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# ***The Fast & The Furious... Torturous?:* Examining the Impact of Torture Scenes in Popular Films on Public Perceptions of Torture Policy**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Entertainment media regularly depict torture as effective. Indeed, most popular films contain torture—often outside of counterterrorism-specific plotlines. In the counterterrorism-specific context, watching a scene where torture works increases support for the practice. Yet counterterrorism-specific media is a niche genre, and we do not know if this holds for torture scenes more generally. We address this gap with a 4 (movie rating) x 3 (scene type) experiment with U.S. adults. While participants recognized that torture scenes are in fact *torture*, viewing these scenes did not impact support for the practice. Findings suggest that media's influence on views about torture is more nuanced.

## **KEYWORDS**

torture, media, public perceptions, experiment

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*“It seems more like something out of Josef Mengele’s laboratory than something that fits into a children’s movie” – participant in our pilot study*

Despite clear domestic and international legal prohibitions against torture—including the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, Section 2340 A of Title 18 of the United States Code, the United Nations Convention Against Torture, and the Geneva Conventions—roughly half of U.S. adults support the use of torture in counterterrorism.<sup>1</sup> Regular and frequent depictions of torture as a socially acceptable and efficacious practice in entertainment media may help explain some of this tension. Concerned about the impact that entertainment media depictions of torture were having on U.S. troops, Brigadier General Patrick Finnegan, former NCIS interrogator Mark Fallon, and other interrogation experts traveled to Hollywood during the height of the Iraq War in 2007 in an attempt to persuade producers to show torture—especially

effective torture—less frequently. Supporting these experts’ concerns, recent experimental research with samples of both college students and U.S. adults shows that seeing torture work on the TV show *24* increased support for the practice.<sup>2</sup> Further, political figures regularly cite pop culture to explain and justify their stances on torture—the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia and former President Bill Clinton both used examples from *24* to justify the use of torture in real-life counterterrorism.<sup>3</sup>

More broadly, torture is frequently depicted in popular media—both inside and outside of counterterrorism-specific contexts. Discussions of torture in popular media are often focused on real or simulated counterterrorism efforts such as *24* or *Zero Dark Thirty*. In these contexts, terrorism and counterterrorism are explicitly discussed, the worlds depicted closely mirror our own, and the protagonists use torture to ostensibly gather information from terrorism suspects—the antagonists—to prevent imminent terrorist attacks. For example, Jack Bauer from *24* was a member of the Counter Terrorist Unit charged with preventing an attack that would occur within the day—making this squarely inside counterterrorism-specific contexts. Yet, torture frequently appears in media that do not depict real or fictional terrorist threats and responses to them. While the same good versus evil narratives are often present, films fall outside of counterterrorism-specific contexts when terrorism and counterterrorism are not explicitly mentioned nor are they core parts of the plot.<sup>4</sup> For example, in the later *Harry Potter* films, Voldemort’s trusted right-hand woman—Bellatrix LeStrange—regularly tortures other characters in an effort to gather information about Harry. These scenes fall outside of a counterterrorism-specific context since Harry and his friends are not depicted as terrorists, even though Voldemort, LeStrange, and the other Death Eaters certainly view them as the enemy.

Most popular movies—including those geared toward children—have at least one scene that that could be considered torture.<sup>5</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising that Marvel films or the Jason Bourne series contain torture, yet so do “family friendly” films including *Shrek Forever After*, *Toy Story 3*, and *Zootopia*. Among scenes where torture is used for interrogational purposes, it is usually depicted as effective at gathering information or coercing behavior.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, frequent usage of torture by protagonists communicates the social acceptability of torture under certain circumstances.<sup>7</sup> What we do not yet know, however, is how the public interprets information gathering, effective torture scenes in entertainment media that occur outside of counterterrorism-specific contexts and the ticking time bomb trope. Given that these more popular films receive far more viewership than counterterrorism-specific media, the potential effects of torture in popular films is much more substantial than that of *24* or *Zero Dark Thirty*.<sup>8</sup> To address this gap in the literature, we examine three questions: First, to what extent does the public recognize entertainment media depictions of torture outside of counterterrorism as, in fact, being *torture*? Second, how do these entertainment media

depictions of torture influence public support for torture? Finally, how does the type of character (animated v. human actors) influence these results?

The manuscript is organized as follows. First, we engage with the literature on why entertainment media matters in general and summarize what we know about depictions of torture—and their influence on opinion—in entertainment media. Next, we outline this study’s design, the analytical approach, and our results. Finally, we discuss our findings in relation to prior research and their implications more broadly, identify the study’s limitations, and outline suggestions for future avenues of research.

## Background

Media help shape people’s perceptions of the world beyond their own experiences.<sup>9</sup> When a person lacks direct knowledge of a topic, media’s influence on how to interpret that issue is particularly strong<sup>10</sup>, which can lead to inaccurate perceptions.<sup>11</sup> Thus, how an issue is framed can influence views—at least for some people—which can generate larger shifts in public opinion.<sup>12</sup>

Both news and entertainment media can influence public perceptions, though entertainment media may be particularly persuasive; since it is ostensibly not intended to be informative, people watch with a less critical gaze.<sup>13</sup> Entertainment media’s primary goal is to entertain, yet non-news media outlets can “still generate a host of unintended political outcomes.”<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, entertainment media help to maintain and regulate social norms and the debate about them.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, experimental research shows that entertainment media can influence public opinion on a host of social problems,<sup>16</sup> criminal justice issues,<sup>17</sup> and counterterrorism responses<sup>18</sup> including torture.<sup>19</sup>

Very few U.S. adults have direct personal experience with torture. Thus, the information that people have about torture largely comes from its depiction in media. Speaking about political issues more broadly, Bennett and Iyengar (2010) contend that entertainment media may present such scattered messages that any persuasion effects would not exist.<sup>20</sup> Yet, this does not seem to be the case for torture, which entertainment media consistently portray as an efficacious and socially acceptable technique under certain circumstances.<sup>21</sup> Since media frame torture as a “necessary evil” in counterterrorism,<sup>22</sup> perhaps it should not be a surprise that roughly half of Americans support the practice. Indeed, experimental research shows that college students and members of the broader public alike are more supportive of torture after seeing a clip from *24* where torture is effective.<sup>23</sup> While public debates on the use of torture in counterterrorism have often used *24* or *Zero Dark Thirty* as examples, torture is commonly depicted outside of the context of counterterrorism as well.<sup>24</sup> Looking at entertainment media more broadly, most popular films over the last decade contain at

least one torture scene—though often outside of the context of counterterrorism-specific plotlines. Further, there is consistent messaging across film depictions of torture—it is generally effective and tends to be depicted as necessary when the protagonist perpetrates it but punitive when the antagonist is the perpetrator. What we do not know, however, is how people perceive dramatic depictions of torture outside of the counterterrorism context and how viewing these scenes influences support for the practice.

## **Current Study**

In studying entertainment media depictions of torture, one key challenge is how to define and apply the term *torture* to fictional worlds. The United Nations Convention Against Torture (UNCAT) codifies the international definition of *torture* as: Any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him, or a third person, information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain and suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in, or incidental to, lawful sanction.

Of course, the UNCAT definition was created to define and prohibit actual behavior in the real-world. In the fictional universes of entertainment media, it becomes less clear who is capable of “acting in an official capacity” or which characters count as a “person.” We again draw on the Harry Potter series to illustrate how these are challenging distinctions in fictional worlds. As noted above, Bellatrix LeStrange regularly uses torture in the later films. Spoilers to follow: Prior to the Death Eaters overthrowing the Ministry of Magic, LeStrange would not have been acting in an official capacity. Once the Death Eaters were in charge, however, she was—at least within the wizarding world. In this fictional universe, there was still a United Kingdom government with a Muggle (non-wizard) Prime Minister, which challenges the Weberian definition of the state. Further, a goblin character was among LeStrange’s victims. While not human (or real), the goblin race were anthropomorphized sentient beings and thus “people” who were capable of being tortured. Finally, LeStrange regularly used her magical powers to inflict torture which is, of course, impossible in the real-world.

To account for alternative universes, anthropomorphized characters, and other challenges (or absurdities) inherent in applying a real-world definition to entertainment media, Delehanty and Kearns (2020, p. 5)<sup>25</sup> used a working definition of torture in this context:

A torture incident includes any act by which severe pain and suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a specific, unwilling anthropomorphized being who a) is not actively resisting or posing a direct, personal threat to the torturer and b) cannot voluntarily remove themselves from the situation in a reasonable manner. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in, or incidental to lawful or unlawful sanctions, murder, or other forms of killing. It does not include descriptions of off-screen torture incidents in which the results are not shown on-screen.

In the present study, we are interested in how scenes that meet the definition of torture stated above—but occur outside of the counterterrorism context and ticking time bomb trope—influence public support for the practice. Here we address three questions: First, to what extent does the public recognize entertainment media depictions of torture outside of counterterrorism as being *torture*? Public discourse on media and torture has predominantly focused on counterterrorism interrogations in *24*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, or similarly themed shows and films. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that people understand these harsh interrogations to be “torture” when they occur in the context of counterterrorism. Yet, colloquially, the term *torture* is also used to describe a range of negative experiences. Thus, scenes that constitute torture but occur outside of counterterrorism may not elicit the same response from people. Given the dearth of clear theoretical grounding, we do not have *a priori* expectations about whether people will recognize entertainment media depictions of torture outside of counterterrorism as being *torture*. Rather, we conduct these analyses exploratorily to better understand how the public understand torture scenes outside of the common ticking time bomb trope.

Second, how do these entertainment media depictions of torture influence public support for torture? Previous research has shown that when exposed to a scene from *24* where torture is effective at eliciting information from a victim, respondents’ support for torture was increased.<sup>26</sup> From this, we expect that seeing torture work outside of a counterterrorism context will increase support as well (H1). Importantly, this effect applies specifically to torture rather than violence in a general sense. Prior research found that people who saw a clip of a fist-fight—which is general violence, but not torture—decreased their support for torture afterward,<sup>27</sup> which may reflect an empathy gap between a terrorism suspect who audiences cannot identify with and someone getting punched which has greater resonance for people. From this, we expect that seeing general violence unrelated to counterterrorism will decrease support for torture (H2).

Finally, how does the type of character (animated v. human actors) influence these results? Social identity theory posits that people have more favorable views of people they perceive as similar to themselves (in-group) and less favorable views of people they perceive as dissimilar to themselves (out-groups).<sup>28</sup> Following from this, the suspect’s social identity—be it religion or race, ideology, or nationality—generally

influences both the extent to which people define an interrogation as being “torture” and public support for torture.<sup>29</sup> Beyond social identity, there is also an experiential empathy gap for torture. People are more likely to consider specific interrogation tactics—say sleep deprivation—as torture when they are experiencing a mild form of that pain—such as fatigue.<sup>30</sup> From this, it is intuitive to assume that people may have stronger in-group identification with and empathy for human characters. Yet, there is a dearth of research comparing perceptions of human versus either non-human or animated characters—and that which does exist is largely theoretical and contradictory in its expectations.<sup>31</sup> However, a related body of work on animated characters alone may provide some insight. For example, children’s perceptions of animated characters alone suggest relatively low levels of perceived social realism and moderate levels of identification.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, adults perceive anthropomorphized computer generated characters as more artificial than their non-anthropomorphized counterparts.<sup>33</sup> Building from this, we expect that that people will interpret torture scenes differently depending on whether the character being subjected to torture is a human versus an animated character (H3).

## **Method**

### ***Data***

Data for this project come from an online sample of 1,199 U.S. adults that is approximately representative of the overall population on race, age, gender, education, and income. We hired Qualtrics, a survey research firm commonly used in academic research,<sup>34</sup> to provide the sample from a panel of participants who were compensated for their time. In January 2021, Qualtrics emailed potential participants who met the inclusion criteria to invite them to participate in our study. Of the 2,283 people who were invited to participate in our study, the majority completed it ( $n = 1,557$ ; 68.2%).<sup>35</sup> [Table 1](#) presents the demographics of our sample and other descriptive statistics.

### ***Procedure***

Participation in the study took place in a single online session with a median completion time of 10 min and 25 s. Participants first answered basic demographic questions to ensure that our sample approximately represents the U.S. public. Next, participants answered pre-test questions about their views on six policy issues including support for torture in interrogations. Following prior work in this area, we also asked questions about views on crime and punishment more broadly and on the legalization of marijuana to conceal the true interest of our study. Participants then watched two video clips—one on torture and one on marijuana—which were presented in a randomized order. For the experimental portion of this study, we use a 4 (movie rating: G, PG, PG13, R) x 3 (scene type: no torture or violence, violence, torture) design where each participant was



randomly assigned to watch one of these 12 videos. All participants watched the same video clip related to marijuana use. Immediately following each video clip, participants were provided with a list of 12 words—including *torture*—and asked the extent to which each word describes the clip they just watched.<sup>36</sup> After this, participants were again asked about their views on the same six policy issues in the pre-test to measure post-test support for each. Finally, participants answered additional demographic questions. See Online Appendix A for the full survey (note: for analyses all items were recoded so that higher scores indicate stronger agreement). All study materials received IRB approval and informed consent was obtained from all participants

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics. ([Table view](#))

Variable	Frequency	Mean (SD)	Median	Span
<i>Demographics</i>				
Race: White	59.8%	---	---	---
Race: Black	14.4%	---	---	---
Race: Hispanic	17.1%	---	---	---
Race: Asian	5.4%	---	---	---
Race: Native American	0.9%	---	---	---
Race: Arab	0.8%	---	---	---
Race: Mixed race	1.4%	---	---	---
Race: Other	0.8%	---	---	---
Gender: Male	47.5%	---	---	---
Gender: Female	52.3%	---	---	---
Gender: Other	0.2%	---	---	---
Age: 18-34	28.7%	---	---	---
Age: 35-54	33.8%	---	---	---
Age: 55+	37.5%	---	---	---
Education: No college	22.5%	---	---	---
Education: Some college	77.5%	---	---	---
Income: Less than \$49,999	39.0%	---	---	---
Income: \$50,000 or more	61.0%	---	---	---
<i>Dependent Variables</i>				
Describe Scene as Torture	---	2.15 (1.10)	2	1-4
Pre-test Support for Torture	---	1.97 (1.04)	2	1-4
Post-test Support for Torture	---	1.94 (1.04)	2	1-4



## **Variables**

### ***Dependent Variables***

We are interested in two main outcome variables. First, we are interested in the extent to which people recognize that entertainment media depictions of torture outside of the counterterrorism context are actually *torture*. Responses were measured on a 4-point Likert scale where higher scores indicate stronger agreement (overall  $M = 2.15$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ). Second, we are interested in support for torture in interrogations, which is also measured on a 4-point Likert scale with higher scores suggesting greater support for torture. In line with prior research, we ask each participant's level of support for torture before watching the treatment videos (overall  $M = 1.97$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) and again after watching (overall  $M = 1.94$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ), which allows us to examine both between- and within-group differences.

### ***Independent Variables***

The two manipulated variables are movie rating (G, PG, PG13, and R) and scene type (torture, violence, and control). For analysis we compare means across all 12 videos. We also examine differences in outcome variables between films with animated, non-human characters (G and PG clips) and human characters (PG13 and R clips). To select the treatment video clips, we first started with a list of recent popular films that include a torture scene.<sup>37</sup> From there, we excluded clips where either: a) torture was conducted for purposes other than trying to extract information, b) torture was used for interrogational purposes but it was unsuccessful, and c) torture (or its result) were portrayed off-screen. We identified a total of 8 possible torture clips to use from two films in each MPAA movie rating: *Cars and Rio* (G), *Wreck-It Ralph* and *The Secret Life of Pets* (PG), *Fast & Furious 6* and *Jason Bourne* (PG13), and *The Revenant* and *Logan* (R). To ensure that viewers recognize that the torture clips show an interrogation where information is gathered, we conducted the first pilot test with a sample of 137 people using Amazon's Mechanical Turk. In Pilot 1, we randomly assigned people to watch one of the 8 possible torture clips from the aforementioned movies and answer questions measured on 5-point Likert scales. There was no difference in responses to "The video showed an interrogation" across the 8 possible video clips ( $F(7, 129)=1.11$ ,  $p = 0.36$ ).<sup>38</sup> Across the 8 potential clips, there were however differences in response to the question "One character got information from another character" ( $F(7, 129)=14.99$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Using pair-wise means comparisons, we then identified which clips scored significantly lower than the others and excluded those clips (and thus the movies they came from). The remaining clips all showed a torture interrogation that was successful (and was perceived as such by participants in Pilot 1), and our final treatment video clips were taken were: *Rio*, *The Secret Life of Pets*, *Fast &*

*Furious 6*, and *The Revenant*. See Online Appendix B for links to the clips. We do not (and cannot) claim that the movies or clips we have selected are representative of all entertainment media depictions of torture—but they are examples of how torture is depicted outside of counterterrorism. From each of these four movies, we then identified a clip that showed violence that was neither related to an interrogation nor had any sort of information exchange for the *violence* condition and a clip that showed neither violence nor an interrogation or information exchange for the *control* condition.

## Results

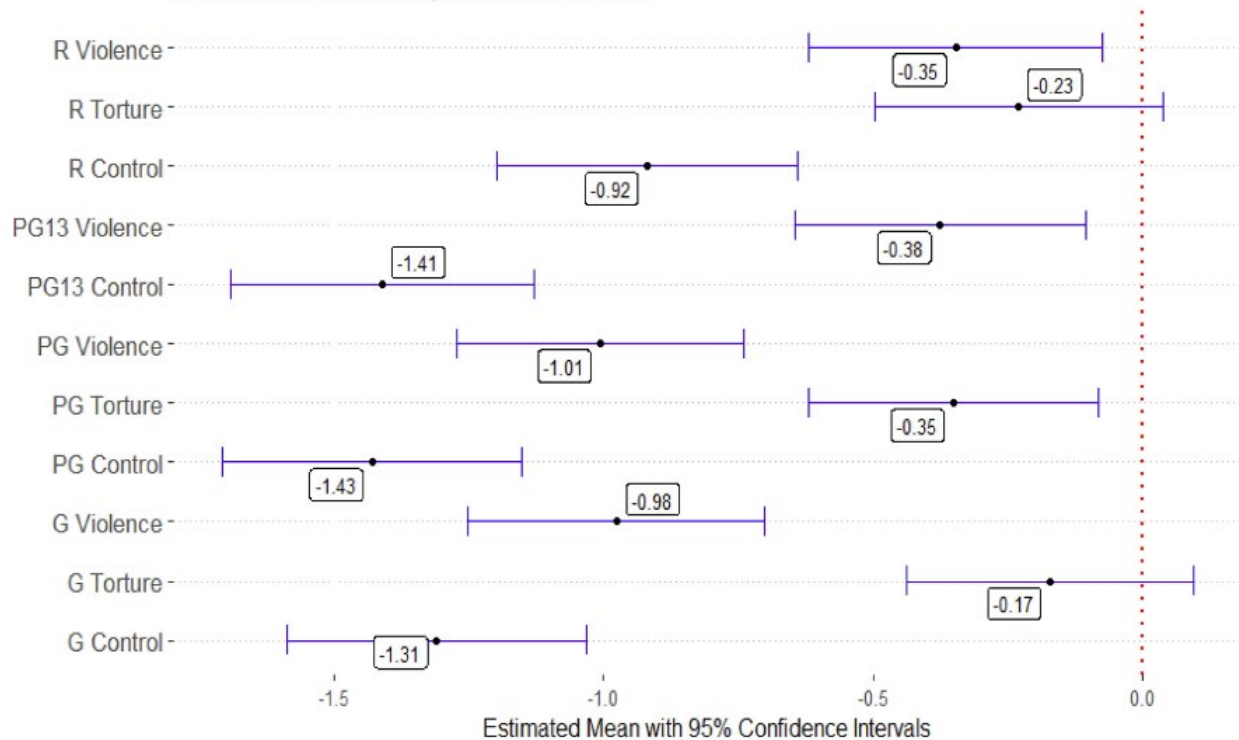
In this study, we are interested in three questions: First, to what extent does the public recognize entertainment media depictions of torture outside of counterterrorism as being *torture*? Second, how do these entertainment media depictions of torture influence public support for the practice? Finally, how does the type of character (animated v. human actors) influence these results? To address these, we rely primarily on ANOVA and post hoc comparisons of means. Additionally, to examine within-group changes from pre-test to post-test measures, we rely on a series of t-tests.

### ***Do People View the Scene as Being Torture?***

To address our first research question, we use ANOVA to test whether there are differences in the extent to which people recognize that torture scenes outside of counterterrorism are indeed *torture*. We also address our third research question by examining whether the type of character—animated v. human—impacts these results. Results show that there are significant differences in the extent to which people recognize scenes as being *torture*, ( $F(11, 1186)=27.18, p < 0.001$ ). To identify where these differences exist, we turn to post hoc pair-wise mean comparisons between each combination of the 12 scenes in the torture treatment, as shown in [Table 2](#). In [Table 2](#), each cell shows the mean of the condition in the column minus the mean of the condition in the row. For example, the first cell shows a difference of  $-0.80$ , which indicates that—compared to participants in the G-rated torture condition—participants in the G-rated violence condition were less likely to view their scene as being *torture* and the difference in the means of these groups is  $0.80$  (on a 4-point Likert scale). To help visualize some of these differences, [Figure 1](#) presents pair-wise comparisons for each condition relative to the PG-13 Torture scene.

## Pairwise Comparison vs. PG-13 Torture Scene

Difference between mean response for 'Is this torture?'



**Figure 1.** Pairwise comparisons of describing each scene as depicting “torture”.

Looking first within each film rating category, we see that participants in the torture conditions were generally able to identify that those clips depicted torture relative to the violence and control clips from those same films. In the G-rated film, participants in the torture condition were more likely to recognize that this scene was indeed *torture* ( $M = 2.66$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) relative to participants in both the violence ( $M = 1.86$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ) and control ( $M = 1.52$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ) conditions. Similarly in the PG-rated film, participants in the torture condition were more likely to identify that this scene was, indeed, *torture* ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) relative to participants in both the violence ( $M = 1.83$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ) and control ( $M = 1.40$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) conditions. Likewise, in the PG13-rated film participants in the torture condition were more likely to identify that the scene was indeed *torture* ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) relative to participants in both the violence ( $M = 2.45$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) and control ( $M = 1.42$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ) conditions. However, in the R-rated film, participants in the torture condition were more likely to identify that this scene was indeed *torture* ( $M = 2.60$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ) relative to participants in the control ( $M = 1.91$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ) condition only; there was no difference relative to participants in the violence ( $M = 2.49$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) condition.

**Table 2.** Pairwise comparisons of describing each scene as depicting “torture”. ([Table view](#))

	G Torture	G Violence	G Control	PG Torture	PG Violence	PG Control	PG1 3 Torture	PG1 3 Violence	PG1 3 Control	R Torture	R Violence	R Control
G Torture	---											
G Violence	<b>0.80</b> ***	---										
G Control	<b>1.14</b> ***	<b>0.33</b> *	---									
PG Torture	-0.18	<b>0.63</b> **	<b>0.96</b> ***	---								
PG Violence	<b>0.83</b> ***	-0.03	<b>0.30</b> *	-	---							
PG Control	<b>1.26</b> ***	<b>0.45</b> *	-0.12	-	-	---						
PG1 3 Torture	0.17	<b>0.98</b> **	<b>1.31</b> ***	<b>0.35</b> *	<b>1.01</b> **	<b>1.43</b> ***	---					
PG1 3 Violence	-0.20	<b>0.60</b> **	<b>0.93</b> ***	-0.02	<b>0.63</b> **	<b>1.05</b> ***	-	---				
PG1 3 Control	<b>1.24</b> ***	<b>0.44</b> *	-0.10	-	-	0.02	-	-	---			
R Torture	-0.06	<b>0.75</b> **	<b>1.08</b> ***	0.12	<b>0.78</b> **	<b>1.20</b> ***	-0.23 <sup>†</sup>	0.15	<b>1.18</b> ***	---		
R Violence	-0.18	<b>0.63</b> **	<b>0.96</b> ***	0.004	<b>0.66</b> **	<b>1.08</b> ***	-	0.03	<b>1.06</b> ***	-0.12	---	
R Control							<b>0.35</b> *					

	G Torture	G Violence	G Control	PG Torture	PG Violence	PG Control	PG1 Torture	PG1 Violence	PG1 Control	R Torture	R Violence	R Control
R Control	-	0.06	<b>0.39</b> *	-	0.09	<b>0.51</b> **	-	-	<b>0.49</b> **	-	-	---
	<b>0.75</b> ***		<b>*</b>	<b>0.57</b> ***		<b>**</b>	<b>0.92</b> ***	<b>0.54</b> **	<b>**</b>	<b>0.69</b> ***	<b>0.57</b> **	

Note: ANOVA post-hoc pair-wise means comparison contrasts reported and should be read as the mean of the row condition minus the mean of the column condition, so a negative score shows that people in the column condition had a higher mean score than people in the associated row condition and vice versa. Significant differences in bold.

- †  $p < 0.10$ .
- \*  $p < 0.05$ .
- \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .
- \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

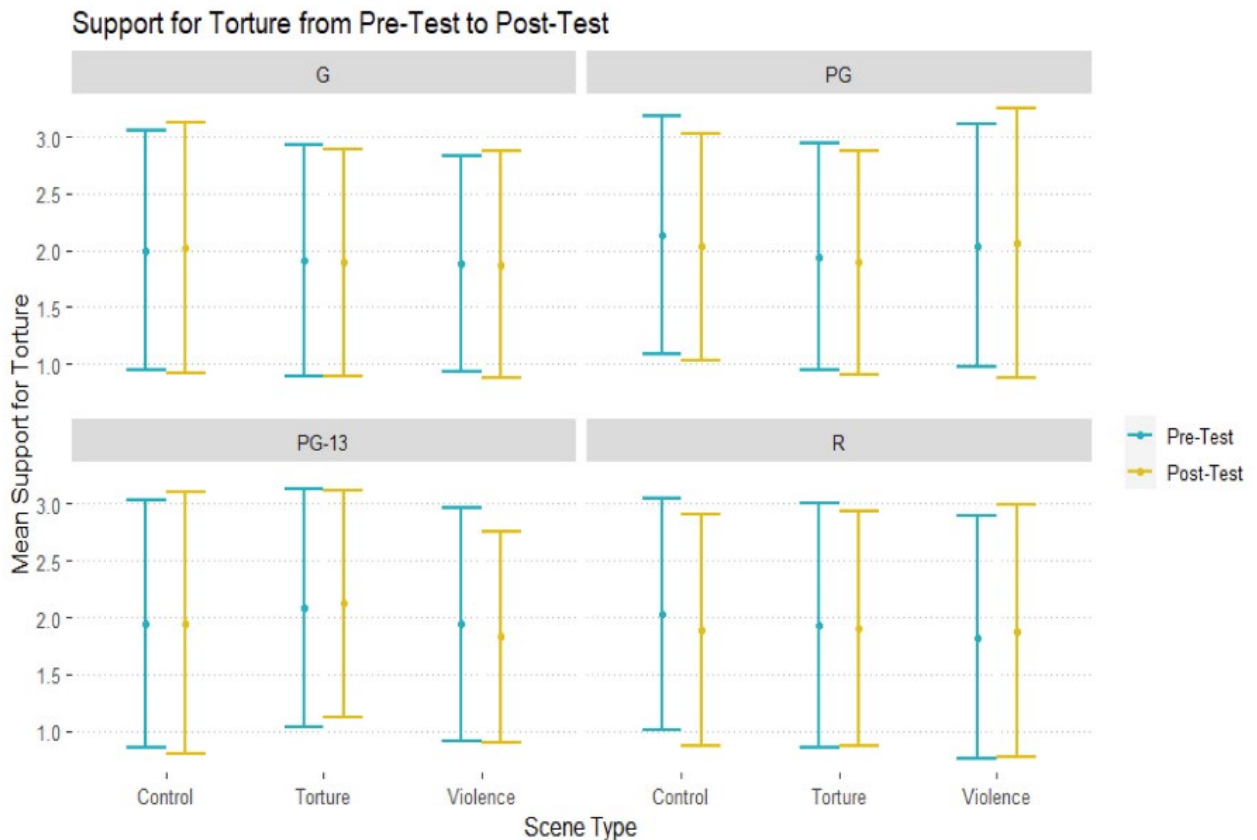
Looking next across the four torture conditions, we generally do not see differences in participants' ability to identify that these clips depict torture. The only notable exception is that participants in the PG13-rated torture clip were more likely to indicate that this scene contained torture relative to participants in the PG-rated torture condition. Since we do not find differences between views of either of these clips and either the G-rated or the R-rated clips, we suspect this difference is more a function of these particular scenes rather than indicative of some difference between films with animated versus human characters.<sup>39</sup> Thus, we do not find support for our expectation that there would be differences in perceptions of torture scenes with human versus animated characters (H3).

### ***Do People Change Support for Torture?***

Before we examine within-person change in views on torture, we first compare between-group differences in support for torture both pre-test and post-test. ANOVAs show that, across the 12 conditions, there was no average difference in support for torture either pre-test ( $F(11, 1184)=0.71, p = 0.73$ ) or post-test ( $F(11, 1187)=0.73, p = 0.71$ ). Indeed, most (73%) participants do not change their stated support for torture from pre-test to post-test.

To address our second research question, we then used a series of t-tests to compare the mean level of stated support for torture in each of the 12 conditions from pre-test to post-test, as shown in [Figure 2](#) (see Online Appendix C for test statistics). Since we specified directional hypotheses for the torture and violence conditions but not the control conditions, we report one-tailed  $p$ -values for the former and two-tailed  $p$ -values for the latter. In H1, we expected that people in the torture conditions would increase their support for the practice after watching a video clip. Yet, we do not find

any support for this. Further, since H3 is predicated on differences between scenes with human versus animated characters, the lack of difference here means that we fail to support this expectation. H2 states that people in the general violence conditions will be less supportive of torture post-treatment. We only find support for this among participants in the PG13-rated violence clip, which offers weak support for this expectation.



**Figure 2.** Support for torture from pre-test to post-test by condition.

## Discussion

Our aim for this study was to better understand how the public view torture scenes in pop culture that do not follow the ticking time bomb trope popular in counterterrorism media. Despite the prevalence of scenes that meet the definition of “torture” in popular media, many of these depictions occur outside of counterterrorism. Yet public discourse on torture centers around its status as an efficacious “necessary evil” in counterterrorism while ignoring that torture occurs in other contexts as well. As a result, we were interested in whether people would recognize these scenes as depicting torture and whether viewing such a scene moves support for torture. We found that people were—in fact—able to recognize the torture scenes as being “torture” and did not generalize this term to apply to other negative experiences as depicted in the

violence conditions. Further, we find limited evidence to suggest that people are more likely to describe a scene as torture when the victim was human versus animated. Taken together, this suggests that the public has a working definition of *torture* that can be divorced from the counterterrorism context in which it is commonly discussed. While public opinion polls on torture tends to center it within the context of counterterrorism investigations where there is an existential, imminent threat, our findings suggests that people have more nuanced understandings of what constitutes torture. Perhaps this presents opportunities to shift public dialogue on torture, to measure public opinion on torture when not framed within counterterrorism,<sup>40</sup> and to identify ways to strengthen opposition to torture broadly. Moreover, there is little evidence of an empathy or identity gap between the viewer and the torture victim—at least across these scenes, which contradicts expectations from the literature.<sup>41</sup>

While viewing a clip of torture working in the TV show *24* increases support for the practice<sup>42</sup>, we find no evidence that seeing torture work outside of the counterterrorism context influences stated support for the practice. Importantly, since people recognize the scenes as torture but viewing these clips does not shift views on the practice, then failure to recognize the scene as torture cannot explain the null effect. This is a somewhat puzzling results that begs further research: The scenes presented in this experiment are fundamentally the same as those presented in Kearns and Young (2018, 2020) in that they show examples of successful interrogational torture, but they do not present the same effect on respondents' views on torture policy. Barring further research we can only speculate on the causal mechanisms here, but some possible answers present promising avenues for research. Perhaps the strict counterterrorism context of *24* provides more policy-relevant information to respondents, or perhaps the urgency of the “ticking time bomb” scenario presented in Kearns and Young (2018, 2020) leads to more drastic changes in respondents' opinions on the practice since there is an imminent, existential threat. It is likewise possible that media outside of a counterterrorism-specific context requires repeated and consistent exposure rather than exposure to a single scene to have an effect on a person's views about torture. Finally, drawing from social identity theory, it is possible that the presented ethnicity of the victim (white or animated in our study, Arab in Kearns and Young) determines whether an individual scene provokes a shift in respondents views toward torture policy. Given random assignment to treatment, participants demographic factors such as political ideology are not driving results since these should be evenly distributed across conditions. While our study suggests that a single torture scene does not shift views on torture, this conflict with previous studies bears further inquiry. It is normatively positive that torture scenes presented in popular films do not always shift views in favor of torture, especially given the prevalence of such scenes.<sup>43</sup> Despite that, we also know



that some scenes *do* affect viewer attitudes toward torture, and thus it is important to understand the specific mechanisms underlying that effect.

Though we did not find support for our hypotheses about the influence of non-counterterrorism-specific torture clips on support for torture, our results do support the notion that most people have fixed views on torture.<sup>44</sup> In this study, the majority (77.3%) of participants did not change their stated level of support for torture from pre-test to post-test. While the percentage of people with fixed versus fluid views on torture is consistent with other studies,<sup>45</sup> the direction of change is not. When presented with torture in counterterrorism, people with fluid views tend to be more supportive of the practice. Yet, outside of counterterrorism-specific torture scenes, a roughly equal portion of people with fluid views increase versus decrease support for the practice. While it is difficult to push people to be less supportive of torture in counterterrorism, it appears more feasible to constrain support for torture more broadly. The prevalence of people with fixed versus fluid views suggests that efforts to reduce support for torture should really focus on people who are likely to be persuaded—those with fluid views.

## Conclusion

As is the case for any study, this project has a few important limitations and it has also raised additional questions for future research to address. The first limitation is that the films selected for this study and the clips used within them are not—and cannot be—representative of films in general. This is an unavoidable limitation since no film or scene can be fully representative of the diversity of films. Accordingly, we have to rely on typical tropes for how torture is depicted outside of counterterrorism. To account for this as best as possible, we used clips from popular films that depict torture for interrogational purposes and are effective in this regard. Given the nature of these treatments, it is impossible to control for all of the other potential subtle factors that could possibly influence our outcomes. The second limitation is that this study only uses short-duration exposure to the treatment rather than the more repetitive messaging that people receive as they consume media over time. While those viewing a single torture clip did not shift views on torture, we cannot say that these depictions don't matter at all—just that they do not push support in a single exposure. To probe this more, future research should consider the possible cumulative effect of media consumption on views of torture by measuring the quantity of media consumed and the duration of consumption. It is possible that viewers are not making the connection between torturing a cartoon bird (as the scene from *Rio* depicts) and torture in counterterrorism, but when the depiction is more overt (as clips from *24* show) this connection is easier to make. Thus, these depictions may just not be as evocative or threatening—especially from an out-group—as media depictions of torture in counterterrorism. Future research

should also probe how media depictions of torture that cue on greater mortality salience and identity, but do so without evoking terrorism, influence support for the practice.

## Notes

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4. We thank the anonymous reviewer for this point. While our focus here is on films that are clearly outside of a counterterrorism-specific context, we also recognize that there is gradation in being inside or outside of a counterterrorism focus rather than it being binary distinction. For example, to the extent that the adage "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter" holds, Han Solo being tortured in *The Empire Strikes Back* could be considered as inside the context of counterterrorism, though this is not how we—nor audiences—tend to view it. Still, this presents a gray area in classification that is outside the scope of this project.

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36. To identify the words to include in this portion of the study, we conducted a second pilot test with a sample of 272 people using Amazon's Mechanical Turk. In Pilot 2, we

randomly assigned people to watch one of the 12 main treatment clips and answer a single question. Participants were asked to describe the clip they viewed using an open-ended question. We took commonly used descriptors from this study to create these questions. Median completion time for Pilot 2 was 4 minutes and 23 seconds, and participants received \$0.60 for their time.

37. Delehanty and Kearns. "Wait, There's Torture in Zootopia?," 835–850.

38. Median completion time for Pilot 1 was 4 minutes and 1 seconds, and participants received \$0.60 for their time.

39. While comparing views of the violence and control conditions across films is not the focus of our study, we do note an interesting comparison across the violence conditions—which did not show torture in any way. Across violence conditions, participants were more likely to describe this as *torture* in both the PG13 and R clips relative to both the G and PG clips but there were no difference between the G and PG clips nor between the PG13 and R clips. Together, this may suggest the people are more likely to view violence in general as being *torture* when the victims are human rather than animated characters.

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44. Kearns and Young, *Tortured Logic*.

45. *Ibid.*

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