The Perpetuation of Hegemonic Masculinity Through Mainstream Heterosexual Pornography

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Abstract

Mainstream heterosexual pornography has been the subject of much scholarship over the past 30 years. That scholarship, however, has neglected two important aspects of mainstream heterosexual pornography: its role in reinforcing social structures and its existence as a workplace. The project proposed here seeks to examine both of these aspects through the lens of hegemonic masculinity.
**Introduction**

The majority of existing scholarship on pornography falls into one of three categories: studies that “explore films’ content (e.g. textual or content analysis of meaning), those that investigate audience reception, and studies of the industry itself, its means of production, and the patterns of labor and power” (Burke, 587). That being said, there is a considerable lack of scholarship on two important aspects of pornography: porn as a medium through which social roles and structures are reinforced and the porn industry as a workplace. My research seeks to examine both of these aspects through the lens of hegemonic masculinity, a concept heavily perpetuated by mainstream heterosexual porn.

Hegemonic masculinity is a culture’s dominant form of masculinity that reflects “normative behavioral ideals for males in a culture in a particular period, regardless of the actual prevalence of such behavior in that society” (Oxford Reference). Within the context of mainstream heterosexual porn, hegemonic masculinity “defines a pattern of gender relations in which men are both in control of women and of themselves” (Garlick, 608). A handful of scholars have asserted that the form of hegemonic masculinity perpetuated through mainstream heterosexual porn has a negative influence on men’s sexuality (Brod, 1988; Cook, 2006; Jensen, 2007; Garlick, 2010). It is argued that by depicting a masculine ideal that is characterized by unrealistic physical attributes, emotional detachment from sex, objectification and degrading treatment of women, and unchallenged male dominance, mainstream heterosexual porn speaks to a harmful fear: not being man enough (Jensen, 33).
Question

With all of this in mind, my proposed research project is divided into two separate parts. The first part examines male viewers of mainstream heterosexual porn and the second part examines the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity within the mainstream pornographic workplace (i.e. on a porn set). Both parts seek to answer the same question: How does the hegemonic masculine ideal presented in mainstream heterosexual porn affect the way men see themselves, relate to their own bodies, and project their own masculinity to the world around them?

Internet Porn and the Cycle of Hegemonic Masculinity

We are currently living in an age in which access to pornography is virtually unlimited. With the development of the Internet and the progression of digital technology in the last 25 years, “pornographic images increasingly travel the globe, circulating rapidly around the Internet, and thereby influencing gender relations worldwide” (Garlick, 598). This is especially true for mainstream heterosexual porn. Dr. Alex Scott-Samuel of the University of Liverpool, asserts that hegemonic masculinity comes out of patriarchal society and begins a cycle of gendered socialization, power inequality and social inequality which leads to the social reproduction of patriarchy and the continuation of the cycle (Figure 1). With the global dispersion of mainstream porn via the Internet, this cycle is only further perpetuated.

Figure 1. Dr. Scott-Samuel’s diagram of the cycle of hegemonic masculinity.
The Current Form of Hegemonic Masculinity

The form of masculinity occupying the hegemonic (dominant) position in a society changes in congruence with the culture of that society. In our current moment, “heterosexual masculinity” holds that position. Heterosexual masculinity is “typically associated with personality traits such as independence and competitiveness, role behaviours such as being the primary provider and initiative-taking, and physical characteristics such as masculinity and a deep voice” (Oxford Reference). Put another way, it is characterised by attributes such as toughness, aggressiveness, excessive risk-taking, suppression of emotions, strength, protectiveness, decisiveness, courage, individualism, competitiveness, rationality, and practicality (Scott-Samuel). All of these characteristics combine to create a breed of masculinity that can be identified by its systematic subordination and objectification of women.

In his article, “Taking Control of Sex? Hegemonic Masculinity, Technology, and Internet Pornography,” Dr. Steve Garlick provides a thorough analysis of the origins and implications of hegemonic masculinity, especially within the pornography industry. According to Garlick, mainstream heterosexual porn presents a fantasy world in which there is a plenitude of libidinous women who always want sex. And even if they don’t realize it at first, they can be persuaded because “it’s in their nature” (Garlick, 607). Garlick states that hegemonic masculinity is “always the answer to a question of what is needed to maintain control” (608). In a patriarchal society, control/domination over women’s “nature” is the question and heterosexual masculinity is the answer. Mainstream heterosexual porn is not, however, simply a matter of men’s domination over women. Rather, it “stages a confrontation between man and nature—one in which the ongoing desire to establish control over nature by bringing it to order is central to the
status of masculinity” (Garlick, 608). Garlick believes that this “control” is central to understanding hegemonic/heterosexual masculinity. Toward the end of his article, Garlick asserts that this need for control played out in mainstream heterosexual porn “may actually raise the standards required to achieve hegemonic masculinity” (610).

**Hegemonic Masculinity and Anxiety**

In his seminal essay, “Western Heterosexual Masculinity, Anxiety, and Web Porn,” Ian Cook argues that “web porn creates conditions under which many men may become increasingly anxious with respect to their ability to perform according to redefined standards of Western heterosexual masculinity” (Cook, 59). Cook claims that heterosexual masculinity is a response to this anxiety, which “is a function of the (failed) repression of femininity that is central to the production of male identity” (48). After examining nine different mainstream heterosexual porn websites, Cook concludes that Internet porn seems to “add significantly to what must be done to prove one’s masculinity, for they suggest that there are a plethora of libidinous women who can be satisfied by those men who have what it takes” and that “by implication, those who fail to both take advantage of these women and satisfy them are not man enough” (48).

**Hegemonic Masculinity in Mainstream Heterosexual Porn**

Hegemonic masculinity is most obviously demonstrated in mainstream heterosexual porn through dominating and manipulative actions, like verbal and physical degradation, coercion, and non-consensual aggressive actions, as well as the “money shot,” during which the man ejaculates onto the woman’s body or into her mouth. Scholars interpret the “money shot” as a way for men to show ownership/domination over these women (Cook, 2006; Jensen, 2007). Heterosexual porn demands that men “conquer increasing numbers of women to demonstrate
their manliness” (Cook, 56). In mainstream porn, women are presented as needing satisfaction, and that they “can only be satisfied by men with large penises who can maintain erections for indefinite periods” (Cook, 56). This unrealistic portrayal of both men’s and women's bodies creates unattainable expectations and ideals that influence personal presentations of masculinity.

**Methodology and Expected Results**

For the first part of my project, I will be conducting multiple focus groups with men of all different ages and backgrounds who watch mainstream heterosexual porn. In these groups, I will ask questions about their feelings toward the representations of heterosexual men in the porn they watch and how that affects their personal views on and presentations of masculinity. For the second part of my project, I will spend time observing and assisting on mainstream heterosexual porn sets. I will interview performers and ask similar questions to those I will ask in the focus groups. Studying the industry in this context can reveal a lot about the social structures that generate the products of the industry (i.e. the porn), the hierarchies of privilege and power that may influence the inner-workings of the industry, and the ways in which social roles and structures are perpetuated, not only through the products of the industry, but within the workplace, itself. Since both parts of my project include human subjects, I will need to get the project approved by the Institutional Review Board. Once I have finished conducting my research, I will write a paper detailing my findings and discussing the larger social and cultural significance of them.
Conclusion

Scholarship on those two neglected aspects of pornography, whether my own or not, is needed in order to better understand the implications that hegemonic/heterosexual masculinity has on cultural ideas of masculinity, as well as the social and personal implications it has on presentations of masculinity and gender relations.

References


Budget

My project is fairly simple and would not require much monetary assistance. I live locally, so housing costs are a non-issue. I would, however, be driving a lot (to focus groups, to and from sets, etc) and would need $200-$300 to pay for the cost of gas.