

**MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
STUDY GUIDE**

THE BRO CODE

How Contemporary Culture Creates Sexist Men

A Film by Thomas Keith
Study Guide by Thomas Keith

CONTENTS

Note to Educators	3
Program Overview	4
Pre-viewing Discussion Questions	4
Introduction	5
Key Points	5
Discussion Questions	5
Assignments	5
Chapter 1: “Train Men to Womanize”	6
Key Points	6
Discussion Questions	7
Assignments	7
Chapter 2: “Immerse Men in Porn”	8
Key Points	8
Discussion Questions	9
Assignments	10
Chapter 3: “Make Rape Jokes”	11
Key Points	11
Discussion Questions	12
Assignments	13
Chapter 4: “Obey the Masculinity Cops”	14
Key Points	14
Discussion Questions	14
Assignments	15

NOTE TO EDUCATORS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content – and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them – the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we’ve structured the guide so that you have the option of focusing in depth on one section of the video at a time. We’ve also set it up to help you stay close to the video’s main line of argument as it unfolds. The structure of the guide therefore mirrors the structure of the video, moving through each of the video’s sections with a series of key summary points, questions, and assignments specific to that section.

Previewing Discussion Questions are designed to improve preliminary discussion about the issues the video addresses prior to viewing.

Key Points provide a concise and comprehensive summary of each section of the video. They are designed to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

Questions for Discussion & Writing provide a series of questions designed to help you review and clarify material for your students; to encourage students to reflect critically on this material during class discussions; and to prompt and guide their written reactions to the video before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for “free-writing” or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

Assignments for each section encourage students to engage the video in more depth – by conducting research, working on individual and group projects, putting together presentations, and composing formal essays. These assignments are designed to challenge students to show command of the material presented in the video, to think critically and independently about this material from a number of different perspectives, and to develop and defend their own point of view on the issues at stake.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

In **The Bro Code: How Contemporary Culture Creates Sexist Men**, Thomas Keith critically examines the ways that popular culture continues to reinforce and reward sexism, particularly among boys and young men. Keith's primary argument is that sexism is still portrayed in contemporary media and culture as cool, desirable, and normal for young men. Those men who resist our culture's normative imperative to treat women purely as sexual objects are marginalized and ridiculed in numerous ways as an attempt to limit the ways that men view and interact with women. The film demonstrates how the devaluing of women by media, men, and the surrounding culture reinforces a hostile climate toward women, homosexual men, and heterosexual men who challenge existing norms about what it means to be a man in our society. Keith also exposes the variety of ways that men are kept in a tightly monitored "man box" of male behavior that emphasizes sexist views and actions toward women, actions that ultimately harm men and pose palpable dangers to women.

Special Note: This video features sexualized images that may be offensive to some. There is also strong language in some places. The film also shows scenes of dramatized rape, making audience awareness a necessity. It is important that educators preview the film prior to screening it with their students. It is also advised that ample time for discussion of the impact of these images and arguments is allowed at each screening.

PRE-VIEWING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Ask the class: Why do you believe boys and men use insults that are feminine in connotation? Why are these kinds of insults more or less the worst thing a man can say to another man? What do you think insults of this sort say to men about women?
2. To males: At what age do you remember viewing pornography? How did it make you feel? Did someone expose you to it, or did you come across it on your own? In what ways has pornography influenced your life or the life of someone you know?
3. Do you believe men are better at some jobs than women? Are these purely physical jobs or do they also extend to jobs that require intelligence and leadership? What is your impression of a man who becomes a nurse or a woman who becomes an engineer?
4. Do you agree with the idea that sexism is not condemned to the same degree as racism? If so, why do you think we tolerate women being called names like "bitch," while deploring the use of the "N-word" toward African Americans? Is there a difference between these two epithets, and if so, why?

INTRODUCTION

Key Points

- The filmmaker admits that he grew up in “bro culture,” pointing to his background in sports and music.
- He then suggests that boys today are being raised in the same sexist ways he was raised.
- But he underlines a key difference between then and now: he claims that the sexism inherent in today’s “bro” culture is far more dangerous than in the past.
- The primary aim of the film, he says, is to understand the variety of ways that this increasingly dangerous strain of sexism continues to be lauded and defined as cool by mainstream media and mainstream male culture.

Discussion Questions

1. In which classes, if any, have you investigated the issue of sexism in our society?
2. Do you believe the subject of sexism should be more prominently featured in high school and college classes? If so, identify some of the classes and disciplines that should feature this issue?
3. If you’re male, would you feel uncomfortable taking a Women’s Studies or a Gender Studies course? Why or why not?
4. How was “feminism” presented to you when you were young? What were your impressions of feminists?
5. Do you agree with the filmmaker that media today are flooded with sexist images? Can you provide some examples?

Assignments

1. Cut out and bring to class five ads from magazines that you believe to be sexist. Be prepared to explain in class what aspect of each ad is sexist, and why the messages these ads send might be harmful.
2. On a scale of 1–10 (10 being the worst), rate the degree to which sexism is a problem in our society today, and explain your rating.
3. Create and prioritize a list of influences that you feel contribute to sexism and the devaluing of what is considered to be “feminine” in our society. Be prepared to discuss your list.

CHAPTER 1: “TRAIN MEN TO WOMANIZE”

Key Points

- The film opens with images of popular film characters that are prototypical of male archetypes, while also being prototypically sexist.
- The film then turns to the wildly unapologetic sexism found in the MTV hit show “Jersey Shore.”
- In its pseudo-reality shows, MTV uses hyper-masculine and hyper-sexist male characters knowing that these sorts of characters will connect with a young, male audience.
- In music videos and other reality television shows, we find this same recipe of hyper-masculine posturing coupled with stereotypically hypersexualized women.
- A theme of many of these shows is competition for sexual attention. Sex is the one and only goal, and one of the predominant messages served up to young women is that they should compete for men.
- In addition to glamorizing womanizing, “bro culture” sends the message that gay men should be ridiculed with fervor. Guys even remotely perceived as “feminine” are regularly subject to homophobic insults, and the threat of hostility and violence.
- Fraternity life is a haven of sexism, porn, misogyny, and rape. Several notable universities with high-profile fraternities have come under investigation for the blatant sexism and rates of sexual assault committed by members of the fraternity.
- “Frat guys” today celebrate their sexism. And they often do so under the guise of humor – like the noted fraternity at Yale University in 2010 or the many college parties that incorporate a “bro–ho” theme.
- Men are taught to place women into two categories: “smart women” who are considered to be intimidating and worthless to bros, and what they consider to be “dumb women,” who they can intimidate and use sexually.
- Women, too, absorb the lessons of the bro code, frequently adopting an “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em” attitude and playing the game of getting sex and kicking them to the curb afterward.
- While bros can be found everywhere, they’re especially prominent on college and university campuses, where sexist behavior is often applauded and rewarded.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think shows like “Jersey Shore” are so incredibly popular with teens? Is it simply a “watching-a-train-wreck” phenomenon, or something else? If kids are simply laughing *at* it and not *with* it, why do you think so many of them have adopted the clothes, hairstyles, and verbal expressions of the characters on the show?
2. Assess the commercials for Carl’s Jr. over the past few years. Do you find them to be sexist? Explain.
3. Other than prison, college parties at fraternity houses are the most dangerous places for sexual assault against women in America. Should fraternities be shut down once and for all, or is there a better solution?
4. Calling women the “B-word” or the “H-word” is commonplace in contemporary culture. Do you think this is just as bad as calling African Americans the “N-word?” Why or why not?
5. What do you think it would take to get men to think seriously about sexism as an issue? Even though men commit the overwhelming majority of physical and sexual violence against women, most men currently view it as having nothing to do with them, How can we get men to think seriously about these problems – as a men’s issue – and to become part of the solution?

Assignments

1. Go to the website www.AskMen.com and find 5 sexist claims. What makes these claims sexist, and what dangers lie in instructing men to think in the ways this website recommends?
2. Prepare a short paper evaluating a popular song today that treats women as sexual objects. In what specific ways do you think the song objectifies women? What do you believe are the effects, if any, of songs and artists that promote sexist messages?
3. Construct a debate over the impact of shows like “Jersey Shore.” Specifically, write a paper that argues for and against this proposition: “Shows like ‘Jersey Shore’ are just harmless entertainment.” Be sure to make your best case for each side.
4. View Jean Kilbourne’s video *Killing Us Softly 4* and then either write a paper or lead a discussion on the use of sexist ads in magazines, billboards, television, and other media sources. Address the ways that you believe these sexist images affect women and men.
5. Interview your friends, or teen and pre-teen brothers and sisters, and find out whether they are fans of the musical artists and/or TV shows featured in the first chapter of the film. If they are fans, document the reasons they give for being fans of these artists, and be prepared to share your findings in class. If they are not fans, document the reasons why they say they aren’t, and be prepared to present this to class as well.

CHAPTER 2: “IMMERSE MEN IN PORN”

Key Points

- Worldwide, porn makes more money than many of the largest multi-national corporations combined.
- For many men, porn use has become a significant problem in their lives.
- As competition has increased due to Internet distribution, many of the most popular forms of pornography have become more degrading and violent toward women than previous forms.
- Many women report problems in their relationships due to increased porn use by the men in their lives.
- Despite conventional wisdom, anti-porn campaigns led by feminists have nothing to do with being anti-sex.
- In reality, feminists who criticize pornography are actually pro-sex: they are simply trying to get people to see how pornography limits sexuality, sexual expression, and sexual freedom by defining sex in the most narrow, sexist ways.
- The popularity of pornography places pressure on both women and men to conform to sexual standards and practices as defined by pornographers -- even those who produce brutally violent “rape porn” and “hate porn.”
- Today, college-aged men celebrate using porn. They not only consider it “normal,” but also make fun of anyone who dares to criticize porn in any way.
- The section concludes by asserting that “we are what we repeatedly do,” making the point that repetitive porn use can narrowly define our sexuality, and narrowly define how men view women.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think of pornography? Do you think it's more or less a harmless form of fantasy, or something more? Do you think we should have real concerns about its effects on us? If so, why? If not, why not?
2. Pornographers often make the claim that porn represents "people making choices." Do you agree that this comes down to a matter of choice? How does the film complicate this idea? Specifically.
3. If you had a daughter, would you, like Jenna Jameson, do everything you could to keep her out of the porn industry – even if she expressed an interest in pursuing a career in porn? Or would you see it as potentially empowering to your daughter, and to women in general? Explain your position either way.
4. If you had a son, do you think you might see his use of porn as good for him? Or do you think it's more likely you'd have concerns about the negative effects porn could have on him?
5. Do you think porn has become more mainstream over the years -- that contemporary culture has become "pornified?" If so, what sorts of negative and/or positive effects do you think this pornification of mainstream culture has had on society?
6. Do you agree with the film that porn does more harm than good (if indeed it does any good)? What are the positives and negatives of porn, in your opinion?
7. Do you feel porn is more dangerous to women or to men -- or to both equally? What's your reasoning?
8. Author Shira Tarrant claims that porn creates less sexiness. What is "sexiness" in your opinion, and do you agree with her?
9. Author Robert Jensen argues that porn constrains our sexuality. What specific reasons does he give for this? Do you agree or disagree with him? Explain.

Assignments

1. Interview a number of young men and women individually. Ask them if they remember when they were first exposed to sexuality, and how. Then ask them to share their overall view of pornography as a representation of human sexuality. Try to determine, specifically, whether they feel porn provides a healthy or unhealthy view of sex and sexuality.
2. While watching TV over the course of a day or two, write up a description of any pornographic imagery or messages you come across in shows, movies, and commercials. Be sure to provide the title of the show, or the product being advertised in the commercial, and be as specific as possible in your descriptions of the pornographic themes you notice.
3. Conduct research into porn addiction, and write a paper summarizing and explaining your findings. Are porn addictions real? How many people are reporting problems of this kind? What is the potential fallout of such a problem?
4. Feminist and pro-feminist scholars such as Catherine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, Robert Jensen, and Jackson Katz have written about the negative effects of pornography. Conduct research into the kinds of negative effects these scholars have identified, and write a paper either defending or criticizing their conclusions. Be sure, of course, to back up your argument either way.
5. Not all feminist scholars agree that porn is harmful to women or that porn is unhealthy. Research the work of Wendy McElroy, who authored the book *XXX: A Woman's Right to Pornography*. Write a paper detailing why you agree or disagree with her specific arguments.
6. View the film *The Price of Pleasure: Pornography, Sexuality, and Relationships* by Chyng Sun and Miguel Picker. Write a paper summarizing the film's take on pornography, and make a case for why you agree or disagree with its conclusions.

CHAPTER 3: “MAKE RAPE JOKES”

Key Points

- Deputy District Attorney Richard Taklender, the head of the LAPD sex-crimes unit, observes that rape is first and foremost a crime of violence, not eroticism.
- Despite how serious a problem sexual violence is, comedians and TV shows regularly make jokes about rape.
- Joking about sexual assault trivializes rape in the minds of a lot of boys and men. As a result, a lot of them end up viewing sexual assault as something to treat lightly and joke about themselves.
- The ultimate quest for many young college-aged males is to get women drunk at a party and take advantage of them sexually.
- Young men are trained not to view such actions as sexual assault, since they are inculcated into a “bro culture” that views alcohol and drugs as natural parts of a sexual encounter with a woman.
- Rape is often perceived as a phenomenon that occurs mostly in poor black and Latino neighborhoods, when in fact sexual assault commonly occurs at frat parties on some of America’s most prestigious universities.
- There have long been concerns that universities are reluctant to follow through on rape cases for fear that it will tarnish their reputation.
- Some women have committed suicide after being raped at major universities, believing that the institution was doing little to nothing to properly investigate and hold the rapists accountable.
- As long as men continue to view rape as a joke, the odds are good that date rape and so-called “party rape” will continue to be huge problems on college campuses.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think it will take to get young men to take the phenomenon of “party rape” seriously? Why do you think so many guys fail to take it seriously now?
2. Why do you think rape jokes are suddenly so popular?
3. What is your own reaction when you hear a rape joke?
4. Do you believe there might be a connection between the light-hearted attitudes toward rape found in bro culture and the number of actual sexual assaults on college campuses?
5. How much of a role do you think drugs and alcohol play in “party rape” and date rape? Do you think rape would be less likely if drugs and alcohol were not involved? If drugs and alcohol are, indeed, common in most cases of rape on college campuses, do you think this means that other factors that might lead to rape – like the sexist attitudes of the bro culture that are examined in this film – do not play a role? Explain.
6. What factors might lead rape victims to decide not to report what happened to them? In your view, what specific steps could be taken to create an environment in which victims of rape would be more likely to come forward?
7. Why do you think young men might be reluctant to come forward and report that one of their frat brothers raped a woman? What sorts of pressures are at work here? In your view, what specific steps could be taken to change this?
8. It’s common for victims of rape and sexual assault to be blamed for the crimes committed against them on the basis of what they were wearing or how they were acting. Can you think of concrete things that can be done on college campuses to change this dynamic of “blaming the victim”?
9. What do you think it would take to change the “sex-is-the-goal” mindset that’s so prevalent in frat culture? Do you see this as a losing battle? If so, why? If not, what can we do to get young men to think about women differently? What are the key stumbling blocks that need to be cleared away?

Assignments

1. Conduct a series of brief interviews with a number of fraternity men on campus. Have them respond as fully as possible to one question: “What constitutes a great party?” Document their responses and share with the class.
2. Research sexual assault, and write a paper detailing what it is, what it isn't, and how it's different (if at all) from what you thought it was before researching it. Be prepared to share your findings with the class.
3. Attend a “Take Back the Night” rally (or a similar event dedicated to raising awareness about sexual violence) and write up a summary of what you heard, what you saw, what you thought of it all, and why.
4. Research and write about an actual sexual assault that occurred on a college campus. Through news reports, articles, etc., learn as much as you can about the case, then write up your own assessment of how university authorities handled the case.

CHAPTER 4: “OBEY THE MASCULINITY COPS”

Key Points

- Young men are taught how to be men not only by the images and messages of popular culture, but also by their parents, peers, coaches, and others.
- Because of the powerful social and cultural influences around them, men are often boxed into a narrow code of acceptable “masculine” behaviors that avoid the appearance of “femininity” at all costs.
- The devaluing of all things feminine is a learned response, and has nothing to do with biology or natural inclinations.
- Tony Porter makes the point that women are casualties of male socialization with a poignant story about a young football player who lived in mortal terror of being called a “girl.”
- Pointing to women’s role in perpetuating the bro code, Michael Kimmel suggests that one of the main reasons men act tough and sexist is because they believe this is what women want from men and find most attractive.
- Tragically, a lot of men have failed to move forward and keep pace with women because of the rugged individualist ethos that tells them they can figure things out on their own, without any help from others.
- The film concludes by acknowledging that there’s a new generation of young men that is refusing to subscribe to the bro code, and embracing healthier, less sexist ways to be men.

Discussion Questions

1. Who are some of the people who have had the biggest influence on your life? What did they teach you about what it means to be a man or a woman?
2. If you have a son someday, what do you believe is the most important thing you can teach him?
3. In your view, what are some realistic, practical ways to help boys stand up to pressures from other boys to conform to hyper-masculine and sexist models of manhood?
4. What are some practical ways to counter the dominant messages of male culture and teach boys and young men to respect girls and women?
5. Do you agree or disagree with the film’s baseline premise that the ways we are currently socializing boys are destructive and can be improved?

Assignments

1. Go to a toy store or go online to a department store chain that carries toys and games. Make a list of the games and toys marketed strictly to girls and those marketed strictly to boys. Write up a summary of the kinds of gender-specific messages these products – and marketing appeals – seem to be sending and reinforcing,
2. The film cites a statistic that men are four times more likely than women to commit suicide. Look into this statistic, do some research on male suicide rates, and write a paper explaining whether you believe male socialization has anything to do with this phenomenon.
3. Write a paper examining a prototypically masculine TV show in light of the central arguments made in this film. (Choose a show on ESPN, Spike TV, or another network geared primarily to male audiences.) Be sure to summarize the various ways that stereotypical masculinity is reinforced – both in the show itself, and the commercials that air during the show. And make note of any examples of femininity being used to reinforce a specific ideal of manhood -- especially the fear of being perceived as feminine.