

Being Woman Hard: Contextualising Men's Usage of Makeup on Vlogs

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Abstract

Gender roles are learned through socio-economic, political and cultural influences. In popular culture the gender roles are depicted in stereotypical ways. In the new form of media content available online, have presented different models of gender behaviour. This research has taken content on YouTube produced by a group of young men and analysed it for the content pertaining to women. The qualitatively analysed videos are produced by Buzzfeed. This study has shown that even on alternative media channels and narratives, cis-gendered men undertake feminine behaviour in the guise of humour to not to have their masculinity questioned by the society. The content analysed is mainly focused on how these men do acts which are primarily done by women but in its context, it is not a serious attempt, it is attempting to trivialise what feminine gender roles are.

Keywords: Cis-gendered, masculinity, YouTube, gender roles.

Introduction

This paper has attempted to address the depiction and construction of contemporary masculinity in contemporary media texts. There exists an abundance of scholarly work about masculinity, some of which have been analysed in detail in the literature review section. The basic arguments one can derive from this scholarly work is that masculinity is not an organic model of behaviour that all men naturally follow. Masculinity is constructed through economic, social, political, historical and cultural processes. Cultural agents, such as producers of media content, play a role in the construction and depiction of masculinity. Therefore, it becomes pertinent to study popular new forms of media content, such as BuzzFeed. Up to date, there has been little to no research on the construction of a masculine model of behaviour in BuzzFeed content. By conducting this study, the researcher will try to identify patterns of masculine behaviour in BuzzFeed content that have been identified in the existing literature. If none exist, it will then be attempted to explain why this might be so.

Significance:

There do exist patterns of behaviour which can be categorized as typically masculine. These patterns of behaviour persist even when the nature of the videos involve performing traditionally non-masculine tasks, i.e. applying makeup. The key point is that the actions they are performing in these videos are meant to be humorous and non-serious. These men are not trying makeup because they are interested in applying makeup. Instead, they are using their usage of makeup to create comic content. This helps us to understand the construction and depiction of masculinity in contemporary popular media texts.

Research Objective:

The research objective of this study is as follows:

What patterns of behaviour exist in Buzzfeed videos that can be characterized as masculine, and what do they signify?

Sample

A generalized study of male characters in BuzzFeed would be extremely time consuming, and beyond the researcher's abilities now, therefore four videos have been chosen that are part of an ongoing series called "The Try Guys". These specific videos involve four men trying makeup in different contexts. The study has conducted visual analyses of these four videos to answer the research question.

Literature Review

In the endeavour to understand what is really being depicted in these Buzzfeed videos, it was pertinent to first create an understanding of what masculinity is, and how it is constructed. This understanding is being created with the help of following literature as to how previous studies have investigated this issue.

"The History of Masculinity" (Connell 1995) performs the task of locating masculinity in American/European history. Connell dissects imperialist, economic, political and social history in relation to the formation of masculinities. For example, she discusses the exclusion of women in factories and their confinement to the home as an important factor in the creation of masculinities. After this change, masculinity became cantered on technical skills and breadwinning. Connell complicates that understanding by looking at heterosexual normativity (as medical definitions problematized homosexuality) and violence as a symptom of the rational imperialist masculinities, illustrates some of the features of what she calls 'Hegemonic Masculinity' (Connell 1995, 253).

Mike Donaldson in his article "What is hegemonic masculinity?" takes a relational approach and argues that masculinity and its relationship with femininity is not an independent framework or identity within itself but is intersected with class relations (Donaldson 1993, 644). He also maintains that two main features of hegemonic masculinity are heterosexuality and homophobia (Donaldson 1993, 645). The idea of men being attracted to men because of their "maleness" (Donaldson 1993, 649) is destabilizing to the status quo, i.e. women are to be pursued by men, and men

compete for control of women (Donaldson 1993, 648). This is manifested in the reduction of women to sex objects, and constant affirmation of a strictly platonic relationship with all men (Donaldson 1993, 645). However, it has been argued that these characteristics are not always fundamental to male personality (Carrigan, Connell and Lee 1985, 579) (Donaldson 1993 646). For example, fatherhood is part of many men's lives, Donaldson argues that parenting children requires a level of emotional intelligence that masculine ideals do not espouse (Donaldson 1993, 650). Thus, men may possess the ability to be nurturing but may not behave nurturing at all, to sustain their masculinity.

He also discusses the idea of cultural ideals that make and maintain masculine ideals (Donaldson 1993, 646). In his review of other work on this topic, he asserts that these men are those who belong to the industries that create cultural content, so to speak. Some examples are journalists, politicians and actors (Donaldson 1993, 646). The main characteristic of these cultural ideals is that they are visible to the public, and therefore have the power to make and manage masculine ideals. However, these ideals do not always correspond to the inherent disposition of men (Carrigan, Connell and Lee 1985, 565) (Donaldson 1993, 646). Men do not follow a universal model of masculine behaviour of their own natural accord which in turn puts them in a powerful position. The cultural ideal of masculinity, what he calls "the public face of hegemonic masculinity", is what gives power to men instead of the other way around (Donaldson 1993, 646). Another way to look at masculinity emerges from this, i.e. that masculinity inhibits "personal growth" of men because of the internalization of the pressure to act in a hegemonically masculine way (Carrigan, Connell and Lee 1985, 579).

In "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), masculinity is defined as "configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action, and therefore can differ according to the gender relations in a social setting" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 836). The difference between hegemonic and subordinated masculinities is also highlighted, in that hegemonic masculinities are the idealized

form of behaviour as a man, even when most of the male population did not follow it (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832). Where Donaldson (1993) discusses the relationship of the average man to an idealized form of masculine behaviour, Connell and Messerschmidt elaborate on the formation of the ideal model and argue that any form of hegemonic masculinity expresses “widespread ideals, fantasies and desires” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 838).

A more critical analysis of the concept of masculinity is that it is based on a “dichotomization of sex... versus gender” and does not effectively consider diversity or marginalization in gender categories (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 836). To elaborate on the same line of thought, in current day hegemonic masculinity, heterosexuality is both culturally enforced (Connell 1995, 246) and inextricably tied to power relations that maintain the status quo (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832). This is echoed in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (Rich 1980), which contextualizes the role of masculinity and masculine power in relation to sexuality and the imbalanced power dynamic embedded into heterosexual relationships. She focuses on enforcement of heterosexuality upon women (Rich 1980, 640) and erasure of non-heterosexual gender relations (Rich 1980, 647-648). For her, the heterosexual norm helps to subordinate women by ultimately leaving them no apparent choice, other than being in a relationship (marital or not) with a man which perpetuates the division of gender roles (Rich 1980, 653).

After reading about masculinities, the understanding of the concept of masculinity as one that is historical (Connell 1995), as well as one that is relational (Donaldson 1993) (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). It has also come into light that it is situated in a capitalist (Connell,1995), heteronormative (Connell 1995) (Rich 1980) context. Furthermore, it has also been learnt that masculinity can be constructed through cultural agents (Donaldson 1993) and enforced through an internalized pressure to conform (Carrigan, Connell and Lee 1985). Therefore, as per the review of

the existing literature, masculine behaviour is not related to biology or universal natural personality traits but is constructed historically and socially.

Methodology

This project was an attempt to examine the construction of masculinity as depicted in a contemporary media text. The chosen media text is web video series created and produced by BuzzFeed's video division. It is titled 'The Try Guys'. It has nine seasons, in which a group of presumably cisgender heterosexual men try a variety of phenomenon, some of which are not typically masculine things to do. The study focuses on the construction of masculinity they are presenting in the context of the United States. These videos usually document the process of learning about what they're going to be trying, the act of them practicing it, performing it, and then their reflections on the experience. Four videos have been chosen that document their interaction with.

This specific media text has been chosen because online videos, especially those that are part of a series, are a new form of media. To look at the most recent depictions of men in media, may offer different insights as compared to forms of media content that have existed for a longer time such as films and television shows. These videos are available online, for any person who has access to the internet and YouTube. Furthermore, there is a strong sense of community on YouTube, for those who are active producers of content and for those who are active viewers of content. This is signified by YouTube's Community Guidelines, which state: "When you use YouTube, you join a community of people from all over the world. Every cool, new community feature on YouTube involves a certain level of trust. Millions of users respect that trust and we trust you to be responsible too. Following the guidelines below helps to keep YouTube fun and enjoyable for everyone." (YouTube. 2017)

This strong sense of community, along with the increased interaction and feedback YouTube allows is what makes this

platform different. However, the medium of content dissemination is not the key characteristic of this project but the fact that this medium may depict a specific form of masculinity and my goal is to identify what that is.

The Try Guys are a group of men: Keith, Eugene, Zack and Ned who try different things, which they have not done before. Some of these videos include trying makeup and beauty trends. The interest lies in studying these videos by employing visual analysis in order to examine the construction of masculinity that these men are presenting. This is especially pertinent because these men try on things that are not characteristic of men, i.e. makeup. This suggests a departure from a traditional American masculinity. It has been observed that in these videos, the Try Guys mention their relationship with makeup and women's relationship with makeup quite often. So, the visuals and sounds (dialogue, sound effects) of these videos to try and locate a model of behaviour that these men might be following.

One aspect that is not considered in this study is the fact that the choice of videos is produced and owned by a company (BuzzFeed) and therefore these videos are not the same as those produced by individual vloggers. When creators of content are not limited to the regulations and code of a company, the content is likely to differ. With BuzzFeed videos, content cannot always be judged to reflect the sensibilities and nature of the people acting/performing, directing and producing the video. A study of the site of production of the videos is then required to be able to judge more effectively where the depictions are coming from and whose nature/character they reflect.

Analysis

One pattern that is repeated with each video analysed is assertion of masculinity in the beginning of the video. The introduction starts off with information about what the Try Guys are going to be doing, paired with jokes or comments that relate to the act of them doing it. video 'Try Guys Give Each Other Facials' for example

starts with a series of clips, some which involve the Try Guys talking and others which depict them getting and giving facials. They make multiple jokes with sexual double entendre, which can be argued is an assertion of their masculinity. Traditionally, men are supposed to be sexual beings, in pursuit of women, and by making these sexually charged jokes they affirm that they are indeed sexual beings and are not women (who are supposed to be objects of men's sexual desires). In another video titled 'The Try Guys Try Makeup Tutorials', the Try Guys assert their masculinity by reiterating the fact that they do not have the knowledge or skills required to apply makeup on themselves. This creates a clear distinction between their usual behaviour as men and the act of putting on makeup as a non-male activity in which they are currently engaged.

It has observed that throughout the course of these videos, there is an element of humour. Men using or trying makeup does not necessarily have to be a funny situation. In fact, there are many men who use YouTube to upload videos about their makeup usage and are very serious about their makeup usage. For those men, using makeup is a part of their lifestyle (Hall, Gough and Seymour Smith 2012). However, the men in these videos are not taking what they are doing seriously, for the most part. They make a lot of mistakes at multiple points in the videos. In the video "The Try Guys Try The Weirdest Makeup Trends Of 2016", three of the men, namely Keith, Ned and Zach, did not do the makeup trends properly. They misname the makeup products (Keith calls the lip glitter, "glimmer glammer"), do not apply the makeup as prescribed, and make fun of the result ("Does it look like I went down on a mermaid?", Zach asks at one point of the video). This is contrasted to Eugene's behaviour, since he does a better job than the others. This leads us to believe that applying those makeup trends was not that difficult, and the point of the video was to create a comic scenario, where it is shown that men truly cannot use makeup. This is exemplified by the choice made by producers of this content to make a video about "boob contouring". Men do

not typically possess breasts and seeing as they show ineptitude at this task as well, while joking about it one can make the conclusion that all these videos are centred around creating humour based on a strict gender-based model of behaviour.

Conclusion

The study has found through the process of analyzing the given media text that when cisgender heterosexual men are depicted doing things that are not typically masculine, they are framed under contexts of humour, which is an attempt to conform to the social parameters of gender roles. The satire is played upon the female body form and is making fun of the procedures that women generally undertake for themselves. The discourse in these videos is trying to ape how women talk to each other and the environment of the settlements where they get these procedures. Also, the fact that men playing such roles in the guise of humour depicts that there is fear of losing their standing as a man in the society, not being man enough!

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