The Influence of Film Personae on the Enculturation of Masculine Identity Performance

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Keywords: Masculinity, Masculine Identity, Dramaturgy

Masculinity is a construct of carefully accepted, culturally defined behavioral patterns (Wedgwood, 2009). These patterns inherently generate criteria to determine if a person can be positively categorized as masculine. The ideal masculine presentation is socially constructed, and members of society are taught how a "man" should look and behave in childhood (Biller & Borstelmann, 1967). Definitions of masculinity range from the stereotypical representation of hyper-heterosexual, hegemonic bread winner to a number of alternative non-hegemonic masculinities (Hatfield, 2010; Wedgwood, 2009). Although contemporary U.S. society's understanding of masculinity is evolving, this image appears to be embedded in the subconsciousness of mainstream thought. Studies involving U.S. college males show that they struggle with ingrained notions of "male competitiveness, homophobia, and sexual objectification of women" (Harris, 2008, p. 456).

Research has shown that gender is less likely to be a personality trait, but rather acquired through social exposure (Buschmeyer & Lengersdorf, 2016). Socialization occurs in many ways, one of which is through the consumption of film and television. Many theories (Forbidden Fruit theory, Classic Conditioning theory, the Transportation Effect, etc.) have demonstrated film and television have an effective influence on behavior (Yang & Berg, 2016). Thus, it stands to reason that many conceptualizations of masculinity are in part influenced by how this gender role is portrayed in film and television.

The purpose of this research was to investigate criteria by which society arbitrates a successful masculine identity performance through the lens of Dramaturgical theory. The researcher further sought to identify various criteria of masculinity embedded in the enculturating standards of contemporary American society, by exploring the influence of key film and television celebrities.

Theoretical Framework

Dramaturgical theory views individuals as actors taking on various roles to communicate their identities (Goffman, 1975). A "performance" is the actions taken by an actor to communicate their role to others (Goffman, 1975). According to dramaturgical theory, the communication of self is accomplished through a interaction between a performer and their audience (Goffman, 1975). For successful communication to occur, the symbols used must be agreed upon by both sides (Stone, 1975). Thus, when conveying a masculine identity, it is most likely that individuals would choose to adopt culturally agreed upon masculine symbols (dress, grooming, speech, etc.) into their performance (Goffman, 1975; Stone, 1975).

Method

To explore the purpose, data were gathered in relation to popular male celebrities (John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, and Burt Reynolds) who often portrayed highly "masculine" roles in films and helped to set some of the present cultural standards for a masculine identity (Hatfield, 2010). A netnographic approach was adopted. Netnography is the ethnography of the internet and allows researchers to explore group behavior and culture online (Kozinets, 1998). Data were retrieved from two online Reddit threads comprised of 14 pages of text (613 individual comments). The two discussion prompts were: 1) "People Watch John Wayne and Clint Eastwood Movies and Comment on How They Were Real Men, but in Reality, They were Grown Men Putting on Costumes and Pretending to Be Cowboys.", and 2) "Burt Reynolds was a Charmingly preposterous Icon of American Masculinity."

Data were copied into an excel document and then analyzed. The constant comparison method was used to reduce data into meaningful units (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The method is comprised of three coding stages: 1) Open Coding to derive units of meaning from words or phrases, 2) Axial Coding combines open codes into categories, and 3) Selective Coding to analyze axial codes into congruent themes (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Results

Following the analysis three prominent themes were identified: 1) Identifying masculine icons, 2) Defining masculinity, and 3) Seeking a new masculinity.

Masculine Icons: Though the topic threads were devoted to specific actors it was common for the respondents to highlight other actors who possessed masculine qualities, such as Charles Bronson, Nick Offerman, and Russel Crowe. Occasional commentary revealed an awareness that actors' personae could represent a masculinity that the actor themselves might not actually embody in real life. This is illustrated in comments like, "Even Cary Grant wished

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he could be like Cary Grant" (Commenter 112) Overall, the respondents referred to 28 male actors possessing qualities which equated to a successful masculine identity performance.

Defining Masculinity: The respondents discussed numerous traits that were important for an ideal masculine identity. They included behaviors (e.g. fighting, smoking, being tough, having courage), physical characteristics (facial hair), and other qualifiers. Respondents had varying opinions on the qualities that define a masculine man, often the variables between bad traits and high masculinity presented as a negative relationship. For example, "…Don Draper. Total piece of shit but we heard all about how there aren't men like him anymore and he's sexy…" (Commenter 97)

Seeking a New Masculinity: The respondents also discussed activities and individuals that were outside of the narrowly defined masculine ideal. For instance, one post pointed out that "Burt Reynolds did an awful lot to expand the range of socially acceptable masculine behaviors" (Commenter 2). These include inviting the feminine gaze by posing nude. There were also instances in which the commenters described alternative masculine practices such as showing "playfulness, humor and an imperfect humanity" (Commenter 2). Besides expanding the current masculine system, others discussed dispensing with opposing gender and working toward an "agendered" society.

Discussion

According to this investigation, the portrayal of an ideal masculinity by film actors appear to influence and even define the collective image of successfully performed masculinity. Dramaturgical theory suggests that the ability to perform our social roles, and potentially our gender roles, are learned by socialization (Goffman, 1975). The online comments provided some insight into how a masculine identity may be validated by a representation of socially defined characteristics. This is reinforced by comments such as "I have a friend who is always considered super manly, because he's 6" 200 pounds and has a massive beard. in [sic] reality, he doesn't know how to use a hammer…" (Commenter 8). This is in line with the Dramaturgical theory which suggest identity is a performance (Goffman, 1975).

Whether or not all respondents agree to what extent masculine icons in film do impact that social learning, it is apparent that the potential for continued influence exists. Future research should further explore how criteria for a masculine identity are identified and communicated through film and other venues.

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