**Domestic Violence in Mass Media: An Analysis of Messages, Images, & Meanings in Motion Pictures**

**by**

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Abstract

The overarching goal of this research was to discover the framing strategies employed within depictions of domestic abuse and/or violence through mass media outlets and what potential impact that can have on the audience, particularly in assigning meaning to the topic. Specifically, this research analyzed the choices made in *how* domestic abuse/violence is framed within four popular motion pictures and the subsequent messages and meanings communicated. Findings from this qualitative analysis reveal common depictions of fictional victims being young, beautiful, naïve, and fully responsible for ending the abuse. In contrast, fictional abusers are depicted as young, handsome, wealthy and/or in a position of authority, with each being provided a pathological reason for their behavior. Finally, the depicted abuse in each film followed a similar path of predictable behavior from psychological manipulation and abuse to physical harm. The research method used in this analysis is derived from rhetorical criticism which examines communication symbols within an object or subject to reveal insights that ideally will aide in understanding and improving human communication. Media has the ability to impact an audience’s construction of serious social topics and issues. That makes this type of analysis vital in revealing communication strategies used by film producers as they depict partner abuse and the unavoidable, subsequent effects it has on viewers; such as in the formation of cultural beliefs and attitudes. Finally, analyzing the communication of a serious, deviant practice like domestic abuse, depicted in popular films, can assist in directing needed attention to a major social issue and provide readers the opportunity to “see” and discuss what is normally hidden and left unspoken within most cultures.

Keywords: Domestic Violence, Intimate Partner Abuse, Mass Media, Motion Pictures, Qualitative Method, Rhetorical Criticism, Framing Strategies

It’s likely that we all know someone who has been a victim of domestic violence or is currently involved in an abusive relationship. If this seems unrealistic or impossible, take a look at the most recent statistics wherein we learn that “More than 1 in 3 women (35.6%) and more than 1 in 4 men (28.5%) in the United States have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime” (Black et al., 2011, p. 2). One troubling aspect of this statistic is that most initial victimizations occur before the age of 25 (Black et al., 2011). Furthermore, this data only reveals the numbers of those who were willing to report this type of crime on the survey. The United States Department of Justice supports this hesitancy of victims to report domestic violence by claiming that nearly half of all domestic violence crimes never get reported to the authorities (Durose et al., 2005).

These staggering figures reveal the ugly truth that domestic violence is still prevalent within our society. Sadly, at this very moment, many friends or family members are potentially experiencing heinous acts of abuse and violence. Gaining an understanding of this behavior can help us identify those who are vulnerable or in danger and possibly help prevent our own victimization. The question is, how do we become informed about such a sensitive and taboo subject? Many people turn to the internet, newspapers, magazine articles, and/or television to provide vital information. That reliance on mass media exhibits a level of trust and expectation for truth.

Mass media, in turn, have a curious and powerful position of influence within our culture making it a critical component in creating, altering, and/or mimicking current ideologies within society. According to Dakroury (2014), “media and culture is interconnected” influencing “cultural perceptions and practices of both those who produce and consume them” (p. 1). In other words, social ideologies and behaviors are influenced by the narratives and discourses emitted from mass media. Typically, the primary function of mass media is to inform and/or entertain and is inevitably intertwined with the necessary goal for financial success. Those who create fictional stories for the widescreen find themselves in the unenviable position of trying to create an artistic story that will appeal to vast audiences and make a significant profit. It is a risky proposition and one seemingly worth taking as is evidenced when looking at the number of successful films each year. In fact, the movie industry’s reported revenue in 2014 (United States and Canada) reached $10.4 billion (*Theatrical market*, 2015). Not surprisingly, young people aged 12-24 represented the majority of moviegoers with 57% of all viewers being female; a relevant fact when looking at the content of films such as is included in this analysis (*Theatrical market*, 2015).

Some films try to incorporate life-like situations or plots into their stories and in doing so, producers can find themselves entering into areas that may be controversial and/or uncomfortable for viewers. One of these situations involves the topic of abuse within intimate, adult relationships. This sensitive subject requires a careful approach by producers as they strive to depict and incorporate realistic elements or images of domestic abuse or violence into the narrative without causing extreme or undue distress to the audience or film critics. If the “invisible line” of appropriate representation is crossed, it could result in negative reviews and the film being avoided by moviegoers. This effort to frame the story is an intentional, albeit subtle, technique meant to lead an audience’s understanding in a certain direction (McManus, 2012).

The term domestic abuse is typically used to reference behavior from an intimate partner or loved one that is harmful to the victim, but does not involve actions that would result in a physical injury also known as, nonviolent abuse (*Domestic violence*, 2012). In contrast, domestic violence is behavior from a partner or loved one that is intended to physically harm, damage, or kill and is considered a criminal act (*Domestic violence*, 2012). This distinction is important when considering the type of abuse someone has endured. Those two terms and their definitions will be applied to the analysis in this paper. Further, those terms will be examined within the context of mass media; taking a closer look at the framing of this personal and social issue within four popular motion pictures. The potential messages and meanings communicated (intentional or not) is included within this paper to further support the analysis.

The first section will examine the findings from an extensive literature review which highlights a few predominant framing techniques used within mass media. Following that section will be an explanation of the chosen method used to analyze the selected artifacts. The third section will be an introduction to the artifacts including a short synopsis of each film. The findings from my analysis will be the fourth section which delves into the construction and framing of the fictional victims, abusers, and the abuse itself. The paper will conclude with a summation and include insight into the contribution this analysis provides to the area of Communication Studies.

# Literature Review

This portion of the paper was prompted by my own research inquiry into discovering the role mass media plays in framing domestic violence. Framing an idea or topic is a strategic process by which the intended meaning or message is carefully constructed and presented. This tactic for relaying information can produce positive or negative results, but it always works to present a decided view all the while, excluding other details that may be important. Exposing how this sensitive social problem is framed can help researchers to identify a possible source for current cultural ideologies surrounding abuse. This review is a synthetization of current research published in journal articles which delved into the framing efforts predominately used in television programs, feature films, documentaries and news reporting. This review will begin by discussing the somewhat conflicting roles that mass media plays in society. Following that will be the revelation of three predominate and universal framing themes used in portraying domestic violence in mass media which are: (1) patriarchal hegemony, (2) individualizing the problem, and (3) assigning blame to women. This review will work as a foundation for the subsequent analysis of mass media representations of violence against women by an intimate partner as depicted in motion pictures.

**Mass Media**

Mass media is the primary means for disseminating cultural information to broad audiences and is capable of doing so at a rapid pace. Its choice in what topics deserves attention, which person or which entity to interview and how to present information places media in a powerful position (Ryan, Anastario, & DaCunha, 2006). Media representations of social issues tend to rely more on dominant perspectives while other perspectives may be completely ignored which means a person could seek out multiple sources and only get a limited view of the issue (Berns & Schweingruber, 2007). As a result, media has the ability to impact an audience’s construction of these issues even when it is only attempting to mimic “reality” through the use of entertainment channels. One unique characteristic of mass media is its offering of content as a source as well as a mirror or manifestation of popular culture (Bullock, 2008). This multifaceted setting provides a realm wherein people can interpret messages, assign meaning(s), and make some sense of their own experiences and that of others within society. In this regard, society is heavily influenced by media in the formation of cultural beliefs, attitudes, and ideas (Flood, 2009).

It’s important to note, mass media is the most frequently used resource for gathering information on socially important issues (Berns, 2001). Since media plays a role in shaping the way people think and act, representations of sensitive issues, like domestic violence, are critical for examination. Depictions of domestic violence can influence how the public view appropriate and acceptable relations between men and women (Malamuth & Briere, 1986). Some critics have already raised serious concerns over media portraying violence against women as a form of entertainment and to some degree, normalizing it as a just a part of the way society works (Convenor & Weaver, 2003). Another concern for critics is the influence media representations work to formulate social beliefs regarding the seriousness of violence against women, dictating who or what is to blame, and how such problems should be addressed (Nettleton, 2011). Mass media serves two conflicting roles; that of providing audiences with both fact and fiction (Wheeler, 2009). This becomes extremely important when looking at representations of domestic violence.

Research has unveiled the somewhat conflicting motivations for mass media- gaining and entertaining audiences, providing useful, relevant information (in the form of news, documentaries, etc.), all the while making a profit (Ryan, Anastario, & DaCunha, 2006). This conflict can sometimes influence the presentation of material, especially when it contains a significant social problem like abuse. That influence can be perceived through the framing of topics. According to Bullock (2008), media frames operate by providing the viewer with a selected interpretation of an event or issue by giving emphasis to some elements and not to others. Often times, discourse surrounding domestic violence is presented in a simple, less confusing frame which helps the audience categorize the event, yet it does not delve into the complexities of a lived experience (Berns & Schweingruber, 2007). One way this is accomplished in film and television is by the use of formula stories which create “stock” victims (Berns & Schweingruber, 2007). These efforts keep the story line and “victim” predictable; allowing the audience to view what is normally hidden and witness a justified happy ending.

**Patriarchal Hegemony**

The United States can be considered a patriarchal society since many of the controlling systems like law enforcement, court systems, and politics are male dominated. These entities, though seemingly less sexist than in previous years, still contribute to the ideology of subjugating women. This gendered power structure, especially the system of law and order, mainly serves and supports the patriarchal elements of society (Bullock, 2007). Mass media also contributes to this ideology by reframing domestic violence as: (1) a human violence by depicting men as equal victims; (2) as having pathologies that explain (or excuse) male violence; (3) making light of physical violence perpetuated by men through humor and sarcasm; and (4) by focusing attention on the female victim thus deflecting attention away from the man, removing the potential for the perpetrator(s) to accept responsibility for the violence (Berns, 2001; Consalvo, 1998; Nettleton, 2011; & Wheeler, 2009).

As Berns (2001) noted in her research, degendering the problem (of domestic violence) and calling it “human violence” works to undermine the role of gender and power in abuse. This type of framing obscures men’s responsibility for their acts of violence reinforcing and maintaining the patriarchal status quo (Berns, 2001 & Nettleton, 2011). Pathological explanations for domestic violence can be found in all areas of mass media. Newspaper articles, documentaries, television and movies tend to offer palatable reasons for abuse such as, alcohol, drugs, poverty, irrationality, the volatile nature of relationships, or that he was justified (Consalvo, 1998; Convenor & Weaver, 2003; & Wheeler, 2009). Making light of domestic violence, as discovered by Nettleton (2011), is a tactic found most often in articles published in men’s magazines. Common are articles that have a dismissive tone, or only mention abuse in passing, relate it to less significant problems such as comparing it to a sports penalty, and professing that domestic violence statistics are exaggerated (Nettleton, 2011). Finally, research has concluded mass media has a propensity for focusing attention on the female victim rather than the perpetrator (Berns, 2001 & Wheeler, 2009). Narratives that highlight the victim’s story deflect attention and responsibility away from the abuser and society at large. All of these framing efforts indirectly support patriarchal hegemony within mass media and society as a whole.

**Individualizing the Problem**

In portraying an actual, isolated incidence or by creating a fictional example of domestic violence, mass media shifts the responsibility for the abuse and for the solution from society to the individual (Palazzolo & Roberto, 2011). According to research, reporters of such crime often focus on the sensational, like a tragic love story gone wrong, which narratives will be framed as an isolated and individual incident, rather than as a social problem (Ryan, Anastario, & DaCunha, 2006). Other depictions (fiction or nonfiction) typically and inaccurately portray domestic violence as a woman’s private, individual problem which leaves little room for approaching the wider and greater social or cultural questions regarding abuse (Gillespie, Richards, Givens, & Smith 2013; Park & Gordon, 2005; & Wheeler, 2009). The focus in these (re)presentations lead the viewer to believe that the violence stems from personal dysfunction(s) and/or a strained relationship; leaving out concerns over the criminality as well as, the exertion and abuse of male power (Convenor & Weaver, 2003). Nettleton (2011) revealed that media coverage of high profile cases, such as abuse incidents involving sports figures or other celebrities, depicts the actions of a few troubled men while ignoring the larger problem. As Wheeler (2009) points out in his research, portraying abuse as an individuated problem reassures the audience since they are not a part of the problem nor do they have any responsibility for a solution. As a side effect, domestic violence in the media tends to be portrayed as being easily solvable which ignores the complex circumstances of abuse (Consalvo, 1998 & Convenor & Weaver, 2003). This then poses the need for individualized solutions to what is actually a social and political problem (Columpar, 2007).

**Assigning Blame to Women**

Mass media not only portray domestic violence as an individual problem, they typically present it as the *victim’s* problem and that she is also responsible for solving it (Wheeler, 2009). Berns (2001) refers to this abnormality as “gendering the blame” wherein domestic violence is reframed in order to side-step discussions about the violence perpetrated by men and assign the responsibility for such acts upon female victims. As highlighted by several researchers, women are held accountable for their status as a victim, for ending the abuse, and advocating for change (Berns, 2001; Consalvo, 1998; & Wheeler, 2009). Looking closer at this phenomenon within women’s magazines, Nettleton (2011), unveiled the blame frame, making it the victim’s responsibility for avoiding violent men, preventing abuse, helping others leave dangerous situations, knowing how the legal system works, knowing where to find help (like shelter locations), and being responsible for leaving home after abuse begins. The depth of such a responsibility leaves the woman absorbing all the financial consequences, disrupting her local ties in order to flee, and ensuring her own protection, since leaving is known to increase the risk of violence and even death (Nettleton, 2011). Newspaper accounts are hardly better in their portrayals, insinuating that victims are responsible for their fate, possibly due to a masochistic tendency, that she provoked the attack, or that she simply failed to leave before it got so bad (Ryan, Anastario, & DaCunha, 2006). Police statements either made in reality television programming or as a source in newspaper articles, further perpetuate victim blaming by pointing out that had the woman taken preventative action, such as leaving or filing charges, then she would not have experienced such abuse (Consalvo, 1998; & Convenor & Weaver, 2003). As if being responsible for her own safety weren’t enough, women are more often held responsible for the safety of children that are present in the home (Convenor & Weaver, 2003; & Wheeler, 2009). Whether they stay or leave, women are solely responsible for their children, placing the burden of family safety squarely on the victim’s shoulders. Women are blamed for their own abuse, expected to end the violence, and heavily scrutinized for their choices while very few in media address the responsibility of men who batter and abuse.

**Literature Review Summary**

As discussed above, mass media play an influential role in the establishment and characterization of social issues. Media producers choose how to depict serious events like domestic violence through the use of fact or fiction. They can attempt to entertain, providing simple plots, formula stories, and “stock” victims in order to efficiently tell a story and resolve it within the length of a television show or feature film. Conversely, fact-based stories printed in newspapers and magazines still have the option of focusing on the issue as a societal problem or as an isolated incident. All media depictions utilize framing techniques to focus the audience’s attention on a particular theme or explanation. Three frames discussed and delivered by previous research include: (1) patriarchal hegemony; (2) individualizing the problem; and (3) assigning blame to women. As detailed in this literature review each framing tactic contributes to a social understanding of domestic violence. Patriarchal hegemony relieves male perpetrators from blame, obscures the role of gender and power, and supports pathological explanations for the abuse. As media individuate the problem, society is reassured and allowed to remain silent. Focusing on sensational, seemingly unusual stories of abuse, media indirectly deflect attention away from domestic violence being a social disorder. Finally, by assigning blame to female victims, the media represent abuse as a woman’s problem. She must avoid abuse, prevent abuse, protect herself and her children, and should she leave, she will be responsible for reconstructing her life. The totality of the situation falls on the victim, leaving an already battered woman further beaten by mass media.

My study is intended to extend this foundation of research by looking at the framing efforts within the motion picture medium. It is an analysis of the depicted domestic abuse and violence in films and how the subsequent messages may impact the understanding of this harmful behavior within individuals and society at large.

## The Method

Rhetorical criticism is, according to Sonja Foss (2009), a research method which allows for the analysis and explanation of communication symbols with the designed purpose of “understanding rhetorical processes” (p. 6). It is this process of examining communication symbols that brings forward the potential for revealing new insights within a chosen artifact (an object or subject of study) or selection of multiple artifacts. Beyond just looking at the unique features of an artifact, rhetorical critics seek to discover how the communicated message(s) of the object or subject of study works to provide a better understanding of the world (Foss, 2009). Finally, Foss (2009) reminds that for researchers, rhetorical criticism is intended to be a tool used in improving human communication skills.

Rhetorical criticism affords numerous methods for analysis and depending on the artifact chosen, a critic may choose a method with specific guidelines and processes or a method with fewer formal boundaries. The method chosen for this paper is called generative criticism which is aptly named due to the analysis process. This method allows the critic to generate their own “units of analysis” which is derived from discovering what is unique, most interesting, and significant about an artifact (Foss, 2009, p. 387). Most often, this method is employed when the critic comes across an artifact that spurs interest, ideas, and/or fuels questions. The artifact or multiple artifacts become the subject of analysis and the critic can then determine the best process and criteria for examination.

The artifacts chosen for this analysis were prompted initially by my curiosity with depictions of domestic violence within films, namely major motion pictures produced in the United States. Later, as I sifted through countless movies dating back to the 1980s, I realized my curiosity also revolved around the subsequent messages received by audiences and how that influenced their understanding of intimate partner abuse. Specifically, I wanted to investigate how these films depicted domestic abuse/violence- namely, what framing techniques were used to characterize the victims, the abusers, and the abuse itself and how the messages from those narratives have the potential to influence the values, morals, and beliefs of an audience.

In selecting artifacts, the decision was made to focus on feature films that ideally met all of the following criteria: (1) included thematic elements of partner abuse which was either implied or depicted; (2) a cast of well-known actors which I felt would lend some credibility to the film; (3) popularity of the film based on box office sales and/or media coverage of the film and (4) released to theatres within the past ten years to allow for a more current look into the cultural relevance and/or potential for social impact. Films were favored over any other medium because of the length of time an audience will spend getting to know the characters and becoming engrossed in the plot. This enables viewers an opportunity to emotionally relate to or connect with characters and identify with the narrative giving it the best potential, over something like a television episode, of influencing the viewer.

Once the artifacts were selected, I began by analyzing each film and looked for points of intensity or aspects that seemed relevant, important, and memorable. Next, I transcribed necessary portions of the films and coded them for commonalities, looking specifically for frequency and types of abuse within scene events, and/or patterns within the scenes and noted whether they were visual or spoken. Within this process I developed my own explanatory schema for which the points of interest naturally aligned. The analysis schema is delivered through three main sections; (1) Fictional Victims; (2) Fictional Abusers; and (3) Fictional Abuse. The framing techniques discovered within the artifacts work to explain the primary messages about the identity and qualities of a fictional victim, the key role of the fictional abuser, and the function of abuse within the narrative. This schema also highlights the narrow view of domestic violence due to the chosen framing strategies employed in these films.

### The Artifacts

As mentioned above, the artifacts chosen had to meet most or all of the preset criteria. The primary requirements involved thematic elements of partner abuse, well-known actors, popular based on box office sales, and released to theatres within the past ten years. The following paragraphs will give a short introduction and summary of each film selected.

The first film chosen for analysis is titled, Safe Haven (Bowen, Godfrey, Kavanaugh, & Tooley, 2013) which according to the International Movie Database (IMDb), was released in February of 2013. It was based on the novel authored by Nicholas Sparks of the same title. Starring in the primary roles was Julianne Hough of Dancing with the Stars (Barkan, 2006-2015) fame, and Josh Duhamel who starred in the Transformers trilogy (Bay, Goldner, Spielberg, & Vahradian, 2007-2014) as well as, numerous television shows. According to IMDb, the total gross earnings for this film reached in excess of $71 million.

The second artifact is a film that was released in the United States on December 3, 2010 and is titled, All Good Things (Papandrea, 2010). The film was based on the real-life events surrounding the still unsolved disappearance of a young woman who had married into a very wealthy and influential New York family. The two main characters are David Marks played by Ryan Gosling and Katie Marks played by Kirsten Dunst. Gosling has over 40 actor credits to his name and Kirsten Dunst has been acting for many years, starring in numerous roles. According to IMDb, this film grossed over a half million dollars. While it did not reach the gross income status of the other films, it did meet the other selection criteria which made it a good candidate for analysis.

Third to be included in this analysis is the much publicized motion picture titled, Fifty Shades of Grey (Brunetti, De Luca, James, & Schlessel, 2015).This film followed the explosive popularity of the novel with the same title. The primary character is Ana, played by Dakota Johnson, who is the daughter of Melanie Griffith and Don Johnson. The character of Christian Grey was played by Jamie Dornan who has been in a few films and television shows. As anticipated and recorded on IMDb, this film racked up over $166 million in the U.S. alone.

Finally, the fourth film chosen for analysis is Temptation: Confessions of a Marriage Counselor (Areu & Hall, 2013), hereafter referred to as Temptation. The film was released in March of 2013. The cast is led by Jurnee Smollett-Bell who plays Judith, a marriage counselor and the eventual victim. Opposite her is the abusive character, Harley, played by Robbie Jones. Both actors have been involved in numerous roles in film and television. As listed on IMDb, gross sales in the U.S. reached nearly $52 million making over $30mil in profit.

#### The Analysis

Each one of the artifacts is unique in story line and end product, yet there are numerous similarities between them when it comes to the framing of characters and the depicted abuse. For these films, the victims are young women who are beautiful, and somewhat ignorant and naive. Each female character makes changes and engages in activities that she would not normally do in order to please the abuser. Finally, all but one of the women must take action to make the abuse stop and prevent dangerous encounters with the abuser in the future.

The abusers in each film are handsome men of extreme wealth and/or in a position of authority within the community. All of the characters are highly influential, extremely manipulative, and lack self-control. Each abuser reaches the point of exercising control over their victim and engages in psychological abuse with most engaging in some form of physical and/or sexual abuse. Curiously, each abuser is assigned a reason for his abusive behavior such as, mental illness, being a past abuse victim himself, and/or abuse of drugs and alcohol. Adding to their advantage, each man has a high level of privilege or position which aids him in his quest to control and dominate the victim.

The following units of analysis contain specific observations that reveal, define, or highlight claims within the established schema. First, the analysis will uncover the framing strategies used to construct the fictional victims in each narrative. The second unit of analysis explores the portrayal of a fictional abuser and how that is framed within the context of the story. The final unit of analysis uncovers the framing tactics used to depict the fictional abuse itself and how it may be in line with or vary from real-life abuse.

**Fictional Victims**

The female characters in all four films share some distinctive similarities. All four are young (early to mid-twenties), feminine in appearance and behavior, weight in proportion to height (or even a bit thinner), and because of the actresses playing the roles, each would likely be considered a Hollywood beauty. Each victim makes changes in her life and/or behaves differently to either conform to the abuser’s wishes or to avoid abuse. At some point, each woman faces uncertainty in how to respond the to the abuser’s behavior with some making dire choices. Most of the female characters start out resisting the persuasive and manipulative efforts of the abuser, yet they prove to be highly vulnerable to his charms and eventually succumb to his influence. Eventually, the women develop some courage to confront and resist the abuse and all of them end up “paying the price” for the abuse inflicted upon them.

**Appearance**

The visual aspects of the women are relevant when assessing what type of victim the producers have chosen to depict. The primary theme is young and beautiful with all of the characters seemingly in their twenties. All but one of the characters is Caucasian, which may be a signal that fewer African-American women are represented in the cinema. The three Caucasian women are petite with blond or brown hair and blue eyes. Interestingly, Katie in Safe Haven (Bowen, Godfrey, Kavanaugh, & Tooley, 2013) changes her appearance when she escapes cutting her long, simply-styled brunette hair to a short, flattering style and bleaches it blonde. This change in appearance is suggested as a way for her to live undetected, however, it is necessary to consider the transformation as evidence that she is no longer her past self. She is no longer seen as the plain and frumpy wife- she is now the hip and self-assured newcomer. Another possible message is that one can become whole and new simply by changing appearances and location; something most real-life victims would struggle to accomplish. Judith from Temptation (Areu & Hall, 2013) also makes changes to her appearance, but she does it to signify an alliance to her new lover; to please him and fit into his “world.” Judith is mocked by her coworker for dressing modestly and not wearing current fashions, so when she falls for Harley (her eventual abuser), she begins dressing more provocatively. She pays attention to the style of her hair and begins wearing makeup. This change in Judith can be viewed as a physical representation of her desire to be seen differently by her husband, as well as to be accepted by her coworker and lusted after by Harley. Coincidently, or not, Judith is sexually attacked by Harley on the very first day of her new image.

All of the victim characters are depicted as young and desirable and are absent of any physical flaws. They are the epitome of what most in American culture would define as beautiful. It could be that the producers wanted viewers to feel more sorrow for the victim because they are so beautiful which contrasts so vividly with the ugliness of abuse. Perhaps, there is an assumption relayed in this framing that because the women are beautiful they do not deserve to be treated this way (not that anyone deserves it). Whatever the actual reason, the women’s appearance definitely allows for the viewer to create an emotional connection to the character.

**Behavior**

Each character’s chosen response to their situation was similar in nature and worth evaluating. To begin with, all of the victims dealt with some initial uncertainty when faced with unusual or unexpected behavior from the abuser. Katie in All Good Things (Papandrea, 2010) finds herself unsure when she repeatedly discovers her husband talking to himself. She is further perplexed when he yells at her and later she appears even more shocked when he abruptly assaults her. She is mentally paralyzed in those moments of his rage and she does not know how to respond. In Fifty Shades of Grey (Brunetti, De Luca, James, & Schlessel, 2015), Ana’s uncertainties mainly derive from her ignorance and naivety. She is unable to understand Christian’s desires and behaviors which causes her some anxiety and concern over how to respond to his unusual relationship boundaries and peculiar sexual requests.

These victims are portrayed as being unsure when confronted with what could be considered abnormal behavior. Some of them question the abuser, work to control their facial expressions and tone of voice, while others retreat into silence. To some degree, each victim displays ignorance or naivety which likely adds another layer of sympathy from the audience.

Another element of the victim’s behavior is an early resistance and a later submission. Three of the characters find themselves rejecting unwarranted mistreatment and yet, they each succumb to the will of the abuser. Katie from All Good Things (Papandrea, 2010) has a family celebration after she graduates from college. During the party, David wants to leave early and demands that they go. Katie resists and tells him in front of everyone that she will not leave which he replies to by grabbing her by the hair and dragging her out. She leaves David, yet she succumbs to his pleadings for a reunion. Unfortunately for her, she disappears on the night that she returns to him. In Temptation (Areu & Hall, 2013), Judith initially rejects Harley’s sexual advances and his proposal for an affair. She leans on her values and morals to resist, but her defenses gradually break down after Harley’s attentions prove to be more than she can handle. She gives in and submits herself to his lifestyle of unprotected sex, drugs, and alcohol and finally abandons her own family.

The final element to the victim’s behavior is their courage to act, to assert themselves, and to free themselves from the abusive trap. In Safe Haven (Bowen, Godfrey, Kavanaugh, & Tooley, 2013), Katie literally fights back when attacked by her husband, Tierney, in their home. She eventually gets a knife and in self-defense stabs her husband, giving her time to escape. At the end of the film when Tierney finds her, she once again must confront him and physically fight for her life. In the scuffle he is shot dead which proved that, in the end, her courage and willingness to fight back saved her life. Ana in Fifty Shades of Grey (Brunetti, De Luca, James, & Schlessel, 2015), takes longer to find her courage. She eventually realizes that Christian will never offer his whole heart; that he will never be able to be in a traditional relationship. She realizes this after being ruthlessly “punished” with a whip and she knows that she must end their “relationship.” She takes that moment to loudly assert that Christian will never touch her again and in the final scene, she walks out on him.

These films framed the victims as being young and beautiful women with each having some level of ignorance or naivety. All of them had to struggle through the uncertainty of how to respond to their abuser’s behaviors with some finding the courage to speak up while others retreated into quiet submission. Initial resistance was worn down by selfish and manipulative tactics which lead to eventual submission to the abuser. Thankfully, most if the victims find the courage to act in her own best interests. However, all of the women carried the primary burden and pain from the abuse and each one had to be responsible for ending the harmful treatment, though not all survived. This framing supports the research which found that mass media individuate abuse and depict it as the woman’s responsibility.

**Fictional Abusers**

The male abusive characters in these films share similarities in appearance, personality traits, and behavior. Like the victims, the abusers are young and attractive which helps to frame them as less evil or even somewhat likable. However, the male characters possess something none of the victims had- that of extreme wealth and/or a position of authority. Each abuser exhibits changes in their behavior which generally swing from kind and loving to controlling and violent. Another distinction for these characters is the pathological reasoning provided to justify their abusive behavior and their lack of responsibility or accountability for their actions.

**Appearance**

It’s essential when analyzing how the abusers are framed to examine their appearance. Instead of casting the roles with scary-looking men, the producers chose four men who were gifted with youth and good looks. This attractiveness gives the audience the opportunity to “like” the characters and not see them as ugly villains. The best examples of this comes from Christian in Fifty Shades of Grey (Brunetti, De Luca, James, & Schlessel, 2015) and Harley from Temptation (Areu & Hall, 2013) who share similar physical appearances. They are both young, very attractive and have a muscular physique. They are both touted as being billionaires and they definitely dress the part- usually wearing very expensive suits.

Good looks and a strong body help these characters to not only be attractive to the victims, but also to the audience. Tierney from Safe Haven (Bowen, Godfrey, Kavanaugh, & Tooley, 2013) may be the only abuser that loses his likeability factor by the viewers, but his addiction calls for sympathy. The men are visually appealing and look approachable and kind. Choosing these actors to portray abusers is an interesting framing technique that quickly narrows the type of men who can be or *are* abusers and excludes the possibility of an abuser being older or less attractive.

**Behavior**

In reviewing the behavior of the abusers it was discovered that all of the characters went from initially acting attentive and kind to later being controlling and violent. The differences were primarily in the time it took for each character to travel the behavioral spectrum and to the degree or severity of their abusive behavior. David from All Good Things (Papandrea, 2010), is somewhat quiet and withdrawn in the beginning. He is enamored with Katie and does everything he can to impress her. As time passes, his attentiveness turns into efforts to control her time and activities. Eventually, he uses physical violence as a means to control her and from that point on, he is rarely attentive or kind to his wife. In Fifty Shades of Grey (Brunetti, De Luca, James, & Schlessel, 2015), Christian begins by being attentive, generous, and kind to Ana, but he fluctuates unpredictably in and out and becomes more and more aloof. He quickly becomes controlling in all interactions with Ana and is cunning in his plans to manipulate her into meeting his needs. He rarely shows any genuine interest in fulfilling Ana’s needs (exception: when she wants to lose her virginity), yet quickly dismisses her desires for a “real” relationship each time she brings it up. Christian persuades only to achieve what he needs and wants and only finds pleasure (usually during a sexual encounter) when inflicting pain on Ana.

One dominate behavioral strategy found in each character was the unscrupulous use of manipulative tactics. These actions were enacted to only serve the needs of the abuser, but appeared alluring to the women; things such as: being charming, issuing flattery, and gift giving. In All Good Things (Papandrea, 2010), David strives to woo Katie with his playboy charms. To win her over, he offers her anything she wants and treats her with kindness and affection. After David returns to work for his father, he buys Katie a really large house and allows her to furnish it however she likes. He may have had genuine intentions in the beginning, but not long after working in the family business, David’s flattery and gift giving becomes restricted and used only to keep Katie appeased and out of his hair. Christian, in Fifty Shades of Grey (Brunetti, De Luca, James, & Schlessel, 2015), is the poster child for manipulation. Right from the beginning he uses flattery to gain Ana’s attention. He quickly manipulates and makes demands on her time and attention. Initially, he teases her with flirty attentiveness and then treats her the opposite way by ignoring her. Later, he buys her expensive gifts like a computer and a new car and takes her on trips in his helicopter. But then, he begins to show up uninvited to places like when Ana goes to visit her mother in Georgia; trivializing his actions to keep Ana from getting upset. His manipulative efforts continue in every scene that he wants something from Ana- which is *every* scene. His efforts are only employed to get Ana to satisfy his needs.

The final behavioral observation was that all four characters lacked self-control. Tierney in Safe Haven (Bowen, Godfrey, Kavanaugh, & Tooley, 2013), abused alcohol and would quickly go from being calm to being enraged and violent. He was completely out of control and did not restrain his impulsive thoughts or behaviors. Christian in Fifty Shades of Grey (Brunetti, De Luca, James, & Schlessel, 2015), is driven by his singular sexual desire and cannot seem to alter his focus. Even though it would be better for Ana, he cannot and will not walk away from her. He will not control his urges to dominate and punish Ana even when he knows it will hurt her (physically and emotionally). In the end, it is his lack of self-control that permanently destroys the relationship he does have with Ana. In Temptation (Areu & Hall, 2013), Harley uses alcohol and drugs to control others and to release his own inhibitions. While under the influence, he can and will do anything he wants with anyone he wants. He knows that Judith is married and has a strong religious upbringing and yet, he will not back down and leave her alone. His obsession grows as does his willingness to do and say whatever necessary to win her over.

**Pathological Explanations**

An interesting discovery within these films is the offering of a reason, or set of reasons, for the male characters abusing the female characters. Each one is given a justifiable explanation for their abusive behavior perhaps to make the characters less villainous or to assist the audience in making sense of the abuse and violence. Three of the characters, Tierney in Safe Haven (Bowen, Godfrey, Kavanaugh, & Tooley, 2013), David in All Good Things (Papandrea, 2010), and Harley in Temptation (Areu & Hall, 2013) are depicted as abusing alcohol and/or drugs. This addiction seems to drive their harmful behavior or be the cause of their rage. Mental illness or trauma also come in as reasons for abusing. David, in All Good Things (Papandrea, 2010), struggles with mental illness which the viewer learns began as a boy after witnessing his mother commit suicide. Christian, in Fifty Shades of Grey (Brunetti, De Luca, James, & Schlessel, 2015), reveals that he was sexually abused as a young teenager by his mother’s friend; something that continued for six years, well into his early adult life. This explanation is offered as the reason he is unable to have a “normal” or traditional relationship with a woman and why his needs override his partner’s needs. All of these men are portrayed to some degree, as having a problem with their emotions and that their tendency for abusive behavior is brought on by these “outside” influences. This framing tactic presents some inaccuracy as mental illness is not present in all cases of abuse, nor are alcohol and/or drugs involved in all cases of partner abuse. A person being mentally unwell may act out in an abusive way, but there is little research actually claiming that one causes the other (Hegarty, 2011). Secondly, abusers who admit consuming alcohol or drugs often use it as an excuse for their becoming violent (*Myths*, 2015). Drinking alcohol provides the abuser justification for the behavior and is not considered a cause (*Myths*, 2015).

The fictional abusers in these films are framed similarly, each one being attractive to both the female characters and likely to the audience. Their good looks is accentuated by their charm and flattery which become modes of manipulation. These characters become likable villains as they strive to lure in the object of their attention. Additionally, the abusers all move through predictable patterns of behavior in order to gain control and dominion over the victim. Unfortunately, each abuser is provided a reason or excuse for his harmful behavior which supports the research revealing a tendency to provide pathological reasoning for abuse. This may suggest that the abusers are also victims and not necessarily fully responsible for their actions. It’s not that the characters have a personality flaw or disposition to be cruel; they are compelled to be abusive by these “outside” forces (reasons). This framed presentation of an abuser is narrow and limiting and excludes many other possible realities.

**Fictional Abuse**

For this analysis, domestic violence depictions within these films are categorized into three groups; (1) Psychological, (2) Stalking, and (3) Physical and/or Sexual. Most of the stories followed a similar path of predictable behavior from psychological manipulation and abuse to physical harm. The behavior of the abuser escalates within each category, or type of abuse, causing serious emotional and/or physical pain for the victims. This analysis does not attempt to rate the seriousness of each category, but only to highlight the forms of abuse producers chose to depict and how it was framed for the viewers.

**Psychological Abuse**

This type of abuse, also known as mental or emotional abuse can consist of a variety of behaviors. According to The National Domestic Violence Hotline, examples of this type of behavior can include, but is not limited to: criticizing, name calling, isolating from friends and family, possessive behaviors like questioning or monitoring the other’s activities, humiliation, blaming the victim for the abuse, and/or making threats (*Warning signs*, n.d.). All of these tactics are used to gain and maintain power and control over a partner (*Warning signs*, n.d.).

In Safe Haven (Bowen, Godfrey, Kavanaugh, & Tooley, 2013), Tierney’s rapid mood swings (likely enhanced by alcohol abuse) prevent Katie from feeling safe in his presence. She must always be on guard with everything she says and does. Tierney produces fear in Katie when in a rage he breaks things and yells, blaming Katie for his anger and outbursts. In one scene, he tries to lessen his own guilt by telling Katie he is sorry, all the while he continues to physically attack her. Threats are used when he finds he does not have enough control over her such as in the scene where he pulls out a gun and yells, “You don’t tell me what to do!”

In Fifty Shades of Grey (Brunetti, De Luca, James, & Schlessel, 2015), Christian exhibits a degree of jealousy right away when he questions Ana on the status of her relationships with her male friends. Early in the film, he criticizes Ana for drinking too much the night before and tells her that, “If you were mine, you wouldn’t be able to sit down for a week.” Christian easily manipulates Ana by appealing to her desire for love and romance. He breaks some of his rules and makes her believe that she is the only one he has done that with. Nevertheless, he still remains distant and prevents her from being allowed to touch him or sleep in the same bed. His possessiveness emerges later when he gets angry over her announcement that she is planning a trip out of state to see her mother. He takes her outside and tells her that he is angry and claims, “You’re mine, all mine. You understand?”

Both of these examples illustrates the type of manipulation and psychological abuse inflicted upon the victims. While it may seem benign at first, all of these behaviors are considered abusive and are often referred to as “red flags.” Psychological abuse is rarely detected by those on the outside of the relationship because most of the harm occurs within the psyche of the abused person and has no outward signs like that of physical abuse, though many consider it to be equally harmful.

**Stalking**

While only two of the films included elements of stalking, it is a serious warning sign and was deemed relevant to this analysis. Most organizations list stalking as a behavior that relates to emotional or psychological abuse, but some list it as a separate offense, especially now that there is an increase in cyberstalking through the use of modern technologies. Stalking can happen at any point in the relationship and can happen in numerous ways. The most common way is to physically follow someone, showing up where the victim happens to be (unannounced and uninvited), tracking someone to find them, repeated attempts to contact the victim through phone calls, texts, emails etc., and watching the victim from a distance, and/or recording the victim’s movements (*Stalking*, 2014).

Tierney in Safe Haven (Bowen, Godfrey, Kavanaugh, & Tooley, 2013) is so obsessed with Katie that he breaks into the neighbor’s house to seek information on Katie’s whereabouts. Since the neighbor had helped Katie to escape, there was a message on her answering machine from Katie which Tierney uses to begin tracking her down. He travels nonstop to the town where Katie is hiding and once he spots her, he watches from a distance. He then follows Katie back to the big house and watches her until it’s time to confront her.

In Fifty Shades of Grey (Brunetti, De Luca, James, & Schlessel, 2015), Christian begins to become impatient when it seems that he is being ignored by Ana. He begins sending her multiple text messages, questioning her about whether or not she has completed researching dominance and submission and if she has made a decision. At one point, Ana tells Christian in a message, “It was nice knowing you” to which he responds by showing up uninvited to her home. Later, when Ana is visiting her mother in Georgia, Christian again shows up uninvited and watches her from a distance. He texts Ana when she and her mother order another drink saying, “Another Cosmo?” letting her know that she was being watched.

**Physical and/or Sexual Abuse**

Physical abuse is an action that causes harm through tactics such as: hitting, slapping, punching, kicking, burning, strangulation, coercing another into substance abuse, and/or refusing medical care (*Warning signs*, n.d.). Sexual abuse, which is not about sex, is an action that attempts to control another person by: forcible sex when it is unwanted, unsafe, and/or is considered by the victim to be degrading, pursuing sexual activity with someone who is not able to consent, hurting the other during sex, interfering with reproductive choices (refusing to use protection, forcing an abortion, etc.), and/or forcing someone to view pornography (*Warning signs*, n.d.). These two types of abuse were combined into one category for this analysis due to the physical nature of the abuses.

Tierney in Safe Haven (Bowen, Godfrey, Kavanaugh, & Tooley, 2013) is shown committing graphic and heinous violence upon Katie. He is shown grabbing her neck with his hands and shoving her into the dining room hutch. He pushes her to the floor, pulls her hair, and then shoves her away. He grabs her arm and takes her to the floor where he attempts to choke her. Later, he sprays gasoline on the house while she is inside and while the house burns, he grabs her from behind, takes her to the ground and punches her face.

In All Good Things (Papandrea, 2010) David grabs Katie by the hair (in front of her family) and drags her out of her parent’s house. Later, he beats her so badly that her face immediately begins to bruise, is cut up, and bloody. He enforces sexual control by forcing her to have an abortion for which he did not attend, instead making her endure the event alone. Towards the end, David kills their dog and after Katie confronts him, she disappears and it is implied that he killed her too.

Christian in Fifty Shades of Grey (Brunetti, De Luca, James, & Schlessel, 2015) spanks Ana while he is angry, which indicates a loss of self-control and is abusive. In one scene, Christian flogs Ana with a whip so hard that it hurts her. Finally, Christian is guilty of sexual manipulation since Ana makes it clear several times that she is uncomfortable with his “play room” and sexual desires/behavior. Knowing her objections, he continues to persuade and manipulate Ana into performing sex acts that she does not necessarily want to do.

Harley in Temptation (Areu & Hall, 2013), sexually attacks Judith on the private plane by forcing her legs apart and touching her all over. She fights back and he stops, but only to tell her that, “Now you can say you resisted” and then continues to have his way with her. In a scene involving her mother, Harley shoves the older woman to the ground and then later fights with Judith over the incident. He follows her through the house grabbing her arm to stop her. Their final scene together ends with Judith severely beaten with visible scrapes, cuts, and bruises on her face and neck. Sadly, Harley knowingly infects Judith with HIV, along with his previous girlfriend, which is a lifelong consequence to being sexually abused.

The overall message with these depictions of abuse can be surmised as being realistic in the pattern and sequence of behaviors. All of the abusers began controlling their victim by utilizing psychological or emotional abuse. As the victims submitted to the pressure and force of the abusers, the harmful behavior escalated into physical and/or sexual abuse. This confirms the idea that most intimate partner abuse is a gradual process of escalating actions. Viewers may be shocked by the graphicness of the images, but it does deliver some elements of truth.

**Conclusion**

This analysis of domestic abuse and violence within four motion pictures has provided an examination of framing tactics used to depict fictional victims, fictional abusers, and fictional abuse. Further, it has speculated potential messages being communicated about intimate partner abuse and the influence of those messages on the audience. Findings revealed patterns within these depictions such as the victims being young, beautiful, and somewhat naïve. Also, it was discovered that the abusers were young, fit, handsome, and had extreme wealth or was in a position of authority. Curiously, all of the male characters were assigned a pathological reason for their behavior. Finally, the fictional abuse was sequenced with emotional or psychological abuse being followed by physical violence.

In some regards, these depictions align well with actual, documented cases of abuse, such as in the depicted abuse. However, framing the characters as they did excludes many other possibilities and facts. According to a report published by the Department of Justice, victims of intimate partner abuse can be of either sex, of any age, and of any ethnicity or race (Truman & Morgan, 2014). No one category of people can be excluded. Likewise, the profile of an abuser is just as universal, meaning anyone can be an abuser: they can be male or female, belong to any culture, religion, or economic class (*What is domestic violence*, n.d.). When you compare the facts with the depictions it reveals a very narrow picture of victims and abusers within films. Limiting the view of domestic abuse/violence through mass media representations can skew an individual viewer’s understanding of the issue- not only in who can be involved, but in what abuse entails. That misunderstanding can then perpetuate stereotypes which are specific types of people who become victims and specific types of people to abuse others. This finite conclusion may create a false sense of security for viewers particularly when they do not fit within the portrayed demographics. Additionally, this can present a risk as this false ideation can then permeate throughout society.

Investigating and analyzing framing strategies within mass media provide researchers with insight into the messages delivered to an audience and the messages omitted. This knowledge can provide a clearer understanding of how those messages are interpreted which then influences the subsequent formation of cultural ideologies. Analyzing communication through mediums of popular culture is an important function within the field of Communication Studies; especially as our culture has been inundated with more advanced social technologies.

This particular type of analysis is vital in revealing the communication strategies used by film producers as they depict partner abuse and the unavoidable, subsequent effects it has on viewers. It can also detect patterns within these depictions such as identifying “stock” characters and/or plots which either align with or counter stereotypes. Additionally, this type of research can unveil the vulnerability humans have to mass media messages and the influence used to create and/or assign meaning to very complex issues like domestic abuse and violence. Finally, analyzing the communication of a serious, deviant practice like domestic abuse, depicted in popular films, can assist in directing needed attention to a major social issue and provide readers the opportunity to finally “see” and discuss what is normally hidden and left unspoken within most cultures.

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