

# Male Oscar winners more likely to suffer

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Is the "Oscar curse" real? Does misfortune befall Academy Award winners after they bring the gold statue home?

A University of Michigan professor says there is something to it, but not what most people think. In fact, sudden positive status shifts—such as winning an Oscar—can have unintended negative consequences, said Michael Jensen, a strategy professor at Michigan's Ross School of

Business.

"Since many aspects of our lives are organized as winner-take-all tournaments, it's necessary to be aware of the potential downsides," Jensen said.

The Oscar curse goes back to the 1930s and Hollywood's golden age. Luise Rainer, the first actor to win multiple Oscars, blamed her wins for "The Great Ziegfeld" (1936) and "The Good Earth" (1937) for the rapid decline of her career.

Jensen and co-author Heeyon Kim of the National University of Singapore and a U-M graduate, found no evidence of negative professional consequences for male or female actors. Oscar winners appear, on average, in more films following their wins than Oscar nominees and other actors.

"The professional Oscar curse is, in other words, only a Hollywood myth," Jensen said. "The personal consequences of the Oscars are different."

The researchers looked at overall divorce rates of Oscar winners and nominees, and found that they weren't all that different from other actors. However, they found that male actors who won an Oscar were three times as likely (and nominees were twice as likely) as other male actors to divorce during their first year of marriage. Female Oscar winners and nominees were much less likely to divorce than other female actors.

Jensen and Kim examined all actors who played lead roles in 1,023 top commercial and top artistic films from 1930 to 2005—a sample of 808 actors that included 165 Oscar winners and 227 Oscar nominees who did not win. They analyzed male and female elite actors separately because

the labor markets and Oscar success criteria for male and female screen actors are different.

"Our results emphasize an important conundrum for male actors—Oscar nominations/wins can help a career but can also ruin a marriage," Jensen said.

Other noteworthy findings:

- The study confirmed there are fewer roles for female actors than male actors.
- Married male actors participate in more movies than divorced male actors, whereas divorced female actors participate in more movies than married female actors.
- Hollywood is not ready for female action heroes: Specializing in action films increases movie participation for male actors but decreases movie participation for female actors.
- Male action heroes are more likely to divorce: Specializing in action films increases the divorce rate of male actors, but not the divorce rate of female actors.
- Male Oscar jealousy: Male actors, but not female actors, are more likely to [divorce](#) if their spouse is nominated for or wins an Oscar.

The study appears in *Organization Science*, a publication of the Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences.

**More information:** "The Real Oscar Curse: The Negative Consequences of Positive Status Shifts":  
[dx.doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2014.0951](https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2014.0951)

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