



AN ANALYSIS OF REPRESENTATIONS OF VIOLENCE IN TOXIC MASCULINITIES IN THE TV SERIES YOU AND 13 REASONS WHY

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INTRODUCTION

Toxic masculinities can be understood as representations of a “cultural ideal of manliness” that is “defined by violence, sex, status and aggression” (Clemens, 2017, p. 1), which then, set a particular standard by which gender identities of men are fashioned. The notion of being ‘manly’ is therefore governed by specific codes of behaviour that encourage and endorse violence and aggression while fostering the need to exercise domination over others on the basis of sex and class. Hence, toxic masculinities can be perceived as performances that are regulated by specific societal norms that define what it is to be a man, and violence seems central to this understanding. As Alorda (2013) observes, “violence can be understood as an instrument through which men can prove their power and maleness” (p. 38). While “male violence exists in a myriad of forms” (Walby, 1990, p, 128) and the recognition of certain actions as violent may depend on the social and cultural context, it becomes a significant element that characterizes different constructions of masculinities. This research will focus on how violence, in its physical and emotional dimensions is closely associated with certain readings of toxic masculinities through the portrayal of male characters in the TV series *You* and *13 Reasons Why*.

METHODOLOGY

Although the topic of toxic masculinities has been a part of popular discourse during the past few decades (Roberts, 2019), there is still an inadequate exploration of the representation of toxic masculinities in visual media, specifically in TV series. Moreover, the reliance on visual media as a source of entertainment was further strengthened during the COVID-19 global pandemic that resulted in social isolation. It is in this context that analysing representations of toxic masculinities via visual media becomes significant. The central objective of this research is to identify the different characteristics of toxic masculinities that are performed by the male characters in the first seasons of the psychological thriller TV series *You* and *13 Reasons Why*. Moreover, the ways in which violence becomes a primary element that constructs certain readings of toxic masculinities will be explored by focusing on the physical and emotional dimensions of aggressive male behaviour.

This is a non-positivist and qualitative research that will be conducted within the larger theoretical frameworks pertaining to feminism, masculinity studies and visual media. The TV series *You* (2018) and *13 Reasons Why* (2017) are the primary sources that will be examined within the research. *You* (2018) is an American psychological thriller TV series created by Sera Gamble and Greg Berlanti based on Caroline Kepnes’ novel by the same title, written in 2014. It follows Joe Goldberg’s obsession with Guinevere Beck that gradually develops as he cyberstalks and follows her, eventually culminating in him murdering her. Directed by Tom McCarthy, the TV series *13 Reasons Why* (2017) is based on Jay Asher’s young adult novel by the same name which was published in 2007. The narrative unfolds through a series of cassette tapes recorded by Hannah Baker, a high school student, prior to her suicide. These visual adaptations will be examined by conducting a textual and visual analysis.

You and *13 Reasons Why* are contemporary productions that are widely consumed. *You* has over 43 million viewers on Netflix and is one of the most popular TV series of the psychological thriller genre. This makes it an important source through which representations



of toxic masculinities can be understood, both in terms of performance and the reception of these constructions of gender. However, there is a significant gap in research conducted on this TV series and the novel by Caroline Kepnes upon which the visual adaptation was created. The existing body of literature is limited to an analysis of Joe, the protagonist, based on the “Mullen stalker typology” (Rosenbaum and Friedman, 2019, p. 267), perceptions of his character through an analysis of social media posts (Lynch, 2020), the romanticisation of the villain (Frederick, 2022) and the use of language (Olsson, 2020). Similarly, the first season of 13 Reasons Why which is based on the novel by Jay Asher, recorded 476 million view hours within the first 28 days of being released thereby, highlighting the increasing level of popularity of the TV series. While the novel has been studied to a certain extent (Kusumaningrum, 2020; Van de Kemp, 2020), research pertaining to the Netflix adaptation has been limited to the portrayal of suicide and its effects (Bridge, et al., 2020; Grant, et al., 2020; Schaffer, 2018), mental health (Uhls, et al., 2021; Quinn and Ford, 2018), linguistic patterns (Martins, 2020) and the portrayal of sexual violence (Horeck, 2019). It is evident, therefore, that there is space for a discussion on male violence and how toxic masculinities are constructed via the psychological thriller genre.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The portrayal of Joe Goldberg’s character in *You* (2018) is reflective of how violence seems to be a central characteristic of certain readings of toxic masculine ideals. His psychopathic nature and obsessive desire towards Beck can be identified as the main mode through which the toxicity of his character is displayed in this TV series. Joe’s actions reflect how violence, aggression and the need for domination are primary personality traits that constitute his character. Furthermore, Joe is also portrayed as a victim of societal perceptions of gender that endorse violence as a valid response to different situations due to the extent to which he has been influenced by unhealthy notions of manhood. In fact, embodying certain readings of masculinities that are generally considered toxic are portrayed as intrinsic to integrating into a predominantly patriarchal social structure. Consequently, male bodies become signifiers of the hierarchical distribution of power that is often maintained through means of violence and oppression of women. As Walby (1990) argues, “male violence against women has all the characteristics one would expect of a social structure, and that it cannot be understood outside an analysis of patriarchal social structures” (p. 128). It is evident that there is a powerful link between patriarchy, violence and the male body. Moreover, this supports the idea that exhibiting ‘toxic’ personality traits is considered to be a part of the “natural gender order” (Whitehead, 2021, p. 19). As Butler argues, “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler, 2006, p. 45). Joe is unable to recognize the toxicity of his behaviour because violence is considered to be a “natural” attribute of masculinities and is re-established through the repetition of such “acts” (ibid.). Therefore, “the body becomes an ideological site of naturalized knowledge” (Peberdy, 2011, p. 27) to the extent that violence appears to be a defining characteristic of male bodies.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the display of male violence in *You* is normalized to a great extent. Each instance that capitalizes on Joe’s aggressive behaviour is immediately followed by a justification provided through his narrative voice. This exemplifies how the TV series presents certain readings of toxic masculinities that seem to depict violence as integral to being masculine. This is a reflection of how unhealthy masculine ideals have become deeply integrated into society that it is difficult to identify what is often deemed as toxic masculinity. As Whitehead (2021) argues,

Men have been performing toxic masculinity for as long as there have been men. And for the most part this form of masculinity has gone unchallenged – it has rarely been analysed as problematic male behaviour... The dominant form of masculinity has always been toxic (p. 52).



Joe's actions are glorified by giving exclusive focus to his point of view while eclipsing the view of the victim. Even the violence demonstrated when he attacks and murders his victims seems to be portrayed in a way that highlights his strength and power as a man that makes his character desirable. This is a problematic depiction that valorizes aggressive, macho male behaviour that is identified as toxic within this research. Moreover, it reiterates how these performances of masculinities have "rarely been analysed as problematic male behaviour" (ibid.). This prevents the audience from grasping the extent of Joe's violent nature and even consider this as being 'masculine'. Furthermore, while Whitehead stresses that the "dominant form of masculinity has always been toxic", it can also be argued that this "dominant form of masculinity" (ibid.) has always been represented through the image of the white, heterosexual male. Accordingly, hegemonic ideologies that privilege whiteness and heterosexuality often govern the construction of masculinities via visual media. The visual representation of Joe's character becomes significant in understanding how the intersectionalities of race and sexuality play a central role in determining the construction of masculine ideals within the Hollywood film genre. Jobs (2019) notes that "most recently, the use of attractive actors and the glorifying of dark behaviour acts as a way of attracting audiences on a sexual or sensual level" (p. 7). As Gordon (2021) reiterates, "Joe Goldberg continues to be heavily fetishised, with hundreds of fans fantasizing about him on social media" (p.1). This emphasizes how idealizing male violence can have detrimental effects on how masculinities are constructed and performed both within visual media and in society at large. The way in which the spectator is made to overlook the toxic traits of Joe's character by adopting a distorted sense of empathy is a reflection of how violence is seamlessly interpolated into specific readings of masculinities.

Moreover, cyber spaces are explored as powerful modes through which male violence is perpetuated in contemporary society, as evident in how Joe victimises Beck in the TV series *You*. The toxicity of Joe's character surfaces as he cyberstalks Beck immediately after their first encounter. Beck's character is constructed through Joe's perspective as he browses social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram in order to divulge personal information that he later uses to manipulate her. Furthermore, the distorted perception of women as sex objects constructs the sense that it is Joe who seems to be entrapped by the sensuality signified by Beck, as evident through the words "there you were. Every account set to public. You want to be seen, heard, known. Of course, I obliged" (*You*, 2018, Episode 1, 7:16-7:26). Beck is not seen as the victim, but rather as the instigator of Joe's violent nature and thus, responsible for her own death. This is similar to the way in which Bryce in *13 Reasons Why* justifies raping Hannah by saying "she was practically begging me... if that's rape then every girl at this school wants to be raped" (*13 Reasons Why*, 2017). The actions of Beck and Hannah are misconstrued to suit the needs of Joe and Bryce, respectively. This shows how women are constructed in relation to the violence that is inflicted upon them via cyber spaces in a way that makes them appear complicit in the perpetration of male violence. Hence, male violence becomes a tool that regulates the behaviour of women or an ideological weapon through which male supremacy is solidified. It is also important to note that the violence implicit in the act of cyberstalking and invading Beck's privacy is foregrounded by focusing on the narrative of romance in *You*. Joe is portrayed as a chivalrous protector as made evident through the words "what you really need is someone to save you. I can help Beck. Let me help you" (*You*, 2018, Episode 1, 40:07-40:13) and this seemingly gallant behaviour becomes a technique that conceals the toxicity of his actions. Therefore, it can be argued that Hollywood representations of toxic masculinities are governed by a narrative of romance that disguises or "soften[s]" (Millet, 1970, p. 36) male supremacy and the oppression of women. Beck and the desire she signifies seem to control Joe and compel him to satisfy her needs, while in reality Joe's chivalrous behaviour can be understood as "a game the master group [men] plays in elevating its subject [women] to pedestal level" (ibid., p. 37). Beck does not possess any form of authority over Joe as made evident through how she is murdered at the end of the "game" (ibid.) Joe plays to gratify his desires.



Furthermore, it can also be argued that there are dominant, normative understandings of masculinities as evident in the representations of male characters in the selected TV series. These representations can be studied through the concept of hegemonic masculinities as theorized by Connell (1995) in *Masculinities*:

Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (p. 77).

In addition to this “configuration of gender practice” (ibid.) that relegates women to the margins while positioning men in the centre, hegemonic masculinities denote a hierarchical relationship between men themselves. While hegemonic masculinities are mobile and non-linear, there appears to be a particular form of masculinity that always tends to dominate other forms of masculinities. As Morrison (2020) argues, hegemonic masculinity is “embodied at the specific intersections of race, class, ableism and sexuality... currently defined in Western culture as white, wealthy, able bodied, and heterosexual” (p. 6). As a white, heterosexual man who belongs to the elite class, Bryce in *13 Reasons Why* enjoys a position of privilege. This allows him to exercise control over his peers as evident through the moment in which he sexually violates Jessica, Justin’s girlfriend by saying “what’s mine is yours” (*13 Reasons Why*, 2017, Episode 9, 45:13-45:15). The power dynamics that dominate Bryce’s relationships with the other characters is also symbolic of the “culture of bromance” (Whitehead, 2021, p. 57) that exists within patriarchy where men help each other commit atrocities and escape the consequences of their actions. The fact that Bryce is not brought to justice within the narrative reinforces how toxic male behaviour is not seen as problematic within the patriarchal social order. As Whitehead (2021) states, “toxic masculinity is not confined to the behaviours of a few aberrant males; it is embedded deep in the psyche of human society” (p. 19). Hence, characters such as Bryce are able to construct and sustain hegemonic, unhealthy masculine identities that are harmful to society and themselves due to the fact that “some versions of masculinity, are privileged over others” (Morrison, 2020, p. 44).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be argued that male violence is central to the construction of different readings of toxic masculinities in the selected TV series. Both physical and emotional violence perpetrated by men has been normalised to an extent that it is equated with maleness. Glorifying physical violence and aggressive behaviour can also be identified as a dominant feature that supports the idea that toxic masculine ideals are not considered problematic in contemporary society. As highlighted in *You* and *13 Reasons Why*, cyber spaces also become important modes through which male violence is perpetuated in contemporary society. Moreover, these TV series construct dominant forms of toxic masculinities that predominantly center around the white, heterosexual, able-bodied male and thus, reflect a particular trend in the performance of masculinities within the genre of Hollywood psychological thrillers. Hence, the portrayals of male characters in *You* and *13 Reasons Why* capture the complexities and nuances of the constructions of toxic masculinities via visual media.

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