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Abstract

Young men's responses to media portrayals of masculinity: A South African qualitative investigation

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The media has always been an institution inseparable from the rest of society – where they have been societies, there have been ways of discussing and representing information that is key to constituting those societies through media. Specifically, it has been argued that gender identities are informed by social representations in the media, but relatively little research has focused on male gender identities. The importance of understanding male gender identity in South Africa cannot be overstated as this identity shapes men's interactions with women and other men. For example, beliefs around male dominance and aggression may lie behind woman abuse, homophobic behaviour, and the spread of HIV (Dunkle & Decker, 2012; Engh, 2011). For example, South African women suffering intimate partner violence or in gender-unequal relationships have a higher risk of HIV infection (Dunkle & Decker, 2012).

In this context, a sample of 52 male undergraduate students from a large university in Johannesburg, South Africa, completed an open-ended survey after viewing video clips taken from popular media. The three clips showed men carrying out non-stereotypical male activities, such as ballet dancing, nursing, and striptease. The participants were asked to give their feelings about the clips, the importance of being male and about masculinity in general. A thematic content analysis of the data gathered illuminated the dominant social representations regarding masculinity in contemporary South Africa, which were primarily interpreted with reference to the theory of hegemonic masculinity and Moscovici's social representations theory.

Some themes which emerged were around heteronormativity, the high status of male identity, male defensiveness and the constant flux of masculine identity. The appearance of these themes shows the complex interplay of sexuality and gender, the diversity of masculinity, and the power that men continue to hold. This serves to illuminate the relationships between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities in South Africa.

Beyond its theoretical significance, this study may also inform gender-education campaigns. There are several university societies for which the results would be useful, such as the LGBQTIA society, Wits Activate. National social programmes that may be able to act on these results include the Brothers for Life campaign, which seeks to change masculine stereotypes. Changing attitudes such as male superiority and defensiveness may be key to the prevention of gender-based violence as well creating greater gender harmony in South Africa. Some hope is created by tolerant attitudes and resistance to hegemonic social representations this study, but the results presented are divergent.