A Content Analysis on Domestic Violence in Lifetime Movies

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Domestic violence has been portrayed in many made-for-TV *Lifetime Television* movies. Women have a higher chance of being emotionally, physically, and sexually abused in intimate partnerships versus men. Lifetime Television targets a female audience and media often performs a key role in the public perception of social issues, therefore, it is important to understand how cases of domestic violence are depicted in these “Television for Women” movies. A content analysis on six *Lifetime Television* movies that offer a plot of domestic violence will be conducted. Findings include themes of race, stereotypes of gender roles, and power dynamics. Additional patterns found were turning points in the relationships, the idea of “If I can’t have you, no one can” and the ways the victims escaped the relationship.
Introduction

Domestic violence, more recently referred to as Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), is a huge issue in the world that affects more than 12 million people each year (The Center for Disease Control 2012). Tjaden and Thoennes’s 2000 study (as cited by Howard et. Al 2009) found that incidents of domestic violence cases are comparable for both men and women, though women tend to be at higher risks for all accounts of abuse. This fact is shown in many forms of media, including films specifically directed towards a female audience. Movies can be seen as a representation of domestic violence to many of its viewers because the media undeniably performs a key role in the public perception of social issues (Wheeler 2009).

Movies displaying plots of domestic violence are also shown on well-known channels like on Lifetime Television, previously marketed as “Television for Women”. Launched in 1984 as a continued leading force of entertainment, the Lifetime Television has always had a purpose of focusing on health and wellness shows for women (Friedman, 2014). The network itself boasts on the fact that they serve as an ‘escape for women’ and remain the number one female-targeted network on all of basic cable (Lifetime 2014) with their made-for-TV movies as the strongest rating performers (Lotz 2006). While film is usually made to provide entertainment and escapism it often does more than that by bringing attention to certain issues and problems in the world as well as giving us a glimpse into the lives of certain individuals (Lenahan 2009). Because of the fact that people are so influenced by film and what they represent, I would like to examine the Lifetime Television’s ability to inform its female audience by specifically looking at how domestic violence is portrayed in these ever so popular Lifetime
Television movies. Using content analysis, I will examine different films created and released by the Lifetime Television that have a plot that includes domestic violence or spousal abuse. It is important to study this to see the underlying messages and themes in these films depicting domestic violence and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV).

**Literature Review**

Domestic violence can vary from different forms of abuse including, psychological or verbal abuse, threats, physical violence, spousal rape, and sadly, death in some cases (Lenaham, 2009). It can also consist of things like intimidation, social isolation, and lack of support (as cited by Wong and Mellor 2014). Because of how common domestic violence has become throughout the world, several organizations including the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) have decided to proclaim intimate partner violence a major health problem threatening more and more women every day (Lenahan 2009).

Domestic violence has been examined repeatedly and in many different aspects by scholars. The definition of domestic violence varied slightly throughout the different research, but each seemed to agree that this type of violence typically involves some form of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse between adults in a relationship (Wong and Mueller 2014, Howard et. Al 2009). While there is no previous research done specifically analyzing Lifetime Television movies portrayal of domestic violence, there is research that has been done through content analysis on media including film and television news.

Popular films have a huge opportunity to reach its audience worldwide (Wheeler 2009) and give its viewers insight by bringing attention to public health issues and other
social matters they might otherwise not be aware of (Lenahan 2009). Film also plays a crucial role in displaying both facts and myths about domestic violence (Wheeler 2009). Besides the breakout movie, the *Burning Bed* (1984), movies with plots of domestic violence were not seen too often in the 1980’s. It wasn’t until the 1990’s that domestic violence and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) began to be depicted in mainstream English-language cinema (Wheeler 2009). Most research on the portrayals of domestic violence in film focused on major films that tend to be well-known throughout the nation. *What’s Love Got to Do with It* (1993) was studied in almost all of the research that has been done on media and domestic violence. The movie is based on the true story of Ike and Tina Turner’s violent relationship and was described as false consciousness by opposing the belief that domestic violence is a result of individual behaviors in a private situation and instead shows it as a product of cultural norms for men and women supported by different institutions, including popular culture (Shoos 2003). Another study examined *Disney’s Beauty and the Beast* (1991) to have been changed from prior versions of the story and romanticized IPV between the two characters, thus creating domestic violence as social norm that will serve as a representation that is both realistic and familiar to its audience (Olson 2006). *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1990) is a movie with a famous female lead (Julia Roberts) who experienced IPV while in a relationship with her rich and powerful husband but eventually escapes his abuse by leaving the marriage. The film was examined to have a ‘victim empowerment frame’, which takes away the true point of the film by focusing on the individual pathological case rather than the whole social problem of domestic violence (Kozal 1995).
Feminism and the female role in domestic violence was another theme among previous research on film and media. A study by Kozal (1995) focused on the understanding of how representations of domestic violence play a role in feminist challenges in mainstream cultural values. With domestic violence depicted typically as a private matter the representation of it through mainstream media tend to protect male power while usually showing the audience two different themes: that women are solely to blame for the abuse or that women are empowering heroes that escape the abuse (Kozal 1995). The cycle of domestic violence theory describes three phases in abusive relationships including a tension-building phase, the acute battering incident, and the honeymoon phase (Lenahan 2009). This theory is visibly focused around a woman victim in a domestically violent relationship, thus, media continues to treat abuse as something that happens to women rather than something that a partner is doing to her (Shoos 2003). In reality, film does something other than show the truth of female persona in domestic abuse. A study by Dolan (2003) examined films that specifically included domestic violence on women, with them escaping their abuse by defending themselves and murdering their abuser. Even though women are more likely victimized of IPV cases ending in serious abuse or murder of a male spouse, film still offers a differ imagination of this by showing heroic women killing their husbands in films like *The Rainmaker* (1998) and *Enough* (2002) (Dolan 2003).

**Methodology**

Domestic violence has been portrayed in different forms of media for years. Because media like film and television play such a huge role in our society and how we form ideas of social issues, I would like to do a content analysis on *Lifetime Television*
made-for-TV movies that have a plot of domestic violence. A content analysis is best for this study because it will allow me to view different movies and observe the manifest and latent indicators throughout the films to discover the underlying messages that Lifetime is sending to its viewers, especially the female audience they tend to attract. *Lifetime Television* can be seen as the CBS for women networks that invites women of all types to view their channel (Lotz 2006), especially their original television movies women from all backgrounds can usually relate upon. Because of previous research and the major themes of film as a representation of how individuals may truly view domestic violence, this particular channel was chosen because of its targeted audience and what is possibly being portrayed to them is important because of their higher chance of becoming victims of domestic violence themselves.

A content analysis on three decades of *Lifetime Television* movies will be conducted, with two movies per decade with a total of six movies. These movies will range from the 1990’s up until the present year. The names of the movies I will examine include: *Cries Unheard: The Donna Yaklich Story* (1994), *No One Would Tell* (1996), *Her Perfect Spouse* (2004), originally titled *The Perfect Husband*, *Stranger in my Bed* (2005), *Reviving Ophelia* (2010), and *Run for Your Life* (2014). These movies were selected by searching the Lifetime website for movies that included a plot of domestic violence or related terms within the summary that is posted. Once I read the synopsis of each movie, I also researched the website’s schedule to see when these movies were going to be presented on *Lifetime Television*. All of the movies are viewable through regular TV broadcasting and to make it more convenient to take notes, I will use Digital Video Recorder (DVR) to record them on the dates they are played. By recording these
movies through DVR I am able to pause parts of the movie in order to take an extra look beneath the surface and find the true meanings within them. I will specifically pay attention to manifest indicators that are obvious and noticeable like the plot, appearance of characters, music and sounds, as well as latent indicators that are hidden within the actual film, like gender roles and stereotypes. Based upon the indicators found through the content analysis of the films, I will be able to recognize how domestic violence is portrayed through *Lifetime Television* movies.

**Findings**

The *Lifetime Television* movies examined in this content analysis had a synopsis that was related to domestic violence and spousal abuse. Each film included a woman as the victim of domestic violence with the men, either boyfriend or spouse, portrayed as the abusers. Other manifest and latent indicators found throughout the content analysis include the race of all couples being represented in the movies as White and stereotypical gender roles that were intertwined with the previously mentioned themes. The movies were similar to one another in many aspects, but there were four major themes found overall. These include higher social status in perpetrators, crucial turning point in the relationships, the idea of “If I can’t have you no one can”, and the victims deciding to get out of the relationship.

*The Perpetrators Social Status*

The majority of the films portrayed the men as having a higher social status than the women they dated and eventually abused. Their authority type characteristics allowed them to become controlling over the women and almost made it impossible for the victims to leave or get help. Men abusing their power to get out of what they are doing
wrong is seen multiple times throughout the movies. The stereotype that women are more emotional, weak, and not equal to men were also represented alongside social status’s shown.

*Cries Unheard: The Donna Yaklich Story* shared a story of Donna and her abusive husband, Dennis, who happened to be a police officer. While his dangerous and aggressive side was once seen as attractive to her it was also part of the reason she was unable to get help when she searched for it. In one scene Donna is meeting with one of her husband’s friend who is also a police officer. Very dramatically she pulls off her sunglasses and reveals a black eye and bruised face. Even with the pain in her eyes, the friend immediately tells her that he cannot be involved in their problems, thus making Donna feel hopeless as she sighs and apologizes for even coming to him for help. Later in the movie when Donna gets the courage to leave, Dennis is able to use his authority influences to find her at a woman’s shelter and forces her to leave with him. During the scene one of the workers at the shelter even lets him know that he is abusing his authority by forcing the workers to let him in the shelter where they promise confidentiality and safety to all of their patients. His power dynamics made it nearly impossible for Donna to get help for herself.

In *No One Would Tell*, Bobby the boyfriend was the high school wrestling team captain. He was very popular and all the girls drooled over him so it was a huge surprise to Stacy, a smart and quiet student, when she found out that he was interested in her. Throughout the movie his role of “the jock” is apparent. In one particular scene, Bobby is being abusive to Stacy and is caught by his coach and teammates as he slaps her and she falls to the ground. His power of being a team captain and excuse of not being able to
wrestle the rest of the season allowed him to get out of the incident by claiming it was an accident and that it would never happen again.

*Run for Your Life* portrayed Robert, the abusive ex-husband, who was “well off and had multiple connections”. Throughout the movie his network of the police and a notable judge allowed him to scare Meredith upon telling her that he could have custody of their two daughters in no time. He hired a private investigator to follow her and it is apparent she is being watched as you hear a camera shutter and see flashes on the screen throughout the movie. After finding out that her ex had hired a hit man to kill her, Meredith was left feeling it was time to step up and do something without the help of traditional authority.

*The Turning Point*

In majority of the *Lifetime Television* movies depicting domestic violence showed a turning point where the relationships went from being perfect to showing signs of control and jealousy to a full on demonstration all three major forms or abuse, including: physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. While the three forms of abuse were depicted in various parts of all the movies, the physical aspect of domestic violence definitely shed more light in all films. Many of the scenes that demonstrated violence were similar as the perpetrator always apologized after becoming physically violent and always promised to never do anything like that again. Most time the women accepted the apologies and decided to move forward with their relationships. In a sense, this seemed to open the door for more abuse and as the women continued to make excuses for their spouses it showed a stereotype of gender roles in that women are more sensitive and passive while it is acceptable for the men to be aggressive and tough natured.
In *Her Perfect Spouse*, Ty starts off as a charismatic author who knows how to attract the ladies. As he and Lisa begin to build their relationship she believes that she has met the perfect man, that is until Ty becomes very possessive of her and tries to control her every action. For instance, in one scene Lisa is on the phone with a friend named Matt, conversing about a career opportunity for them to work together. It is obvious that Ty is jealous of this chance for her to work with another man and decides to take matters in his own hands. He ends up attacking the male friend while in disguise causing him to be put in a coma. While Lisa believes this happened to be a random robbery, Ty is secretly satisfied with his work until Matt starts to recover and Lisa starts talking about their plans to work together again. In this scene Ty becomes furious and accuses her of alternative motives with Matt and screams, “Why don’t you just get it over with it and marry the son of a bitch!” With that he pushes her down the stairs leaving her with a fractured ankle. Matt apologizes and says I don’t know what came over me. He blames it on work and the stresses of life and promises nothing like this will happen again and she ends it with “I really want to believe you.”

In *Reviving Ophelia*, Liz is the perfect daughter who could do no wrong. When she introduces Mark to her parents he presents himself as very well-mannered and respectful young man and because they trust their daughter, they automatically put their trust into him. Everything seems perfect between the two as they spend more and more time with one another, though Mark’s controlling side begins to show early on in the film. In one scene, Liz is surprised when Mark questions an outfit that she is wearing and claims that it is too tight and tells her to change. As the movie plays on it shows more occurrences of Marks controlling tendencies towards Liz in ways of checking her cell
phone and demanding that she respond to all his calls and texts immediately, causing Liz to become nervous when she is unable to answer to him right away. Then one night, after Liz sneaks out with Mark, things take a turn for the worse as the relationship becomes abusive. While the actual physical abuse is not originally shown, Liz is described as being in a “car accident” where she hit her face on the dashboard leaving her bruised. Though while in the hospital Mark is revealed apologizing to Liz for hitting her and promises that he will never do it again, claiming that he doesn’t know what made him so angry. She believes him and goes along with the car accident scenario when her parents show up.

In *Cries Unheard* the turning point occurs after a scene of Dennis injecting steroids into his leg in the privacy of the bathroom is shown. Afterwards he is seen in bed with Donna tossing and turning and sweating profusely. As Donna tries to comfort and console him he shrugs her off and tells her to go sleep in the other room. It is obvious to the audience that he is under the influence and possibly suffering from side effects of the steroids. She finally gives in and leaves the room. Not long after she hears Dennis working out so she walks in as he is lifting weights in his underwear. She tells him that she needs a pillow and he irritably tells her to get out. When she demands to know what is wrong with him he angrily picks up a full beer can and throws it across the room hitting her in the face. The next scene shows her pacing at her sister’s house as the phone rings with Dennis on the other line. He eventually shows up after she ignores his calls and loudly bangs on the door while crying and screaming. Donna’s sister warns her that once she opens the door there is no turning back and that once a man shows a violent side it is likely for him to be violent again. Donna chooses to open the door where she sees
Dennis on his knees. She makes him promise that he will never do anything like that again and he agrees as they hug.

*If I Can’t Have You, No One Can*

A lot of the movies that I viewed for this content analysis had an element that related to “If I can’t have you, then no one can.” This motto basically means that the woman has no choice but to stay in the relationship and put up with all the controlling, possessive, and abusive traits of the man. If she does decide to leave though she can already accept the fact that it is not going to be easy and in some instances it will not be possible.

*Stranger in my Bed* portrays the story of Sarah who goes into hiding after faking her own death to escape the abuse of her husband, Ryan. After nearly a year and a half of living another life and finally feeling safe, Sarah begins to date a new man named Brad. After finding several clues of not actually being dead, like a will and other documents on how to change your identity, Ryan goes on the hunt to find his missing wife and even hires a private investigator to help. Eventually he finds her and figures out that she is dating someone else. This only adds fuel to fire as he refuses to let anyone but himself have her and he ultimately makes plans to kill her and Brad. After Sarah comes home one afternoon and sees her home destroyed time seems to slow down and she knows deep down Ryan has found her and she finally gets the courage to tell Brad about her past and her maniac husband. They decide that their love was too strong to let go and Brad agrees that they are in it together and will fight for her protection.

*Her Perfect Spouse* was centered on the idea of “If I can’t have you, no one can.” Throughout the movie Ty shut many of Lisa’s friends and family out. He attacked a male friend that she had an opportunity to work with, he tricked Lisa into thinking her sister
came on to him, thus forcing her out, and even killed her friend who came to check on Lisa when she hadn’t returned any of her calls. The real cutting part is that Ty did not even want to share Lisa with their unborn child. In one scene Lisa discovered that Ty had been giving her pain medicines that was really contained a compound that induces abortions which caused her to lose her baby.

Sadly in *No One Would Tell*, the pattern of “If I can’t have you, no one can” left the victim, Stacy, dead. After several accounts of abuse and violence the teen decided to leave her boyfriend Bobby once and for all. After some time apart Bobby calls Stacy and reminds her of a haircut she promised she would give him. It was obvious that she had her doubts because she was finally moving on in her life, but she made it clear that she would only go over on the terms that they were friends and only that. It was apparent Bobby was being phony as the audience saw the amused look upon his face. Once at his house she gave him a haircut as they laughed and reminisced on good times. His performance of this genuinely changed person led her to agree when he asked her to go for a ride. As they arrived to the destination you could see the nervousness on Stacy’s face. It was dark secluded area that they use to visit when they dated. However, she agrees to get out and walk along the lake as they had previously done. As they are walking he stops and asks for one last hug and whispers in her ear, “you promised we’d be together forever” as he begins to stab her in the back.

*Women Getting Out and Leaving the Relationships*

The women portrayed in these movies often were left with the decision of how to leave the abusive relationship they had become accustomed to. While some simply tried to break up and end the relationship others knew that it would never be that simple so
they relied on more extreme plans like killing their husbands or by disappearing altogether.

Sarah in *Stranger in my Bed* ultimately decided to disappear and fake her own death when she could no longer take her husband’s abusiveness. After getting out of the hospital as a result of his violence she came up with the perfect scenario. As a reporter for a local newspaper she thought it’d be the perfect opportunity to fake her death while working on a report on caves. She decided she would fall to her death and even invited her husband along to make the situation more convincing. As she executes the plan and pretends to fall in one of the caves her husband Ryan rushes to go get help. Sarah gets away and makes it to another state where she begins her new life for the next eighteen months.

“Somebody is going to die, either him or me,” Donna says in *Cries Unheard*, right before she asks her neighbor Eddy to carry out the job of killing Dennis. She agrees to pay him a good amount of money and makes him promise not to tell anyone. Donna gets impatient as the murder seems to take longer than she expected. She is still being abused often and doesn’t know how much longer she can wait so she confronts Eddy on the hold up. After confirming plans and hiring another killer the crime is eventually committed and Dennis is shot dead. Though this is what Donna wanted, her happiness was short lived once police found out it was her behind the assassination. She ended up in prison with a charge of murder. In a dialogue with her son she lets him know that she would have walked if she had been the one to pull the trigger in self-defense, but has no regrets and would do it all over again if she had too.
Run for Your Life was a combination of the two previous movies. The scenes in the movie were split between Meredith choosing to kill her husband and her choosing to disappear. The result of killing her husband left her being found guilty of murder in the first degree and leaving her daughters without both parents. With the choice of disappearing her and her daughters had a tough time adapting, but overall lived happily in a new place with new identities. At the end of the movie it is revealed that she indeed chose the underground railroad option of hiding and starting completely over rather than killing her husband.

Discussion

The themes that appeared in the Lifetime Television movies relate to different sociological theories. While the movies consisted of women victimized by their spouses in terms of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, there were underlying aspects found through the content analysis.

The race of all the couples in the Lifetime Television movies analyzed were White. This could lead the audience to believe that domestic violence is more common or only happens to women who are racially White. Data shows that the average rate of nonfatal IPV cases that occurred throughout 1993-2004 was higher for Black women at 8.2 per 1000 versus White women at 6.3 per thousand, though African American women are also less likely to report domestic violence and IPV in African American couples remains understudied (As cited by Mansley 2009).

Looking at the different social statuses of the men portrayed in these movies, it is obvious that the movies had a crucial message of power dynamics. Often abusers feel entitled and believe that they have special status that gives them rights and privileges
others don’t possess (As cited by Spangler and Brandl 2007). The men portrayed in the movies often held prestige and honor. For instance, representing a police officer or the captain of the high school wrestling team. These labels allowed the abusive men in these films to have advantages in their communities. Due to these advantages, the situations with the spouses and girlfriends of the perpetrators became more difficult when they wanted to escape the relationship and the domestic violence that they were experiencing.

Majority of the movies in this content analysis had a representation of some type of turning point where the perfect relationship took a turn for the worse with the men becoming violent with their partner. Previous research conducted on perpetrators of domestic violence show that domestic violence is more of a pattern rather than an isolated event (As cited by Fowler and Westen 2011). A social theory, called the cycle of violence theory, identifies three different phases in domestically violent relationships which include: the tension-building phase, the acute battering stage, and the honeymoon phase (Lenahan 2009). These different phases were all portrayed throughout the films analyzed. There were also several indicators leading up to the “turning point” and these behaviors occurred frequently in the different movies. The men showed multiple warning signs in ways of making the victim feel bad and blaming her for their anger or trying to control their partners every action. Other warning signs of domestic violence include jealousy, controlling behavior, quick involvement, unrealistic expectations, isolations, blame-shifting, hypersensitivity, rigid gender roles, drink or substance abuse, and so forth (Hidden Hurt 2014). Warning signs the abusers portrayed in the movies gives the viewer the opportunity to grasp some common patterns of domestic violence.
The theme of “If I can’t have you, no one can,” can relate to the specific psychological characteristics that the perpetrators often possess. Research has found that the men who are committing violence and abuse against their spouse can be considered insecure, with low self-esteem and have poor social skills, and lack empathy and compassion for others (As cited by Rode 2010). These different characteristics were portrayed in the movies by the different roles of the perpetrators and therefore can give the audience some insight to true representation of a person who may have violent tendencies and could become abusive at some point.

The pattern of women taking a stand and finding a way to escape their abusive relationship can be tied to feminism. As Lifetime Television tends to focus on a woman audience, it is of no surprise that feminism plays a role in the movies viewed for this analysis. After being abused and controlled throughout most of the relationships the victims often took a stand and decided to do something about their situation. While some of them broke up with their spouses, others faked their death, went into hiding, hired hit men, and in some cases murdered their husbands. Regardless of the outcome each scenario left the women with a sense of empowerment. Kozal (1995) says that feminism, after all, is to give women the courage to exercise their free will and to not be the brainwashed by the victim role that they have played for so long. People often find themselves questioning why the women stay, but this habitual thinking is what keeps women quiet about their situations in the first place because they don’t want to feel pitied as the victim (Shoos 2003). Lifetime Television’s depiction of domestic violence can help shed light on to the reasons that make it almost impossible sometimes for people to leave
an abusive relationship, but can also show that women are capable of taking a stance by seeing light at the end of the tunnel.

**Conclusion**

The rates of domestic violence and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) continues to be a problem throughout the world and has been portrayed in many different forms of media over the years. Lifetime Television’s ability to reach a female audience makes it important to study their depiction of domestic violence through film because women tend to be at higher risks for all accounts of abuse in IPV (Howard at. Al 2009). There were different themes and patterns found throughout the six movies analyzed by looking at latent and manifest indicators that overall relate to sociological theories.

The movies in this content analysis included *Cries Unheard: The Donna Yaklich Story* (1994), *No One Would Tell* (1996), *Her Perfect Spouse* (2004), originally titled *The Perfect Husband*, *Stranger in my Bed* (2005), *Reviving Ophelia* (2010), and *Run for Your Life* (2014). Manifest indicators revealed all the couples involved in domestic violence in the movies analyzed to be White. Gender stereotypes were also among the latent indicators including women to be more sensitive, emotional, passive, and nurturing while the men followed a pattern of assertive, confident, and ambitious. Power dynamics was another latent indicator shown in majority of the movies showing that men had higher social status in cases like being a police officer or being connected and well off. Other major findings included a dramatic turning point in the relationships where the men began to show and a different side to themselves, the idea of “If I can’t have you, no one can, and the victims deciding enough is enough. The audience of these *Lifetime*
Television movies can be influenced by the similarities seen throughout the characters and overall storylines.

There were some limitations to this content analysis and that includes the sample of the movies because not all races and non-traditional relationships are represented. Majority of the movies had similar storylines and while there were plenty of Lifetime Television movies that portray domestic violence and IPV there wasn’t much variety in terms of the plots. Because of this limit the audience may build certain stereotypes to domestic violence.

There has been numerous research done on media and how it depicts domestic violence, including several Hollywood movies have been studied and critiqued on how the portrayal of perpetrators and victims. Therefore, this content analysis could be further studied by looking at other made-for-TV movies that show domestic violence in order to get a broader and more represented sample.
References


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