Film and Media Gender Stereotypes and Implications for Young Boys and Men

“The Mask You Live In”

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For the purpose of this paper the primary source will be the film “The Mask You Live In” Directed by Jennifer Siebel Newson. Based on the film “The Mask You Live In” the focus will be about young boys and men who are influenced by gender stereotypes in the media. This paper will also focus on Intersectionality with the main focus of gender including sexuality and masculinity. The purpose of this will be to understand the impact of how boys are under pressure to become a “real” man. Film and media representation of the culturally ideal man in the media will be examined by looking at boys and men’s self-esteem, sexual orientation, theory and stereotypes in the historical past and present. The purpose of this will be to gain a full understanding of how boys and men have been and continue to be influenced and pressured by the media. The question that will be guiding my research is: How does film and media create gender stereotypes and what are the implications for young boys and men?

Media and film’s power and influence in the past and present may have multiple impacts for young boys and men which involves pressure to be a “real” man.

History

The representation of gender in film and media in the 1950’s meant to restore the hetero normative gender between men and women; during this time period men were expected to fill the role of the breadwinner.1

Film and media in the 1950’s represented gender and sexuality from popular culture in America; these versions of masculinity seemed to follow gender stereotypes, which involved following traditional gender norms.2 In film and media gender is a cinematic performance. 3

The notion of gender in the 1990’s begins to change. During this period of history in film and media hegemonic masculinity becomes relevant.4 Gender identities become rooted in stereotypical masculine ideas.5 Into the late 1990’s film and media roles demonstrated Intersectionality and gender identity could impact masculinity.6 The current research emphasizes “The Mask You Live In” film because analyzing the overwhelming gender stereotypes to be a “real” man is becoming relevant to society.

Theory

History plays an important role in analyzing media and films. History’s role and historical events helps us understand individual actions, social structures, and individual events. After World War II there was an increase in media and representation.8 The study of media and film expanded and an in-depth analysis about gender and stereotypes became present.9 In the past there was a huge impact on the media and development of gender behaviours and attitudes.10 Past history can be analyzed by looking at theoretical modes used for studying the effects media has towards gender and serotypes.11 There has been more discussion of gender, sexuality, and masculinity representation in the media over the past decade, however most of the representation is of women.12 In the past there has been representations of men but this is seen within the gay movement and seems to forget about heterosexual men.13 The fact heterosexual masculinity analysis in film and media has been invisible leads to increasing pressure and contradictions for men in the past and present.14

The cinema-psychoanalytic theory acknowledges “problem-masculinity”, which discusses masculinity and gender.15 The film “The Mask You Live In” seeks to acknowledge that masculinity and gender is not discussed, leading to a problem of phantasy and hegemonic masculinity.

The oppositional gaze explains the history and the power of reproducing white supremacy. 17 Looking at gender and stereotypes with an intersectional perspective emphasizes the history of race and representation. Hooks explains how racialized people in the United States had an opportunity to look at film and media and became aware that the media was a system of knowledge and power.18 Analyzing the film “The Mask You Live In” racialized viewers of this film would be impacted differently then non-racialized viewers. The oppositional black gaze can explain this by looking at racial equality within films and media.19

“The Mask You Live In” Does not specifically address Intersectionality. However, the history of Intersectionality is important to consider. Intersectionality provides insight on the dominant conceptions especially relating other identity categories other than gender.21 Intersectionality helps explain how film and media exclude, marginalize, and oppress those who are different.22

Intersectionality helps define social identities, which are constructed by films and media.23 Identity is composed from multiple factors; film and media create identity’s that are formed through history and can be understood from historical discourses of race.24 Understanding Intersectionality is important to analyze the power production of masculinities.25 Gender is an identity, which is also associated with race. “The Mask You Live In” focuses on the gender stereotypes young boys and men experience but does not discuss the importance of how gender stereotypes and ethnicity impact masculinity. This is important because the portrayal of gender and race is seen in almost all films and media. In media and films racialized and non-racialized people are able to access information about the “appropriate roles” racialized people should fill portraying a specific stereotype.26 Film and Media has a huge impact on shaping racialized and non-racialized people’s beliefs and values. “The Mask You Live In” helps viewers of film and media understand the pressure young boys and men are facing in terms of a stereotypical masculine role. The problem with this is more complex with people who are racialized. The media enforces stereotypes; this is problematic because racialized men are being marginalized because of how they are being portrayed in films and media. The stereotypical roles are created from the dominant culture perception of racialized people and how racialized men “should” act.27An example of this can be seen by how racialized men are portrayed in advertisements. 28 African American men are normally cast as athletes rather than professionals. 29 The representation of African American men is problematic because it ignores other skills this person or group may posses such as intellect and over-emphasizes their physical skills.30 This stereotypical portal of African American men creates a specific role that other African American men may feel they have to fill to be seen as a “real” man to fill this gender stereotype.31

Self Esteem

There is a gap in the research regarding effects of media and self-esteem for young boys and men. “The Mask You Live In” emphasizes the effects of films and media towards young boys and men’s self-esteem, especially the pressure to be a “real” man. Film and media has changed through history of what it means to be a “real” man.32Today the effect on young boys and men’s self-esteem is by an ideal muscular male body. 33 The representation of the ideal male body that is seen in films and media has decreased self-esteem in young boys and men.34 The research explains that young boys and men are pressured to compare themselves to the standards of what is seen in the media.35 Most of the research has been on self-esteem based in white heterosexual men, which is problematic for the many young boys and men who do not “fit” into this category because of race or sexuality. The impact of young boys and men comparing themselves to an ideal male body seem to have created eating disorders, body dysmorphia, excessive exercise, and steroid use.36 It is obvious that the ideal male body that is portrayed in films and media has affected young boys and men’s self-esteem by an increased focus on their bodies leading to physical and behavioral health problems.37

Hegemonic Masculinity

The history of hegemonic masculinity became a concept in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s.38 The concept of hegemonic masculinity became relevant in film and media involving the representation of men.39 Men and boy’s idea of masculinity is a specific model of masculinity, which they believe they need to strive towards.40 Masculinity does not represent one individual but rather a way men position themselves to be a “man.” 41Relating hegemonic masculinity to the film “The Mask You Live In” explains how the definition of masculinity that is defined in the film is very narrow and is affecting young boys and men’s perspective. The film challenges the idea of hegemonic masculinity and for young boys and men to over-come gender stereotypes toward gender and race that film and media has created.

Media and Sexual Orientation

To understand media and sexuality we need to understand it from a historical perspective. The media has portrayed men and masculinity differently. This is relevant in the lack of research conducted in the past and limited research conducted in the present to represent this issue. The research that has been conducted suggests sexual minority men, or gay men, have many different factors than heterosexual men when it comes to masculinity and media representation.42 Gay men have extra pressure to meet a specific attractiveness standard, which includes specific levels of thinness and muscularity.43 Therefore, gay men may find lower levels of body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem than heterosexual men based on medias representation of a “real” man. 44 The findings in the research suggest sexual minorities and the importance of sexual orientation is important to consider when analyzing masculinity in the media.45 Analyzing the film “The Mask You Live In” does not identify the effects of sexual orientation and the media and what it means to be a “real” man. However, this is an important angle because sexual orientation’s impact has different standards when it comes to being masculine and being “man” enough.

In conclusion, the film “The Mask You Live In” focused on young boys and men who are influenced by gender stereotypes in the media. “The Mask You Live In” demonstrates the construction of masculinity, which is manifested in film and media. Hegemonic models of masculinity have fit into society’s mainstream and seem normal, especially when analyzed in masculine norms associated with racialized individuals.

Understanding how Intersectionality, gender, sexual orientation, and hegemonic masculinity provided an understanding of how young boys and men are under pressure to become a “real” man. Film and media representation of the culturally ideal man in the media were examined by looking at boys and men’s self-esteem, sexual orientation, theory and stereotypes in the historical past and present. Young boys and men have been influenced and continue to be influenced and pressured by the media.

The question that guided the research revealed that media and film create a power and influence in the past and present that has multiple impacts for young boys and men which involves pressure to be a “real” man.

Endnotes

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