

Netflix trivializing teenagers' pain, says study

March 28 2024



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

A new analysis of adolescent TV and films on Netflix suggests that too often, it shows misleading depictions of pain, portraying pain as something arising only through a violent act or injury. Instead of trivializing the experience, it could do more to educate young people about much more common, everyday pain.

Adolescents watching popular Netflix shows such as *Stranger Things* and

Sex Education or films such as Spiderman: Homecoming are exposed to an average of 10 incidents of pain every hour, according to new research from psychologists in Canada and the UK.

A new study analyzed how characters' experiences of pain were depicted across different media aimed at 12 to 18-year-olds. The team behind the research was interested in assessing what painful incidents characters experienced as well as how the characters themselves and others around them responded to painful incidents.

This is the first time research has examined how pain is portrayed in adolescent media, despite adolescence being the developmental period when [chronic pain](#) typically emerges.

Their analysis looked at 10 trending / popular films and six television series from 2015 in North America featuring adolescent protagonists. They include Sex Education, Stranger Things, Enola Holmes, and To All The Boys I Loved Before.

Over the 10 films and six television series (which equated to over 60 hours of footage), the researchers identified

- 732 painful incidents—a mean of 10.24 incidents of pain per hour.
- Violent pain or injury being the most common type of pain depicted occurring in more than half of instances (57 %).
- Boy characters more likely to experience pain in comparison with girl characters (77%).
- Boys are often portrayed as heroic figures coming to the rescue, being twice as likely than girls to help sufferers.
- Girls were often portrayed as being more emotional than boys in response to witnessing pain.
- White characters are depicted as pain sufferers more often than

characters with a racialized identity. (78% of white characters suffer pain, compared to 22% of racialized characters suffering pain).

- When a person from a racialized identity experienced pain, they were more likely to experience pain caused by another person (80%).
- Examples of everyday pain (e.g., a [character](#) falling over or bumping their knee) and chronic-type pain (i.e., headache, [abdominal pain](#), backache), being much less common (represented in only 21% and less than 1 % of incidents respectively.)
- A general lack of empathy from other characters in responding to pain. They commonly responded to sufferers with criticism (24%) and humor (10%).

Dr. Melanie Noel of the Department of Psychology at The University of Calgary, who led the research, explains why this research matters.

"Media is one of the most powerful engines of influence on children's development and could be harnessed to address pain and suffering in the world. Stories matter. Fictional stories can matter more in some cases than real-life stories. So, let's create stories to reflect the world we want to see: A humane, diverse, inclusive, equitable, compassionate, and caring world."

Dr. Abbie Jordan of the Department of Psychology and Centre for Pain Research at The University of Bath emphasizes the importance of accurately representing pain experiences.

"If we're not showing the types of pain that adolescents might typically experience, like back pain and menstrual pain, then we're trivializing pain. We're not doing a great job of enabling them to think about how to manage pain, how to talk about pain, and how to show empathy when

other people experience pain."

"This research matters because if every film and [television series](#) shows a boy being a 'tough guy' when they experience pain and a girl as a 'damsel in distress' in need of saving, they might think they have to be like that in real life. This depiction reinforces old-fashioned ideas about gender and is misleading."

The lack of empathy displayed by characters in the media could also play out in real life. Research suggests that when people see kindness in media, they start mirroring this behavior themselves. On the flip side, watching violent, painful acts can make people care less about others' pain.

The study also highlights the need for more realistic depictions of pain and diverse representations of pain sufferers. Dr. Jordan explains the findings:

"Sadly, we anticipated an overrepresentation of pain in white individuals compared with people of color, highlighting the underrepresentation of pain in marginalized groups. Our findings really highlight the importance of pain researchers working with the media to find better ways to represent the experience of pain and how individuals respond to pain in others, particularly around marginalized groups."

The findings echo a [previous study](#) examining how young children's (aged 4–6 years) pain is portrayed in popular media.

Now, the researchers are calling on Netflix to listen to their findings. Dr. Noel said,

"I want Netflix to take this seriously and get excited and inspired to influence millions of children around the world directly. They have a

monumental opportunity to influence the compassion and humanity we see in our children and our future world."

Dr. Jordan said, "We would love to work collaboratively with Netflix and movie/television creators on increasing the representation of girls and people of color in instances where the pain is experienced and start a dialogue around how to more realistically respond to pain in others, thinking about pro-social behaviors and displaying empathy."

The findings are [published](#) in the journal *Pain*.

More information: Allison Cormier et al, The sociocultural context of adolescent pain: portrayals of pain in popular adolescent media, *Pain* (2024). [DOI: 10.1097/j.pain.0000000000003216](https://doi.org/10.1097/j.pain.0000000000003216)

Provided by University of Bath

Citation: Netflix trivializing teenagers' pain, says study (2024, March 28) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-03-netflix-trivializing-teenagers-pain.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.