

Review Article

# Contribution of Media to the Normalization and Perpetuation of Domestic Violence

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## Abstract

Domestic violence (DV) is becoming more prevalent in social media as well as academic literature. Based on the astonishing prevalence rates of DV there are good reasons to consider this issue an epidemic. This paper discusses the mechanisms through which DV is normalized and desensitized in the public's eye. Specifically, DV awareness campaigns, psychosocial interventions, legal definitions, religious traditions, and family cultural influences are each ways in which people understand the issue of DV. However, there are mechanisms through which DV is normalized and condoned through the media. These media outlets unfortunately tend to address DV by portraying sexism, devaluation of women, and most importantly, violence against women. Furthermore, DV continues to be normalized through its comedic portrayal via news outlets, magazines, advertisements, and television shows. Although there is a growing body of research and literature focused on the media's comedic portrayal of domestic violence, it is quite limited. Suggest that using sexist humor, offensive and prejudicial humor, jokes promoting destruction to victims of DV, and language in connection with DV allow society to view this type of violence as more acceptable. Behavioral scientists should work to reverse this trend by demonstrating how the media irresponsibly shapes peoples' perception of DV through a lighthearted and comical fashion.

**Keywords:** Domestic violence; Media; Desensitization; Humor

## Introduction

Violence against women is a serious social problem. Domestic Violence (DV) is one specific type of violence against women that is increasingly being acknowledged in social media and academic literature. In addition to the increasing attention, there are good reasons to believe DV is becoming significantly widespread. For example, we looked at 48 worldwide population-based surveys and found that 10 to 69% of women reported a physical assault by an intimate male partner at some point in their lives (as cited in [1]. More specifically, rates of DV in the United States result in one in four women reporting some type of DV over their lifetime [2], as cited in [3,4]. Data from the United States Bureau of Statistics indicated that 691,710 nonfatal and 1,247 fatal violent victimizations in 2001 were committed by intimate partners [5] this accounts for 20% of the violent crimes committed against women in the United States [6]. Of the types of intimate partner violence reported in 2001, approximately 72 percent involved simple assaults while seven percent involved sexual assault or rape [6]. In addition, [7] and [8] suggest that recidivism rates of DV are approximately 40% to 80% (as cited in [5,9]. surveyed a large number of studies conducted from 2000 to 2006 that focused on partner violence. Their results highlight the existence and seriousness of persisting physical and mental health problems in DV victims [9] and suggest that the astonishing prevalence rates warrant that DV now be considered an epidemic. The following literature review will discuss how DV is normalized and how the public is desensitized to it by way of comedic portrayal in the news, social media, and sexist language. The purpose is also to highlight how the use of humor in television commercials, magazine

advertisements, and television shows facilitates the acceptance of DV in mainstream society.

## Legal construct of domestic violence

Although there are many ways people conceptualize DV, perhaps the most prominent or salient way is as a legal phenomenon—an illegal act of physical violence. In the state of California, the current Health and Safety Code defines DV as “the infliction or threat of physical harm against past or present adult or adolescent intimate partners and shall include physical, sexual and psychological abuse against the partner and is a part of a pattern of assaultive, coercive and controlling behaviors directed at achieving compliance from or control over, that partner”. Equally as broad as California's definition of DV are the charges through which acts of DV may be prosecuted—from felony corporal injury [10] to a misdemeanor ‘simple’ domestic battery [11]. However, when the relationship to the victim cannot be substantiated, alternative or creative penal codes are often used for prosecution, including aggravated battery [12], assault [13], battery [14], elder abuse [15], child abuse [16], child endangerment [17], and criminal threats [18].

## Cultural mechanisms of domestic violence normalization and perpetuation

There is a growing body of research and literature focused on the mechanisms through which DV is normalized and desensitized in the public's eye [19-23]. Such mechanisms include news media coverage of DV, social and cultural perspectives, intergenerational abuse, and even humor used in advertisements and TV shows. Moreover, these mechanisms present themselves differently according to culture.

Domestic violence has been shown to exist in various forms in most societies throughout the world; indeed it is a global phenomenon. Nonetheless, acceptability of DV varies across cultural groups due to a culture's perception of DV behavior [24,25]. Broadly speaking, legal definitions of DV tend to include only physical or assaultive violence between two intimate partners; yet, the expression of DV varies among cultures and sub-cultures, as do mechanisms of normalization and perpetuation of violence in intimate relationships.

One of the most influential factors influencing social acceptance of DV is a society's understanding of gender roles and the implications of marriage. A notable instance in which gender roles normalize DV within a society can be seen in many Arab cultures, in which women are thought to *belong* to their husband's agnatic group and may be controlled as necessary [25]. A similar example can be seen in Hispanic culture: the concepts of *machismo* and *marianismo* normalize many violent patterns of behavior that Westerners might consider DV. Hispanic men are expected to be sexually aggressive, dominant, and maintain control of their wives, whereas Hispanic women are expected to be chaste, subservient to their husbands, and endure a certain degree of suffering for the good of the family [26]. In like fashion, Vietnamese women are expected to maintain a harmonious atmosphere within the family unit—often to their own detriment—which may reinforce cultural expectations that men have control [25]. A prime example can be observed in the LGBTQ population, where victims of abuse may be less likely to report DV or leave abusive relationships for fear of being “outed” or “estranged” from the LGBTQ community.

Furthermore, the tendency for many cultures to value family privacy and prioritize the good of the family above that of the individual, referred to as *familism*, contributes to continued acceptance of abusive behavior [26]. Commonly observed in collectivist cultures, familism can facilitate and perpetuate physical and emotional abuse within families by effectively preventing victims from seeking outside help or even perceiving their treatment as abusive [25]. Still another phenomenon that might facilitate and perpetuate differential patterns of abusive behavior in some cultures is the absence of common terms and an understanding of DV. For example, the phrase “domestic violence” does not translate directly into Russian; thus, recognition of widespread abusive behaviors within families is complicated by the lack of a universal definition [28].

### Religious tradition

From a survey of 1,476 fairly and deeply religious Christian women, Wang, Horney, Levitt, and [29] found that DV is common among them. In fact, more than 50% of the Christian women surveyed reported experiencing at least one form of abuse [29]. Found that church attendance and a belief in God act as protective factors for women in Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) relationships. Victims of IPV reported that their belief gave them the strength to leave the relationship because they felt empowered when they discovered that “God hates abuse more than divorce and they are worth being free from abuse” [29].

Although a belief in God may serve as a protective factor for intimate partner violence, other research suggests that religious leaders may hinder a woman's decision to leave an abusive relationship [30]. Interviewed 22 religious leaders from Christian, Jewish, and Islamic

backgrounds in Memphis, Tennessee. The exploratory analysis suggests that the majority of religious leaders do not accept divorce as a suitable solution to an intimate partner violence relationship. Rather, some leaders reported that divorce should only occur in the case of infidelity or desertion [30]. Found that although religious leaders did not support abuse, religious leaders were concerned with protecting the institution of marriage. These beliefs may have a negative impact on women living with DV due to the fact that religious pressures to preserve the marriage may lead women to stay in abusive relationships.

### Family culture

The family structure can contribute to and perpetuate cycles of abuse, especially in circumstances where victims are dependent on the abuser. Child abuse and intimate partner violence are most prevalent, as children are highly dependent on their caregivers to survive and abusive partners tend to isolate their significant other to gain control over their social, financial, and other aspects of life. Children in stepfamilies seem to be at higher risk for child victimization due to the elevated levels of familial issues, such as higher interpersonal conflict and low socioeconomic status [31]. However, child victimization has different risk factors in single parent family households, namely environmental factors such as unsafe neighborhoods, unsafe schools, and low socioeconomic status [31].

### The Role of Mass Media in Perpetuating Domestic Violence

In addition to cultural factors playing a role in normalization of DV, media reports on DV have the power to desensitize the public's perception of violence via repeated exposure. Chronic and repeated exposure to domestic violence is believed to cause changes in affective, cognitive, and behavioral processes. Specifically, these effects are considered to foster adoption of desensitized thoughts and reactions to DV [32]. Moreover, consistent portrayals of violence in the media are considered to create public acceptance of violence [33]. While there is rising research on how humor is used to portray sexism, devaluation of women, and most importantly, violence against women [34], the comedic portrayal of DV in the media (i.e., television shows, magazines, and advertisements) is under-researched.

Humor is often used to make light of DV; however, jokes about DV frequently contain strong sexist language and can be quite offensive [34]. Television shows and commercial advertisements that portray DV as funny can contribute to the ever-growing problem of normalization and social desensitization. Cable News Network (CNN) recently ran a story on a community high school in which students re-enact Chris Brown, a music celebrity, beating up his celebrity girlfriend, Rihanna, at a homecoming pep rally [35]. The students claimed it was meant to be funny and were expecting applause; however, the community took offense. The students' behavior further perpetuates society's perceptions—especially those of young people—that DV is not serious and is acceptable to joke and laugh about. A model assessing inner-city youth indicated that their exposure to violence normalizes their thoughts about violence [36]. In addition, [37] found that through social media young adults seem to be adopting different expectations of privacy from their partners, termed “boundary lessens,” which can make them more at risk for and accepting of abusive behaviors. It is suggested that social

networking can be used as a tool for domestic violence as way to establish an imbalance of power and control in relationships.

### News outlets

News reports and broadcasts have been found to reflect and shape public opinion [19,21]. Recently, more studies looking at how DV is portrayed in the news have been emerging. Specifically, the press, televised news, and newspaper articles have been shown to have a profound impact on public perception of crime, as cited in [19], for example, looked at how newspapers word articles about DV crimes and related crimes such as rape. She found that the articles tended to describe the offender positively and to characterize the victim in a negative light. She claims that such wording can change the way the public perceives the victim; if a victim is shown negatively, others may believe that the victim “deserved it” and that violence is acceptable [21], also discuss how the wording of an article about DV can impact the way the public views DV. These authors discuss a newspaper article about a man who fractured his Russian mail-order bride’s skull and subsequently pointed a gun at responding police officers. The policemen began firing killed the man. When local newspapers covered the story they portrayed the man as “lovesick” and “wronged by his wife.” These researchers suggest that stories like this distort reality and consequently distort public opinion [21]. Also looked at local and national newspaper articles and collected the articles related to violence and DV; they found that even high quality newspapers do not cover DV consistently.

Similarly, [20] investigated the consistency of DV reporting in newspapers during and following the well-known OJ Simpson murder case. These researchers noted how celebrity cases of DV, such as OJ and Nicole Simpson, show the public that DV occurs even in the “best families” (p. 258). The authors predicted that due to the high coverage of the murder trial, other cases of DV would start emerging in the media and that the murder trial would have a long term effect on the media covering DV [20]. Found that the number of DV related newspaper articles increased during the prime of the OJ Simpson case; however, after the trial was over, the number of DV articles in newspapers decreased, further supporting the inconsistency of DV coverage in the news.

### Humorous Portrayal of Domestic Violence in the Media

Although research on the combination of humor and violence in the media and its influence on viewers are currently limited, it is becoming more prevalent. As such, [34] discuss how humor can be used as a form of sexism and can make DV seem more publicly acceptable if it is turned into a joke. The authors suggest that sexist humor (i.e. offensive and prejudicial humor/jokes causing destruction to the target person) and language can be used to make women appear inferior to men through means of nonchalance: “humor allows insult and disrespect to enter dialogue in a disguised and deniable form” [34,38]. Concur that sexist humor is extremely powerful and can cause and legitimize prejudice against the opposite sex. Sexist humor allows jokes to be made that sexually objectify women, devalue women in their personal and professional lives, and support and normalize aggression and violence against women [34]. However, others assert that it is not simply sexist language that is the problem but who controls the language; patriarchal culture assumes

that men would be in control of such language [39].

A woman’s response to these jokes is also extremely important and has numerous conflicting social implications. There is a proverbial ‘double-edged sword’ in play when a woman is told a sexist joke. If she laughs at the joke, she is seen as devaluing her own group; however, if she does not laugh at the joke, she is seen as not having a sense of humor. In either situation the woman’s “social power” is lowered [34]. Conducted a study that examined themes in various sexist jokes found on internet websites dedicated to jokes; the authors found five themes, four of which are of particular relevance: devaluation of personal characteristics, backlash against feminism, sexual objectification of women, and violence against women [34]. Suggest that jokes “downplay the seriousness of DV” and allow society to view this violence as more acceptable. The authors conclude that disparaging humor such as this belittles and “silences” the target social groups (women), normalizing and desensitizing society to violence against women [40]. Indicate that sexist jokes do not simply reflect underlying assumptions about women but also facilitate an atmosphere of tolerance for the disparagement of women.

### Domestic violence in magazines

Looks at how social media, particularly in magazines, presents DV in a light, amusing, and humorous way [41]. Notes that male and female magazines largely differ in the way they discuss DV. Magazines geared towards female readers tend to connote women as victims and responsible, whereas male magazines seem to present a “tolerance for and celebration of domestic violence” through humor and exoneration [41]. Male magazines specifically introduce the topic of DV through patriarchal ideals that condone and excuse male aggression in an amusing way. Though domestic violence seems to be mentioned briefly, it is presented in humorous ways that undermine the seriousness of its effects. When discussing the effects of DV, male magazine *Sports Illustrated* wrote, “You needn’t be M. Night Shyamalan to know how these stories often end. I see dead people” to illustrate fatality in humorous tone [41]. In addition, a 2013 advertisement in the *DuJour* magazine features the image of a woman laying face down on the ground as her head is being crushed by a large suitcase. The image, used for The Standard hotel, insensitively demonstrates violence against women as a way to advertise traveling in a ludicrous way [41,42]. Argues that popular media shapes social and cultural values and that magazines “have a direct bearing on how individuals and the public perceive and respond” to DV issues (p. 5).

### Television, movies, and video games

The Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) revealed that more than half of all games are rated as containing violence [43]. Long-term exposure to the violence of these portrayed in these video games and television shows may result in an increased acceptance of violence. Further research shows that television media seems to echo magazine representations of domestic abuse. Multiple forms of media produce a cyclical construction of individual “values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structure of the larger society” [41]. A 2011 episode on the widely familiarized television sitcom, *Family Guy*, highlighted an abusive relationship. With few moments of somberness, the majority of the episode translated relational abuse in a light-hearted and comical way as a woman was assaulted and beaten [44]. This type of comical



illustration can aid in sending the message that hitting women is a laughing matter. Portrayal of DV in an amusing fashion continues to send the message that male aggression and domestic abuse is acceptable and insignificant. During the Domestic Violence Awareness Month in 2013, the focus was to create public awareness of domestic violence in the popular culture. Popular romantic comedies such as *500 Days of summer* and *There's Something about Mary* were discussed as films that normalize violent behaviors such as stalking and intense fights. This type of abuse is cinematically portrayed as romantic gestures rather than dangerous and ominous behaviors in violent relationships [45]. A study assessing how acceptable the audience finds reality television portrayals of domestic violence indicated that the public views this type of graphic material as normal aspects of relationships and therefore becoming desensitized [32].

### Advertisements

Investigated commercial advertisements aired during three Super Bowl games over a five-year period [46]. The authors identified the number of commercials with violent acts and counted the number of violent acts shown within each commercial, the number of commercial with humorous acts, and the number of commercials that combined humor and violence. The results indicated that 61.3% of the violent acts were combined with humor. Similarly, [47] conducted a study of nearly 4,500 commercial messages during one week of prime-time television and assessed the presence of aggression. Yielding similar findings, they found forms of aggression in 12.3% of the advertisements, where, 53.5% of these advertisements also contained elements of humor [47].

It is important to note that humor and violence in the media and advertising extends beyond simply targeting women [48]. Advertisement broadcasts during the Super Bowl of 1989, 1999, and 2009 and television advertising of the five most advertised brands in 2008 (i.e. Verizon, AT&T, Macy's, Sprint, and Wal-Mart) were analyzed and assessed for the presence of aggression, the target of aggression (gender), and the type of aggression portrayed [49]. While not providing any statistics, analysis revealed that the three of the top five brands (Verizon, AT&T, and Sprint) advertised in 2008 used denigration humor that was often violent in nature. In addition, the researchers found that over the 20 year cross section of advertising, the use of disparagement, particularly physical aggression aimed at males, increased from 13.6% in 1989 to 73.4% in 2009. This number stands in contrast to the humorous ads with females as the target of aggression which only grew from 0% in 1989 to 10.8% in 2009. The researchers discuss plausible reasons for this disparity including the lack of research on female initiated interpersonal violence which may influence society's perspective that violence on men is laughable and even acceptable [49]. Researchers suggest that although advertising often presents an incomplete, unrealistic, and distorted view of society, these distortions often shape societal culture [48,49].

### Potential for Breaking the Cycle

Over time society has become more aware of violence against women. High profile DV cases like O.J. Simpson and Chris Brown's alleged abuse of Rihanna bring attention to the scope of this problem and show that it can have very negative and pervasive effects [50]. Yet media exposure of violence against women can also have certain untoward effects; it can desensitize people to social problems like

DV, making them seem less problematic than they really are and obfuscating the issues that are involved in them. In particular, the media's association of DV and humor seems to make it appear silly or trivial—something people can laugh at [51]. Behavioral scientists may be able to address how the media influences societal perception of DV by presenting consistent research on various ways that the media portrays DV in an acceptable light in television shows, video games, news reports, and advertisements [52].

### Awareness campaigns

It is important to understand that awareness about DV occurs through a variety of frameworks. In order to make the issue of DV more visible beyond the micro level, several institutions have developed campaigning strategies to uncover, discuss, and challenge DV in the meso and macro levels. According to The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010, it is required that new health plans provide preventative services for women's well-being without requiring a co-payment, co-insurance, or deductible. Included in these preventative services is screening and counseling for interpersonal and domestic violence. According to [53], agencies like the Kaiser Permanente Family Foundation have reported that 44% of health care plans will receive DV screening with the expectation that the number would grow over time. Being the victim of DV is predictive of poor health outcomes [54] and, therefore, requires the medical field to help prevent future incidents of DV [55]. Found that women who were screened for DV in a healthcare setting considered it a "socially accepted way to break the silence" (p. 218) as long as professionals were open minded and ready to listen. In fact, participants in this study encouraged larger community awareness campaigns to address DV, which have the ability to utilize resources including statistics, personal testimony, and intervention programs.

According to [56] an effective response to violence must address the immediate needs of women experiencing abuse and change cultural norms and legal provisions that promote the acceptance of violence against women. The National Coalition against Domestic Violence, The U.S. Department of Justice's Office on Violence against Women, and National Network to End Domestic Violence are a few organizations that provide referrals, workshops, hotlines, support groups, shelters, psycho education, and advocacy for the awareness of DV [57,58]. Several agencies also offer creative ideas to touch the public such as using famous actors and actresses to take a stand and become spokespersons or representatives for their campaigns [59,60]. Such campaigns, like PSAs NO MORE, additionally cooperate with corporations like the Avon Foundation for Women, Verizon, Kaiser Permanente, and Allstate as a way to reach consumers [59]. As institutions address DV through campaigns, the public is receiving a more widespread knowledge of DV on a national and communal level.

### Conclusion

As the media continues to perpetuate representations of DV as trivial and comical, it will be further normalized and desensitized in the public view. In addition, misrepresentation of DV as romantic and attractive translates that violence against women is acceptable. Minimizing the gravity of DV can lead to troubling outcomes such as underreporting of DV; this can impact the amount of individuals seeking treatment and result in victims of DV being unacknowledged

and underserved. As researchers investigate interventions for DV at individual and family levels, their work must continue to inform clinical psychologists and other mental health professionals about the sequelae associated with it. Clinicians should likewise educate themselves through continuing education and other sources of information about the problems associated with DV. Yet, they should also understand how society-at-large may influence the nature of DV; if the media impacts culture, then it, too, should promote accurate messages about DV. Without awareness regarding the existence of the media's normalization of DV, survivors and all those affected may remain victims of a normalizing culture. Moreover, clinicians' ability to educate themselves about factors that may perpetuate the cycle will allow them to provide services for clients affected by DV in a more holistic manner. Providing more comprehensive education on how media can serve as a barrier to accurate representations of DV may aid in reshaping the public's opinion about DV.

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