

Why Media Matter: Media Effects on Stalking Myth Endorsement

by Julia R. Lippman*

In early 2015, an Australian court ruled in favor of an Indian man charged with stalking after his lawyers successfully argued that the man could not be held accountable for his behavior.¹ The reason? He was merely mimicking the romantic pursuits he had seen in Bollywood films. The whole affair brings to mind an article that appeared in the satirical magazine *The Onion* back in 1999: Romantic-Comedy Behavior Gets Real-Life Man Arrested.² Only this time it wasn't satire.

But beyond anecdote, is there any reason to believe that movies affect how we view stalking? My research suggests that the answer is yes.³ My research demonstrates that movies depicting persistent pursuit influence the extent to which women endorse stalking myths, which are false or exaggerated beliefs about stalking that serve to minimize the seriousness of the crime.⁴ However, the direction of these effects is dependent on the nature of the persistent pursuit depiction.

Following up on my earlier research,⁵ I conceptualized stalking as a type of persistent pursuit. Importantly, persistent pursuit also captures behavior proscribed for men by the dominant heterosexual courtship script,⁶ in which men are expected to demonstrate romantic interest through active and persistent overtures. Moreover, men are encouraged to continue their pursuits even when they are explicitly told they are unwanted because of a complementary script for women that proscribes either passive expression of interest or a disavowal of interest (*i.e.*, token resistance).⁷

“Stalking Is Love” Trope

The “stalking is love” trope appears so commonly in media that it garners

its own page on the website TV Tropes, a website that, despite its name, catalogs common tropes across a range of media.⁸ And although this trope appears in music (every breath you take, Sting will be watching you; Lady Gaga promises to “follow you until you love me”) and television, nowhere is it more common than in movies. Think: *The Graduate*; *Say Anything*; *50 First Dates*; *Twilight*; *Crazy Stupid Love*; *Fifty Shades of Grey*. In every one of these films, male characters go to extreme lengths to win over the objects of their

in expressed level of stalking myth endorsement.

Research Method

The study employed a between-subjects design in which participants were randomly assigned to watch a film that depicted persistent pursuit as romantic, a film that depicted persistent pursuit as scary, or a control film that did not depict persistent pursuit at all. To increase the generalizability of the findings, each condition was represented by two films. Participants

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affection. Yet somehow, the women in these movies never seem all that bothered by these men who refuse to take no for an answer. On the contrary, they are ultimately “won over” by the man’s persistence.

Social cognitive information processing theory⁹ suggests that media affect beliefs about social phenomena through schemas, which are cognitive structures that organize knowledge about attributes inherent to, and associated with, a construct. This theory suggests that short-term media effects occur because schema are primed, which causes them to exert a temporarily heightened influence on subsequent judgment tasks. With repeated priming, schemas can become chronically accessible and thus chronically employed. I reasoned that because both stalking and the romantic pursuits commonly portrayed in films are forms of persistent pursuit, exposure to either type of pursuit might prime a “persistent pursuit” schema that would affect judgments of stalking, and I expected this to manifest

in the romantic condition watched an excerpt from either *There’s Something About Mary* or *Management*; participants in the scary condition watched an excerpt from either *Sleeping With the Enemy* or *Enough*; and participants in the control condition watched an excerpt from either *March of the Penguins* or *Winged Migration*.

When selecting films, I took care to match them on several dimensions that prior research suggested would be relevant to evaluations of stalking. Consequently, the films in the two experimental conditions (romantic pursuit and scary pursuit) share several commonalities. All feature a man pursuing a woman in the context of a current, former, or desired romantic relationship; all feature a pursuit that is driven—at least in part—by the man’s desire for a relationship; all feature a pursuit that the woman does not want, for at least part of the narrative; all feature White actors playing characters that appear to be in their

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20s or 30s; and it was possible to edit all the films into coherent narratives that did not include physical violence.

Participants were 426 undergraduate women ($M_{\text{age}} = 19.45$, $SD = 1.65$), the majority of whom (69.2%) identified as White, non-Hispanic. Participants completed the study in a lab, where they were informed they were completing a study on “media and attitudes.” After signing an informed consent form, each participant watched a half-hour edited excerpt from a film, completed a series of survey measures, and was fully debriefed. Depending on recruitment method, participants were awarded either participation credit toward a course requirement or a \$15 gift card.

been, and how positively they viewed the pursuer and target.

Stalking myths ($\alpha = .84$) were assessed using Sinclair’s Stalking Myths Scale.¹² Sample items from the 21-item scale include “A person who is willing to go to the extremes of stalking must really be in love” and “Many alleged stalking victims are actually people who played hard to get and ‘changed their minds’ afterwards.” Participants were also asked to report on their personal experience with being “undesirably and obsessively pursued” using an eight-item index.¹³

Findings

Consistent with expectations, participants who watched a scary portrayal of persistent pursuit endorsed lower levels of stalking myths than

in part, by the perceived appropriateness of the pursuer’s behavior. That is, one possible mechanism through which watching a silver-screen pursuit affects levels of stalking myth endorsement is by shaping how we view pursuers, which in turn shapes the extent to which we buy into stalking myths.

Practical Implications

A substantial body of research highlights the importance of targeting rape myth endorsement in efforts to reduce rape and improve the climate for rape victims.¹⁴ Given their conceptual overlap, targeting stalking myth endorsement is likely to yield similarly positive results for stalking. The study reported here suggests that media may provide an effective point of entry for these efforts.

As noted above, watching a film in which persistent pursuit was portrayed in a negative light led to a reduction in stalking myth endorsement. This finding suggests that media narratives that feature the harms of stalking may be usefully employed as part of interventions designed to reduce stalking myth endorsement.

On the other hand, watching a film in which persistent pursuit was portrayed in a positive light led to an increase in stalking myth endorsement among some participants. This finding has a couple key implications. First, other researchers had speculated that media might contribute to the normalization and trivialization of stalking by glorifying persistence as evidence of love;¹⁵ this study provides empirical evidence in support of these speculations. Second, perceived realism emerged as a moderator of this effect; that is, there was an increase in stalking myth endorsement among participants who perceived the romantic films as more realistic, but not among participants who perceived the romantic films as less realistic. This finding suggests that interventions that highlight the unrealistic nature of the relationships featured in these films would be an effective buffer against harmful effects.¹⁶

Another key finding was that the relation between film exposure and stalking myth endorsement was mediated by perceptions of pursuer appropriateness. As might be expected,

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Several measures assessed participants’ perceptions of the films, the films’ characters, and the viewing experience. The measure assessing perceived realism ($\alpha = .82$; 5 items)¹⁰ asked participants to indicate the extent to which they agreed with items like “The film reflects problems couples encounter in their relationships” and “The events in the scenes resemble ones in the real world.” Transportation, which describes the subjective experience of narrative immersion (*i.e.*, feeling “transported” into the narrative world), was measured by asking participants to indicate the extent to which they agreed with items like “I could imagine myself in the scenes I was watching” and “I was mentally involved in the scenes I was watching” ($\alpha = .72$; 5 items).¹¹ Single-item measures asked participants to indicate how physically attractive they thought the pursuer and target were, how appropriately they thought the pursuer and targets’ actions had

those in the control condition. Stated another way, watching a scary portrayal of persistent pursuit led people to see stalking as a more serious crime than they otherwise would.

Watching a romantic portrayal of persistent pursuit, on the other hand, only produced higher levels of stalking myth endorsement if participants perceived the film as more realistic or if they experienced higher levels of narrative engagement (*i.e.*, transportation). In other words, for some participants, watching a romantic portrayal of persistent pursuit led them to see stalking as a less serious crime than they otherwise would.

Additional analyses tested if perceptions of the pursuers or targets depicted in the films could account for the changed levels of stalking myth endorsement. These analyses suggested that in both the scary and romantic persistent pursuit conditions, the effect of film exposure on stalking myth endorsement could be explained,

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most participants strongly disagreed that the pursuer had acted appropriately in the scary pursuit films. However, this was not the case among participants who watched a romantic pursuit film. Thus, emphasizing the inappropriateness of these romantic pursuits could be expected to mitigate the observed effects.

Just as rape myth endorsement is positively associated with behavioral outcomes, so, too, is stalking myth endorsement. In this study, stalking myth endorsement was positively associated with being the target of an unwanted pursuit ($r = .13, p < .01$). This is a finding I replicated in a brief report examining the relations among stalking myth endorsement, unwanted pursuit perpetration, and unwanted pursuit victimization among 750 college students.¹⁷ Among women, there was a significant positive association between stalking myth endorsement and being the target of an unwanted pursuit ($r = .13, p < .01$); among men, however, this association was non-significant ($r = .08, ns$). Further, for both men and women, stalking myth endorsement was positively associated with perpetrating an unwanted pursuit (both $r = .20, p < .05$). Together, these findings suggest that interventions aimed at reducing stalking myths should lead to a reduction in unwanted pursuits.

The research described above suggests the need to take seriously the role of media in efforts to reduce gendered violence. Media can—and commonly do—serve as purveyors of scripts that sell unwanted pursuits as romantic, and exposure to these media texts may increase the extent to which viewers hold stalking-supportive beliefs, which in turn are linked to relevant behavioral outcomes. On the other hand, media may also serve as a force for good, leading viewers to recognize stalking for the threat that it is. These insights contribute to a fuller understanding of the contributions to stalking perpetration and victimization.

End Notes

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