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Hypermasculinity In The Media: When Men "Walk Into The Fog" To Avoid Affective Communication

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Men's tendency to exhibit withdrawal behaviors during affective communication has been shown to be a point of contention in romantic discord. The current study was designed to examine whether men's desire to facilitate a discussion regarding affective communication would be affected by media portrayals of subtle versus blatant withdrawal; the latter epitomized by a hypermasculine man who opts to leave an emotionally tense situation, while it is evident that his distressed female partner desires communication. To this end, male and female college students participated in an alleged memory experiment for media clips taken from Hollywood films. Viewing a blatant (but not a subtle) withdrawal clip caused men to shy away from facilitating affective communication as compared to controls. This finding was not obvious, given people's documented tendency to attempt to disconfirm group stereotypes when a prime is blatant. We situate findings at the intersection of social psychological and media theorizing.

Keywords: hypermasculinity, affective communication, media, stereotype threat, mood management theory

Scarlett:	Rhett . . . if you go, where shall I go, what shall I do?
Rhett Butler:	Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn. [*Rhett walks off into the fog*]

(*Gone with the Wind*, 1939).

The popular dating site, eHarmony, offers advice, which is mainly geared toward women who want to "get the guy." In a recent column, the company focused on men's tendency to exhibit withdrawal behaviors by attempting to disengage from the conversation at hand (e.g., Gottman, 1993; Holley, Sturm, Levenson, 2010; Vogel & Karney, 2002; Ward, Bergner & Kahn, 2003); a pivotal point of contention in romantic discord between heterosexual couples (eHarmony, n.d., para. 1–3):

> Does this scenario sound familiar? You meet a guy. You go out. It's clear that you like each other, and you begin to open up more and more. Things get increasingly serious, and you make yourself emotionally vulnerable. You feel like the relationship is progressing. Then, out of nowhere, he withdraws . . . . You're not alone. This is an old story that many people—both men and women—have been through.

Why do men exhibit withdrawal from affective communication and intimacy, especially in the context of romantic relationships? What is the role of the media's portrayal of (hyper)masculine men in influencing men's desire to engage in (instead of to withdraw from) affective communication?

The Development of Masculinity and Its Implications for Male Withdrawal Behaviors

Male identity in the United States is developed, in part, through the negation of prescribed feminine traits and behaviors (e.g., Gelman, Taylor, & Nguyen, 2004). Gelman et al. (2004) demonstrated that mothers tended to accentuate

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gender during communication with their children (ages 2–6). Furthermore, during the communication process, boys were more likely than girls to exhibit *gender contrast*, that is, a tendency to negate prescribed feminine/communal (relational and other-focused) behaviors ("That's for girls, not boys," p. 27). Girls, however, were less likely to negate prescribed masculine/agentic (autonomous and self-focused) behaviors. Gender contrast transcends childhood. Men are culturally encouraged to engage in masculine/agentic behaviors while eschewing what might be perceived as feminine/communal behaviors (Prentice & Carranza, 2002) to avoid being classified as members of a lower-status group, such as *homosexual* (Bosson, Prewitt-Freilino, & Taylor, 2005). Boys and men learn that they ought to be assertive and decisive and ought not be emotionally expressive (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Furthermore, if men violate these prescriptions/proscriptions, they risk experiencing a *gender backlash* via social and economic sanctions (Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Rudman, 2010; for a general discussion of how people react to social "deviates" from a group-threat perspective, see Prentice & Trail, 2010).

Hypermasculinity in Popular Media

Perhaps the most poignant prototype of masculinity as a negation of femininity is the *hypermasculine* man, depicted in a plethora of popular culture media (e.g., Dill & Thill, 2007; Iwamoto, 2003; Scharrer, 2005). The hypermasculine male is characterized by the idealization of stereotypically masculine traits, such as virility and physicality, while concurrently rejecting traits seen as feminine and thus perceived as antithetical and even inferior to machismo, such as compassion or emotional expression (Zaitchik & Mosher, 1993; Scharrer, 2005). Consider the case of the superhero, *Wolverine*, who originated in the X-Men comic books published by Marvel Comics. Wolverine, also known as Logan, is a mutant (a character who is born with the so called X-gene that enables the development of superhuman powers) who possesses an ability to heal from almost any injury, which makes him a fearsome opponent in battle, and who is often portrayed as being capable of great acts of heroism. Wolverine has been and continues to be a highly popular character in most X-Men adaptations including those to TV (an animated series), video games, and to the popular X-Men film series. An example of Wolverine's tendency toward emotional withdrawal is captured in part in the following exchange between Wolverine and Mystique; the latter character who attempts to seduce Wolverine despite their complex history of being friends, lovers, and eventual enemies (IMDB, n. d.):

Mystique:	No one's left a scar quite like you.
Wolverine:	What do you want—an apology?
Mystique:	You know what I want.
Mystique:	But what do you want?
Mystique:	What do you *really* want?
Wolverine:	I want you to leave.

Despite this and similar depictions of actual or desired withdrawal from affective communication by human protagonists and by superheroes, hypermasculinity in the media has been studied primarily in the context of male aggression (e.g., Scharrer, 2005); admittedly a topic that is highly controversial such that some authors have now concluded that data linking media to aggression were fallacious (for a discussion, see Ferguson, 2009). Hypermasculinity has been also linked to behaviors that trivialize intimate relationships (see Zaitchik & Mosher, 1993) but to date, there have been no studies on the potential effects of hypermasculinity in the media on men's withdrawal from affective communication—an already proscriptive set of behaviors (e.g., Prentice & Carranza, 2002).

The main goal of the current study was to explore whether males' willingness to engage in affective communication (the opposite of withdrawal) would be affected by media portrayals of blatant withdrawal, per hypermasculine prescriptions, versus more subtle withdrawal per masculine prescriptions. Hypermasculine withdrawal behaviors are epitomized by stoic males who refrain from initiating and engaging in affective communication even when their female partner is clearly distressed and desiring of connection; as implied by Rhett Butler's classic retort to Scarlett O'Hara as he disappears into the fog. It is important to note, however, that our discussion of withdrawal behaviors is not meant to condemn men. Men's withdrawal behaviors in media as well as in real life may stem from diverse etiologies including a genuine desire to protect the relationship (for a discussion of power differences between women and men vs. individual differences see, e.g., Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000).

Stereotype Threat and Mood Management Theory: An Intersection of Social Psychological and Media Theorizing

We situate our investigation of media effects on withdrawal behaviors, in part, within a stereotype threat framework. Stereotype threat is a type of social identity threat (e.g., Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Major & O'Brien, 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which occurs when members of devalued groups experience a fear of being evaluated through the lens of a negative stereotype (e.g., Murphy, Steele, & Gross, 2007; Steele, 1997). Davies, Spencer, Quinn, and Gerhardstein (2002) have argued and shown evidence for how societal-level images of women broadcasted in mass media affected women's performance and well-being. The authors used female-stereotypic TV commercials to prime female stereotypes. The first study showed that after being shown female-stereotypic commercials, both women and men evidenced heightened activation of female stereotypes. Importantly, women who showed higher levels of stereotype activation also tended to underperform on a math test that followed the presentation of the stereotypic commercials. The second study showed, furthermore, that after viewing the female-stereotypic commercials women, but not men, preferred solving verbal versus math test items. Finally, in the third study, exposure to the female-stereotypic commercials caused women to show less interest in pursuing careers in quantitative domains. We agree with Davies et al. (2002) that in social psychological/interpersonal research despite a "widespread concern in our society over the consequences of being raised on a steady diet of cultural stereotypes, there has been remarkably little experimental research conducted on the effects of exposure to gender stereotypic media images" (p. 1616). In the same spirit, the present study was designed to examine the effects of media imagery with a focus on priming male stereotypes (i.e., watching a film clip of subtle/masculine vs. blatant/hypermasculine withdrawal) on actual behavior (i.e., men's decision on what extent to withdraw from/engage in an affective communication task).

Furthermore, Schmader, Johns, and Forbes' (2008) Integrated Process Model of stereotype threat demarcates how concern with negative evaluation leads to heightened self-monitoring and increased arousal (also see Ben-Zeev, Fein, & Inzlicht, 2005), which coconspire to deplete working memory resources. This integrated process can lead to a state of ego depletion (e.g., Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007) and has been shown to interfere with self-regulation in contexts that give rise to stereotype threat (see Inzlicht, McKay, & Aronson, 2006). It would stand to reason, therefore, that heightened arousal and ego-depletion stemming from the presentation of a hypermasculine stimulus would lead men to avoid other similarly high-arousing states. This hypothesis speaks to media research based on Mood Management Theory (e.g., Zillmann & Bryant, 1985).

According to Zillmann and Bryant (1985), people who are in a negatively valenced state of high arousal would tend to avoid or to display low preference for engaging in activities that would perpetuate that negative state. In the present study, we do not assess nor predict specific moods, however, Mood Management Theory provides an important theory-based prediction: Men who view a male hypermasculine character who exhibits withdrawal behavior (blatant withdrawal) are likely to experience heightened arousal that results in negative affect and therefore a decreased desire to engage in affect-related tasks (as compared to men who view a subtle withdrawal or a control clip). This prediction might be especially applicable to stereotype threat in men given that men tend to exhibit more intense and prolonged physiological reactivity to threatening stimuli associated with negative affect (see Gottman & Levenson, 1988). Consequently, men exposed to a media depiction of blatant withdrawal might display lower preference for a subsequent task that requires facilitating a discussion about emotion.

Experimental Paradigm and Predictions

The current experimental framework was adapted from Davies et al. (2002). Male and female college students were asked to participate in an alleged memory experiment for media clips. The two experimental clips, taken from Hollywood films, depicted a heterosexual couple engaging in affective communication in which the male character exhibited withdrawal behaviors in either a *subtle* (per masculine prescriptions) or a *blatant* (per hypermasculine prescriptions) manner. After viewing a given clip and before taking an alleged memory test, participants were asked to assist with a purported unrelated study that was described as a distractor—in which they were asked to indicate their degree of preference for facilitating a structured (mixed-gender) group discussion on how to best analyze affective communication in romantic relationships.

It is likely that men in the blatant (vs. subtle) withdrawal condition would shy away from the affective facilitator role compared to males in the subtle withdrawal condition given the heightened salience of belonging to the male category implicit in hypermasculinity and its antithesis to femininity (see Leyens, Désert, Croizet, & Darcis, 2000). Such data would be consistent with stereotype threat and Mood Management Theory and furthermore supportive of an *assimilation effect* (e.g., Wheeler & Petty, 2001), in which men behave in accordance with a primed stereotyped male behavior. This prediction is not obvious, however. Exposure to blatant/hypermasculine withdrawal behaviors could give rise to a *contrast effect*, in which men behave in opposition to a primed stereotyped male behavior; because the priming of a group stereotype (in this case, men's withdrawal behavior) has been shown to sometimes cause a desire to disconfirm a group stereotype (e.g., Wheeler & Petty, 2001). Of relevance, contrast effects are more likely to occur to the extent that a prime is blatant (Lombardi, Higgins, & Bargh, 1987; Wheeler & Petty, 2001), which affords an alternative prediction that men would show higher preference for an affective facilitator role when primed with hypermasculinity or blatant (vs. subtle) withdrawal.

Method

Participants

Eighty-four college students (43 men and 41 women) from a California State University participated in the study for partial course credit.

Materials

Film clips. Participants viewed a 60-s clip, presented twice, and were given no outside context regarding from where the clip was excerpted. The clip either depicted a blatant male withdrawal from the film *Bandits* (Amritraj & Levinson, 2001), a subtle male withdrawal from the film *Bullit* (D'Antoni, Relyea, & Yates, 1968), or was a control clip from National Geographic's *Reptiles and Amphibians* (National Geographic, 1989*)*. The difference between the blatant and the subtle withdrawal was that in the former, the male protagonist walks away from an emotionally charged conversation whereas the in the latter the male protagonist stays present but silences his partner by redirecting/distracting from the conversation.[1]

Facilitator form. This form described a purported "second 'unrelated' study"—a group discussion of a clinical case involving a videotaped interaction between heterosexual romantic partners. The participant was advised that he or she could choose to serve in one of two roles: an *active participant* (by default) or an *affective facilitator* that would be expected to lead the group discussion based on structured criteria (adapted from Davies et al., 2002). Participants were then asked to rate the extent to which they desired to assume the role of the affective facilitator on a Likert-type scale (where 1 = *No Interest*; 7 = *Strong Interest*).

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to viewing one of three video clips under the guise of an experiment on memory for visual and audio information in media: subtle withdrawal, blatant withdrawal, or control. Participants were informed that there would be a delay before the memory test. During this time, participants were asked to participate, voluntarily, in a second "unrelated" study, on affective communication that allegedly served as a distractor task. No participant declined. A confederate, blind to experimental condition, then administered the *facilitator form*. After participants rated the extent to which they desired to assume the facilitator role, participants were informed that there were no remaining time for an actual group discussion and were asked to resume the "original" study. Participants then completed content questions about the clip and a demographic form.

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[1] The experimental (subtle versus blatant) clips did not differ significantly on familiarity nor on perceptions of characters' dispositions, characters' attractiveness level, and footage quality, based on data from a group of matched controls' ($N = 12$) ratings on a 1-7 Likert-type scale; all $ps > .05$ (none approached significance). Controls were also asked to determine the nature of the movie's genre and its approximate year (or range of years) of release. Participants' modal response for both clips was "drama" and their median response was mid-eighties for the subtle clip and mid-nineties for the blatant clip.

Results

Men's Average Affective Facilitator Score as a Function of Blatancy/Subtlety of Prime

Participants' preferences for the affective facilitator role were analyzed using a 2 (participant gender: male vs. female) × 3 (withdrawal prime condition: control, subtle, blatant) analysis of variance (ANOVA). The only effect that emerged was a significant interaction between gender and condition, $F(2, 78) = 4.05$, $p = .021$, $f = .269$. Whereas women's scores did not differ significantly as a function of condition (please see subsequent section for detail), men who viewed *Bandits* (blatant withdrawal condition) ($M = 1.78$, $SE = 0.35$) toward the affective facilitator role than both the men who viewed *Bullitt* (subtle withdrawal condition) ($M = 3.69$, $SE = 0.46$), $t(34) = 3.45$, $p = .002$, $d = 1.20$, 95% CI on Cohen's d [0.45, 1.93], and men who viewed *National Geographic's Reptiles and Amphibians* (control condition) ($M = 3.57$, $SE = 0.63$), $t(28) = 2.71$, $p = .011$, $d = 1.17$, 95% CI on Cohen's d [0.26, 2.06]. Men's preferences for the affective facilitator role in the control condition, however, did not differ from the subtle withdrawal prime, $t(18) = 0.12$, $p = .903$, $d = .06$, 95% CI on Cohen's d [−0.86, 0.97]. No main effects emerged for participant gender or condition.

Women as Controls: Women's Average Affective Facilitator Score as a Function of Blatancy/Subtlety of Prime

Women in the control condition ($M = 3.40$, $SE = 0.37$) who viewed the *National Geographic* clip did not differ significantly from women in the blatant withdrawal prime condition ($M = 3.50$, $SE = 0.59$) who viewed the clip from *Bandits*, $t(26) = 0.15$, $p = .885$, $d = .06$, 95% CI on Cohen's d [−0.76, 0.88] nor from women in the subtle withdrawal prime condition ($M = 2.77$, $SE = 0.46$) who viewed a clip from *Bullitt*, $t(31) = 1.06$, $p = .297$, $d = .38$, 95% CI on Cohen's d [−0.33, 1.08]. Additionally, women in the blatant withdrawal prime condition did not differ from the women in the subtle withdrawal prime condition, $t(19) = 1.02$, $p = .321$, $d = .46$, 95% CI on Cohen's d [−0.44, 1.35]. For male and female data, see Figure 1.

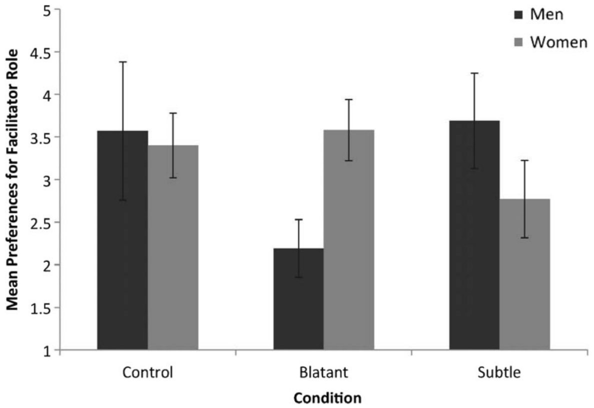

Figure 1. Mean Preference for Affective Facilitator Role by Condition and Gender.

Discussion

Viewing a film clip depiction of blatant withdrawal, per hypermasculinity prescriptions (but not subtle withdrawal, per masculinity prescriptions), caused men to shy away or to withdraw from facilitating affective communication. This finding was not obvious, given that people have been shown to attempt to disconfirm group stereotypes when a prime is blatant rather than subtle. More optimistically, men exhibited a similar level of desire to engage in the affective facilitator role given the subtle withdrawal prime as men in the control condition, perhaps because leading a discussion is more agentic than communal (e.g., Moss-Racusin et al., 2010) despite the affective domain in question. In any case, the main finding was that men in the blatant withdrawal prime condition (vs. in the subtle withdrawal prime condition) exhibited a significantly lower preference for the affective facilitator role, indicating a disidentification with/withdrawal from affective communication following exposure to hypermasculine behaviors in film clips.

We used an affective facilitation task as a proxy for assessing men's desire for engaging in affective communication in real-world settings. The rationale for using this proxy was to create a highly controlled and standardized experimental context. This context, however, has limitations with regard to ecological validity because withdrawal was not situated in an actual interaction between couples. Thus, in future studies, it would be useful to conduct this inquiry within romantic dyads for generalizability purposes. Another possible limitation is that the use of two different films instead of clips from the same film might have added some unwarranted noise. Having the same character in a given film enact the different types of withdrawal (subtle vs. blatant) would have been ideal from an experimental control perspective. However, finding two clips from the same film was a challenging task because a hypermasculine character is usually depicted as binary (stoic or filled with pathos). However, these limitations notwithstanding, there have been very few studies on men in the context of stereotype threat (for an exception see, for example, Leyens et al., 2000).

Men of course are deserving of being studied in their own right, but the current data invite further investigation of an underemphasized moderator of stereotype threat, namely a disposition toward physiological reactivity, which covaries with gender (Levenson & Gottman, 1985). Schmader et al.'s (2008) Integrated Process Model of Stereotype Threat is a mediation-based model in which arousal features predominately and causes or interacts with other mediators, such as heightened self monitoring and depleted working memory resources. Arousal, in this context, is a biological response to social contextual cues (i.e., priming of stereotypes). It is possible that arousal reactivity might also be a moderator variable, however, beckoning a moderated mediation model (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Namely, people (more men than women, per Levenson & Gottman, 1985) who are predisposed to experience greater physiological reactivity and resultant negative affect might exhibit differential responses to social cues that signal threat and furthermore show differential reactivity to the subtlety versus blatancy of these cues.

In an evocative article, Halpern et al. (2007) argued for the use of a biopsychosocial model for understanding gender differences in performance. Applying this kind of model to stereotype threat would be highly productive (also see Josephs, Newman, Brown, & Beer, 2003). In the stereotype threat literature there is an explication of how social context leads to heightened physiological reactivity and reduced cognitive capacity, but there is little research on the physiological predisposition to experiencing stereotype threat (but see Josephs et al.'s 2003 data, which showed that women with higher testosterone levels were more susceptible to stereotype threat effects). Thus, the current finding might indicate that men who are exposed to a blatant or hypermasculine media stimulus might avoid high arousal situations involving affective communication because of the "semantic affinity" (Zillmann, 2000) between the stimulus and the task.

Furthermore, Vogel, Wester, Heesacker, and Madon (2003) argued and showed evidence for the idea that engaging in affective communication requires emotional vulnerability, or the willingness to risk being hurt or rejected, which goes beyond arousal-induced discomfort or negative mood alone. They provided evidence that while coping with the natural discomfort inherent to emotional vulnerability, men but not women, showed a heightened concomitant need to engage in stereotypical gender behaviors, such as withdrawal. Such a predicament is tough. Vulnerability (not to be mistaken for pathos) is incompatible with hypermasculinity (and its associated withdrawal behaviors).

One productive future direction, therefore, would be to assess individual differences in men's *rejection sensitivity*, or a dispositional tendency to predict, perceive, and to react to rejection by others, because rejection-sensitive men have been shown to attempt to prevent expected rejection by lowering their investment level in an intimate relationship (Downey, Feldman, & Ayduk, 2000). Moreover, men have been shown to express a fear that they may be "overmatched" by a female partner during affective interaction, because of a perception that their female partner would be more skilled at communicating affectively (Leyens et al., 2000; Ward, Bergner, & Kahn, 2003). Thus, discussing the potential harm of withdrawal on a relationship while acknowledging and perhaps validating some men's fear of lower self-efficacy in affective communication might help to keep men engaged in affective communication. In the current study, we did not prime positive role modeling of males' engagement in (rather than withdrawal from) affective communication in the media, but we advocate for this kind of future research. It would also be beneficial to examine whether it would be possible to teach men to view the subjective experience of heightened arousal invoked by threat as a useful (and perhaps even as a welcome) cue for behavioral change (also see Jamieson, Mendes, Blackstock & Schmader, 2010, for mitigating threat via priming the idea that arousal improves performance).

In sum, the depiction of hypermasculinity has the potential to negatively impact men as well as their partners (see Levenson & Gottman, 1985). Consider why Susan Faludi titled her influential book on males and masculinity, *Stiffed*:

> To me it has three meanings: working stiff; the ways guys have been cheated by this society; and the fact that men are supposed to be stiff—that they have to show their armored self to the world all the time. Having to do that hurts them as much as it hurts everyone else (Halpern, 1999).

Introducing and reinforcing male role models in real life and in the media who embrace masculinity while upholding engagement in affective communication might help to shape new masculine prescriptions that would be beneficial to men and women alike. Imagine a futuristic male superhero that continuously saves the metaphorical Gotham while working just as hard to open up even a small piece of his armored self to those he loves. After all, media does not only reflect cultural norms but can and does transform social reality.

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