

“Let’s Hug It Out, Bitch”: HBO’s *Entourage*, Masculinity in Crisis, and the Value of Audience Studies

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Abstract

Media scholars have begun to examine how masculinities function in the media through exploration of a variety of texts and personas; however, most have sought to do so by using textual analysis. We argue that this emphasis on textual analysis has overshadowed scholarship on media audiences, limiting opportunities to understand how audiences’ gender identities are affected by mediated masculinities. Through interviews with viewers of HBO’s *Entourage*, we examine how viewers apply their attitudes and beliefs about masculinity to *Entourage*’s characters and use *Entourage*’s portrayal of masculinities to think through their own gender identities. We found that participants were drawn to a fantasy version of a powerful, dominant masculinity and felt less favorably about characters who exhibited forms of masculinity that incorporated attitudes and behaviors deemed feminine. Our findings suggest that scholarship on the crisis in masculinity, and theorization of hegemonic masculinity generally, would be strengthened with critical qualitative audience studies.

Keywords

television, masculinity, audience, gender, qualitative methods, cultural politics

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In their cultural histories of American manhood, Faludi (1999) and Kimmel (2006) trace the origins of the contemporary “crisis in masculinity” and suggest that changes in American social and economic systems in the twentieth century fundamentally destabilized American masculinity, leaving men unsure about their place in contemporary culture. Kimmel (2008, 166) asserts that, as a result, men have lost “[t]heir sense of entitlement. Their sense that the world is their oyster, their home, their castle.” Both Faludi and Kimmel insist that at the close of the twentieth century, an unstable form of masculinity, conflated with and perpetuated by mass consumerism and mass media, had a firm grasp on American culture: “men find themselves in an unfamiliar world where male worth is measured only by participation in a celebrity-driven consumer culture and awarded by lady luck” (Faludi 1999, 39).

A cursory look at press surrounding recent televised representations of men and masculinities corroborates Faludi’s and Kimmel’s assertions that entertainment media contribute to the crisis in masculinity by sending confusing messages about men’s roles in contemporary society. Such press has repeatedly reported on how television messages both reflect and distort contemporary men’s lives, particularly with regard to a perceived change in male characters’ roles and character traits. For example, in 2005, *The New York Times* reported on cable network Spike’s market research with young adult male viewers that demonstrated that they enjoy morally ambiguous characters. Television producer Gary A. Randall, who was quoted in the article, opined that watching characters who struggle “makes men feel better about their own flaws and internal conflicts” (St. John 2005, para. 8). In addition, the popular press frequently scrutinizes representations of men through coverage of the fall television premieres. *Entertainment Weekly*, for instance, lamented the wealth of immature and insecure adult male characters in the 2007 premiere lineup (Harris 2007, para. 3). *Time* suggested the 2011 fall offerings were full of messages about how men “need to rediscover their masculinity” (Poniewozik 2011, para. 2), and *The Wall Street Journal* similarly suggested the 2011 premieres contained “a new generation of TV wimps” (Chozick 2011, para. 2).

These popular press accounts demonstrate that conceptions of manhood in contemporary culture are perceived to be changing and that television is indeed a “site where hegemonic masculinity gets negotiated, recuperated, and reimagined” (Becker 2009, 122). Critical studies of audience reception can demonstrate these negotiations by examining how audiences make sense of mediated messages in a culture where masculinity is in flux. To the growing literature on masculinities and media audiences, we add a close examination of viewers’ interpretations of one television series. Specifically, we interviewed viewers of HBO’s *Entourage* to explore how they evaluated the series’ portrayal of men and masculinities and used them to explore their own views on masculinity. We argue that *Entourage*, with its portrayal of the relationships among young, white, middle-class men, is a product and a symbol of the crisis in masculinity, and as such is a fruitful text through which to explore audience reactions to televisual portrayals of men and masculinity. The success of HBO’s *Entourage* (2004–2011), a series “written for men, primarily by men” (Flint 2011), has been attributed to the “realism” of the relationships between the characters, a quality that audiences “really bought into” (Tucker 2011).

Through our approach, we attempt to answer Hanke's (1998, 188) call to "consider how hegemonic masculinity articulates to structures and lived forms of patriarchy within everyday life." We learned how the interview participants applied their attitudes and beliefs about masculinities to *Entourage's* characters and to their own gender identities. We also found that the participants preferred a fantasy version of a powerful, dominant masculinity and felt less favorably about characters who exhibited forms of masculinity that incorporated attitudes and behaviors deemed feminine. Our findings suggest that media scholarship on the crisis in masculinity, and theorization of hegemonic masculinity generally, would be strengthened with critical qualitative audience studies. Before turning to the responses received from the group interview participants, we ground our analysis with relevant scholarship on masculinities and the media.

Scholarship on Masculinities and the Media

In this section, we examine scholarship that explores the relationships between masculinities, gender identities, and the media, and demonstrate the need for more critical qualitative studies that examine how audiences make sense of masculinities. We begin with a brief examination of Connell's hegemonic masculinity, a dynamic theoretical model that has proven invaluable to media studies scholarship on masculinities, before moving on to look at audience studies of masculinities.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Challenging the notion that there is one clear definition of what it means to be masculine, Connell (1995) constructed a theoretical model that recognizes multiple masculinities and the complex relations among them. Her conception of "hegemonic masculinity" refers to the culturally authoritative form of masculinity that supports the dominance of (mostly white) men and the subordination of women. Although hegemonic masculinity occupies a powerful cultural position, Connell argues that it is important to recognize the fluidity of this power; when patriarchal notions are challenged, hegemonic masculinity shifts to preserve its power. Thus, hegemonic masculinity is subject to different embodiments over time depending on the culture in which it is operating—it is this push and pull of masculinities that helps to explain the changing nature of masculinities that constitutes the contemporary crisis in masculinity.

Although hegemonic masculinity is the dominant form of masculinity, Connell (1995) argues that few men actually meet its standards, which necessitates multiple masculinities, including subordinated and complicit masculinities. While Connell's conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity has been critiqued (Howson 2005; Whitehead 1998), extended (Lindgren and Lelievre 2009; Trujillo 1991), and reworked (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), its emphasis on the ongoing struggle for dominance among multiple masculinities remains invaluable to the study of masculinities in a range of cultural forms, including the media. Below, we discuss how media studies scholars have engaged with this literature through audience research.

Masculinities and Media Audience Studies

Despite a flourishing of critical audience scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s, McKay et al. (2005, 279) suggest that the “ethnographic turn” in audience studies “seems to have bypassed researchers who have analyzed men and the media.” This “bypassing” is particularly troubling because audience scholars have been at the forefront of the explorations of the meanings audiences make of gendered media messages, and feminist audience studies have been particularly useful for understanding the range of ways audiences have “read” gendered messages in a variety of texts, including romance novels, prime-time television, and adolescent magazines (e.g., Currie 1999; Press 1991; Radway 1984). Feminist media scholarship has also emphasized the importance of designing studies that incorporate both textual- and audience-based methods (Brunsdon et al. 1997).

Critical qualitative audience research is a necessary component of contemporary media scholars’ explorations of the shifting nature of contemporary masculinity because it enables an examination of the ways audiences make sense of mediated masculinities, a subject about which textually based studies can only speculate. Lewis (1994, 25) argues that it is the viewer who brings meaning to the television programs they watch, “The meaning of the television message is not fixed, but neither is it arbitrary. It is determined by the viewer’s semiotic environment . . .” Radway (1986, 99) has also emphasized the importance of contextualizing scholars’ interpretations of a text with audience’s interpretations, insisting that,

. . . although our own interpretation as an analyst is inescapable, it is nonetheless important and helpful to begin with a real audience’s conscious, surface interpretation of a given form if we wish to understand how that form functions within the larger culture . . .

Because there is no guarantee that scholars’ readings will mirror the readings made by viewers, it is difficult to investigate the impact of changing and complex forms of mediated hegemonic masculinity without talking to audiences about how they understand the messages in the media texts they consume. Thus, if media scholars wish to develop a sense of how hegemonic masculinity works to reproduce itself by winning (or losing) consent through media texts, we must study the sense audiences make of mediated messages about masculinities.

Although few in number, studies on masculinities and media audiences are unified by their focus upon the ways men and boys incorporate media messages about masculinities into their gender identities. In his study of popular magazine readers, Gauntlett (2002, 256) argues, “ideas about lifestyle and identity that appear in the media are resources which individuals use to think through their sense of self and modes of expression.” He suggests that the media are a particularly influential resource in contemporary culture for men, in part because the crisis in masculinity has made ideas about masculinity less certain. He insists that the media, in this shifting context, “offer important tools to help men—and women—adjust to contemporary life” (Gauntlett 2002, 7). Gauntlett (2002, 255) asserts that because messages about male and female

gender identities are no longer “singular, straightforward messages,” men (and women) increasingly turn to popular culture, drawing from its “range of stars, icons and characters” to build their gender identities.

Men’s use of media messages for the construction and performance of masculine identities is the focus of Jewkes’s (2002) exploration of television in the prison context. Through participant observation, interviews with prison officials, and interviews with incarcerated men at four prisons in the United Kingdom, Jewkes found that watching television enabled prisoners to conform to and perform the “excessively masculine” (2002, xiii) identities necessary for survival in prison culture by “providing material for the construction or enhancement of masculine identities based on popular cultural heroes and role models” (2002, 187). Jewkes’s study underscores the importance of media messages in the construction of hyper-masculine identities for the purpose of survival in a threatening subculture, yet other studies set in less threatening environments report similar findings.

Klinger (2008) found that men use the recitation and performance of popular film dialogue “to rehearse different types of masculinity they deem attractive as they attempt to figure out their identities . . .” Her examination of this fan practice revealed that men were most interested in repeating lines expressed by particular film characters and stars, especially those with “tough guy,” sarcastic, anti-authoritarian, and comic attitudes. Klinger’s study also explores the social impact of the media’s messages about masculinity, as many of the college students with whom she spoke suggested that they memorized and performed film quotations to impress their friends and demonstrate textual mastery within a group setting.

Hoover and Coats (2011) similarly demonstrate that men can use television characters to construct and reinforce the boundaries of their identities as well as to articulate gendered narratives of self. Their work is based upon interviews with Evangelical men in which they discussed the television characters the men liked and disliked. They found that television programs and characters “become a common source of shared language and shared experience that are integrated into interactions and potentially into life narratives and identity constructions as well” (Hoover and Coats 2011, 886). The men’s discussions of characters they dislike were especially important to their identity constructions because they served as masculine symbols from which they wished to distance themselves.

Thus, from the high-stakes prison environment to seemingly insignificant practices of film line recitation and everyday TV viewing, critical qualitative audience studies demonstrate that men and boys in varying social situations use media messages to shape their constructions and performances of gender identity and underscore how much work there is left to be done on this important topic. That critical qualitative audience studies have begun to explore the ways male audiences use media to shape and mark the boundaries of their masculine identities reinforces our assertion that media scholarship about masculinities, primarily textual in nature, would be better equipped to understand the impact of media messages examined if critical qualitative audience studies constituted a larger part of the subfield’s literature. The present study endeavors to contribute to the scholarship in media studies on masculinities and media

audiences with an examination of viewers' responses to the depiction of masculinities in *Entourage*, a series praised for its realistic representations of men and men's lives. Below, we discuss our study's methods.

Study Method

To explore the meanings made from the characters' enactments of masculinities in *Entourage*, we conducted focus group interviews with regular viewers of the series. Lunt and Livingstone (1996) assert that focus group interviews are useful for developing an understanding of how audiences make sense of television through conversations with others. Specifically, they argue that focus groups, and the group discussions they elicit, give researchers a way of observing these important everyday interactions. Because focus groups generate discussion, they can simulate everyday conversations about television, offering a better sense of participants' perspectives on the discussion topics and how they debate these topics with others.

We recruited *Entourage* viewers from a mid-sized Midwestern U.S. college town from a range of sources: former students, flyers posted around campus and the surrounding community, and contacts made through colleagues. In total, thirty interviewees participated in eight focus group interviews in sessions lasting 90 to 120 minutes between May and August 2011. Many of the participants attended with a friend, and three groups were composed entirely of friend groups. Demographically, our interviewees were mostly male ($N = 23$), white ($N = 25$), students ($N = 25$), and in their twenties (ages ranged from nineteen to forty-four; the mean was twenty-two), which is representative of the series' target audience, young adults (Kaplan 2005). All had watched multiple seasons of the series and described themselves as *Entourage* fans. Although the demographic similarity of the participants could be considered a weakness of the present study, our aim was to include demographically similar participants, as well as participants who were friends, to promote discussion and dissension, minimize the chance that they would give socially sanctioned answers, and approximate naturally occurring conversations among friends (Bloor et al. 2001; Krueger and Casey 2000). Although we first planned to recruit only male viewers, we included female viewers who answered our call knowing that men are not the only consumers of mediated masculinities, and thus like men, women shape the performance and perpetuation of masculinities. In addition, we found that female regular viewers' interest in the series and conversations with male siblings, friends, and romantic partners shaped their contributions to the focus group discussions.

To approximate viewers' regular viewing conditions, the interviews were held in a research lab containing a widescreen television and comfortable furniture, and the participants were offered food and drink. Each interview was conducted by one or two members of the research team and began with the screening of a thirty-minute *Entourage* episode (the season 7 finale, "Lose Yourself," airdate 09/12/2010) to give the participants a common episode to discuss and to put the series at the forefront of the participants' minds, especially because a number of our interviews took place between seasons 7 and 8. Once the screening was over, the interviews began with

general questions about the series' storylines, character attributes, and favorite characters. We used these initial questions to gather their feelings about *Entourage* and its characters as a whole, and also to build the participants' comfort.

After this initial "warm up" phase of questions, we asked the participants to discuss their conceptions of masculinity and use these to evaluate the *Entourage* characters' gender traits. Because we asked the participants to discuss masculinity in the context of their evaluations of the characters, and the series as a whole revolves around a group of young men exploring their self-identities, we found that participants were generally comfortable with this potentially sensitive line of questioning. The interviews concluded with questions about the participants' overall interest in *Entourage* and their feelings about the series' final season. All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by members of the research team, resulting in 419 single-spaced pages of verbatim transcripts. In each transcript, the interview participants were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality in the reporting of our findings. Next, we describe HBO's *Entourage* and demonstrate its relevance for the study of masculinities and media audiences. We then turn to a discussion the most salient themes that emerged from our analysis of the participants' group interviews.

Understanding Masculinities through *Entourage*

Entourage: Realism and Fantasy

On September 11, 2011, HBO's *Entourage*, based upon actor Mark Wahlberg's experiences as an up-and-coming actor transplanted to Hollywood from modest beginnings in Boston, Massachusetts, ended its successful eight-season run. Wahlberg and his manager, Stephen Levinson, worked with writer-director Doug Ellin to create *Entourage* and developed the comedy's main character, Vincent "Vince" Chase (Adrian Grenier) in Wahlberg's image. As its name suggests, the series revolves around the experiences of A-list actor Vince and the friends he brings to Hollywood from back home (Queens, New York). Vince's entourage includes childhood friends Eric "E" Murphy (Kevin Connolly), who is Vince's best friend and manager, Salvatore "Turtle" Assante (Jerry Ferrara), who initially serves as Vince's driver/assistant, and Vince's half-brother, Johnny "Drama" Chase (Kevin Dillon), who is an actor who is much less successful than Vince. Vince shares his wealth and success with his friends so selflessly that at times it seems that Eric, Turtle, and Johnny benefit unduly from Vince's generosity, but Poniewozik (2004, 76) suggests that in return for Vince's generosity, the members of the entourage "make him feel safe" by providing a protective community in the competitive environment of Hollywood.

Ari Gold (Jeremy Piven), Vince's agent, is a central character in the series because the guys "depend on him for income, advice on comportment, introductions and Lakers tickets" (Heffernan 2005). Ari is abrasive, sharp-tongued, and larger-than-life; he frequently berates and belittles Lloyd Lee (Rex Lee), his gay, Chinese American assistant, to mask his dependence upon and genuine affection for him. Ari's signature phrase, "Let's hug it out, bitch," used to promote the series' second season (Martin

2005), expresses the contradictions in the series' messages about masculinities; while *Entourage* breaks with dominant cultural messages in its portrayal of the close relationships among the male characters (who always "hug out" their differences), the series reifies hegemonic masculinity by policing masculinity's borders (hugging thus necessitates the feminine insult, "bitch").

Entourage was successful in regularly drawing an audience of 2.5 million viewers (Levine and Weisman 2011). Although the demographics of the series' viewers have not been reported in the popular or industry press, Strauss (2007) argues that the series "is a staple on college campuses" and also has an "appeal [that] stretches beyond any one group." Snierson (2006) calls *Entourage* "a zeitgeist cult hit that can't truly be measured by the size of its small but enamored audience . . ." In addition to HBO viewers, *Entourage* has reached audiences on DVD and Viacom's Spike TV, which purchased *Entourage*'s off-net rights in 2009 to help draw large audiences for its original programming (Flint 2011). An *Entourage* feature film is slated for June 2015 (Kroll 2014).

Although critics point to the realism of the interpersonal relationships in the program, the *mise-en-scene* among rich actors in Hollywood opens a window into the fantasies of celebrity life. Critics have praised *Entourage*'s seemingly authentic portrayal of men and male friendships, "These are the rare TV characters who feel an awful lot like real people" (Peyser 2004). Indeed, it was Executive Producer Doug Ellin's goal to make the characters on *Entourage* feel genuine to a range of viewers, "We haven't really seen a realistic show about men on television . . . to be relatable to firemen or stockbrokers who hang out together—that was the goal" (quoted in Snierson 2006). To ground the fantasy elements of the Hollywood setting, *Entourage* endeavored to make its portrayal of celebrity life realistic by shooting scenes on location at the Sundance Film Festival, a U2 concert, and a Lakers game (Hochman 2005), and by including numerous celebrity cameos with stars "playing" themselves. Noting the success of this strategy, Stuever (2011) suggests, "No series had ever so accurately made use of the feel of doing business in Hollywood and West L.A."

The viewers we interviewed cited *Entourage*'s skill at incorporating elements of reality and fantasy as a major attraction of the series. A number of respondents reported being drawn to the series because it was based on Mark Wahlberg's real-life experiences. In addition, respondents, like Justin (twenty-one, white), felt that they could relate to the characters' statements and actions, "Even though they're living a famous life there's a lot of things that we can identify with . . . the way they talk to each other, for instance. I mean, it's just so spot on." Ryan (twenty-three, white) suggested the members of the entourage are "the kind of friends that anybody would want to have."

Despite the respondents' emphasis on the appeal of the characters' realness, the characters' wealth and status in image-conscious Hollywood were also important components of the series' appeal. For example, Adam (twenty, black) shared, "I think a lot of people fantasize when they watch *Entourage* just because it's a life that anybody . . . would want." Javier (nineteen, multiracial) found the characters' social status and economic position to be exciting: "You kind of feel that connection, that thrill along with the show. 'Cause they're going out and buying expensive ass cars and partying all the time . . . you sit there and you're kind of like, 'this looks pretty cool.'"

The combination of fantasy and reality in *Entourage* is significant because its elements of fantasy allow for the expression of desires and ambitions, and its elements of realism and authenticity allow the fictional series' ideological messages to hold greater sway. As Fiske (2011, 30) suggests, realism

promotes and naturalizes the dominant ideology. It works by making everything appear "realistic," and "realisticness" is the process by which ideology is made to appear the product of reality or nature, and not of a specific society and its culture.

Thus, because media texts work "ideologically to promote and prefer certain meanings of the world, to circulate some meanings rather than others, and to serve some social interests better than others" (Fiske 2011, 20), it follows that the gender ideologies in *Entourage*, even those constructed as fantasies, will resonate strongly with viewers. *Entourage's* portrayal of a range (albeit limited) of masculinities enables an examination of which masculine characteristics most resonate with viewers. We therefore argue that *Entourage* is an exemplary text for examining how audiences make sense of mediated messages about masculinities in a culture where such notions are in flux. To demonstrate how viewers evaluated the messages about masculinities in *Entourage* in the context of their own masculine identities, we first discuss the participants' beliefs about masculinity and then explore how the characters' portrayals of masculinity resonated with viewers' gender identities.

Defining Masculinity

Given that our participants live in an American culture framed by discourses of masculinity in crisis, and are shaped by a greater range of masculinities on television than ever before (McKay et al. 2005), it makes sense that many of the interview participants struggled to articulate their own definitions of masculinity. Many of our questions about participants' views of masculinity were initially met with long pauses and hesitant statements. With reassurance from the interview moderators that there were no incorrect answers, they articulated a relatively stable and consistent view of masculinity, described by Zach (twenty, white) as "a set thing of rules for guys . . . like how you're supposed to act." For those who participated in our interviews, the rules included being confident, protective, and physically strong.

Confidence is the masculine trait most frequently mentioned by the participants. Brandon (twenty-one, white) noted that this characteristic of masculinity includes "being comfortable with yourself," and David (twenty-seven, white) suggested that confidence is demonstrated when one does "not back down when you need to step up." Linked to these descriptions of masculinity as a display of unwavering outwardly projected confidence, Kevin (twenty-six, white) insisted that confident masculinity also means being "emotionally strong . . . masculinity, you don't think of men crying or anything like that."

Taking confidence one step further, participants suggested that having the power to protect oneself and others was an important component of being masculine. Carlos (twenty, Latino) maintained that masculinity involves, "being in control . . . of yourself and whatever's going on . . ." Some participants linked this trait of protection to

being a provider for one's family. Ryan stated, for example, "If you have a family, [you] obviously take care of them, provide them with food, shelter, . . . love."

Physical strength is one of the qualities linking confidence and protection, so it is not surprising that the participants also discussed the relationship between physical appearance and masculinity, although we were surprised it was not regularly or immediately mentioned in the interviews. David linked "muscles" and "stature," and suggested that being masculine is "carrying yourself in a certain way." Aaron (twenty, Asian American) asserted that he thinks of masculinity as "a physical description" and shared that he feels a "sportier" body type is most masculine. For many participants, a masculine appearance includes a muscular, athletic body type and facial hair.

In general, the participants articulated a coherent set of rules that comprise their notions of masculinity; however, as we discuss below, they applied them unevenly when discussing masculinities on *Entourage*. Although each of *Entourage*'s six main characters was discussed in the interviews, the participants regularly and rigorously discussed the masculinities of only three characters: Ari Gold, Eric Murphy, and Johnny Chase. Masculinity was less salient when discussing Vincent Chase, Salvatore "Turtle" Assante, and Lloyd Lee in part because of the way each character developed over the course of the series. For example, although the series revolves around A-list actor Vince Chase, our respondents saw him as a relatively hollow character. Thus, Brandon suggested that Vince "is the necessary tool for the show to take place but I don't care about him at all." Although he is the foundation for the series, Vince likely is minimally constructed to enable viewers to readily identify with, and fantasize about, his luxurious lifestyle. Discussions about Turtle similarly yielded little discussion. Like many of the participants, Ryan described him as, "the lazy guy of the group . . . he just hangs out and chills most of the time." In total, the participants had relatively little to say about Turtle and Vince; because these characters and their masculinities were relatively underdeveloped, they were not readily discussed, and as a result, we learned little about masculinities on *Entourage* through discussions about them.

Participants had little to say about Lloyd Lee, Ari's gay Chinese American assistant, not only because he is a minor character in the series but also because they were generally uncomfortable discussing his race and sexual identity. In line with Shek's (2006) assertion that forms of masculinity among men of color, including Asian Americans, gay men, and bisexual men, are subordinated, the participants viewed Lloyd as the least masculine character in the series. They repeatedly described Lloyd using a number of gay stereotypes, such as "flamboyant," "feminine," "girly," and "sassy." Although Lloyd's sexual and racial identities no doubt played a role in the participants' stereotypical evaluations of Lloyd's masculinity, providing useful information about their views of masculinity, Lloyd is a minor character in the series, and thus participants had little to say about him beyond a few mentions in each group discussion.

Although discussions of Vince, Turtle, and Lloyd offered little to our examination of masculinities, we found discussions of Ari, Eric, and Johnny to be much more fruitful for understanding how regular viewers of *Entourage* understand, discuss, and

utilize their conceptions of masculinity and apply them to their own lives. Indeed, Ari, Eric, and Johnny seem to more saliently reflect how viewers negotiate the series' depiction of hegemonic and alternative masculinities and how the characters' varied incorporation, revision, and exclusion of masculine and feminine traits and behaviors contributed to the participants' interest in emulating Ari's, Eric's, and Johnny's masculinities.

The Fantasy of Hegemonic Masculinity

Overwhelmingly, the participants suggested that Ari Gold (Jeremy Piven) was their favorite character and the most masculine member of *Entourage's* cast. Their evaluations of Ari's masculinity were based upon their vicarious enjoyment of watching him in action, suggesting that they are drawn to Ari's achievements and the power he wields. Although they recognized that Ari's discriminatory behaviors are unacceptable in contemporary culture, the participants enjoyed them, indicating that even this negative aspect of Ari's character offers them the chance to momentarily experience the pleasures of dominant masculinity. Such offensive behaviors solidified Ari's hegemonic masculinity, which a number of participants felt compelled to temper with reference to moments where he demonstrated a feminized care for others.

Although relatively short in stature, Ari's broad shoulders, expensive suits, prestigious position, antagonistic personality, and competitive nature position him, in the participants' eyes, as a hegemonically masculine fantasy figure. Patrick (twenty-one, white) described Ari as "the most powerful man in Hollywood," and Zach emphasized that, "He's in the biggest agency in Hollywood, and his name's on it." Many participants were quick to share that Ari's achievements in Hollywood are due not only to his hard work but also to his fearless and aggressive personality. Jeremy (twenty-four, white) emphasized that Ari is, "real driven, his whole business, like his life is his work and everything else kinda comes second, including his wife."

Tied to Ari's power and confidence is his need to be in control of every situation. Tyler (twenty-two, white) maintained that Ari is "very controlling. He enjoys . . . having his power trips and being in control." To maintain control, Ari is frequently vengeful, deceptive, and ruthless—he takes pleasure from bullying and humiliating other people, usually with sexist, racist, classist, and heterosexist language. Will (nineteen, white) shared that he feels Ari's unpredictable behavior is part of the series' appeal "because every time that he blows up you're glued to the screen 'cause you never know . . . how far he'll take something. And it's always one step farther every time."

Most respondents acknowledged that Ari's behavior is offensive, and thus undesirable for emulation, but they still found Ari's misogynist and homophobic comments and actions to be a major appeal of his character. For example, Derrick (twenty-one, white) asserted that Ari is "insanely offensive. Not exactly the guy you want to grow up to be, but . . . pretty funny." Amanda (twenty-one, white) described Ari as "disrespectful of women" but shared, "it's funny still . . . I'm glad he's not saying that to me, but it's funny to watch." While the participants discussed a number of characters to whom Ari has been unkind, they found his interactions with Lloyd Lee (Rex Lee) to be the most comedic; for instance, Cody (twenty, white) remarked, "Ari always makes

fun of [Lloyd] for his sexual orientation. . . . He just has a ton of racial slurs. I mean, it's funny to watch." Viewers' enjoyment of Ari's inflammatory behavior resonates with Yochim's (2009, 154) ethnographic research with male members of a skateboarding community, whom she argued were "expected to assert their dominance over women and their suspicion of homosexuality in order to maintain their place in the culture." Thus, the pleasure viewers take from Ari's misogynist and homophobic statements and behaviors is tied to an enjoyment of the fantasy of hegemonic masculinity.

While some participants reconciled their interest in Ari by laughing off his offensive behavior, others justified his language and actions by citing either the competitive environment in which he works, or moments in the series when Ari shows a less hostile side. Michael (nineteen, white), for instance, asserted, "That's the way that L.A. works. If you're not forceful then people walk all over you, so he puts on this front." A number of participants rationalized Ari's derogatory behavior by positioning it against examples from the series when Ari expressed care for others, suggesting that at his core he is not all bad. Justin's statement is representative, "I love the fact that . . . he really is truly concerned with his family . . . I think that's a really important part of his personality besides just his aggressive business behavior." Participants also used Ari's relationship with Lloyd to temper Ari's bad behavior. Cody maintained that Ari cares deeply for Lloyd, "There [are] some episodes where Lloyd quits or threatens to quit and Ari goes and gets him back because he really does care about him."

These discussions of Ari Gold demonstrate that viewers admired their favorite character's power and confidence, and although they recognized the offensiveness of his aggression, they enjoyed it, indicating that his hegemonic attitudes and behaviors are appealing. That participants readily recognized that Ari's version of masculinity would be an unacceptable component of their own gender identities suggests that they use him as a fantasy, vicariously enjoying aspects of masculinity deemed unacceptable in contemporary culture. Klinger (2008) noted similar pleasures in her study of men's recitations of popular film quotations and asserted that fans' performance of masculine "rebellion, determination, aggression, power, [and] subversive humor" in their favorite movie lines allowed men an outlet "to articulate what they experience as a rebuttal of and resistance to social norms." Thus, while these respondents' reactions to Ari's harassment of other characters are deeply troubling, their admiration for Ari's power, and their amusement with his aggressive behavior, suggest that *Entourage* allows viewers to recuperate, or at least temporarily enjoy, some of the authority Kimmel (2008) argues white hegemonic masculinity has lost in contemporary culture.

The Disappointments of Alternative Masculinity

The participants' evaluations of Eric Murphy (Kevin Connolly) and his masculinity complicate their constructions of what it means to be masculine in contemporary American culture. Unlike with Ari, a fantasy figure of hegemonic masculinity, our interview participants struggled with, and often made conflicting statements about, Eric (nicknamed "E"). Specifically, the participants struggled to reconcile Eric's

ambition and leadership with his physical appearance and emotional sensitivity, indicating that Eric's "femininity" negatively affected their evaluations of his masculine traits. Viewers' assertions that Eric's character is "realistic" suggest that the respondents recognize in him alternative characteristics of masculinity valued and expected of men in contemporary culture. Their negative appraisals of Eric's "femininity," especially when compared with their use of Ari's care of others to recuperate his hegemonically masculine behaviors, expose the boundaries these *Entourage* viewers have constructed to stave off the encroaching feminine elements in this contemporary form of alternative masculinity.

Central to the participants' evaluations of Eric's character are his drive and commitment to becoming a successful, well-respected Hollywood manager. David gave a quick description of Eric's background:

He used to be . . . a pizza boy in New York, and ever since they got out to L.A., he took on the role of Vince's manager . . . through that he kinda learned the business and tried to grow and actually do something on his own that doesn't have to do with Vince.

Many participants found Eric's interest in working hard to make a name for himself, independent of Vince, admirable. Jeremy insisted, "He's probably the most organized and driven character." Other participants praised Eric for "act[ing] the most mature," being a "very loyal friend," and being "the voice of reason out of all of them." Eric's many laudable qualities positioned him as an authentic and positive model of masculinity for many participants, like Michael, who shared that Eric "seems like the most real of all the characters to me." Kyle (twenty-one, white) described Eric as "the kind of guy that you want your kid to grow up to be."

Despite their positive evaluations of Eric, and their suggestions that he is the most realistic character in the series, his masculinity was called into question through participants' reflections upon two major components of his character: his physical appearance and his emotional sensitivity, including his desire for a long-term relationship with Sloan McQuewick (Emmanuelle Chriqui). Although Eric's stature does not differ dramatically from Ari's, Aaron called Eric "the tiniest of them all." Kristen (twenty-one, white) shared that Eric is "kinda feminine" because he "takes care of his appearance a lot," suggesting that masculinity and grooming, even in image-conscious Hollywood, are oppositional. Despite the participants' assessment that providing for a family was an important component of a masculine identity, they rebuked Eric for his desire for a long-term, committed relationship with Sloan and judged him as being too "emotional" and "sensitive." For example, Zach criticized Eric for "how easily he shows his emotions" and for his "vulnerability to love." This repudiation of Eric's "feminine" qualities is in direct opposition to the participants' use of Ari's emotional expressions to temper or excuse his offensive behavior and demonstrates viewers' need to protect the boundary between masculinity and femininity.

Eric's differences from his friends often position him at the periphery of the entourage, despite the fact he is Vince's lifelong best friend. Seth (twenty-two, white) insisted, "I don't really care much for E, just because he's always ruining their fun."

Eric's differences also open him up to negative appraisals of his masculine identity from the other characters, most notably from Ari Gold. Acknowledging this, Kyle shared, "E gets picked on a lot." Tyler called Eric "a pushover" and "a huge pussy."

Perhaps more than any character on *Entourage*, Eric Murphy feels "real" to the participants and exhibits their stated qualifications for masculinity: he is confident and ambitious, stands up for what he believes is right, and cares for others. However, the participants' denial of Eric's masculinity due to his incorporation of traditionally feminine characteristics reveals their disappointment with contemporary masculinity's inclusion of ethics, responsibility, and concern for others. The participants' discussions of Eric's gender characteristics resonate with Hoover and Coats' (2011) finding that men use media characters they like and dislike to mark the boundaries of their gender identities. Thus, while Eric is discussed as a realistic character ripe for emulation, the participants distance themselves from his portrayal of an alternative masculinity with disparaging comments about Eric's appearance, responsibility, and emotional sensitivity. Rejecting Eric's gender traits and behaviors as "feminine," these participants reinforce their evaluations of this alternative masculinity as inferior to the more aggressive, hegemonic form.

The Comedic Catharsis of Crisis

While the participants' differing evaluations of Ari Gold as hegemonically masculine and Eric Murphy as threateningly feminine expose the boundaries these viewers have constructed around hegemonic masculinity, their discussions of Johnny "Drama" Chase's (Kevin Dillon) exaggerated gender characteristics suggest that Johnny embodies the resultant angst of the contemporary push-and-pull between hegemonic and alternative masculinities. On one hand, viewers respected Johnny's over-protectiveness of his "baby brother" Vince and his insistence on being physically strong; on the other, they mocked Johnny for being overemotional, unsuccessful, and oblivious to his traditionally feminine behaviors. Rather than a fantastical or realistic representation of masculinity, viewers' discussions of Johnny's extreme gender characteristics demonstrate that he serves as a cathartic release from the anxieties caused by the shifting nature of masculinity in contemporary culture.

A frequent observation participants made about Johnny concerns his protectiveness of Vince. Ashley (twenty, white) said, "He's always supporting Vince. Even when [Johnny's] down and [Vince's] up, he's supportive." Many suggested that his protectiveness makes Johnny one of the more aggressive characters in the series. As Adam noted, Johnny is "not afraid to fight," and many of his fights begin as attempts to defend Vince. Patrick recounted a representative example from season 5, "One of the producers jacked Vince around a little bit and kind of made him look like a fool. So, Drama, looking out for Vince, took his five iron and beat up the guys."

The participants connected Johnny's aggressiveness to his muscular body, goatee, and the manner in which he carries himself; Ryan described Johnny as, "always walking with his chest all puffed out and always trying to be really tough." Johnny actively works on and talks about his physique, as noted by Jason (twenty-five, white), who

observed that Johnny is “really big into working out, getting ‘jacked.’” Some participants argued that Johnny’s work toward a traditionally masculine physical form increased his masculinity; Tyler argued, “Drama is the only character that actually cares about his physique and he kind of comes off as the most masculine character in the show because of those attributes.”

Despite discussing elements of his character that labeled him masculine, the participants also readily associated Johnny with the comical characteristic from which his nickname developed: his overblown emotional responses to a variety of situations. Jeremy suggested that Johnny “overreacts to every situation,” and Adam described him as “a drama queen.” Tyler asserted that Johnny is “very feminine with his emotions” and “reacts a lot more to emotional circumstances than the rest of the characters.”

Overwhelmingly, viewers grounded Johnny’s “drama” in insecurity, a characteristic that made his attempts to appear masculine seem performative only. Nick (twenty-one, white) emphasized the reason for Johnny’s nickname,

“Johnny Drama” is what his name is. You can see it in his mannerisms and his gestures and he walks with his chest pumped out, but there is always some shit going on and he always blows it up to be bigger than it is . . .

Many laughed at Johnny’s repeated attempts to posture as tougher than he is; for example, Patrick said, “he’s obviously harmless.” Of Johnny’s overtly masculine physique, Tyler snickered, “It’s funny because he’s obviously not. He’s got that feminine side to him as well.” Many participants linked Johnny’s insecurity to his lack of success as an actor, especially when compared with Vince. Patrick described Johnny’s career: “He’s always been like a real C-list actor . . . he’s always apprehensive about . . . the whole Hollywood thing.”

The participants also indicated that Johnny’s preoccupation with grooming threatens his masculinity. For example, Zach mocked Johnny for thinking “he’s so good looking.” Patrick emphasized that Johnny’s enjoyment of manicures and pedicures gives him “a metrosexual quality.” Adding to Drama’s assumed weaknesses, Nathan (twenty-two, white) suggested that Johnny’s interest in cooking for the entourage was “a feminine trait,” and Richard (forty-four, white) insisted that Johnny’s concern for his brother Vince gives “a little bit of mother hen aspect to him.”

Ultimately, the participants suggest that Johnny’s performance of masculinity is unconvincing, even though he regularly, if only misguidedly, asserts his success and power. The result is comedic. Ashley described Johnny as “the funniest . . . it’s his personality . . . it’s really funny how dramatic he gets.” This humor, in line with Fiske’s notion of “hyperbolic excess,” makes Johnny a cathartic symbol of the crisis of masculinity; as Fiske (2011, 91) notes, hyperbolic excess functions as “a form of exaggeration which may approach the self-knowingness of ‘camp’ . . . or self-parody.” The combination of Johnny’s over-the-top masculine and feminine traits allows participants to laugh at both the performative nature of hegemonic masculinity and the insecurities invoked by an image-driven consumer culture in which men are

increasingly unsure of how to prove their masculinity. Thus, while Ari provides a desirable, if fantastical, version of hegemonic masculinity, and Eric illustrates a contemporary, alternative masculinity blended with traditionally feminine characteristics, Johnny is the comedic relief from the anxieties caused by society's demands that traditional masculinity give way to alternate forms. As Ari is the only of the three characters to be positively and consistently seen as masculine, the participants' comments reveal that the most desirable masculinity in contemporary culture remains the hegemonic one.

Conclusion

HBO's *Entourage*, a series depicting men's lives and relationships, is a fruitful text for exploring how television viewers experience and value masculine identities in contemporary American culture. To examine how audiences evaluate masculinities in a culture where such notions are shifting and uncertain, we conducted group interviews with *Entourage* viewers. Through analysis of the participants' perceptions of the masculinities exhibited by Ari Gold, Eric Murphy, and Johnny "Drama" Chase, we found that viewers were drawn to traditional, hegemonic masculinity and disdainful of alternative masculinities that incorporate feminine traits. Set in a culture in which normative definitions of masculinity are purportedly changing, the complexities of the participants' evaluations of the characters' masculinities make sense. Their interest in Ari suggests a yearning for the dominant masculine traits increasingly seen in contemporary culture as oppressive and objectionable, and their criticism of Eric indicates a desire to dissociate from the evolving notions of masculinity in the present. Johnny is an anxiety-ridden, exaggerated example of a masculinity caught between the hegemonic and the alternative that allows viewers to laugh at and shake off the difficulties of performing masculinity properly in a shifting and uncertain environment. The viewers' preference for the fantasy of hegemonic masculinity in a series praised for its realism suggests both that realistic and contemporary masculinities are unappealing while the hegemonic influence of traditional masculinity endures.

Although the present study is limited by the relative homogeneity of the interview participants, we believe it demonstrates that media scholars should continue to examine mediated masculinities through critical qualitative audience studies. If indeed media audiences use televisual texts like *Entourage* to "re-create what they feel they've lost in reality—entitlement, control, unchallenged rule, and the untrammelled right to be gross, offensive, and politically incorrect" (Kimmel 2008, 160), then media scholarship must enhance the findings from textual analyses with audience studies. Such studies tell us "what the world produced by patriarchy and capitalism looks like from inside" (Radway 1986, 118), strengthening our scholarship and informing gender politics. Thus, to fully understand how audiences view masculinity in the context of its contemporary crisis, it is necessary to explore how masculinities work culturally—and media audiences are key sites for this exploration. We believe that incorporating critical qualitative audience studies into scholarship on masculinities and the media will enable media scholars to better understand masculinity's

hegemonic nature and to create a more expansive and inclusive understanding of the ways media audiences use media texts in the construction of their gender identities.

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