

Where Does it Hurt? A Cultivation Theory's Perspective on Domestic Violence

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Abstract

This study investigated Cultivation Theory and its role in the issue of domestic violence. I hypothesized that people who are exposed to larger quantities of pop culture mediums will have less negative attitudes towards the issue of domestic violence. My study also posed research questions about the relationship between the attitudes towards domestic violence with both basic domestic violence knowledge and personal experience with the issue. I gathered my data through a thirty-question survey and distributed it online, using convenience and snowball samples. My results did not support my hypothesis; however, I did find statistical significance for a negative correlation between reading celebrity gossip magazines and knowledge of basic domestic violence facts. I conclude with a discussion highlighting the implications and limitations.

Where Does it Hurt? A Cultivation Theory's Perspective On Domestic Violence

Throughout the last several decades, the people of the United States have gone from rotary-dial landlines to smartphones, dial-up to WiFi, and VHS to Blu-Ray. Accompanying these recent and enormous advancements in the field of technology has been a substantial increase of media availability for the general public's consumption. Media is all around us; it is television, movies, the internet, magazines, newspapers, and so much more. It is how we stay entertained and connected to the rest of the world. This sociological change has brought scholars to question the effects that our increased media consumption may have on us as people and as a community. There has been much speculation in regards to the implications that consuming violent media may have and whether or not the public is becoming desensitized to real life violence because of their viewership.

I wanted to take this debate one step further and examine it through a more focused scope. I have noticed that there is a great deal of media dealing with the issue of domestic violence, both in a journalism capacity as well as through entertainment medium and programming. I wondered if whether or not having such a severe issue presented so often and in different ways was affecting the general public's perception on the issue through the effect of the Cultivation Theory.

Violent Media Exposure

According to the Southern California Academic Center of Excellence on Youth Violence Prevention, University of California, Riverside, the average child spends twenty-eight hours per week watching television, and up to twenty acts of violence occur per hour in children's programming. By the time the average child has turned eighteen years old, he or she will have

already witnessed 200,000 acts of violence, including 16,000 murders, just from television programming alone. Beyond the tube, internet websites showing violence (killing, shooting, fighting, etc.) correlate with a 50% increase in reports of seriously violent behavior (Lomonaco). Misogyny is “an ideology that reduces women to objects for men’s ownership, use, or abuse” (Cundiff). Ever since misogynistic themes were first seen in hip hop music during the 1980s, they have only become much more prevalent in today’s hip hop culture, with women being portrayed as sex objects and victims of violence. These images of women “teach men that aggression and violence are closely linked to cultural views of masculinity...and encourage misogyny” with the physical abuse of women being “celebrated” in the music itself (Cundiff). These types of visual images are provided in the films like “Showgirls.” The movie features a brutal rape scene, and although it was rated NC-17, it was marketed to 1,388 theaters with an elaborate public relations campaign that included posters on taxicabs, 250,000 free eight-minute video samples and even a promotional site on the Internet (Clark). These other forms of media give everybody the opportunity to be introduced to this movie with adult themes, despite the rating, and therefore unintended viewers may be affected as well.

Because there are so many examples of partner abuse circulating our popular culture, I wanted to specifically examine if this abundance is desensitizing the public’s opinion of the problem by means of the Cultivation Theory. Desensitization is the idea that heavy exposure to violence leads people to be less affected by it, and repeated exposure to media violence will lead to decreases in arousal, emotional reactions, and concern. Cultivation Theory states that “the more TV a person watches, the more their perceptions of social reality reflect the “realities” portrayed on TV” (Thomas). This includes exaggerated estimates of real-world violence and crime, as well as gaining “Mean World Syndrome” which is when a person assumes the worst

out of others and from the world itself (Thomas). This could be potentially dangerous when it comes to media showing domestic violence if viewers are assuming this is the norm and expecting it from others.

Healthy vs. Unhealthy relationships

To examine unhealthy relationships, I had to look at what makes a relationship actually good, stable, and satisfying. The research suggests that adequate problem-solving is one strong indicator towards a healthy relationship. A study conducted by Marianne Dainton and Jamie Gross has results that suggest that negative maintenance behaviors were negatively associated with relationship satisfaction and positive maintenance behaviors were positively associated with relationship satisfaction (Dainton). Furthermore, in consideration of long-distance romantic relationships, the perceived helpfulness of a joint problem was a predictor of satisfaction (Maguire). Another element which research illustrates to be an important aspect contributing to relational satisfaction is the nonverbal behaviors between the couples. Nonverbal behaviors encompass everything from a conveyed look to direct physical contact, and can be particularly powerful in expressing affection. There were significant findings in the research that overall relationship satisfaction is positively correlated to the use of positive, compassionate, nonverbal behaviors (Spott).

As I had to find what makes a healthy relationship, I also needed to examine the behaviors, patterns, and risk factors associated with domestic violence. Dr. P. Malyadri of Osmania University found that certain groups of women are more at risk to be involved in such relationships, such as minority groups, indigenous and migrant women, refugee women and those in situations of armed conflict, women in institutions or detention, women with disabilities, female children, and elderly women. Those who endure violent romantic relationships often end

up incapable to express their opinions or even to make any of their own decisions. Because their fear is so powerful, victims are left powerless, insecure, with distorted views of sexuality, a sense of inferiority and fear of isolation (Malyadri). As reported in 2013, the strongest risk factor for transmitting violent behavior from one generation to the next is a child's exposure to the father abusing the mother. Furthermore, even as young as high school, the amount of female high school students who reported being physically or sexually abused by a dating partner is at 20%. This only gets worse, as women ages 20-24 are at the greatest risk to be involved in partner violence (U.S. Department).

Celebrity Influence

Also alarming, there is a substantial amount of empirical evidence available which shows the strong influence that celebrities have on their fans, indicating the depth of the impact which a star can have. The influence of public figures can be very important during the period of development in young adolescent minds. Social cognition in the brain is required for understanding and interaction. Recent evidence indicates that these social cognitive functions including responding to peer influence and social evaluation are still are developing during adolescence (Burnett). "The brain undergoes more change during the teenage years than any other time except for the first two months of life....The frontal lobe networks are responsible for reasoning, planning, decision-making, judgment, inhibiting bad choices, and other high-level cognitive functions" (Chapman). Therefore, messages expressed by the media have the potential to produce a lasting effect. According to a study conducted in 2001, results showed that over 75% of the individuals that were questioned reported a strong attraction to a celebrity at some time in their lives and 59% claimed that a celebrity had an influence over their attitudes or

beliefs (Roberts). Because of this, I have chosen to look at three well-known examples of media content which relate to domestic violence: Rihanna, the *Twilight Saga*, and *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Rihanna

One celebrity with the potential to have a lasting effect is global pop/hip hop musical sensation Rihanna. She has graced the cover of countless magazines, is featured nonstop on television programs and websites, and her millions of loyal fans can follow her every move on her personal Twitter and Instagram accounts. In a study conducted in 2013 by Zimbio.com, Rihanna was dubbed the most influential celebrity online, as she had the fifth-most popular Twitter account, the second-highest Klout score, the most popular Facebook page, and was the most-viewed star on YouTube.com (The 50). With such a large following, it is inevitable that she would have an effect on some of her fans, the majority of whom are teenage females. Rihanna is legendary for pushing boundaries in every aspect of her life including her intense relationship with musical heart throb, Chris Brown. The pair went public with their romantic relationship in 2008 but within a year they proved it was not as perfect as it seemed. The February night before the 2009 Grammy Awards, Brown reportedly assaulted Rihanna in his vehicle, repeatedly punching her, slamming her head into the car window, threatening to kill her, and even strangling her—all because she confronted him about some text messages he received from another woman. News of the assault graced every news medium possible for weeks if not months. They broke up publicly, but several years later she decided to get back together with him even after the abuse, a decision which also graced the news for weeks (We Know). Instead of using the incident as a platform to combat the issue of domestic violence by educating the public, Rihanna bypasses the severity of the issue. Nicole Fleetwood for the *African American Review* explains:

Rihanna's injured body took on heightened eroticism through incessant revelation of more details about the incident itself and speculation about what led to it. The singer's strategy of incorporation, instead of denying or minimizing the incident, served as a highly successful commercial venture that has only increased her appeal and success as a mainstream pop star (Fleetwood).

Rihanna worked to distance herself from being viewed as a victim or "battered woman" and instead morphed her image into one of "erotic pleasure that incorporates practices of pain" into this persona, with performances that connect "erotic violence to gendered attachments that represent intimacies," to tell the story of seduction and love (Fleetwood). By romanticizing the entire situation to her fans, Rihanna may be sending out a message that what happened with Chris Brown was okay, and perhaps even sexy.

Twilight

Another popular example of romanticized partner violence is the multibillion dollar franchise, the *Twilight Saga*. The four-book series was written by Stephenie Meyer which has also been adapted into film. These novels sold over 85 million copies and spent a cumulative 134 weeks on The New York Times' bestseller list. The first three films earned more than \$1.6 billion worldwide and broke box-office records. A study conducted by Meenakshi Gigi Durham in 2011 suggests that the Twilight story appears to be about romantic love, sexual abstinence, and morality; however, the romantic relationships within the texts are also predicated on an "ever-present danger of violence." The findings are as follows:

Five dominant themes emerge: (1) the representation of violence as an inherent characteristic of masculinity; (2) the portrayal of male violence as a justifiable by-product of heterosexual relationships; (3) the definition of masculinity in terms of a dualism

wherein “good” boys repudiate their own “instinctive” predilection for violence and “bad” boys allow it to go unchecked; (4) the continual imperilment of girls in situations from which they are rescued by boys; and (5) the assertion of control by boys over girls’ crucial life decisions. I conclude that *Twilight* works ideologically and visually to coax audiences to expect boys to be violent and girls to be compliant in regard to violence in the context of heterosexual relationships (Durham).

Fifty Shades of Grey

Author E.L. James was inspired by the *Twilight* Saga to write another book series, the *Fifty Shades of Grey* novels which have developed an enormous fan base. The series has received a very large amount of criticism, due to the various examples of partner abuse which are masked by eroticism and romance. The books tell the tale of a multimillionaire entrepreneur named Christian Grey and his budding romance with college student Anastasia Steele. A study conducted in 2013 by Amy Bonomi, Lauren Altenburger, and Nicole Walton for the *Journal of Women’s Health* examined the novel and came to the conclusion that there is emotional abuse present in almost every single interaction between the couple. This includes many instances of Christian stalking, using intimidation, and isolating Anastasia. There are also scenes perpetuating sexual violence, such as “using alcohol to compromise Anastasia’s consent,” as well as intimidation once again. The study states that Anastasia exhibits reactions typical of abused women such as constant perceived threat, altered identity, and stressful managing, all because of her relationship with Christian and her anticipation and fear of his temper, clearly exhibiting themes of partner abuse in the most romantic of forms (Bonomi).

Rationale and Hypotheses

With all of this in mind, I developed these key terms for my study. The first major component I am looking at is media consumption, which I have conceptually defined as the exposure and attention media sources are obtaining from the viewer. With this study, I am operationally measuring the amount of media which the consumer is viewing. The second term I must define is domestic violence, which I conceptually define as physically abusive, through inflicting physical force or pain upon one's partner, and/or emotionally abusive through controlling, manipulative, or humiliating words. The third term is attitudes, which I am conceptually defining as the severity in which a person deems the issue of domestic violence.

Based upon the above findings, I see a gap in the research looking at the actual amount of media being consumed correlating to the issue of domestic violence; therefore I wanted to investigate this, and thus posed the following hypotheses and research questions:

H1: People who are exposed to larger quantities of pop culture mediums will have less negative attitudes towards the issue of domestic violence.

RQ1: What is the relationship between basic knowledge about domestic violence and the attitudes towards domestic violence?

RQ2: What is the relationship between domestic violence knowledge and media consumption?

Method

Sample

I received responses from fifty-two participants. The surveyed population consisted of both males and females; however, 90% of the respondents were female. I surveyed those who

are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four years old. The mean age of the participants was 21.6 years old with a standard deviation of 1.32. The age range is fairly small because I aimed to glean my information from other college students. My data also showed that a third of respondents have witnessed partner violence occurring, 19.6% of whom know somebody who has been in an abusive relationship. 19.6% of participants have actually also been involved in an abusive romantic relationship themselves. I used a convenience sample for my sampling type because I requested that my participants pass on the survey link to their friends. I also used snowball sampling, and these are both non-probability samples.

Measures

Knowledge: To measure the amount of knowledge a respondent had prior to taking the survey, I included four basic fact questions gathered from U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics from June 28, 2013, such as “Which group is at the greatest risk for domestic violence?” (U.S. Department). For these questions, there is a right or wrong answer, so this gauged their understanding. By testing this, I was able to see if their level of prior knowledge influenced the results. I calculated a person’s knowledge score by calculating their total number of correct answers (1 = correct, 2 = incorrect), therefore the lower the score, the more correct answers a person had, ranging from 4 to 8. The mean knowledge score from the population was 5.0, meaning that the average person got three questions correct, and one incorrect.

Attitudes: Additionally, I included ten questions which tested the attitudes of my participants towards domestic violence. I did this by listing a statement and asking them to rate their opinions on it through a five-point scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. I used statements such as “if you love someone, you should try to make it work no matter what.” and “if your partner betrays or hurts you, they deserve to be punished.” I created these questions

from a risk assessment test for potential victims (Aria Health). The reliability statistic, which I found by running Cronbach's Alpha, is 0.697. The mean for the combined attitude scale is 16.88, and standard deviation is 3.64.

Media Habits: Lastly, I inquired about my respondents media intake by asking questions like "about how many posts on social media do you see per day in regards to celebrity gossip/pop culture?" and giving them different ranges to choose from (See Figure 1 in Appendix). The answers were varied: for the question asking how often the respondent checks TMZ.com, about 75% participants said "never" and about 4% said hourly. When it comes to receiving email alerts, only one respondent responded yes. However, when it came to checking other celebrity gossip websites, about 16% of participants said they check them about once a week. Social media also seems to provide more gossip media, with about 14% of respondents estimating they see over sixteen posts per day in regards to celebrity gossip/pop culture, and another approximately 14% seeing eleven to fifteen posts per day.

Procedure

To test my hypothesis and research question, I administered an online survey because I felt that the most efficient way of sampling this population would be through utilizing the internet. I chose this because most college students use the internet regularly and would have access to the survey. I used GoogleDocs to create the survey because it has the capability to send out the survey itself or send it through a provided link and I used e-mail, Facebook, and MyCalPoly class lists to distribute the survey. I cannot confidently say how many people were ultimately exposed to the survey due to the nature which I distributed it and the anonymity that the internet provides. I posted the link on my Facebook wall as well as created an event page with the survey link. I used MyCalPoly to send the survey to e-mail lists of past and current

classmates to maximize distribution. After the participants had submitted their responses, I was able to view their results on a Google spreadsheet. The survey was completely anonymous and I was the only one able to access the results. Still, in order to ensure confidentiality, the only potentially identifying factor was that I was able to see the time at which my participants responded.

Results

Hypothesis 1 stated people who are exposed to larger quantities of pop culture mediums will have less negative attitudes towards the issue of domestic violence. To determine this, I looked at my variables, the amount of media consumption, and the attitudes towards domestic violence. Depending on the level of measurement for the medium variable, I ran either a t-test or correlation to compare consumption to attitudes. I did not find any statistically significant correlations between a person's media exposure and their attitudes towards domestic violence; therefore, I failed to reject my null hypothesis. Research Question 1 looked at whether or not there was a relationship between basic knowledge about domestic violence and the attitudes towards domestic violence—again, I did not find any statistical significance to indicate this from the correlations test. However, I did find that there was a significant negative correlation between reading gossip magazines and knowledge on domestic violence, $r = -.31$, $p < .05$ (see table). I am also approaching significance between having read the Fifty Shades of Grey novels and domestic violence knowledge, $r = -.26$, $p = .06$. These results contribute to my Research Question 2, which asks about the relationship between domestic violence knowledge and media consumption.

attitudes towards domestic violence, as well as that between domestic violence knowledge and media consumption. My results suggest that consuming a larger amount of media is not going to affect a person's attitude towards domestic violence and shows no indication of desensitization. They also suggest that there is no relationship between basic knowledge about domestic violence and the attitudes towards domestic violence. They do show that there is a negative correlation between reading celebrity gossip magazines and knowledge of basic domestic violence facts; however, this is the only significant findings I had between any form of media consumption and the knowledge of domestic violence.

Implications

The cultivation theory research findings show that when a person consumes more television, their perceptions of social reality reflect what they are watching on television (Thomas). Based on my findings, this does not include their attitudes about domestic violence, therefore there appears to be no risk involved in consuming more media when it comes to attitudes towards partner abuse. However, the negative correlation between reading celebrity gossip magazines and knowledge of basic domestic violence facts indicates that perhaps gossip magazines are portraying these issues the wrong way and should incorporate more facts, rather than gossip. When there is a story about a partner violence situation, it appears that the magazines are not using this as an opportunity to educate the public but rather share the scandalous celebrity details.

Limitations

The research did encounter some limitations which may have affected the outcome of the study. The first issue was my sampling method. Since it was a snowball sample, I had very little control as to who took the survey. Age of the participants may have also affected the responses

in questions regarding attitude. An eighteen year old is younger and generally less mature than somebody who is twenty-four years old; therefore they may be more impressionable to the media context, especially in high quantities. I would only be able to change this by narrowing my surveyed population to a smaller age range. My sampling method also caused the issue of a response bias. My respondents were predominantly women because very few men chose to participate. This may have been because fewer men were interested in a questionnaire about media usage and/or domestic violence and so they declined to participate. Although I cannot say with certainty, it is highly possible that the results are skewed because the large majority of respondents were women. In partner violence situations, women tend to be the victims more often than not, so I think this pattern may have only provided one side of the true implications being observed in my study. If there had been more male respondents, there likely would have been better insight into both sides of the issue. Although the convenience snowball sampling is very efficient, it does not allow for much control over the overall sample population, and if the study were to be repeated, I would recommend conducting the survey using a systematic random sampling approach because I think that may glean a more equal amount of gender responses overall. Another option for future research would be to change the method completely. If these concepts were discussed in a focus group, I may have seen different opinions emerging. Rather than simply asking their opinions on certain statements, I could have analyzed respondents' reactions to media clips showing those types of attitudes they were questioned on. Administering a survey made conducting the study much more efficient, but may not have been as effective for accurate results in the end.

Although there does not appear to be a correlation between the amount of media consumed and people's attitudes towards partner abuse, media intake should still be monitored

closely. What we see shapes us as people, and we need to be careful with that in order to ensure that we treat others with respect. Media has many benefits and is a very easy and efficient way to share information and maintain contact with the world. However, the cultivation theory is worrisome because media is framed in certain ways and the public needs to be aware of that so that it is not construed as the ultimate truth.

Appendix

Figure 1: Copy of survey administered

- Gender

- Male
- Female
- Age [fill in]

Answer the following questions to the best of your knowledge or with your best guess.

[key: *=correct]

- More often than not, ___ are the abusers in a domestic violence situation.
 - Men *
 - Women
 - It's equal
- Which group is at the greatest risk for domestic violence?
 - Women ages 20-24 *
 - Men ages 20-24
 - Women ages 28-32
 - Women ages 36-40
- Are the majority of domestic crimes reported to the police?
 - Yes
 - No *
- What is the strongest risk factor for transmitting violent behavior from one generation to the next?
 - A child's exposure to the father abusing the mother *
 - Encoded through genetics
 - Parental neglect
 - Low income household

Please answer the following statements with your opinion out of the options provided.

- If you love someone, you should try to make it work no matter what.
Strongly Agree – Agree – Neutral – Disagree – Strongly Disagree
- If your partner hits you, they must have had a good reason.
Strongly Agree – Agree – Neutral – Disagree – Strongly Disagree
- In a relationship, your partner always deserves a second chance.
Strongly Agree – Agree – Neutral – Disagree – Strongly Disagree
- If your partner betrays or hurts you, they deserve to be punished.
Strongly Agree – Agree – Neutral – Disagree – Strongly Disagree
- It only counts as abuse if things become physical.
Strongly Agree – Agree – Neutral – Disagree – Strongly Disagree
- If your partner hits you, it is really just because they love you so much and cannot bear to lose you.
Strongly Agree – Agree – Neutral – Disagree – Strongly Disagree
- It is better to be in a bad relationship than no relationship at all.

- Strongly Agree – Agree – Neutral – Disagree – Strongly Disagree
- If your partner sincerely apologizes and promises not to hurt you again, they won't.
Strongly Agree – Agree – Neutral – Disagree – Strongly Disagree
 - Domestic violence is hyped up—very few people get seriously hurt.
Strongly Agree – Agree – Neutral – Disagree – Strongly Disagree
 - When it comes to abuse, some women ask for it, provoke it, and want it.
Strongly Agree – Agree – Neutral – Disagree – Strongly Disagree

Please answer or estimate the following questions as accurately as possible.

- Approximately how often do you check PerezHilton.com?
 - Multiple times a day
 - Once a day
 - Once a week
 - Once a month
 - Every few months or less
 - Never
- Approximately how often do you check TMZ.com?
 - Multiple times a day
 - Once a day
 - Once a week
 - Once a month
 - Every few months or less
 - Never
- Approximately how often do you check other celebrity gossip websites?
 - Multiple times a day
 - Once a day
 - Once a week
 - Once a month
 - Every few months or less
 - Never
- Do you get email alerts or updates from any of these websites?
 - Yes
 - No
- Approximately how often do you read celebrity gossip magazines (such as Us Weekly, People, InTouch, etc.)?
 - Multiple times a day
 - Once a day
 - Once a week
 - Once a month
 - Every few months or less
 - Never

- How many celebrity gossip magazines do you subscribe to?
 - 5+
 - 3-4
 - 1-2
 - None
- About how many hours do you spend watching celebrity gossip television programs (such as Entertainment Tonight, Extra, Access Hollywood etc.) per week?
 - 4+ hours
 - 3 hours
 - 2 hours
 - 1 hour
 - Less than one hour
 - None
- About how many posts on social media do you see per day in regards to celebrity gossip/pop culture?
 - 0
 - 1-5
 - 6-10
 - 11-15
 - 16+
- How many books in the Twilight series have you read?
 - All three
 - Two
 - One
 - None
- How many movies in the Twilight series have you seen?
 - All four
 - Three
 - Two
 - One
 - None
- How many books in the 50 Shades of Grey series have you read?
 - All three
 - Two
 - One
 - None

Please answer the following questions honestly.

- Have you ever been involved in an abusive romantic relationship?
 - Yes

- No
- Do you know somebody who has been involved in an abusive romantic relationship?
 - Yes
 - No
- Have you ever witnessed partner violence occurring?
 - Yes
 - No

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