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# An analysis of domestic violence in mass media & motion pictures

Renee Delcambre, *Utah State University*

Figure 1: Motion pictures analyzed



## I. Introduction

Mass media have a curious and powerful position of influence within our culture making it a critical component in creating, altering, and/or mimicking current ideologies within society.

Motion pictures often incorporate life-like situations or plots into their stories which can contain controversial or taboo topics. One of these situations involves abuse within intimate, adult relationships. Choices made in *how* the abuse and characters are depicted is called framing. This strategy is a deliberate means of including

and excluding certain information and/or details. It is a tactic used to provide the viewer with a carefully “framed” picture.

This analysis reveals the framing choices made in the portrayal of domestic abuse victims, abusers, and the depicted abuse within four popular motion pictures (figure 1).

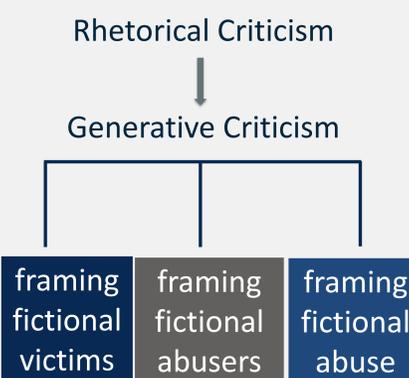
This research also speculates on the subsequent messages and meanings communicated (intentional or not) to audiences.

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## II. Methods



The qualitative research method used in this analysis is derived from rhetorical criticism which examines communication symbols within an object or subject to reveal insights that ideally will aid in understanding and improving human communication. The specific method is generative, allowing for the generation of analysis criteria. That criteria, as shown in figure 2, are framing strategies used within the films.

Figure 2: Method and criteria

## III. Results

Discovered within this research is a tendency for mass media to frame domestic abuse and violence through the lens of patriarchal hegemony, individualizing the problem, and assigning blame to women. The specific findings related to motion pictures is similar in nature with similar patterns emerging for the characters (figure 3).

The framing of victims reveal:

- women are innocent and vulnerable
- changes herself to appease the abuser
- it's the woman's responsibility to be safe and end the abuse

Fictional abusers are framed as:

- likable villains
- extremely wealthy and/or hold positions of power within the

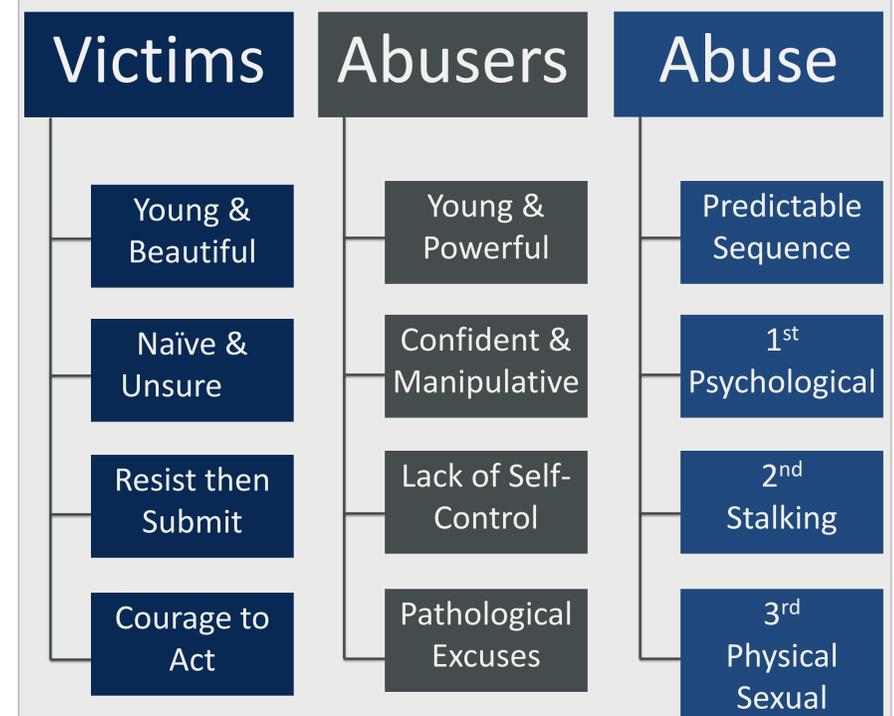
community

- pathological explanations given for abusive behavior, such as alcohol or drug abuse

Framing the depicted abuse:

- escalating harm
- power & control over victim
- emotional manipulation
- stalking (following)
- physical violence
- sexual control
- death

Figure 3: Framing results



## IV. Conclusions

This analysis reveals a propagation of stereotypes for fictional victims and abusers involved in a domestic abuse scenario. Providing the audience with such a narrow view of character types naturally eliminates all other types which can skew an individual's understanding of the issue- not only in who can be involved, but in what abuse entails.

This finite understanding may create a false sense of security for viewers and influence incorrect ideations. This in turn influences societal beliefs and morals regarding the issue and can hinder awareness, empathy, and action.

This particular type of analysis is vital in revealing the communication strategies used by media as they depict abuse and the unavoidable effects it has on audiences. Finally, analyzing the communication of a serious, deviant practice like domestic abuse, can assist in directing needed attention to a major social issue and provide a means for people to “see” and discuss what is normally hidden and left unspoken within most cultures.