Chapter 30

Depictions of Intimate Partner Violence:
Responses of College–Aged Youth to the Music Video "Love the Way You Lie"

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ABSTRACT

The music video for Eminem and Rihanna's hit single "Love the Way You Lie" (2010) reproduces commonly held myths about intimate partner violence (IPV), primarily that many women instigate their abuse or even enjoy it. Music video culture has been of concern to parents, researchers, and policymakers because youth are considered developmentally susceptible to gendered sexual scripts. However, some scholars suggest that audience members, rather than being passive consumers, are practical actors who filter information according to first- and secondhand experiences. This study examined how young adults' respond to the depiction of IPV in the music video for "Love the Way You Lie." Findings indicated strong emotional response, a tendency to filter media through personal experiences, and a continuation of gendered blame. However, participants also demonstrated critical analysis. Thus, even when depictions are sensational or reinforce myth-based beliefs and gendered biases, young adults are capable of being critical consumers of popular culture.

INTRODUCTION

Intimate partner violence (IPV) has been described as a significant public health issue with serious health and mental health outcomes (Black et al., 2011). In the United States, 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men have reported ever experiencing rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner, and women are more likely than men to report multiple forms of abuse and to experience serious mental health conse-quences, injury, or death as a result (Black et al., 2011; Campbell et al., 2003). Women experience the greatest risk of IPV during the stage of young adulthood (18-29 years; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Black et al., 2011), with as many as 78% of female college students reporting at least one violent incident in their current or most recent relationship (Helweg-Larsen, Harding, & Kleinmen, 2008). However, despite high rates of victimization, many young women do not engage in help seeking behaviors, partially due to feelings of shame and stigmatization (Helweg-Larsen et al., 2008; Henning & Klesges, 2002; Murray & Kardatzke, 2007). Worden and Carlson (2005) found that 1/4 of respondents in a public opinion survey in the United States believed that some women secretly desire to be abused. Likewise, both female and male university students in the US reported a common belief that victims are at least somewhat respon-sible for their abuse (Nabors et al., 2006; Peters, 2008). Notably, young women under the age of 30 were more likely than men of the same age to blame the victims (Waltermaurer, 2012). These beliefs can be detrimental because they lead to support for policy decisions that criminalize and/or withhold support for victims, placing them in increased danger (Policastro & Payne, 2013).

Berns (2001) has identified the perpetuation of *gendered shame* in relation to IPV, theorizing that an inordinate amount of blame and responsibility is typically placed upon female victims as a gendered form of social control. Women are held responsible for their own victimization because, for example, they "elect to stay" with their abusers. Some studies have found that education about IPV is associated with one's ability to distinguish myth-based beliefs from empirically based research evidence (e.g., Fox & Cook 2011; McMahon et al., 2013; Nabors, Dietz & Jasinksi 2006; Worden & Carlson 2005). An individual's first- or second-hand experience with IPV may also play a part. In her study of perceptions of IPV, Berns (2004) observed that individuals with first- and secondhand experience with IPV are more likely to understand the complexity of IPV situations and the needs of victims. In contrast, individuals with no first- or secondhand experience will likely acquire knowledge of IPV from various institutional ideologies or the media, both of which tend to reduce the experience of abuse to stereotypes rather than acknowledge individual experiences.

Activists have advocated for victims of IPV by working to bring visibility to the problem, but they have had little control over how the media or various visual or performing artists have represented this issue or how consumers have received the depictions. The hit single "Love the Way You Lie," released by Eminem (aka. Marshall Mathers) and R&B singer Rihanna in June of 2010, is one such depiction of IPV. The lyrics, sung by Eminem, describe a physically and emotionally abusive relationship and culminate with a chilling threat:

If she ever tries to fucking leave again
I'mma tie her to the bed
And set the house on fire
Rihanna responds with the chorus:
Just gonna stand there and watch me burn
But that's alright because I like the way it hurts

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