

## Hyper Masculinity and Domestic Violence: Misleading Media Representations and the Media Effects of the “Macho” Man

For my final project in this class, I will discuss the relationship between portrayals of hyper-masculinity in the media and domestic violence in the U.S.. Utilizing Social Learning Theory, a psychological theory studying aggressive behavior as a specific media effect, I will analyze the depiction and idolization of hyper-masculinity and its media effects, using magazine advertising as a particular example; I wish to know whether changes in these representations could play a role in the rise or fall of actual domestic violence in American households. I believe that, according to Social Learning Theory, we can expect to see that adolescent males who consume media emphasizing intense manliness could potentially be influenced to idealize characteristics such as male dominance, leading to the adoption of hyper-masculine tendencies in their future as a direct media effect. When messages that misrepresent victims and fail to properly display the negative effects of intimate partner violence appear on our screens, adolescent boys may learn that same behavior as means to “conform to a social stereotype of manliness” that associates violence and masculinity to define the “male role” depicted in mass media (Breines 24).

Hyper-masculinity, defined as “an extreme form of masculine gender ideology” based on elements of “toughness, violence, dangerousness, and calloused attitudes toward women and sex,” has been linked to increased levels of “violence toward women” (Vokey 562). In “An Analysis of Hyper-Masculinity in Magazine Advertising,” researchers found that several magazines such as *Game Informer* and *Playboy* exhibit some form of hyper-masculine related ideals in about 56% of all advertisements they feature (Vokey 569). Out of these advertisements,

13% directly feature messages that associate manliness with violence and ‘calloused attitudes towards women and sex’ (Vokey 570). Since men that exhibit hyper-masculine tendencies have a higher likelihood of committing acts of violence against women, “depictions in advertising” that “promote hyper-masculine beliefs and behaviour in society” could be linked to increases in domestic violence (Vokey 573).

When applied to violence in media, Social Learning Theory, observes a particular “link between violent media programs . . . and aggressive behavior”; this theory is specifically an analysis of aggression, and focuses on four essential processes that must occur for the violent materials observed to lead to an actual media effect (*Media & Culture* 524). First, a person must “attend to the media and witness the aggressive behavior” depicted, and they must be able to “retain the memory” of that media for “later retrieval,”; an example of this process could be exposure to media violence and inaccurate representations of domestic violence from an early age (*Media & Culture* 524). They “must [also] be able to physically imitate the behavior,” which would likely occur in adolescence, and “there must be a social reward” or “*motivation*” that “encourage[s] modeling of the behavior” (*Media & Culture* 524).

The interaction between Social Learning Theory and media occurs at the first and last stages of the process through which behavior is developed, *attention* and *motivation*. In the aforementioned study on magazine advertisements, the *attention* stage is simply the moment in which a young man witnesses a media depiction of hyper-masculinity. Since these magazines were stated to have some form of content reinforcing hyper-masculinity in over half of the ads they feature, and advertisements take up between “45 percent and 51 percent” of the total content in an average magazine, it is clear that there is serious exposure to such overtly “macho” ideals

in magazine advertising (Moses). The reward, or *motivation*, stage of Social Learning Theory is directly associated with learning aggressive behavior. It is found that, when a perpetrator of media violence is perceived as “attractive” and the violence depicted is rewarded, rather than punished, the media effect may be that a consumer of this media can be subconsciously influenced to idealize that same behavior (Comm 100 Lecture “Games” Table 1).

Magazine advertisements that exhibit hyper-masculine ideals of attractiveness and a dismissive attitude toward women imply that there is a social reward to be gained by adopting more macho characteristics, such as violence. These rewards include being perceived as more attractive and powerful as well as the typical “you get the girl” motif, promoting masculinity and sexual dominance through portraying a woman as a prize; evidence of this comes from the several magazine advertisements in which men were depicted with a submissive, attractive woman by their side. In the *motivation* stage, we see not only how depictions of hyper-masculinity can influence adolescent males to associate macho behavior with positive rewards, but we also see how important it is for contemporary media to accurately portray the intense emotional and physical pain that domestic violence can cause. Failure to display the “punishment” an abuser should receive, instead focusing on the faults of the victim, is further evidenced to reinforce aggressive behavior (“Games” Table 1).

However, according to an analysis of 44 studies on media representations of domestic violence by Our Watch, “depictions of violence against women [in the media] bear little resemblance to the reality of gender-based violence” (Our Watch). Furthermore, in “Media Representations of Domestic Violence,” Meda Chesney-Lind and Nicholas Chagnon contend that “media depictions of domestic violence provide the public with a partial and often

misleading representation” of violence between intimate partners (Chesney-Lind 2) This creates a rift between what a consumer understands as domestic violence and the reality of the abuse. When transmitted from fictional media into news media, we find that “reporting on domestic violence almost always focuses on the victim, implying that the violence is an individual problem owned by the victim”; this develops a climate of “victim blaming” where “media reports offer explanations that dehumanize and blame battered women” for the violence they themselves have suffered (Chesney-Lind 5).

Thus, a kind of perfect storm has developed in which hyper-masculinity is rewarded in media while the reality of domestic violence is obfuscated. Adolescent boys are exposed to a media climate in which depictions of violent behavior are both readily available and offer a social reward, which, according to Social Learning Theory, could influence their behavior and cause them to learn aggression toward women that shapes their actions in adulthood.

Disconcertingly, the same study on magazine advertising found that “the age of target readers was most strongly, negatively correlated with the frequency of hypermasculinity depicted in the advertisements” (Vokey 572). This means that the highest frequency of portrayals of hyper-masculinity in magazine advertising is in ads that promote products and content designed for adolescent boys. With adolescence being a time of increased impressionability, I believe there is a possibility that such interactions with media could influence their behavior subconsciously because they are still developing.

Although critics of Social Learning Theory may contend that many studies indicate “no link between media content and aggression”, and that the theory simply makes “media scapegoats for larger social problems relating to violence,” I believe that they fail to address the

true intent behind the theorem (*Media & Culture* 524) The point, in my opinion, is not that every single person who ever consumes violent media will become more aggressive. However, if a person is taught that there is a social reward of violent behavior through the media they consume, there may be at least some individuals who enact violence upon their intimate partners who have been influenced to do so by the hyper-masculine ideal they have been taught through advertisements and movies.

This matters because, although incidents of “nonfatal domestic violence” have declined by 63% since 1994, there is no cause to celebrate when 1 in 4 women in the U.S “have experienced severe physical violence by an intimate partner (e.g., hit with a fist or something hard, beaten, slammed against something) at some point in their lifetime” (CDC 2010 Summary Report). Digital convergence ensures that media plays a more and more prevalent role in our lives at younger and younger ages; according to eMarketer’s 2014-2019 report, Americans are currently believed to spend more than 12 hours per day consuming some form of media (*Emarketer*). If hyper masculinity can be developed by media, and hyper-masculine tendencies are tied to increases in domestic violence, then there could be a link between portrayals of intense masculinity and increased domestic violence rates (Vokey 562 and Chesney-Lind 3-4). We are consuming media that misrepresents domestic violence and simultaneously acts to promote and portray the social rewards of tendencies that are associated with increases in intimate partner abuse. According to Social Learning Theory, this climate could be analyzed for an association between hyper-masculinity in media and real world domestic violence as a direct media effect.

Media is essential to the everyday lives of so many Americans and, according to Social Learning Theory, acts as a powerful influence on the behavior we exhibit even if we do not realize it. If we focus on promoting accurate representations of domestic violence, ending victim blaming in news media, and “challenging . . . values and beliefs linking masculinity to violence and other harmful behaviour,” media could serve as a powerful tool in the prevention of the widespread national epidemic of intimate partner violence (Vokey 573). If the media effect of promoting hypermasculinity in advertising and failing to properly address domestic violence in the news is the teaching of aggression and violent behavior, then perhaps if those subjects were properly handled we would see the opposite media effect as a reduction in violence. We owe it to sufferers of domestic violence to utilize such a powerful tool as media, a foundational part of our everyday lives, to prevent violence through reshaping cultural examples of what it means to be a man.

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