FROM VILLAINS TO HEROES: A CONTENT ANALYSIS ON THE MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF PEOPLE WITH LIMB LOSS

Abernethy L.M, Childers W.L
Alabama State University, College of Health Sciences, Montgomery, AL

INTRODUCTION
Classic villains and heroes such as Captain Hook and Luke Skywalker are a few examples of how characters with amputations have been displayed in a negative and a positive manner. The portrayal of people with amputations in film has influence on how these individuals may be perceived in society. However, there is no research to date on their representation in mainstream media. Determining how and why people with amputations are presented to the audience is important to identify what psychosocial barriers are faced by these individuals and develop future interventions to minimize any potential negative societal associations to people with amputations.

This study will define the portrayal of those with limb loss in film and explore the variables in recent feature films released in America. Our hypothesis is that there will be a higher frequency of characters with amputations portrayed as major characters and in a positive manner.

METHOD
Procedures: We will use content analysis to identify various representations within the past five years.

Search Strategy: Movies will be selected by searching the IMDB database for feature films released in theatres in the United States between years 2010 and 2015. Keywords featuring movie descriptors include: “amputee, prosthetic leg, prosthetic arm, prosthetic limb, artificial limb, artificial leg, mechanical arm, hook for hand, hook for a hand, wooden leg, and peg leg”.

Data Analysis: The frequency with which a person with an amputation appears under a specific variable will be used to evaluate portrayal of people with amputations in the media. The variables include heroism, major or minor, amputation cause, and how realistic the prosthesis is.

RESULTS
The frequency with which people with amputations appear as major characters, supporting, or minor characters are 37%, 17%, and 46%, respectfully. Many characters were unknown, but twice as many heroes as villains were portrayed in Figure 1. Most characters shown were wearing a prosthesis, 45% of which were wearing futuristic or bizarre prostheses such as the machine gun toting-zombie fighter, named Cherry Darling from Planet Terror or the bilateral blades used by the villain, Gazelle, in Kingsman. The frequency of trauma related amputations in Figure 2 is very high considering that most are due to dysvascular disease, which did not occur once in any of the films viewed.

DISCUSSION
While the higher frequency of heroes over villains is promising in terms of positive portrayal, the unrealistic causes and prostheses could be considered negative if misunderstandings ensue. Further research should be done to investigate other media influences such as commercials and social media and the effects all of this has on the audience’s perceptions and interactions with those missing limbs.
CONCLUSION
Popular feature films in the past five years show an unrealistic but positive representation of what living with an amputation entails. While the portrayal of heroes over villains is a good sign, there is still a lack of information being provided to the public.

CLINICAL APPLICATIONS
Negative stereotypes and unrealistic expectations could increase misunderstandings of what real people who are missing limbs have experienced. In addition people who have recently lost a limb could be unaware of the reality of their situation and how to cope.