



## **Toxic Masculinity on Television: A Content Analysis of Preferred Adolescent Programs**

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Toxic Masculinity on Television: A Content Analysis of Preferred  
Adolescent Programs

By

Lindsay Roberts

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS


In the Graduate College

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

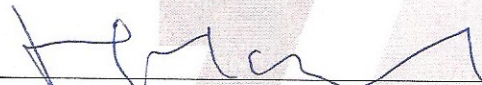
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THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA  
GRADUATE COLLEGE

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### **Abstract**

The present study examined the prevalence of toxic masculinity on adolescent television programs using social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) and social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation (Bussey & Bandura, 1999) as a theoretical lens. Drawing from a sample of current television shows that adolescents watch, the content analysis observes two indicators of toxic masculinity: aggression (physical aggression and expressions of anger) and an avoidance of femininity (a mockery of femininity, a suppression of vulnerable emotions and an intolerance of homosexuality). The results indicated that toxic masculinity occurs within 36.8% ( $n = 869$ ) of scenes on adolescent television shows. Furthermore, gender differences occurred in the enactment of specific indicators of toxic masculinity. Physical aggression was exhibited more often by male characters than female characters, but female characters enacted a suppression of vulnerable emotions more often than male characters. Future research along with theoretical and practical implications in regard to toxic masculinity are discussed.

*Keywords:* toxic masculinity, adolescents, television, gender

### Introduction

“You play ball like a girl,” is the most insulting statement to the male characters in the 1993 movie, *The Sandlot*. This statement exemplifies a current problem our society faces: that men being compared to a woman is the ultimate insult. To be sure, this quote is not the only of its kind; there are many more lines of dialogue that could replace this statement. The issue with these statements is that they encourage men to be “manlier” and to be less feminine. Statements like this encourage men to adhere to a specific type of masculinity in order to fit in with others, thus reinforcing traditional gender roles.

Empirical research explores such portrayals of traditional gender roles, like the one above, by examining the differences between men and women in regard to behaviors, communication, attitudes, and a variety of other attributes (Gerding & Signorielli, 2014; Hentges & Case, 2013; Luther & Legg, 2010). Specifically, research has frequently examined such media depictions of traditional gender roles (Collins, 2011). These depictions of stereotypical gender roles for males and females influence how the individual acts in regard to their respective gender (Ward & Aubrey, 2017). While much of the content analytic literature examines gender roles as a concept, much of the critical and cultural research on gender roles for men focuses in particular on hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is the culturally and widely accepted and idealized form of masculine character in a particular historical context and serves as the standard by which “real men” are defined (Connell, 1990). Hegemonic masculinity currently emphasizes an inability to express emotions besides anger, the subordination of women, competitiveness and toughness, an unwillingness to admit weakness, and homophobia (Brittan, 1989). Similar to hegemonic masculinity is

toxic masculinity, which has made its way into popular discourse within the last few years. Toxic masculinity is “a heterosexual masculinity that is threatened by anything associated with femininity (whether that is pink yogurt or emotions)” (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2015, para 1). Thus, toxic masculinity can be considered as part of the overarching idea of hegemonic masculinity because these traits of toxic masculinity are widely accepted and expected of men. However, toxic masculinity differs from hegemonic masculinity because of its’ sole focus on the regressive traits (or toxic elements) of hegemonic masculinity. That is, toxic masculinity encourages an avoidance of femininity, which includes the repression of vulnerable emotions, and the expression of only aggression and anger. The emphasis on these regressive traits for men can lead to harmful effects, like to their mental health (Kupers, 2005). The purpose of this content analysis is to examine the extent to which toxic masculinity is perpetuated by television shows targeted to adolescent audiences.

### **Toxic Masculinity**

#### **Origin of Toxic Masculinity**

The concept of toxic masculinity was developed by Dr. Bliss in the 1980’s. During this time, Bliss created the Mythopoetic Men’s Movement, a movement that sought to liberate men from the ideals of the modern world in regard to masculinity. This movement coined the term toxic masculinity to describe the “toxic” masculine gender roles, which the movement aimed to liberate men from. In recent years, a resurgence of the term began in 2015 due to the trending of the #MasculinitySoFragile hashtag on Twitter (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2015). The discussion of toxic masculinity continued on Twitter and throughout 2016 due to the aggressive discourse spouted by male

presidential primary candidates. The Representation Project, an organization that examines representation within the media, went so far as to say it was the theme that dominated the year (The Representation Project, 2016). Additionally, toxic masculinity has been discussed in light of sexual harassment and assault allegations stemming from the Me Too movement. In a tweet responding to Harvey Weinstein being charged with sexual assault, The Women's March, a women-led political movement, connected toxic masculinity to his acts by stating, "Toxic masculinity and misogyny can no longer be ignored or tolerated at the workplace or any other place in society." While toxic masculinity has been a part of the popular discourse for more than the last quarter of a century, its recent resurgence has highlighted the effects of toxic masculinity on men and on society as a whole.

### **Definition of Toxic Masculinity**

Toxic masculinity is a more specific form of other types of masculinity, such as hegemonic masculinity. Toxic masculinity emphasizes the *avoidance of femininity* and the *demonstration of aggression and anger* whereas hegemonic masculinity is based on two ideas: a hierarchy of internal dominance and the domination of women (Connell, 1987). This type of masculinity is also different from other types of masculinity because of its detrimental (or "toxic") effects on men. Toxic masculinity encapsulates characteristics that are socially destructive, such as aggression and the avoidance of femininity, from aspects that are socially constructive, like achieving success or being a loyal friend and family man (Kupers, 2005).

Because content analytic research has examined masculinity in the media, aspects of toxic masculinity have been incidentally examined as well (Luther & Legg, 2010;

Scharrer, 2012). However, no published content analytic studies have focused on toxic masculinity specifically. The lack of content analytic research is most likely due to its recent relevance within the mainstream. Although the research is just beginning to look at effects of this specific type of masculinity, the repression of emotions and expression of only aggression have the potential to lead to a variety of problems for men and women. First, toxic masculinity encourages men to enact the rigid set of expectations, behaviors, and perceptions of what is considered “manly.” Men who do not fit within this strict definition of what is “manly” are ostracized and considered not “real men.” This idea forces and encourages men to behave in a certain way or else they will forfeit their “manliness” (Edwards & Jones, 2009). Second, stereotypical ideas about masculinity for men lead to stereotypical ideas of femininity for women also. The dichotomous way society views masculinity and femininity necessitates that men must act one way, and women must act the other. Thus, toxic masculinity affects not only men, but also women by enforcing and encouraging beliefs and attitudes about stereotypical gender roles for both men and women (Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2006).

### **Gender and the Media**

#### **Social Cognitive Theory**

Social cognitive theory describes the way individuals learn behaviors through the process of observing others (Bandura, 2001). Bandura posits that there are three reciprocal determinants (personal, behavioral, and environmental) that affect and inform one’s modeling of an observed behavior (Bandura, 2001).

The behaviors are not observed and automatically enacted, but rather a series of other factors influence one’s decision to enact a learned behavioral script (Bandura,

2001). Observational learning includes four sub-stages: attentional processes, cognitive representational processes, behavioral production processes, and motivational processes. Attentional processes determine which modeling influences an observer will attend to and which modeling influences they will not. Some factors that influence what an observer attends to include cognitive skills, salience, preconceptions and attractiveness. Cognitive representational processes involve retention of the modeled behavior. This is aided by the transformation of the behavior from the model into a memory code and then cognitive rehearsals of the coded information. The behavioral production process involves translating those conceptions of a behavior into an action. This process requires a lot of modification cognitively and behaviorally in order to transform the conception into an enacted behavior appropriately. Motivational processes are used to distinguish between the acquisition of a behavior and the performance of a behavior. This is influenced by three types of motivators: direct, vicarious, and self-produced. These motivators are what determine if a behavior will be enacted (Bandura, 2001).

Vicarious motivators are one way in which behaviors are learned from media models. Viewers further learn about possible rewards or consequences that occur because of the model's actions. According to Bandura (1971), knowing a model's behavior will produce rewards can increase motivation to enact the behavior, and knowing a model's behavior will receive a punishment will reduce the tendency of an observer to act in a similar way.

### **Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation**

Social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation, an extension of social cognitive theory, explicates the way which children develop their ideas about

gender. According to the theory, one way that children learn gendered behaviors is through exposure to gender-stereotyped media and gendered toys (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). There are two processes that shape gender development. The first process, known as modeling, occurs when children learn gendered behavior by watching parents, peers, teachers, and media models. Children will especially learn from salient models that are same-gender, powerful, attractive and/or rewarded for their behaviors.

The second process of gender development is direct tuition, which states that children are rewarded and encouraged, to enact gender-stereotypical behavior and are discouraged for engaging in gender atypical behaviors (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). These processes, which inform children's gender typing, are how children acquire gender identity and motives, values, and behaviors appropriate for their biological sex (i.e., gender role standards).

In early adolescence, gender is more salient than in other stages of development. According to Erikson's (1968) model of psychosocial development, adolescents are grappling with identity cohesion versus role confusion. In this stage, adolescents grapple with their values and beliefs about a variety of subjects, including gender. Also, during this developmental stage, there are gender intensification pressures such that gender becomes more pronounced and noticed by adolescents. Due to this rigid focus on gender, adolescents find activities that are gender stereotypical and will associate more with other adolescents of the same gender (Hill & Lynch, 1983). This second gender intensification stage co-occurs with puberty for adolescents. Therefore, during these times, the need to develop a stable gender identity becomes more salient, and adolescents look to the media for how to behave in regard to their gender (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Thus, examining

toxic masculinity in television shows that teens are watching will aid in our understanding of how toxic masculinity is potentially learned as a part of this developmental stage.

### **Masculinity in Television Programs**

Depictions of masculinity and femininity are one way in which the media perpetuate gender-stereotypical beliefs and behaviors. Such depictions are usually examined under the overarching concept of gender roles, which has been extensively researched in regard to the media (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004; Gerding & Signorielli, 2014). Gender roles include the stereotypical traits, behaviors, and attitudes usually ascribed to men and women. Most depictions of gender roles in the media include portrayals of men as dominant, aggressive, and unemotional, and women as submissive and emotional (Baker & Raney, 2007; Scharrer, 2012). Depictions of gender roles also appear in television shows for adolescents. In tween television shows, Gerding and Signiorelli (2014) found that male characters outnumber female characters 2 to 1 and in action-adventure shows (tween television shows geared towards male viewers), male characters outnumbered female characters 3 to 1. In a separate content analysis of tween television shows, Gerding (2011) found that male characters were more likely than female characters to not only commit violence, but also be the victims of violence as well. The results of such content analyses are consistent with the gender role patterns in other content analyses of television.

Despite content analyses not explicitly exploring toxic masculinity as a concept, there is research that explores (1) male aggression and (2) feminine and emotional avoidance in men separately (Martin, 2017; Sink & Mastro, 2017). Male aggression is

particularly prevalent in the media. For example, a wealth of content analytic evidence suggests that men are more often portrayed as behaving aggressively than women (e.g., Barner, 1999; Coyne & Archer, 2004).

Research has also explored the idea of avoiding femininity. Specifically, content analyses have looked at the act of avoiding feminine emotions and/or only demonstrating anger. Previous research has supported this trend in television (Scharrer, 2012; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). Martin (2017) found that male characters exhibit more anger than female characters. However, contradicting prior research, male characters were also found to portray all emotions more frequently than female characters. Martin suggested that the reason men in children's television have been demonstrating more emotions recently is because they are often the protagonist of the show and therefore the center of action. Therefore, the mixed research in regard to male character's emotions on television necessitates further exploration.

Additionally, there have been a few key studies on masculinity in television: (1) Van Damme and Van Bauwel's (2010) textual analysis of *One Tree Hill*; (2) Scharrer's (2012) content analysis of police and detective dramas, and (3) Sink and Mastro's (2017) examination of gender within primetime television. Overall, these examinations of gender roles, which include behaviors and attitudes about masculinity and femininity, have found that men and women are depicted often in stereotypical ways (Sink & Mastro, 2017). Moreover, men tend to lack emotional intelligence, and demonstrate more aggression, while women tend to be physically attractive and use their bodies to get what they want (Scharrer, 2012; Van Damme & Van Bauwel, 2010).

While there are some content analytic examinations of parts of toxic masculinity in the media, Rohner's (2018) master's thesis appears to be the first piece in communication literature to examine toxic masculinity as a whole concept. This study used elements from the hypermasculine index (including insulting others, callous attitudes towards sex, violence, risky behavior, and suppressing emotions) to develop a codebook that was used to examine toxic masculinity in Netflix original series. This study had three major findings: (1) there is a rather high prevalence of toxic masculinity enacted by both male and female characters in Netflix original series with males overall displaying more toxic masculinity than females, (2) the most common occurring toxic masculine trait was insulting others whereas the least occurring toxic masculine trait was violence, and (3) the three genres (comedies, crimes, and dramas) were equally likely to depict toxic masculinity (Rohner, 2018). This research gives valuable insight into what toxic masculinity may look like on television, although more research is necessary to determine whether or not toxic masculinity occurs in shows popular with adolescent audiences.

### **Masculinity and Media Effects**

Research demonstrates that the media can affect audiences' attitudes and behaviors about masculinity and femininity (see Ward & Aubrey, 2017, for review). More specifically, heavier viewing of gender traditional movies and television programs is related to the expression of more traditional beliefs about how men and women are expected to behave in regard to occupations, household chores and even women's bodies (Nathanson, Wilson, McGee & Sebastian, 2002; Ward et al., 2006). Additionally, these messages within television not only affect attitudes about gender roles but behaviors as

well. In regard to men, Giaccardi, Ward, Seabrook, and Lippman (2017) found that the masculine ideology mediated the relationship between media use and risk behaviors. Thus, increased media use was associated with more participation in risk-taking behaviors in young men's lives due to the acceptance of stereotypes about risk, power, and danger for boys. Therefore, depictions of traditional behaviors and attitudes ascribed to men in turn affect the attitudes and behaviors of audiences in regard to masculinity.

Watching and accepting such examples of traditional gender stereotypes is especially consequential for adolescents. During adolescence, teens turn to the media to learn about their gender (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). However, if adolescents are watching gender stereotypical messages on television, then they are only learning one set of rigid expectations for their gender (Ward & Aubrey, 2017). It is particularly harmful for adolescents' intellectual and professional potential (Bian, Leslie, & Cimpian, 2017), as well their future romantic and sexual encounters (Kim et al., 2007). Starting at age five children are able to determine characteristics that "belong" to each gender. One such characteristic that belongs to males is intelligence (Bian et al., 2017). Such messages are learned continuously throughout the lifetime, thus influencing adolescents' view of themselves and their intellectual capabilities. Adolescents are also learning how to behave sexually and in romantic relationships from the media. Such messages depict sex for men as being important, desirable and a necessary form of masculinity, whereas women are depicted as the "gatekeepers" of the sexual experience (Kim et al., 2007). Overall, research has established that the media has effects on masculinity and has demonstrated the ways in which the media perpetuate the ideals set forth by gender stereotypical depictions within the media.

### The Present Study

The present study aims to address three main gaps within the current empirical research on toxic masculinity. First and foremost, it aims to examine the prevalence of toxic masculinity in adolescent television shows. Due to the salience of gender during the adolescent years, teens will turn to the media in order to understand how to act in accordance with their gender (Aubrey, Harrison, Kramer, & Yellin, 2003). This means that same-sex role models will be extremely salient to adolescents (Slaby & Frey, 1975). If toxic masculine behaviors are prevalent within shows that adolescent men watch, then they are more likely to learn the rules and standards of toxic masculinity. Therefore, the current study asks the following question:

**RQ1:** How frequently does toxic masculinity occur on adolescent television shows?

The second gap this research aims to address is the way toxic masculinity is being portrayed. Because there are two distinct parts to this specific type of masculinity, aggression and an avoidance of femininity, this research aims to examine the frequency of the depiction of each of these types. How portrayals of toxic masculinity are depicted can help us to understand how such behaviors are being learned by adolescents.

As stated previously, one gender-typed behavior that is attributed to males and displayed frequently on television is the enactment of aggression (Bem, 1974; Levant et al., 2007; Scharrer, 2012). Thus, the following research question is asked:

**RQ2a:** How frequently do characters demonstrate aggression (physical aggression and the expression of anger) on adolescent television shows?

Additionally, most of the current literature examines masculinity in regard to men and femininity in regard to women. While toxic traits for males and females are different, it is still possible for female characters to portray toxic masculine behaviors. In other words, because masculinity and femininity are socially constructed concepts that do not belong to one biological sex, performances of each can be examined in regard to both genders. Thus, the following research question is posed:

**RQ2b:** How frequently do male characters demonstrate aggression (physical aggression and expression of anger) compared to female characters?

Objects can also be associated with a specific gender. Gender-stereotypical objects have been frequently portrayed in advertisements specifically. Previous research indicates that males are depicted in advertisements with stereotypical male products such as electronics or cars, whereas females are depicted with stereotypical female products such as body products or clothing (Paek, Nelson, and Vilela, 2010). However, gender-stereotypical objects have yet to be examined in regard to emotions. To understand the expression of anger further, the object and the intensity of the expression of anger should be examined as well. Examining the object and the intensity of the expression of anger could influence how “acceptable” the expression of anger is as an enactment of toxic masculinity. Therefore, the following research questions are asked:

**RQ2c:** How frequently do male characters express anger about gender-stereotypical objects compared to female characters?

**RQ2d:** How does the intensity of anger compare between male and female characters?

Avoidance of femininity is much more underrepresented in the current literature. Few studies have examined this type of behavior, even though it is considered one major component of different types of masculinity (i.e., hegemonic and toxic). Given that avoidance of femininity is largely unexplored, we defined it in three ways that was seen as relevant to television: a mockery of feminine behavior, a suppression of vulnerable emotions, and an intolerance of homosexuality. Additionally, as stated previously, toxic masculinity is conceived to have toxic effects for males but can still be demonstrated by females. Therefore, to add to the current literature, the frequency of portrayals of an avoidance of femininity and the gendered nature of the portrayals should be examined. Thus, the following research questions are asked:

**RQ3a:** How frequently do characters demonstrate an avoidance of femininity (mockery of femininity, suppression of vulnerable emotions, and intolerance of male homosexuality) on adolescent television shows?

**RQ3b:** How frequently do male characters demonstrate an avoidance of femininity compared to female characters?

One major indicator of an avoidance of femininity is restrictive emotionality, which is the idea that only certain emotions are allowed to be expressed. In the case of men, this means that only anger is “acceptable,” while other more vulnerable emotions (such as fear, grief, or sadness) should be restricted (Scharrer, 2012; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). Thus, in the present study, the suppression of vulnerable emotions by characters was measured. Because there is hardly any research on what makes expressing emotions more acceptable or unacceptable between genders, the uncertainty about the portrayals of restrictive emotionality leads to the following research questions:

**RQ3c:** How frequently do male characters suppress vulnerable emotions about gender-stereotypical objects compared to female characters?

**RQ3d:** How does the intensity of the suppressed emotions compare between male and female characters?

The last gap in current research that this research aims to investigate is whether toxic masculine behaviors are vicariously reinforced on television programs popular with adolescents. As stated in social cognitive theory, if a model's behavior is rewarded it can increase the motivation of the observer to also enact that behavior. Comparatively, knowing a model's behavior will receive a punishment will reduce the likelihood that the observer enacts the behavior (Bandura, 1971). Indeed, research demonstrates that the media are one way gendered behavioral scripts are taught to adolescents, especially in regard to vicarious rewards and punishments (Eyal & Kunkel, 2008; Finnerty-Myers, 2011). Using the concept of observational learning from social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) and social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation (Bussey & Bandura, 1999), the following research questions are asked:

**RQ4:** Is there a gender difference for consequences for aggression?

**RQ5:** Is there a gender difference for consequences of an avoidance for femininity?

## **Methods**

### **Sample**

The sample for the present study is comprised of favorite television shows of adolescents (12-18 years old). This sample was collected using a survey that was distributed by Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). In total, 184 parents participated in

the survey. To be eligible to participate in the survey, participants first had to answer a series of eligibility questions. There were seven eligibility questions in total; however, five of the questions were included as foils to prevent the participants from figuring out that one specialized population (i.e., parents of 12-18-year-olds) was being targeted. Such questions included, “What is your annual income in dollars?”, “Did you vote in the last election?”, and “How many hours a week do you spend watching television?” Only two of the eligibility questions were used to determine participants’ eligibility: “Are you a parent?” and “Is your child between the ages of 12-18?” If participants answered “no” to either of these questions, they were redirected to the end of the survey.

If participants answered they were a parent of a 12-18-year-old, then they were directed to the consent form where they either agreed or disagreed to participate in the survey. Following the consent form, participants filled out the two-question survey. The first question asked parents to identify the gender of their child who was 12-18. If they had multiple children in this age range, we asked them to think of the child with the birthday closest to the date they took the survey. The second question asked them to list this child’s three favorite television shows on cable, broadcast, or streaming services (excluding YouTube or other social media sites).

Streaming services are one the main ways this age group watches television (Piper Jaffray, 2018). Due to this, we felt it important to include these streaming services when examining what television shows are most watched by adolescents. Thus, a sample could not be comprised using data from Nielsen ratings because Nielsen does not have comprehensive data about streaming services, and the data they do have in regard to streaming services is limited or too specific to be useful for the present study.

Additionally, streaming services themselves are not forthright with the demographic characteristics of their viewers. For these reasons, parents were surveyed to create a sample of adolescents' favorite television shows instead.

Given the nature of this information (i.e., it was not sensitive or personal), it was determined that parents were an appropriate proxy to answer such questions for their adolescent child. While there could be some issue with self-reporting (e.g., parents did not read the question carefully, parents conflated favorite television show with the most watched television show by their child, parents thought of the wrong child or participants took the survey multiple times), we tried to protect against this by using eligibility questions to eliminate inaccurate answers, keeping the survey short to protect against fatigue, and using Qualtrics filters to block participants from taking the survey more than once (i.e., only one survey was allowed per IP address).

A list of 228 discrete television series was generated from the parents' answers. Any television show that was mentioned more than three times as an answer to the survey was retained. This sample included 26 television shows. However, two shows (*Paw Patrol* and *Mickey Mouse Playhouse*) were excluded from the final sample because they are targeted to a much younger audience than the present study aims to examine.

Therefore, the final sample consisted of 24 unique television series (see Table 1).

Streaming services allow for television shows to be watched at any time and are plentiful in today's media environment. Children can now start viewing television shows on these platforms and continue watching using these platforms well into adulthood due to their prevalence and availability. Streaming services carry a wide variety of shows from a large timeframe and this can explain why some of the shows in the sample are not

as recent (e.g., *Friends* or *The Office*). These shows can now be watched easily and for a multitude of reasons including nostalgia, their relevance in popular culture, and their abundant number of episodes. Additionally, the appeal of the themes and characters within these shows do not wane despite the time that has passed. Given the number of responses from parents some of these television shows had in the survey and the screening process participants had to go through in order to be eligible to participate, the television shows in the sample seems to be a fair representation of what adolescents are watching today.

Episodes were randomly chosen from the 24 television series included in the sample. In total, the 24 television programs represented a variety of genres, including animation (29.2%,  $n = 7$ ), comedy (20.8%,  $n = 5$ ), action (20.8%,  $n = 5$ ), drama (16.7%,  $n = 4$ ), and crime (12.5%,  $n = 3$ ). To select episodes from these programs, a random number generator was first used to determine the season of the television series, and then the episode. This procedure was performed twice to attain two episodes from each television series.

### **Units of Analysis**

Each episode was coded on the scene level. A scene is be defined as a change in characters, environment, or time within the span of the television show (Greenberg & Busselle, 1996). The scenes were examined to determine whether a reference or multiple references to toxic masculinity occurred. Toxic masculinity was defined as any demonstration of aggression (which included physical aggression or expressions of anger) or an avoidance of femininity (which included mockery of feminine behaviors, suppression of vulnerable emotions, or an intolerance of male homosexuality). Each

scene was coded as a separate unit that can have multiple references of toxic masculinity within it. However, all variables were only coded in regard to one random reference of toxic masculinity within the scene. Scenes were determined by the researcher before coders received their episode assignments to code. This was done because attempts to train coders reliably to unitize latent content from a continuous stream of content has been met with mixed results (Neuendorf, 2017).

### **Measurement**

For the present study, the author utilized a team of coders. These coders were trained on the following variables using a detailed codebook and practice episodes before beginning to code the final sample. The codebook is included in the Appendix.

**Unitizing Variables.** In each scene, the coder first documented the number of references per scene. In many scenes multiple references to toxic masculinity occurred. Coders would determine a new reference by using one of three criteria: if the source of the toxic masculinity changed, if the target of the toxic masculinity changed, or if the enactment of toxic masculinity changed. Coders would then count how many references occurred in the scene and record it. If there were more than 10 references coders would note this by coding 10+ ( $n = 39$ ; 1.7%). After recording how many references occurred, they would use a random number generator to pick one of the references from the scene to code the following variables. It was possible for variables to occur simultaneously in the scene. If the coder could not distinguish which variable was enacted first, then they would code both ( $n = 122$ ; 5.2%). For example, if a character was angry, and physically aggressive at the same time, this would require the coder to code both enactments of this variable.

**Gender.** Coders determined the gender of the source of the toxic masculinity. The source is the character who enacted the toxic masculinity. If toxic masculinity was present in the scene, coders would answer whether the character(s) enacting the toxic masculinity was male, female, or mixed/both genders.

**Aggression.** This variable includes two indicators: physical aggression and expression of anger. Physical aggression is defined as any overt depiction of a credible threat of physical force or the use of force that is intended to harm or coerce a character. Threats are included in this category and can be verbal if they are threats to be physically aggressive. Intention of harm or the actual use of such harm can be to an animate or inanimate being. Coders would code physical aggression if it was present in the reference.

The second indicator is the expression of anger. This item is defined as an overt depiction of extreme displeasure, fury, rage or hostility. Anger that is disguised as sarcasm is included in this category if it is clear from the context of the scene that the character's sarcasm is an expression of anger. To determine whether it is an expression of anger, coders were asked to look at the character's nonverbal cues, if the character has not directly stated that they are experiencing anger. These nonverbal cues included facial, posture, and tonal cues demonstrated by the character. Expressions of anger would be coded if they were present in the reference.

If anger was present, coders assessed two more dimensions of the anger: the object of the anger (i.e., what the character was angry about) and the intensity of the emotion (i.e., how angry was the character). The object of anger was coded as whether it was dissonant (gender atypical) or consonant (gender stereotypical) for the source's

gender. For example, it would be consonant for a man to be angry about losing a bet, but it would be dissonant for a man to be angry at a romantic partner for not receiving affection. On the other hand, it would be consonant for a woman to be angry about not receiving enough affection from a romantic partner, but it would be dissonant for a woman to be angry about losing a bet.

The intensity of anger was coded as either 1 (a little), 2 (some), or 3 (a lot). If there was no anger in the reference, then the intensity would be coded as 99 (not applicable to scene). For example, “a little” would be a character raising their voice or yelling briefly and then returning to a normal volume, “some” would be a character raising their voice or yelling with a behavioral display like clenching their fists tightly or scrunching their face, and “a lot” would be a character yelling, a statement indicating and recognizing they are angry, and a behavioral display like punching a wall.

**Avoidance of femininity.** This variable includes three indicators: mockery of feminine behaviors, suppression of vulnerable emotions, and intolerance of male homosexuality. Mockery of feminine behaviors included insulting feminine behavior, appearance, and/or mannerisms. In general, femininity has been associated with an affective concern for others and as having an expressive orientation (Bem, 1974). Therefore, stereotypical displays of femininity included depictions of emotions, demonstrations of affection, or work that is seen as traditionally feminine, and when these displays were the object of ridicule, they were coded as mockery of femininity. The category also includes any remarks made that devalue women, being a woman, or things associated with being feminine. Coders only coded this if feminine behaviors were being

made fun of or mocked; they did not code a mockery of masculine behaviors. Coders would code a mockery of feminine behaviors if it was present in the reference.

The second indicator was a suppression of vulnerable emotions. This included depictions of the vulnerable emotions of sadness, fear, and grief being repressed or avoided by a character. It included characters who tried to hide these vulnerable emotions or make attempts to not display these vulnerable emotions. The character could also show discomfort when confronted with other characters feeling these emotions or experience discomfort when feeling these emotions for him or herself. Coders would code a suppression of vulnerable emotions if it was present in the reference.

Additionally, coders assessed the object of the vulnerable emotions (i.e., what the person was sad, fearful or grief-stricken about). The object of a suppression of vulnerable emotions was also coded as dissonant (gender atypical) or consonant (gender stereotypical) for the source's gender. For example, it would be consonant for a man to be sad that his favorite sports team lost, but it would be dissonant if he was sad because of a romantic movie. On the other hand, for a woman it would be consonant if she was sad because of a romantic movie, but it would be dissonant if she was sad because her favorite sports team lost.

Coders also coded for the intensity of the vulnerable emotion before it was suppressed. The intensity of the vulnerable emotion was coded as “a little,” “some,” or “a lot.” For example, “a little” could be portrayed as a few tears on someone's face before wiping them away, “some” could be portrayed as crying along with the statement that the character is upset, and “a lot” could be portrayed as sobbing uncontrollably while also stating how upset the character is.

The third indicator of avoidance of femininity is an intolerance of male homosexuality. This item was any depiction of disdain or discomfort for non-platonic male relationships. It could also include any remarks that were derogatory in nature when referencing homosexuality such as “fag” or “pussy.” Coders would code this item if it was present in the reference.

**Consequences.** Consequences are any positive or negative outcome in response to the character enacting aggression or an avoidance of femininity. These consequences can be discussed or portrayed and were only coded if it immediately followed an act of toxic masculinity. The scene’s context was used to determine whether a consequence of either variable occurred. Negative consequences included any negative repercussion as a result of a character’s demonstration of aggression or an avoidance of femininity. This could include an emotional detriment, physical consequence, relational detriment, or some form of punishment. Positive consequences included any positive outcome as a result of a character’s enactment of aggression or an avoidance of femininity. This can include an emotional benefit, physical reward, relational benefit, or some form of encouragement. Coders were asked to determine if a negative or positive consequence was present in the scene.

### **Intercoder Reliability**

Coders consisted of a team of three undergraduate coders: one female and two males. The author trained all three coders on the coding scheme for 10 weeks. During these 10 weeks the coders would meet with the author for one and a half hours per week and then complete approximately three hours of practice coding throughout the week. All coders practiced on the same sample of episodes and these practice episodes were not

included in the final sample. Coders reached an appropriate level of intercoder reliability before beginning to code the final sample ( $AC2 = .71$ ). The coding of the main sample took place over three weeks with one check of reliability to monitor coder drift.

For each variable, the author calculated intercoder reliability with Gwet's  $AC2$  statistic. This statistic is a preferable measurement for intercoder reliability when there is high percent agreement among coders, but a skewed distribution where some categories of a variable are over-represented (Neuendorf, 2017). This was the case with the toxic masculinity variables in the present study; the absence of all of the variables were more common than their presence. Therefore, the Gwet's statistic was used to calculate reliability for all variables. Coefficients between .80 and 1.0 are considered "very good" (Gwet, 2018). By extension, I considered any variable that had an  $AC2$  of .70 or higher to be acceptable. The individual coefficients were: gender of the source ( $AC2 = .73$ , % agreement = 95.7%), physical aggression ( $AC2 = .87$ , % agreement = 88.4%), expression of anger ( $AC2 = .87$ , % agreement = 88.4%), anger object ( $AC2 = .90$ , % agreement = 84%), anger intensity ( $AC2 = .85$ , % agreement = 80%), mockery of femininity ( $AC2 = .99$ , % agreement = 99.3%), suppression of vulnerable emotions ( $AC2 = .94$ , % agreement = 94.9%), vulnerable emotion object ( $AC2 = .98$ , % agreement = 94.6%), vulnerable emotion intensity ( $AC2 = .97$ , % agreement = 94.6%), intolerance of male homosexuality ( $AC2 = .99$ , % agreement = 99.5%), negative consequences ( $AC2 = .89$ , % agreement = 90.0%), and positive consequences ( $AC2 = .91$ , % agreement = 92.0%).

## **Results**

### **Descriptive Statistics**

With 2,363 scenes occurring in 48 episodes of adolescent television, there were approximately 49.2 scenes per episode of television. Given that the sample was comprised of both 30 minutes and 60 minute television shows, the number of scenes per episode is not surprising. Many of these television shows, especially the animated shows, use quick cuts between scenes and will go back and forth between characters multiple times.

To answer RQ1, I will discuss the prevalence of toxic masculinity in adolescent television shows. In total, 36.8% ( $n = 869$ ) of scenes had at least one reference to toxic masculinity. Of these scenes, 15.3% ( $n = 133$ ) had more than one reference to toxic masculinity. Thus, taking the total number of references to toxic masculinity into account, on average there was 0.43 ( $SD = 0.62$ ) reference to toxic masculinity per scene. Per episode, there were 18.10 references to toxic masculinity.

### **Aggression**

In regard to RQ2a, I analyzed how often aggression occurred in adolescent television shows. Overall, physical aggression was present in 16.7% ( $n = 394$ ) of scenes and an expression of anger was present in 18.6% ( $n = 439$ ) of scenes.

In regard to RQ2b, and consistent with previous research, males demonstrated physical aggression in more scenes than females. A 2 (male, female) X 2 (physical aggression present, absent) chi square demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between gender and physical aggression,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 780) = 20.76, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .163$ . (Only scenes in which the source of the aggression could be identified as male or female were submitted to this test,  $n = 780$ .) Of scenes in which male characters enacted toxic masculinity, physical aggression was present in 45.9% ( $n = 238$ ) of the scenes. In

scenes in which female characters enacted toxic masculinity, physical aggression was present in 29.0% ( $n = 76$ ) of scenes. Pairwise comparisons using  $z$  tests with Bonferroni corrections further demonstrated that the difference between male and female characters' enactment of physical aggression was statistically significant. These corrections compared the two raw frequencies using the critical ratio of 1.96 to determine if there was significance between the two numbers. This test is more conservative when computing multiple comparisons. See Table 2.

Also, in regard to RQ2b, the chi square model for gender and expression of anger was not statistically significant,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 780) = 2.43, p = .119$ , demonstrating that there was not a general relationship between gender and anger. The expression of anger was not statistically significantly different between males (52.1%,  $n = 270$ ) and females (58.0%,  $n = 152$ ). See Table 3.

In regard to RQ2c, I tested whether the gender-stereo typicality of the object was associated with the expression of anger differed by gender. For this test, only expressions of anger that could be identified as initiated by male or female and only objects of anger that were identified as consonant or dissonant were submitted to the analysis ( $n = 414$ ). The 2 (male, female) X 2 (dissonance, consonance) chi square was not statistically significant,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 414) = 1.22, p = .270$ . As shown in Table 4, male and female characters were just as likely to express anger about gender stereotypical objects.

In regard to RQ2d, an independent samples  $t$ -test determined that male characters ( $M = 1.93, SD = 0.72$ ) and female characters ( $M = 1.87, SD = 0.81$ ) express anger equally intensely,  $t(418) = .747, p = .46$ . For this test, only cases where anger was initiated by a

male or female character and only scenes that had an expression of anger were submitted to the analysis.

### **Avoidance of Femininity**

To address RQ3a, I analyzed how often avoidance of femininity occurred in adolescent television shows. In total, mockery of feminine behaviors was present in 0.3% ( $n = 7$ ) of scenes, and an intolerance of male homosexuality was present in 0.3% ( $n = 7$ ) of scenes. With such low numbers of mockery of feminine behaviors and intolerance of male homosexuality, it did not make sense to run chi square analyses examining gender differences. Males demonstrated a mockery of feminine behaviors in three scenes, whereas females demonstrated a mockery of feminine behaviors in two scenes, and an intolerance of male homosexuality was exhibited by males in six scenes, and females exhibited an intolerance of homosexuality in one scene.

A suppression of vulnerable emotions was present in 7.2% ( $n = 171$ ) of total scenes. To test RQ3b, a 2 (male, female) X 2 (suppression of vulnerable emotions present, absent) chi square analysis demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between gender and suppression of vulnerable emotions,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 780) = 20.81, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .163$ . (Again, only scenes in which the gender of the source of suppression of vulnerable emotions could be identified as male or female were submitted to this test.) Although male characters' raw frequency of portrayals of a suppression of vulnerable emotions was greater than female characters ( $n = 85$  and  $n = 80$  respectively), when we take into account how many times each gender enacted an instance of toxic masculinity, female characters enacted suppression of vulnerable emotions *proportionately* more often than male characters (30.5% compared to 16.4%

respectively). Pairwise comparisons using *z* tests with Bonferroni corrections further demonstrated that the difference between male and female characters' suppression of vulnerable emotions was statistically significant. See Table 5.

In regard to RQ3c, males and females suppressed vulnerable emotions about gender stereotypical objects to the same degree. For this test, only suppressions of vulnerable emotions that could be identified as initiated by male or female characters, and only objects of vulnerable emotions that were identified as consonant or dissonant were submitted to the analysis. In total, 162 instances of toxic masculinity were analyzed. The 2 (male, female) X 2 (dissonance, consonance) chi square was not statistically significant,  $\chi^2(1, n = 162) = 1.03, p = .748$ . As shown in Table 6, male and female characters were just as likely to suppress vulnerable emotions about gender stereotypical objects.

Finally, when examining RQ3d, the intensity of the vulnerable emotion being suppressed, an independent samples *t*-test determined that male characters ( $M = 2.42, SD = .50$ ) suppressed vulnerable emotions as intensely as female characters ( $M = 2.40, SD = .59$ ),  $t(113) = 0.92, p = .763$ .

### **Consequences**

To answer RQ4, I analyzed whether there was a gender difference for consequences when displaying aggression, and to answer RQ5, I analyzed whether there was a gender difference for consequences when avoiding femininity. Overall, of scenes that had aggression, positive consequences occurred in 13.2% ( $n = 85$ ) of scenes. A 2 (male, female) X 2 (positive consequence for aggression present, absent) chi square determined that the relationship between gender and positive consequences was not statistically significant,  $\chi^2(1, n = 645) = .001, p = .981$ . See Table 7.

Furthermore, when examining negative consequences, a 2 (male, female) X 2 (negative consequence for aggression, present, absent) chi square showed that the relationship between gender and negative consequences was not statistically significant,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 645) = 1.805, p = .179$ . See Table 8. Thus, both male and female characters were just as likely to receive consequences (both negative and positive) for enacting aggression.

In addressing RQ5, I similarly found that receiving a positive consequence for avoiding femininity was also not statistically significant. A 2 (male, female) X 2 (positive consequence for an avoidance of femininity present, absent) chi square determined that the difference was not statistically significant,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 177) = 0.156, p = .693$ . In total, positive consequences of an avoidance of femininity occurred in 11.9% ( $n = 21$ ) of scenes. See Table 9.

When examining negative consequences, a 2 (male, female) X 2 (negative consequence for an avoidance of femininity present, absent) chi square determined that the difference was not statistically significant,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 178) = .091, p = .762$ . See Table 10. Overall, negative consequences for an avoidance of femininity occurred in 10.1% ( $n = 18$ ) of scenes. This means that male and female characters were equally likely to receive a positive or negative consequence for enacting an avoidance of femininity.

Moreover, positive and negative consequences for avoiding femininity occurred less frequently than positive and negative consequences for aggression. In fact, positive and negative consequences for avoiding femininity were rare overall.

## Discussion

Due to the popularity of toxic masculinity in popular discourse and lack of scholarly research on this type of masculinity as a concept, the present study examined the prevalence of toxic masculinity within adolescent television shows. The research at hand took stock of the frequency of toxic masculinity within television shows that are watched by adolescents currently. The current study only coded for one reference per scene and not all references per scene, therefore the results are an approximation of the frequency of toxic masculine behaviors and attitudes. Overall, toxic masculinity occurs just over one-third (36.8%) of scenes in adolescent television shows. In scenes where toxic masculinity occurred, the average number of references was .43. In the 48 episodes that were examined, approximately 18 references occurred per episode. Given the inclusion of a similar number of shows from each genre, further research is needed to determine whether the genre of the show affect the frequency of toxic masculinity in adolescent television shows.

Of the two types of toxic masculinity, aggression was the most common form. Physical aggression occurred in just about 17% of scenes, and expressions of anger occurred in almost 19% of scenes. In comparison, avoidance of femininity occurred less frequently with mockery of feminine behaviors occurring in 0.7% of scenes, a suppression of vulnerable emotions occurring in about 7% of scenes, and an intolerance of homosexuality occurring in 0.9% of scenes. Furthermore, receiving either positive or negative consequences was infrequent for both aggression and an avoidance of femininity, but receiving a consequence for an avoidance of femininity was even rarer than receiving a consequence for aggression. Additionally, there were gender differences in the enactment of physical aggression, and the suppression of vulnerable emotions.

Male characters were more likely to enact physical aggression than females and females enacted a suppression of vulnerable emotions more frequently than males. While there were not differences between males and females for each variable, the results generally show that the manifestations of toxic masculinity coded in the present study fell along gendered lines.

### **Prevalence of Aggression as Toxic Masculinity**

The finding that physical aggression and expressions of anger were the most frequent portrayals of toxic masculinity within this sample is in line with extensive previous research that has demonstrated aggression is extremely prevalent on television (Barner, 1999; Coyne & Archer, 2004; Gerding, 2011; Smith et al., 1998). One reason for this prevalence could be because physical aggression and anger are usually external actions, which makes them easier to code. The manifest nature of these variables could explain why the estimates of toxic masculinity in this form occurred so frequently. Additionally, perhaps expressions of anger occurred so frequently because they can include physical aggression, but they can also be portrayed in other ways that do not include physical aggression. For example, a character may be angry and yell (i.e., an expression of anger) rather than punch a wall (i.e., physical aggression). This would be an expression of anger without an act of physical aggression, but it is much more unlikely that an act of physical aggression would occur without some sort of catalyst such as an expression of anger.

Males portrayed physical aggression more frequently than females. Aggression is a gender stereotypical trait of males (Bem, 1974; Levant et al., 2007), so it is no surprise that males demonstrated more physical aggression in this sample. However, there was not

a statistically significant difference in the expression of anger between male and female characters. Males expressed anger twice as often as females, however *proportionally* when an expression of anger occurred, males and females were equally likely to express anger. Both genders were also equally likely to express anger about gender stereotypical objects. In line with the general idea that the media portray males and females in gender stereotypical ways (Lauzen, Dozier & Horan, 2008; Signorielli, 1990; Sink & Mastro, 2017), the objects that males and females express anger about were portrayed stereotypically as well.

Males and females were also equally likely to express the same level of intensity when expressing anger. This could be because both genders feel that this emotion is appropriate for their gender. Because it is seen as “acceptable” to enact anger, but not other emotions (Scharrer, 2012; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995), males could potentially feel more comfortable allowing themselves to demonstrate this emotion. In comparison, females are allowed to express multiple emotions, and therefore also feel that anger is “acceptable” to demonstrate for their gender.

### **Prevalence of Avoidance of Femininity as Toxic Masculinity**

One positive finding from this study is that adolescent television shows are not depicting an abundance of an avoidance of femininity. Both mockery of feminine behaviors and an intolerance of homosexuality occur very rarely. This means that both these items are rarely shown on adolescent television allowing for less opportunity for these behaviors to be learned by adolescents. Therefore, these particular indicators of an avoidance of femininity are possibly being learned from other sources, such as peers or parents. This finding thus suggests that television shows in the current sample are more

accepting of traits associated with being a woman and ideas about the LGBTQ community. This could be due to the plethora of television shows in the sample that have LGBTQ characters, such as *This Is Us*, *Game of Thrones*, *Riverdale*, and *Empire*. This could also be because several shows included in the sample have a prominent female character, such as *Stranger Things*, *The Umbrella Academy*, *Friends*, and *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. Thus, this finding suggests that representation matters in that it is more difficult to mock or express intolerance toward female or LGBTQ characters when they are prominent cast members, and viewers identify with them.

Suppression of vulnerable emotions occurred more frequently than a mockery of feminine behaviors or an intolerance of homosexuality, but still only occurred in only 7% of scenes. That is, suppression of vulnerable emotions occurred less than half as often as physical aggression or an expression of anger. This could be due to the fact that suppressing emotions occurs internally. It is not like anger or physical aggression, which are demonstrated externally as an action. Suppression of vulnerable emotions is a more latent variable that may be harder to capture in a visual medium like television. Furthermore, suppression of vulnerable emotions occurred *proportionately* more frequently for females than males in scenes. Emotional expression is a gender stereotypical trait of women (Bem, 1974). While this category was a suppression of vulnerable emotions, the emotional depiction had to be present before the character could suppress it. Therefore, females could have shown more suppression of vulnerable emotions because they were depicted as being more emotional than males overall. More emotional expressions by females means there were more opportunities for a suppression of vulnerable emotions to occur.

Both males and females were equally likely to suppress vulnerable emotions about gender stereotypical objects, and both genders were equally likely to express the same level of intensity when expressing a vulnerable emotion. Again, due to the way gender is portrayed stereotypically on television (Lauzen et al., 2008; Signorielli, 1990; Sink & Mastro, 2017), it makes sense that each gender would be vulnerable about gender stereotypical objects (i.e., females would be upset about a break up, whereas males would be upset about losing a sporting event). However, it is surprising that males and females were equally likely to be vulnerable with the same intensity considering that one stereotypical portrayal of females is to be more emotional than males (Bem, 1974; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). Perhaps the lack of a gender difference is due to the infrequency of portrayals of vulnerable emotions within the sample. Future research on depiction of vulnerable emotions within adolescent television is needed to determine the gender differences in regard to this topic.

### **Prevalence of Consequences**

Because social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) posits that people are more motivated to enact behaviors if they are rewarded and less motivated to enact behaviors from role models if they are punished, I argued that adolescents will learn toxic masculinity from television characters that receive positive consequences for their toxic masculine behaviors. More specifically, I sought to answer the questions: do male characters receive more positive consequences than female characters when enacting aggression and an avoidance of femininity? The present study indicates that this is not the case. Neither positive nor negative consequences were demonstrated frequently, and they were especially infrequent in regard to an avoidance of femininity. Despite the

infrequency at which consequences occur, adolescents can still learn toxic masculinity from models on television. Tacit reinforcement is the idea that when there is neither a positive nor a negative consequence, the model is still being reinforced, by the lack of explicit punishment for their behavior (Bandura, 2009). Because there was no significant finding in regard to consequences between male and female characters, both female and male audiences have the potential to learn about toxic masculinity from the tacitly reinforced models in adolescent television. Based on the current study, males would be learning that physical aggression is a male trait, while females would be learning that suppressing vulnerable emotions is a female trait.

### **Implications**

The results of this study support previous research that has found stereotypical depictions of gender roles, specifically masculinity and femininity, on television. According to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2009) and social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation (Bussey & Bandura, 1999), these depictions on television can be problematic for adolescents. Males are being modeled to adolescents as physically aggressive, whereas females are being modeled as emotional, by demonstrating vulnerable emotions that they then suppress. Adolescents turn to the media, especially, to learn what behaviors and attitudes are appropriate for their gender (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). If what they watch are gender stereotypical depictions, then they are more likely to believe that is the acceptable way that individuals of their gender can act. Additionally, Bandura (2009) suggests that reinforcements or consequences, both positive and negative, encourage or discourage viewers to enact a modeled behavior. Because consequences of aggression and an avoidance of femininity were rare in this

sample, modeled behaviors are tacitly reinforced; thus, adolescents are still seeing implicit motivations for these toxic masculine behaviors and attitudes from the television shows they watch.

Especially during adolescence, which is a period of gender intensification, adolescents turn to the media to determine what is appropriate and socially acceptable for their gender (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Therefore, the depiction of gender on television during adolescence is even more salient. Moreover, during this developmental stage, adolescents are attempting to discover their identity through beliefs and values, which includes their gender (Erikson, 1968). This exposure to the frequent enactment of socially regressive, and gender stereotypical traits can lead adolescents to mimic what is observed from television in their own life and accept these values as their own.

These gender roles can be harmful for both male and female adolescents, especially when such portrayals encourage the enactment of toxic traits of their gender. Learning from television models who portray rigid gender stereotypical traits can lead to men and women who then enact these same “ideals” in their own life. For men, masculinity can lead to a variety of problems (Kupers, 2005). For example, according to the American Psychological Association, conforming to stereotypical masculine ideology has been shown to negatively influence males physical and mental health as well as limit males’ psychological development, constrain their behavior and result in gender role strain or gender role conflict (American Psychological Association, 2018). To combat these effects gender needs to be portrayed in a more accurate way on television. Overall, gender roles should be depicted as less rigid and more fluid since there is no “correct” way to be a man or a woman. While television needs to be more inclusive of different

types of gender expression and not rely upon gender stereotypes when writing characters, parents need to also talk to their children about gender fluidity and what constitutes a healthy masculinity or femininity. As well, more academic research needs to be conducted on toxic masculinity as a concept and its effects overall. Such research can help enlighten scholars, parents and the media industry about the effects of toxic masculinity not only on adolescent men, but on men of all ages. These are three ways society can begin to shift how it views gendered expressions.

### **Limitations**

There are three main limitations to the present study. The first limitation is that the sample is comprised of self-report data from parents. While I considered parents an appropriate proxy for their children when it comes to what their children watch on television, some of the obtained data challenged this assumption. Based on the responses received from an MTurk survey, the comprised sample did have many shows that could be and most likely are watched by adolescents; however, two shows raised caution. Two of the most responded shows, *Paw Patrol* and *Mickey Mouse Playhouse*, are shows meant for a preschool audience and not an adolescent audience. It is possible that parents did not read the questions carefully enough or thought of the wrong child when answering these questions. Nevertheless, many of the shows within the sample are watched by adolescents, and some of the most mentioned shows (*SpongeBob SquarePants*, *The Office* and *The Big Bang Theory*) are all shows that are realistically watched by 12-18 year old children.

The second limitation is that the variables assessing toxic masculinity only reflect an approximation of some aspects of the construct. Based on the way the codebook was

written, coders were asked to only code one reference per scene. Due to the lack of research on toxic masculinity, it was difficult to estimate how many references would be present within a scene. In order to achieve reliability among coders, the author made the decision for each coder to only code one random reference within the scene. Future research should explore the extent to which toxic masculinity is portrayed on adolescent television by examining all references within a scene and not just a random reference. This future research will give a more accurate representation of toxic masculinity within this type of media specifically.

The third limitation is the lack of academic discourse and research on this topic. While toxic masculinity is prevalent in popular discourse, it has yet to become popular within academic discourse. Currently, this means that researchers studying toxic masculinity are left to conceptualize the topic on their own with little to no research to back up their claims. This makes it quite difficult when attempting to study toxic masculinity within a specific area like the media. However, despite the gap in research in regard to this particular topic, there are other well studied concepts that are similar to toxic masculinity, such as gender roles, or hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Scharrer, 2012; Sink & Mastro, 2017). The present study uses these notions to help inform the discussion surrounding such a new concept.

### **Future Research**

There are many avenues for future research when it comes to the concept of toxic masculinity due to its relative recency and frequency in popular discourse. First, the main gap in the research currently is a lack of consensus about toxic masculinity. By having a more concrete and universal definition of toxic masculinity, it will be easier for other

researchers in the future to study the construct in other media or in other places. Other researchers would then be able to look at toxic masculinity in movies or online platforms (like on social media sites). By first creating a universal definition and then looking at this topic in other media, academic research will be able to start developing a consensus on how toxic masculinity is portrayed in the media and how it affects both male and female viewers. Toxic femininity is another gap within the research that could use further research. Toxic femininity currently is not as discussed in popular discourse as toxic masculinity. However, it makes sense that there would be regressive traits that are harmful for women as well. Some of these regressive traits, behaviors and attitudes could include passivity, passive aggressiveness, pettiness, jealousy, and clinginess. This topic is also not frequently examined in academic literature. Finally, a further exploration of the portrayals of emotion by males on television is necessary. This can include the suppression of emotions or the expression of emotions. The literature in regard to this topic is mixed currently. Research has suggested two contradictory ideas. The first is that male characters demonstrate more emotions than female characters (Martin, 2017). In comparison, research has also found a lack of emotionality in regard to male characters (Scharrer, 2012; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). Therefore, future research should examine emotionality in male characters as a concept to further understand what is occurring.

### **Conclusion**

In adolescent television programs, toxic masculinity occurs in a sizable minority of scenes. This is consistent with the extensive literature that has examined gender stereotypes and gender roles in the media and more specifically on television. Most

occurrences were an enactment of aggression. Males especially demonstrated physical aggression enactments, thus modeling one aspect of toxic masculinity to male viewers. Additionally, males' expressions of anger were more intense than females, which models another toxic masculine behavior to male viewers. Female characters were depicted as suppressing their emotions more frequently than male characters. These messages about rigid gender structures teach and reinforce adolescents' beliefs about how their gender should behave and act.

**Table 1. Sample developed from responses to MTurk survey of parents by genre**

SpongeBob SquarePants	Animation
Big Bang Theory	Comedy
Pokémon	Animation
Stranger Things	Drama
Riverdale	Crime
The Office	Comedy
The Walking Dead	Drama
The Simpsons	Animation
Family Guy	Animation
The Flash	Action
Game of Thrones	Action
Supernatural	Drama
Gravity Falls	Animation
Modern Family	Comedy
Arrow	Action
The Umbrella Academy	Action
This is Us	Comedy
Bluebloods	Crime
Teen Titans	Animation
Rick & Morty	Animation
Power Rangers	Action
Friends	Comedy
Law and Order SVU	Crime
Empire	Drama

**Table 2. An Analysis of Gender and the Presence of Physical Aggression**

	Male Character Source	Female Character Source	Total
Present	45.9% ( $n = 238$ ) <sub>a</sub>	29.0% ( $n = 76$ ) <sub>b</sub>	40.3% ( $n = 314$ )
Absent	54.1% ( $n = 280$ ) <sub>a</sub>	71.0% ( $n = 186$ ) <sub>b</sub>	59.7% ( $n = 466$ )
$\chi^2 (1, n = 780) = 20.76, p < .001$ , Cramer's $V = .163$			

Note. Differences in subscript letters indicate a statistically significant difference.

**Table 3. An Analysis of Gender and the Presence of Expressions of Anger**

	Male Character Source	Female Character Source	Total
Present	52.1% ( $n = 270$ ) <sub>a</sub>	58.0% ( $n = 152$ ) <sub>a</sub>	54.1% ( $n = 422$ )
Absent	47.9% ( $n = 248$ ) <sub>a</sub>	42.0% ( $n = 110$ ) <sub>a</sub>	45.9% ( $n = 358$ )
$\chi^2 (1, n = 780) = 2.43, p = .119$			

Note. Differences in subscript letters indicate a statistically significant difference.

**Table 4. An Analysis of Gender and the Object of Expressions of Anger**

	Male Character Source	Female Character Source	Total
Consonance	71.9% ( $n = 189$ ) <sub>a</sub>	76.8% ( $n = 116$ ) <sub>a</sub>	73.7% ( $n = 305$ )
Dissonance	28.1% ( $n = 74$ ) <sub>a</sub>	23.2% ( $n = 35$ ) <sub>a</sub>	26.3% ( $n = 109$ )
$\chi^2 (1, n = 414) = 1.22, p = .270$			

Note. Differences in subscript letters indicate a statistically significant difference.

**Table 5. An Analysis of Gender and the Suppression of Vulnerable Emotions**

	Male Character Source	Female Character Source	Total
Present	16.4% ( $n = 85$ ) <sub>a</sub>	30.5% ( $n = 80$ ) <sub>b</sub>	21.2% ( $n = 165$ )
Absent	83.6% ( $n = 423$ ) <sub>a</sub>	69.5% ( $n = 182$ ) <sub>b</sub>	78.8% ( $n = 615$ )

$\chi^2 (1, n = 780) = 20.81, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .163$ .

Note. Differences in subscript letters indicate a statistically significant difference.

**Table 6. An Analysis of Gender and the Object of Suppression of Vulnerable Emotions**

	Male Character Source	Female Character Source	Total
Consonance	91.5% ( $n = 75$ ) <sub>a</sub>	90.0% ( $n = 72$ ) <sub>a</sub>	90.7% ( $n = 147$ )
Dissonance	8.5% ( $n = 7$ ) <sub>a</sub>	10.0% ( $n = 8$ ) <sub>a</sub>	9.3% ( $n = 15$ )
$\chi^2 (1, n = 162) = 1.03, p = .748$			

Note. Differences in subscript letters indicate a statistically significant difference.

**Table 7. An Analysis of Gender and Positive Consequences for Aggression**

	Male Character Source	Female Character Source	Total
Present	13.2% ( $n = 59$ ) <sub>a</sub>	13.1% ( $n = 26$ ) <sub>a</sub>	13.2% ( $n = 85$ )
Absent	86.8% ( $n = 388$ ) <sub>a</sub>	86.9% ( $n = 172$ ) <sub>a</sub>	86.8% ( $n = 560$ )
$\chi^2 (1, n = 645) = .001, p = .981$			

Note. Differences in subscript letters indicate a statistically significant difference.

**Table 8. An Analysis of Gender and Negative Consequences for Aggression**

	Male Character Source	Female Character Source	Total
Present	20.1% ( $n = 90$ ) <sub>a</sub>	15.7% ( $n = 31$ ) <sub>a</sub>	18.8% ( $n = 121$ )
Absent	79.9% ( $n = 357$ ) <sub>a</sub>	84.3% ( $n = 167$ ) <sub>a</sub>	81.2% ( $n = 524$ )
$\chi^2 (1, n = 645) = 1.805, p = .179$			

Note. Differences in subscript letters indicate a statistically significant difference.

**Table 9. An Analysis of Gender and Positive Consequences for an Avoidance of Femininity**

	Male Character Source	Female Character Source	Total
Present	12.8% ( $n = 12$ ) <sub>a</sub>	10.8% ( $n = 9$ ) <sub>a</sub>	11.9% ( $n = 21$ )
Absent	87.2% ( $n = 82$ ) <sub>a</sub>	89.2% ( $n = 74$ ) <sub>a</sub>	88.1% ( $n = 156$ )
$\chi^2 (1, n = 177) = 0.156, p = .693$			

Note. Differences in subscript letters indicate a statistically significant difference

**Table 10. An Analysis of Gender and Negative Consequences for an Avoidance of Femininity**

	Male Character Source	Female Character Source	Total
Present	9.5% ( $n = 9$ ) <sub>a</sub>	10.8% ( $n = 9$ ) <sub>a</sub>	10.1% ( $n = 18$ )
Absent	90.5% ( $n = 86$ ) <sub>a</sub>	89.2% ( $n = 74$ ) <sub>a</sub>	89.9% ( $n = 160$ )
$\chi^2 (1, n = 178) = .091, p = .762$			

Note. Differences in subscript letters indicate a statistically significant difference

## Appendix

### Codebook for Toxic Masculinity

#### Version 3.28

#### General Coding Rules:

Save each coding sheet as follows: Last name \_television show season.episode

Example: Roberts \_Empire 2.12

#### Scenes

A scene occurs in a single locale with one set of characters present and without and commercial interruption (Greenberg & Busselle, 1996). Scenes have already been determined for the coders. The time stamps are as accurate as possible, but coders may need to rewind a few seconds or play a few seconds after the time stamps to capture the whole scene. Please only use the context that is within the scene to make your coding decisions. Even if you know other information, please use only the scene as your reference for context.

For each scene, please answer the following questions about each variable.

#### Toxic Masculinity:

Toxic masculinity is the idea that masculinity contains regressive traits that then have toxic effects for males. More specifically toxic masculinity includes two parts: aggression and an avoidance of femininity. These components can be and are displayed by both genders though.

To be considered toxic masculinity, actions must be shown on the television show (i.e., you must see the character depicted enacting these behaviors.) The behaviors in regard to **aggression** include physical aggression or an expression of anger. The behaviors in regard to **an avoidance of femininity** include the mockery of feminine behaviors, a suppression of vulnerable emotions, and an intolerance of homosexuality.

#### References:

A reference to toxic masculinity occurs any time one of the following behaviors occurs within a scene. These references will always have a “source” (the person who initiates or enacts the behavior first) and a “target” (the person who receives the behavior or the behavior is directed at). To be considered a new reference at least one of the following must occur:

- 1) The source changes
  - a. Example: Character A was the initiator of physical aggression but now character B is enacting mockery
- 2) The target changes
  - a. Example: Character A was the initiator of anger at character B but is now angry at character C

- 3) The enactment of behavior changes
  - a. Example: Character A was physically aggressive at character B but is now trying to suppress their grief about character B's betrayal.

If there is a group of characters (more than 2) please still code in the same way. Whomever initiates the behavior is the source and whomever receives the behavior is the target. It is possible that one person could be the target or that multiple people could be the target within a group. Additionally, if a group is all enacting the same behavior as a unit (for example a group of henchmen or a team), please code that as one reference.

You will count each time a reference occurs within the given scene and report it in the respective column. However, if more than 10 references occur in a scene, please indicate this by coding 10+

Variable: Num\_Ref

How many references of toxic masculinity occurred in this scene?  
(Insert number directly into spreadsheet)

After answering how many behaviors occurred within the scene, please only answer the rest of the questions in regard to **a random reference** of toxic masculinity that occurred in the scene. For example, if there were 5 references to toxic masculinity, you would randomly choose a number from 1-5 and then code that reference for its portrayal of the following behaviors.

### Source and Target Gender

*Source:* Each scene could contain characters of multiple genders. Therefore, when coding for source gender, please code what gender the character enacting the following variables appears to be. The "source" is the initiator of the behaviors discussed below. If the character specifies that they are either female or male, please code for the gender they identify rather than assuming their gender based on depiction.

Variable: Source\_Gen

What is the gender of the source of toxic masculinity in this scene?  
Nothing in scene= 0, Male= 1, Female= 2, Mixed/Both= 3, Source is an object/no gender= 4, Can't tell-behavior was initiated off screen= 5

*Target:* When coding for gender, please code what gender the character receiving the following variables appears to be. The "target" is the receiver of the source's behaviors. If the character specifies that they are either female or male, please code for the gender they identify rather than assuming their gender based on depiction.

Variable: Target\_Gen

What is the gender of the target of toxic masculinity in this scene?

Nothing in scene= 0, Male= 1, Female= 2, Mixed/Both= 3, Target is an object/no gender= 4, There is no target or the source was the target= 5, Can't tell-behavior was initiated off screen= 6

## I. Aggression

*Physical Aggression*: is an overt depiction of a credible threat of physical force or the actual use of such force intended to physically harm or coerce. Coercion can also include manipulation of the target by the source. Threats can be verbal in nature only if they are threats to be physical aggressive. Target must be in scene for it to count as a threat. This intention of harm or actual harm can be to an animate or inanimate being.

General examples: pushing, hitting, sexual advances that are uninvited, kicking, etc.

Examples from TV:

- In *Riverdale*, when Mrs. Blossom grabs Cheryl's wrists and drags her to the barn
- In *Empire*, when Eddie threatens Luscious with a gun

Variable: Physical

Does the scene include a reference to physical aggression?

No= 0, Yes= 1, Can't code= 99

*Expression of Anger*: is an overt depiction of a feeling of extreme displeasure, fury, rage or hostility. When coding for demonstrations of anger, the actions must be clearly due to the emotion. The context of the scene is one way to determine if the emotion being demonstrated is anger. Sarcasm is included in this category if it is clear from the context that the person is angry. Try to avoid coding annoyance of any kind and rather look to the following nonverbal cues to help determine whether the emotion portrayed is anger when a character has not verbally stated they are angry.

Nonverbal cues can include:

- 1) Facial cues—red face, tensed mouth or jaw, or furrowed brow, grimacing or scowling, no eye contact or extreme eye contact, stoic expression
- 2) Posture cues—tense body, aggressive stance, finger pointing
- 3) Tone of voice—firm, short/snappy, can be loud or quiet

If this anger leads to an aggressive behavior (as defined above) or vice versa, then you would need to code for both types of toxic masculinity in this reference.

General examples: the character raises their voice to a significantly louder level or the tone of voice changes, the character becomes red in the face, clearly clenches jaw or fists, etc.

Examples from TV:

- In *Empire*, when Luscious yells at a reporter, and kicks her out of his office
- In *Riverdale*, when the Blossoms get angry at Betty and her family for showing up in the middle of the night

Variable: Anger

Does the scene include a reference to an expression of anger?

No= 0, Yes= 1, Can't code = 99

Expressions of anger will be directed at an object. When considering the object, it can be either consonant with their gender (objects that are appropriate for men/women to get angry about) or dissonant (objects are that inappropriate for men/women to get angry about). These objects should be thought about as the reason the character is angry (i.e. what or who), and not what does the character use to express his/her anger.

For male characters:

Examples of consonance: anger at their sports team for losing, anger at another man for looking at girlfriend, anger at losing a video game, anger at car for breaking down, anger due to betrayal from a romantic partner or friend, anger at a child for misbehaving, anger at a co-worker for stealing their idea, etc.

Examples of dissonance: anger due to the way their clothes fit or how they look, anger at another person who stepped on their garden, anger due to not receiving enough affection from a romantic partner, etc.

For female characters:

Examples of consonance: anger for a romantic partner cheating, anger at breaking a nail, anger for a partner/friend not paying attention to them, etc.

Examples of dissonance: anger at a sports team losing a game, anger at losing a bet, anger at the television for breaking, anger at a romantic partner for giving them affection, etc.

Variable: Ang\_Object

Was the object of this reference dissonance or consonance?

Dissonance= 0, Consonance= 1, Not applicable to scene= 2, Can't tell due to context of scene= 3

Expressions of anger will also have a level of intensity ranging from "a little" to "a lot." "A little" would be described as either a small behavioral display of anger and not spoken or stating that they are angry and no display. For example, one person in an argument raising their voice for a short period of time (one interaction, or a few seconds).

"Some" is described as a distinct behavioral display of anger and possibly the statement of such. For example, a raised voice for more than a few seconds or one interaction and/or a behavior demonstrating anger.

“A lot” is described as an exaggerated display of anger and possibly the statement of such. For example, intense yelling for a long duration of time and/or a behavior demonstrating anger.

Variable: Ang\_Intensity

How intense was the display of anger or angry behavior?

A little=0, Some= 1, A lot= 2, Not applicable to scene= 3

## II. Avoidance of Femininity

*Mockery of feminine behaviors:* includes insulting of feminine behavior, appearance and/or mannerisms. Feminine behaviors include stereotypical displays of femininity such as displays of emotions, demonstrations of affection, work that is seen as traditionally “feminine” (i.e. household chores), etc. These depictions should only be coded if they are being made fun of within the reference.

Additionally, this includes any remarks made that devalue women, being a woman or things associated with being a woman or femininity. This category ONLY includes the mockery of feminine behaviors, and NOT masculine behaviors.

General examples: Jokes about males being “whipped”, a group of boys being called “ladies”, remarks about women being less than men in some way, etc.

Examples from TV:

- In *Black-ish* when Zoey comments that her guy friend takes longer to get ready than she does in order to get her sister to stop liking him.
- In *The Flash*, when Dibny calls the bachelor party a bunch of girls for not wanting to go to a strip club

Variable: Mockery

Does the scene include a reference to mockery of feminine behaviors?

No= 0, Yes= 1, Can’t code= 99

*Suppression of vulnerable emotions:* is a depiction of vulnerable emotions (sadness, grief, or fear) being **repressed or avoided** by the character. This may also include the character showing discomfort with vulnerable emotions being displayed by others or themselves. This category is when characters hide their emotions and make attempts to not display emotions. This does not include coping where characters may distract themselves from their emotions with other behaviors.

General examples: Wiping away or hiding tears, saying they do not want to talk about a sensitive subject, pretending to not be afraid, etc.

Examples from TV:

- In *Riverdale*, when Jughead's dad hangs his head after telling Jughead to leave
- In *Modern Family*, when the librarian is short with Manny because she doesn't want to talk about their breakup
- In *The Good Place*, when the judge puts himself into a cocoon anytime someone around him becomes emotional

Variable: Vulnerable

Does the scene include a reference to a suppression of vulnerable emotions?

No= 0, Yes= 1, Can't code= 99

Vulnerable emotions also occur in regard to an object. When considering the object, it can be either consonant (objects that are appropriate for men to experience vulnerable emotions about) or dissonant (objects are that inappropriate for men to experience vulnerable emotions about). The object of the vulnerable emotion is what the character is feeling vulnerable about.

For male characters:

Examples of consonance: upset at a sports team losing a big game, afraid of losing a job, etc.

Examples of dissonance: upset about ruining a favorite piece of clothing, afraid of bugs/snakes/the dark, cries from a romantic movie, etc.

For female characters:

Examples of consonance: upset about a break up, fear of spiders, grief over losing a loved one, etc.

Examples of dissonance: upset about losing a video game or competition, sadness about ruined prized possession like baseball cards, etc.

Variable: Vul\_Object

Was the object of this reference dissonance or consonance?

Dissonance= 0, Consonance= 1, Not applicable to scene= 2

Vulnerable emotions will also have a level of intensity ranging from a little to a lot. This level of intensity is in regard to how much emotion is demonstrated when the character is trying to suppress it.

“A little” would be described as either a small behavioral display of a vulnerable emotion and not spoken or stating that they are upset, fearful or experiencing grief, and no display.

For example, a few tears could be running down the character's face before wiping them away.

“Some” is described as a distinct behavioral display of a vulnerable emotion and possibly the statement of such. For example, the character could be shaking due to a fear and also state how afraid they are to another character.

“A lot” is described as an exaggerated display of a vulnerable emotion and possibly the statement of such. For example, the character could sob hysterically and while expressing the anguish they are currently in.

Variable: Vul\_Intensity

How intense was the emotional display or behavior?

A little= 0, Some= 1, A lot= 2, Not applicable to scene= 3

*Intolerance of homosexuality*: is any depiction of disdain or uncomfortableness for non-platonic male relationships.

Examples: calling males derogatory names like “fag” or “pussy”, discomfort when touching other males, uncomfortable with male/male affection, etc.

Examples from TV:

- In *Jane the Virgin*, when Jane is uncomfortable because she finds out her boyfriend is bisexual

Variable: Homosexuality

Does the scene include a reference to homophobia?

No= 0, Yes= 1, Can't code= 99

### III. Consequences

Consequences could be discussed or portrayed and should only be coded if it immediately follows an act of toxic masculinity. A consequence is a positive or negative outcome in response to the enactor of aggression or an avoidance of femininity. Again, please only use the scene's context to determine whether there was a consequence of toxic masculinity. If neither a positive, nor a negative consequence occur, please indicate this by marking “0” (which indicates no) for both questions. There could be instances when there is no consequence at all.

*Negative consequences*: include any negative repercussion as a result of toxic masculinity. This occurs when a character receives some detriment (i.e. emotional

detriment, physical consequence, relational detriment or punishment) due to their behaviors.

Examples could include:

- Emotional detriment—explicitly upset partner or friend (i.e. crying, yelling)
- Physical consequence—drink thrown in face, getting punched, hit, slapped.
- Relational detriment—a break up or ending of a relationship (romantic or otherwise)
- Punishment—discouraged, reprimanded, put in jail, kicked out of place (school, building), lawsuit, rejection (must be explicit)

Variable: Neg Cons

Does the character receive a negative consequence in response to their toxic masculinity?

No= 0, Yes= 1

*Positive consequences:* include any positive outcome as a result of toxic masculinity. This occurs when a character receives some benefit (i.e. emotional benefit, physical reward, relational benefits, or encouragement) due to their behaviors. These verbal and behavioral responses must be welcomed by the receiver in order to be considered a positive consequence.

Examples could include:

- Emotional benefit—explicit happiness, person getting what he or she wants
- Physical reward— high five, hug
- Relational benefit—explicit inclusion by a group, person has sex with
- Encouragement—laughter at joke, comments reinforcing behavior or talk

Variable: Pos Cons

Does the character receive a positive consequence in response to their toxic masculinity?

No= 0, Yes= 1

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