and how audiences perceived the female characters. Carroll (2017) was able to report two consistent themes from his work. The first theme was that female superheroes were generally accepted. However, audiences had a problem with them when they were exclusively used as a romantic interest within the storyline instead of having their own identity. The second theme that was discussed was this idea that female characters were not taken as seriously by male audiences. This theme was present even in situations where female and male characters were in equal positions of power, yet the female character was viewed as less than the male character (Carroll, 2017). This shows that although media and comic books specifically have progressed in creating equality amongst its characters, society is still battling with interpreting it as such.

Methods

In order to examine violence in the *Incredible Hulk* comics, two researchers independently read 248 issues of *The Incredible Hulk* comics. The researchers utilized compendiums of the *Incredible Hulk* comic, which had the comics organized by appearance, as the comics were read chronologically in order of appearance starting with #1 appearing in May 1962 and ending with issue #248 in 1980. A content analysis was selected as

a conventional analysis technique which has been used within Cultural criminology and to study comic books. This approach allowed scholars to measure the degree in which crime is covered by this media outlet and the prevalence of criminal imagery (Ferrell, 1999).

While reading the comics, the researchers each recorded by hand on a coding sheet every instance that they saw the variables occur. They also took notes about the comic book issue (for example, issue #15) and that occurrence. Please refer to Table 1 for the complete description of each variable used in the content analysis.

Table 1

Variables

Violence committed against men (by the Hulk)	Behavior involving physical force intended to hurt or kill a male committed by the Hulk
Violence committed against women (by the Hulk)	Behavior involving physical force intended to hurt or kill a female committed by the Hulk
Violence committed against objects (by the Hulk)	Behavior involving physical force intended to damage, or destroy something committed by the Hulk
Unpunished violence committed by the Hulk	Behavior committed by the Hulk which involves physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something that received no punishment by the formal criminal justice system, law enforcement agency or military
Unpunished violence committed by OTHERS (Includes humans and supernatural or extraordinary beings)	Behavior committed by other individuals which involves physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something that received no punishment by the formal criminal justice system, law enforcement agency or military
Formal intervention by authorities on Hulk	The criminal justice system, law enforcement agency or military intervenes to attempt to stop, and/or stop, violent acts committed by the Hulk or others in the comic
Formal punishment of violence by authorities (Hulk)	The criminal justice system, law enforcement agency or military formally punishes violent acts committed by the Hulk
Justification for violence by the Hulk	Prior to, or after a violent act, the Hulk provides rationale or justification for the violence committed
No justification for violence by the Hulk	Prior to, or after a violent act, the Hulk provides no rationale or justification for the violence committed
Commissioned violence of the Hulk by agency	The criminal justice system, law enforcement agency, military or superhero organization requests/hires the Hulk to commit behavior involving physical force intended to damage, or destroy an object and/or persons

The researchers chose to examine violence committed by the Hulk by the category of gender to determine if the Hulk was more or less violent to a person based on their gender of male or female. It was hypothesized that the Hulk would be *less* inclined to be violent against women. This hypothesis was based on the larger societal ideal that violence against women would not be something that would be promoted within the pages of Marvel Comics as a result of the Comic Code. The Comic Code, which was in effect at that time that these comics were published, would have prohibited blatant violence against women under General Standards Part A (7): “Scenes of excessive violence shall be prohibited. Scenes of brutal torture, excessive and unnecessary knife and gunplay, physical agony, gory and gruesome crime shall be eliminated” (Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America, 1954).

Unpunished violence by the Hulk was examined to see if the acts committed were subject to any formal punishments by an established authority (law enforcement, government, and organized superhero alliance such as S.H.I.E.L.D or the Avengers). It was hypothesized that the majority of violence committed by the Hulk would go unpunished and/or there would be little or no formal intervention for his acts of violence. Justification of violence by the Hulk was another variable that was examined to assess whether the Hulk provides any sort of rationalization for why he is committing violence. It was hypothesized that the Hulk would provide no justification for the violence that he committed.

In addition to examining the violence committed by the Hulk, the researchers also examined violence committed by others in the comic, which included humans, supernatural entities and/or other extraordinary individuals with powers or gadgets. It was hypothesized that this would also be a high number, but not as great as the violence committed by the Hulk. The researchers also chose to examine the amount of violence commissioned of the Hulk by an agency, as the Hulk has historically been recruited to work for the government and armed forces. However, it was hypothesized that most of the violence committed by the Hulk would not be due to an external agency’s commission, but as a result of the Hulk’s own intentions.

After both researchers finished independently reading all of the designated issues of the *Incredible Hulk* comics, the data from the handwritten sheets that the researchers used were entered into an Excel spreadsheet in order to get a tally for the total number of incidents that each researcher had for each variable. For each variable, the final tally was very close, with each variable having a less than 10 difference in the counts. The researchers met and referred to their notes for the incident that differed in each variable and discussed the few cases where there was deviation to agree on the final count for each variable.

Results

The 248 issues analyzed in the content analysis revealed the Hulk was very violent against both objects and people. He was the *most violent* against objects (5,231), often smashing and/or destroying inanimate objects such as buildings, structures, vehicles, weapons and/or rocks. This was often because he was angry or he was using them to defend himself and/or others from enemies. There was more violence committed by the Hulk against men (2, 976) than women (43). Most of the violence that was committed against men and women were men that were trying to harm to the Hulk or someone he cared for. The fact that there were more acts of violence against men than women shows that men are more often portrayed in comics as heroes, villains or foes during this time frame of printing comics, whereas the women were more likely to not be portrayed as villains or heroes, but rather as victims who need saving. These findings are expected as they are mainly in accordance with the Comics Code which guided comic book writers at that time. The fact that women were most commonly seen as victims also might be a reflection of the overall societal climate at the time, as during these decades when the comics were printed, the women’s rights movement was just getting national attention in the 1970s and American society was still heavily patriarchal.

The one hypothesis that was *not* supported was that the Hulk would not justify his violence. We found that the Hulk justified his violence more times (3,189) than not (531). His justification for violence was usually protecting himself or someone else from harm (human, supernatural or superhero) or the violence was in support of a cause that he believed in. Most often, when the Hulk responded violently it was justified by himself because he was working to help someone or stop someone else's violence. There was a great deal of violence committed by others (3,186), usually in trying to harm the Hulk. Those that committed violence the most were often opponents of the Hulk, either a villain that had superhuman abilities, a human that wanted to hurt the Hulk, or the U.S. military or organized superhero collective who were at odds with Hulk for some reason and/or trying to use him as a weapon. A prevalent story line throughout the Hulk comics is that the government wants to use the Hulk and harness his power to fight. The Hulk does not want to be an agent of the government so there is much conflict regarding this storyline. The results of this content analysis revealed that the government worked to commission violence by the Hulk 124 times, which included working with the Avengers. In these cases, the organization was conveying that it was acceptable for the Hulk to be violent and destroy things as long as it was sanctioned destruction. However, the Hulk did not often readily agree to work with the government or the Avengers, and this was a source of many physical altercations in the comics as he usually did not go willingly. There were many verbal and physical conflicts between the Hulk and the Avengers, as well as General Ross. Examining these storylines within the larger context of what was going on in society at the time arguably shows some social commentary on war. The Vietnam War was in effect when many of the issues were published. The Hulk did not want to be used in larger conflicts or as an agent of war. He ultimately wanted to be left alone and not become involved in conflicts that he did not have a stake in. In many issues of the comic, government sanctioned agents kept trying to get him to fight, but his goal was peace. When examining the stories involving General Ross and the Avengers, they are often seen as the villain or enemy from the Hulk's perspective as their cause is not his cause. This could be a direct correlation to how many of the people in the United States felt at the time in relation to the Vietnam War. While many may not think of the Hulk as a peaceful entity, the stories of the comic show that he did not want conflict or to be involved in large scale military initiatives. Ultimately the Hulk wanted a peaceful existence for himself and others. The violent acts of *others* are ultimately what would cause the Hulk to react with aggression and violence.

There was a large amount of unpunished violence committed by the Hulk (3,720). The authorities formally punished him a small amount of times (31). The Hulk was usually committing acts of destruction without punishment. Most often, he would destroy property or fight others and then leave the scene with no later punishment. However, there were formal intervention attempts, and some successes (404) by authorities to stop the Hulk from smashing and destroying property or physical items. However, usually, the most successful technique that the authorities found was to redirect the Hulk to work for them as he was often too powerful for many to fight and/or control, except for members of the Avengers.

Table 2: *Results*

Violence committed against men (by the Hulk) = 2,976
Violence committed against women (by the Hulk) = 43
Violence committed against objects (by the Hulk) = 5, 231
Unpunished violence committed by the Hulk = 3,720
Unpunished violence committed by the OTHERS = 3,186
Formal intervention by authorities on Hulk = 404
Formal punishment of violence by authorities (Hulk) = 31
Justification for violence by the Hulk = 3,189
No justification for violence by the Hulk = 531
Commissioned violence of the Hulk by an agency = 124

The results indicate that the Hulk is violent and can consistently be seen smashing within the pages of the comic. However, when examining the findings and considering the world in which this comic was written, it is understandable why the writers and the readers of the *Incredible Hulk* comic issues that were analyzed in this study had such an affinity for this character and his violent adventures. During the time these comics were analyzed (1962-1980), writers for major comic book titles such as the *Incredible Hulk* were Caucasian men and they arguably wrote for young or adult men of the same demographic. The stories and their content reflect the writers and the audience. The violent nature of the Hulk, the inclusion of the military in many storylines and arcs, and the villains are a product of those decades. Within this time period there was the Vietnam War and the Cold War which dominated the U.S news cycle and impacted many people's lives. The writers of the Hulk and the stories within it are not immune from these events. The inaugural issue of the *Incredible Hulk* is a testament to this. Banner becomes the Hulk as a result of gamma radiation from working as a scientist on a government sponsored project. In America in the 1960s, there was fear over nuclear war which permeated into the coming decades in different ways as the Cold War grew. Many of the villains in the *Incredible Hulk* comic over the decades gain powers from gamma radiation (Abomination, The Leader) and use them for evil. There is often a battle between those that have these powers and the Hulk, with the Hulk always victorious in the end. The Abomination, real name Emil Blonsky, was a Soviet of Yugoslavian origin working for the KGB. This could be an analogy for America and its fight in the Cold War. The writers and readers of this comic wanted to see the U.S victorious against the perceived enemy at the time as it gave them hope that the U.S would win in the end. The issues of the Hulk that portray storylines such as this give hope the reader and also make them want to read more.

Discussion

The character of the *Incredible Hulk* is often synonymous with violence. He is known for his smashing and often is referred to by many as an anti-hero as he lacks conventional hero attributes. The Hulk can be mean, violent and aggressive and often just wants to be left alone. He is the opposite of what people think of when the term "superhero" is uttered. He is not charismatic as Dr. Banner. He is often a reluctant and sometimes unwilling participant in helping others. However, despite these things, the reader of the *Incredible Hulk* comics often supports and cheers for the Hulk. He is one of the most popular characters within comics. The *Incredible*

Hulk comics have survived and thrived since Marvel comics printed the first issue in 1962. It is still in monthly print today. The Hulk has also evolved past comics into a live action television show, cartoons, and feature films. There are classic forms of collectibles such as action figures, statues, and quirkier version such as rulers and spatulas that sport the Hulk's image. People have even permanently inked their body in tribute to the Hulk. The question becomes if the Hulk is extremely violent and not the traditional hero in a cape out trying to save the world and be a shining beacon of hope, why do the fans support and root for him?

The potential reason for the continued popularity surrounding the Hulk (spanning over 50 years) in pop culture today, is that people can identify with his rage. The Hulk is the person that everyone wants to be *sometimes*. Most people want to be able to smash things and/or someone who angers them, but because of societal laws and moral conventions they do not. The fact that so many identify with him as a character may result from the fact that the Hulk is not just wantonly violent. He often has a reason and justification for his violence, as revealed by this research. This can allow the reader to empathize with him. The reader sees things from his point of view and can understand why he is angry and why he wants to smash and eventually does smash. Even when the Hulk does not give the reader the justification, it can often be inferred from the context of what is happening the comic. The Hulk also has anger from things that have happened years ago. The very basis of Banner's anger that fuels the Hulk originates from issues of abuse within his family, which go back decades. Readers can identify with holding onto anger for a long time. We as humans often remain angry for a long period over something that has happened previously. Readers can relate to holding a grudge, resembling a little Hulk inside of all of us, making the Hulk resonate with a larger audience. Different iterations of the Hulk have gained popularity over time because we see ourselves in him and relate to him. The comic, the live-action television show, various cartoon versions over the years, and the Hulk's own feature films and his inclusion in the Avengers films and Thor: Ragnarok show that his appeal is enduring.

In the most current version of the Hulk comic *The Immortal Hulk*, which was launched in 2018, we see the Hulk fighting and smashing for justice and what he believes to be in the best interests of a society that has been devastated by environmental ruin and corrupt institutions. He is fighting the big fight against those that have been hurting people and the world. However, an even more interesting plot point in the current comic, which shows us that we all do want to be the Hulk, at least sometimes, and that we identify with his rage occurs in the *Immortal Hulk* with the character Jackie McGee, a Black woman who had her home destroyed by the Hulk when she was a child. She reveals that she has been angry about that event and its ramifications her whole life. We hear how having her home destroyed impacted her. In an encounter with the Hulk as an adult, she tells the Hulk about her anger from that event. She reveals that she is envious of the Hulk's ability to show and display his rage and anger in the way that he does. She says that the Hulk's anger is respected and sanctioned, but that her anger as a Black woman is dismissed and often ignored. She goes on to tell the Hulk that she wants to have the freedom to be angry the way that he does. Banner, an extremely educated Caucasian man, is sought after by the government and the Avengers for the sole purpose of his anger, which is the source of his power. He destroys places and things and he is still be respected and admired. Jackie points out that most people do not have that luxury. The Hulk is a way for the reader of the comic to escape and daydream that we could be the Hulk and express our anger at individuals or the establishment in a way that would be respected and also without consequence.

In addition to giving readers a way to live vicariously through his smashing, the Hulk is popular among readers because he is fighting for what he perceives to be justice, which most often translates to social justice. He wants to right wrongs in society and help people. It may not necessarily be something we ourselves would fight for, but the readers want the Hulk to be victorious. The Hulk often fights for the little guy, the underdog and/or the ones that can't fight for themselves. His origin story of saving Rick Jones speaks to his true nature. He will always put himself in harm's way to save others, whether as Banner or the Hulk. Long time readers of the *Incredible Hulk* are often loyal to the Hulk and want him to "win" in battles or achieve the goal he was

working towards. In the newest version of the comic, *The Immortal Hulk*, he too is fighting against the evils that have arisen in the world. As an anti-hero, he is the hero that does not want to be a hero or a role model. He continues to fight for social justice and defend the weak, even when he does not want to. Readers can identify with this as there are many times throughout the course of our daily lives that we may not want to do the right thing, but we do it anyway. The Hulk speaks to his readers by showing that a hero does not have to be a perfect specimen of goodness like Superman or Captain America, but that you can be a hero and be flawed. This is a characteristic that readers have not seen in great quantities in other characters that were published in major comic books at the time, which also may be why the Hulk resonates with so many.

As this research revealed, the Hulk is most often not punished for his violence. Readers enjoy seeing him violently avenging wrongs that were perpetrated and able to go on to fight another day. While some will argue that the Hulk (and other superheroes) fight crime, they technically are committing acts of vigilantism as they usually are acting outside the confines of the law, which makes them criminals as well. But because of the fact that heroes, like the Hulk, are fighting for something that is often bigger than themselves, the reader identifies with the cause. The Hulk can often save people, places and yes, the world, when others have failed. This may involve some crime and violence, but readers enjoy seeing him come to the rescue and not get punished for it. It is a way to escape and enjoy the actions that you wish you could do. These were the very things that Wertham warned parents about. The notion that readers would want to act out the violence and crime seen in comic books. However, reading the Hulk and acting like the Hulk are two very different things. While the *Incredible Hulk* comics are indeed very violent, they are a way for us to channel our fantasies without actually acting upon them. At the time the comics examined in this research were written (1962-1980), this may have been a very important outlet when readers were scared and/or angry about war, nuclear fall-out and the world coming to an end.

Limitations

This research was not without limitations. A potential limitation of this research is that not all of the *Incredible Hulk* comics were examined. Including all of the comics in the series may have yielded different results. Another limitation may be researcher bias. Both researchers in this study are from Pennsylvania, female, Caucasian, aged within 10 years of each another, from similar socioeconomic backgrounds and also have similar viewpoints on politics, gender, and crime. This may have caused the researchers to see things too similarly when coding and conducting the content analysis. If researchers from different backgrounds conducted this analysis, they may have had more conflicting results and variation in how they saw what was being portrayed in the comics and the conclusions reached.

Most of the early research that was collected under the topic of Cultural criminology utilized an ethnographic technique to record the sociological and criminological dynamic that was present within deviant subcultures (Ferrell, 1999). The notion of “criminological verstehen” is heavily rooted within the application of ethnographic data collection in Cultural criminology. “Criminological verstehen” addresses the role that the researcher has with activity participating with participants that are being studied (Ferrell, 1999). It acknowledges that the researchers’ own experiences and emotions are accounted for, giving a more in-depth understanding of the subculture being analyzed. In the case of the current research, this was noted, as one of the researchers had a particular love for the Hulk and had grown up reading these comics and has read them multiple times over her lifetime. She was familiar with the story lines prior to reading the comics for this analysis as she has been a lifelong fan.

Future Research and Conclusions

This research served to identify the violence in the *Incredible Hulk* comics. It revealed the violence in the first 248 issues of the Hulk. However, more research should be conducted of a similar nature on later issues of the *Incredible Hulk*, as well as other comic book series, particularly those in which there is a violent character. For example, one could replicate this study on the comic series *The Punisher*. The character of Frank Castle, also known as the Punisher, is very violent but in a different way than the Hulk. The Punisher is viewed by many as an anti-hero as well. The Punisher kills people regularly, whereas the Hulk has not overtly killed anyone in the comics analyzed. There are a handful of people, that based on the frames or context clues, could have arguably have been killed as a result of his rampaging or smashing, but there is no text to directly indicate the Hulk murdered them. The Punisher kills often with malice and revenge as his main motivation. It would be interesting to see if there were justifications made or inferred by the Punisher are to a greater or lesser degree than those of the Hulk.

This research revealed that the violence in the *Incredible Hulk* comics, while prevalent, was not what was originally hypothesized. The Hulk is a violent, raging being, but he is not mindless or without reason as many perceive him to be. The Hulk has a reason for the violence he commits, which is often altruistic in nature. This fact allows people to connect with him. Reading the *Incredible Hulk* comic and watching the films or television shows will likely not make you as a violent as the Hulk, but it will allow you to escape into the violence that the Hulk commits and live vicariously to fight for social justice. The *Incredible Hulk* comics analyzed in this study show us that the Hulk did not want to work for the government or the Avengers to fight battles that he felt were not his or were morally wrong. While he sometimes did team up with them for the missions, he often was conflicted and/or angry about it. The integrity of the Hulk in the issues analyzed in this study to only use his powers for what he believed in gave readers hope. Arguably, today in the current Hulk comic the *Immortal Hulk*, he still gives readers the same confidence that it is acceptable to stand up for what you believe in and that you do not always have to agree with the government, especially if there is corruption and harm being inflicted.

The Hulk also inspires us to do the right thing. When the Hulk smashes, we smash. Characters like the Hulk allow us through them to be violent, yes, but the Hulk also allows us to be powerful. We all have a little Hulk inside of us, and many of us want to fight for those less powerful than ourselves just like him. This, we believe more than anything makes the character enduring and so popular among his fans big and small and worthy of academic study.

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