Comic books shadow how we react to threats

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Smith College scientists in Northampton, Mass., say comic books reflect how most people react to threats. Psychology Professor Bill Peterson says in times of social danger and economic turmoil, many people become more aggressive, more conventional, and less interested in feelings and emotions.

Peterson's research finds comic book characters reflect the same behaviors. In times of higher threat, such as during 1979's Iran hostage crisis, comic books contained more aggressive imagery, focused on male characters, and were less introspective.

Peterson and colleagues reviewed eight Marvel comic books with four titles featuring conventional heroes representing American virtues (Captain America) and the everyman (Spider-Man). The other four heroes were less conventional, with themes such as persecution by society (X-men) and a vigilante who lives in an "amoral urban hell" (Daredevil).

When compared against their own sales, the unconventional titles sold more copies during low-threat times compared with the high-threat times; whereas the conventional hero sales remained flat.

"As an aspect of popular culture, comic books have always reflected the historical time period in which they were produced," Peterson said.

The study appears in the December issue of Political Psychology.

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