

Let's CHAT about Machismo in Mexican Culture

Emily Reynoso-Romero

In this article, Emily Reynoso-Romero dives into machismo in Hispanic—and more specifically Mexican—culture. She uses Rhetorical Genre Studies and P-CHAT (Pedagogical Cultural Historical Activity Theory) to suggest that, by identifying gender norms as a type of genre, it's possible to see how gender norms can be reinscribed through the ways that humans use them to shape their behavior. As part of the article, Emily interviews different people, asking them for their thoughts on the concept of machismo in order to learn from their antecedent knowledge and opinions on the topic.

A Woman Needs a Husband More than an Education

“Por que vas ha ir a la Universidad? Encuentra un hombre que te puede mantener?” While I was applying for college my senior year of high school, my Mother told me that I shouldn't be applying for college but focus my energy on finding a husband that can support me financially. My Mother grew up in a very traditional Mexican society, so I understood why she thought this was useful advice. *Machismo* is a Spanish term defined as aggressive masculine pride found prominently in Hispanic culture. On a smaller scale, machismo affects the day-to-day life in the household, limiting women to subservient roles and men to the dominant decision-making roles. On a larger scale, it perpetuates gender inequality, domestic abuse, and lack of representation of women in the work force. My Mother's advice exemplified the socioeconomic subordination of women that follows machismo. Mexico itself has made a lot of progressive strides in the fight for women's rights. For example, according to the *Washington Post*, “For the first time, 50 percent of lawmakers in Mexico's lower house of congress are women. (That compares with 27% in the US House of Representatives).” However, machismo is still very alive in

Mexican communities, as well as in Mexican-American communities in the US. Generally, in many of these communities, working is seen as a symbol of masculinity whereas not working is seen as feminine. Many Mexican men and women, particularly from older generations, believe that a women's livelihood should be reserved for domestic work and as a provider for the men of the household. According to *The Pursuit of Gender Equality*, "Only 44.9% of working-age Mexican women are employed" while "Mexican men, in contrast, have a relatively high employment rate (78.5% of men are employed), leading to one of the largest gender gaps in employment in the OECD." Women in Mexico do indeed work, however the gender employment gap illustrates that Mexico is far from gender equality when it comes to working outside of the home. This is one example of how the concept of *machismo* works in Mexico, resulting in unequal opportunities for women. Gender norms are reinforced in the nuclear family and machismo experienced in people's day to day lives connects to large-scale phenomena such as the gender unemployment gap. When it's reinscribed through the everyday practices of people, a gender-norm genre such as machismo can continue because machismo values are passed down by older to younger generations.

In my own experience, I was given a broom before I was given a book, which was my first encounter with machismo. This might seem like a small, unimportant gesture, but being encouraged to learn how to clean before prioritizing education is part of how many Mexican women are socialized in ways that discourage them from empowering themselves outside of home responsibilities. Being born and raised in the United States has given me the privilege to use many resources to accomplish my goal of being a first-generation college graduate. That being said, machismo is not absent in Mexican-American society, but seems to appear differently than machismo in Mexican society. For example, if we look at modern day romantic-comedy, telenovela, *Jane the Virgin*, it focuses on a family of three Hispanic women, independent and working hard to be successful. In one of the episodes that came out in season five, episode eleven, about machismo. In this episode it showed how the grandmother accepts her boyfriend's machista behavior such as being expected to be served his food, to be cleaned after, and requesting women's products to be out of the bathroom so he can feel more comfortable. The main character Jane does not accept this behavior. She was infuriated by his lack of household responsibilities. This exemplifies how two different generations of Hispanic women raised in two different environments have encountered machismo and feel differently about it. But even though younger generations of Mexican and Mexican-American women are resisting these Machismo-based definitions of gender roles,

they are still embedded in understandings of gender that can make change difficult.

Gender as a Genre: Examples of Subgenres

In this article I've connected the ways that gender roles work in Mexican culture to ideas about genre that help me see some of the ways that behavioral patterns get repeated, helping to prevent a move away from machismo in Mexican culture. In rhetorical genre studies, **genre** is defined a lot more flexibly than just as way to categorize literature (which is how many people understand the concept of genre). As defined by Berkenkotter and Huckin (1993), "Genres are dynamic rhetorical forms that develop from responses to recurrent situations and serve to stabilize experience and give it coherence and meaning (479). When understood in this way, *Gender* = *Genre* can become easier to understand because our understanding of gender roles and norms is not some fixed set of categories, but instead these understandings are built, over time, through the ways that people behave, the ways they teach behaviors to younger generations, and the ways that they "police" behaviors that don't match up to expectations. In other words, if we understand that genres are built through activities, repeated over time, then we can understand that gender norms are built in the same way.

In some cases, a concept can be like an umbrella genre that contains lots of different understandings or subgenres beneath it. For example, in this article I'm trying to look at gender as an umbrella genre, which would mean that subgenres might include women, men, transgender, intersex, gender fluid individuals and other identities. While there are many possibilities for examining how different genres related to gender are built through expected behaviors, in this article, I want to focus specifically on women and men as subgenres in relation to heteronormativity. This is because the concept of *machismo* heavily influences heteronormative standards and gender roles for women and men in Mexico, as well as shaping attitudes towards other gender groups. Mexican society has come a long way in changing the conventions that identify how people in different gender categories can (or should) behave (act, dress, think, work); however, traditional conventions, like those related to Machismo, that define women as women and men as men, can work to prevent people from shaping gender categories in more flexible ways.

When studying an unfamiliar genre, a researcher can use **genre conventions** "to describe all the things [they could] discover (and discuss) about a particular genre that makes us recognize it as . . . what it is" ("Key Terms"). The conventions that fall under the traditional gender genre of

woman can include “teach[ing] the importance of caretaking, self-sacrifice, and self-denial” (“Gender Norms”). *The Pursuit of Gender Equality* explains how different factors influence Mexican women’s lifestyles by stating “Gender stereotypes and discrimination continue to restrict women’s choices, and women perform over 75% of all unpaid housework and childcare.” This means that providing Childcare and unpaid housework are also conventions that fall underneath the expectations of being a woman.

Traditionally, Mexican women are expected to give up a part of themselves up in order to be a perfect homemaker, but are rarely encouraged to empower themselves and be independent. Rather than taking care of themselves, they are tasked with taking care of everyone else in their immediate family, especially the men. Machismo, as it works to shape expectations differently between genders, causes humans who fit into the gender category of “woman” to lose their autonomy. On the other hand, conventions that identify the gender category of “man” include “pride and domination, sexual potency, and benevolent sexism towards idealization of females” (Gender Norms”). If we try to see gender conventions as part of what identify the different *genres* of gender, then these conventions create a foundation for machismo as a particular genre of manhood that is enacted in Mexican culture.

Mexican women uphold machismo just as much as Mexican men. Men that explore beyond their masculinity as defined by machismo are seen as inferior men. In this way, both men and women reinscribe machismo as an important convention of the genre, by ridiculing men who fail to exhibit these conventions in their daily behavior. Thus the cycle continues.

Let’s Focus on the Production of These Gender Norms and How Reception is Affected

Let’s go back to the introduction when I said, “In my own experience, I was given a broom before I was given a book, which was my first encounter with machismo.” This may have seemed like an exaggeration, but this is actually a true story. When I was four years old, I lived in Mexico for some months before my Mother decided to immigrate back to the United States. One day, my Grandfather came home from work and gifted me a toy broom and dustpan and said “*Aquí ten esto para que ya aprendes a limpiar*” which translates to “Here have this so you can start learning how to clean.” My Grandfather was a good man, but his understanding of the conventions of being female were based on the way he was raised. As I think about this story, I can connect it to the ISU Writing Program P-CHAT term known as **production**.

Production is a term that contributes to the model for talking about how **cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)** can be used to think about writing. P-CHAT is designed to help writers and researchers navigate through different aspects of literate activity, including representation, distribution, reception, socialization, activity, and ecology. One of the things that P-CHAT can help us do is to study the way a genre develops, how it's used by humans, and even the ways it can make humans feel and behave. According to the ISU Writing Program website, **Production** “deals with the means through which a text is produced,” and, using this concept, writing researchers can consider “the genres and structures that can contribute to and even pre-shape our ability to produce text” (“Key Terms”).

When using the idea of **production** as it applies to gender in Mexican culture, we can see how Mexican women and men are a production of their environment. Women and men are produced differently in machismo culture because of what they are taught and because each gender category has different activities, expected behaviors, and responsibilities. For example, Mexican women are usually pushed to do household chores, take care of younger siblings, and taught how to cook; while the men are expected to be the breadwinner of the family but are not expected to handle any responsibilities around the home. My sister, who was born and raised for most of her life in Mexico, has had three boys of her own. I have seen her do all the household chores, cook, and groom the men in her family while her husband does none of these tasks because his responsibilities involve being the breadwinner and mowing the lawn. This strong understanding of the division of activities that men and women can do obviously isn't based on what different genders of humans can physically do. Instead, it's based on conventions that, when acted out, create an unequal distribution of work in the Mexican family.

Another feature of machismo that shapes how gender is understood includes the idea that men are the decision makers in the relationship. They tend to control their partner's looks, actions, and sexual acts. Machista men act like this in part because they imitate the family dynamics that they grew up with, but machista men also continue to act this way because they are expected by women to treat them as their fathers treated their mothers. Any feminine characteristics a man shows are frowned upon by both sexes, which is the reason why it is hard to move away from machismo lifestyles. And even when men do move away from certain expectations, they can, at the same time, be reinscribing other norms. For example, in 2018 Bad Bunny, a Puerto Rican trap artist and reggaetonero, was denied a manicure in Spain, another country where machismo is a prominent cultural feature. In a 2018 article, Cepeda explains that the rapper Bad Bunny was “attempting to

reinvent masculinity outside of homophobia.” But interestingly, when Bad Bunny used his social media feed to complain that he’d gone to a salon to “get my nails done (manicure + color) and “they told me NO because I’m a MAN,” he got support for his statements about outdated gender norms, but also had Twitter users “question his sexuality” (Cepeda, 2018). In response, Bad Bunny reacted defensively, making statements of extreme virility, like “saying he could impregnate a troll’s wife,” which caused another round of backlash, and an later apology by the artist.

This complex interaction exemplifies that machismo is maintained because people can perceive things like getting a manicure as feminine and a threat to their understanding of manhood. They strongly believe that activities that are strictly for each sex should stay that way. But in pushing back against detractors of his genre-bending manicure, Bad Bunny used some of the same kind of language and thinking that are part of a traditional machista understanding of manhood. The production of these conventions for the subgenres of men and women cause machismo to persist. The reception within the Mexican community is similar when it comes to the production of how women and men are raised. **Reception** is defined by the ISU Writing Program as the way a “text is taken up and used by others” (“Key Terms”). But instead of using it to talk about how people take up texts, I will use **reception** as a way to describe how people take up gender norms and make use of them. The Mexican community allows the production of machismo ideologies because they interpret it as the norm. Machismo is taken up in many different ways, and it shapes how people think of other tools in terms of gender. For example, a broom is a regular cleaning tool, however, the broom I was given as a child was interpreted as a feminine object. Reception of gender is not limited to personal objects but also mannerisms, employment, and appearance. Individuals also interpret and experience machismo in different ways.

Interviews with People Who Have Different Antecedent Knowledge

So far this article has dealt with my own understanding of how machismo works to help define masculine and feminine genres in Mexican culture. But in in order to try to get a broader view, I also conducted four different interviews to explore what people with different antecedent knowledge know and feel about machismo. **Antecedent knowledge** is defined as “things a writer already knows that can come into play when a writer takes up any kind of writing” (“Key Terms”). What people have been taught in school and what type of environment they grew up in can affect what they know and feel

about machismo. That is why I thought it was crucial to get four different interviews with people who come from different backgrounds. I hope these responses will add to discussions about the genres of gender norms.

Key

- **Interviewee #1:** Eighteen-year-old Caucasian female who is a freshman in college. She has always lived in the suburbs of Illinois. All her family is born and raised in the United States.
- **Interviewee #2:** Eighteen-year-old Mexican female who is a freshman in college. She was born and raised in the suburbs of Illinois. Her parents immigrated to the United States from Mexico.
- **Interviewee #3:** Fifty-six-year-old Mexican female mother of six who immigrated to the United States and now lives in the suburbs of Illinois.
- **Interviewee #4:** Fifty-eight-year-old Mexican male father of five who was born and raised in Mexico and lives there.

Interview

Q1: How Would You Define Machismo?

Interviewee #1: “Well, I am not 100% sure because I was never informed on this topic.”

Interviewee #2: “Machismo is the belief in which men are looked as superior to women within, more specifically, Latinx/Hispanic culture.”

Interviewee #3: “*El machismo es un hombre que nada más piece en el mismo y es egoísta.*” This translates to “Machismo is when a man only thinks of himself and is egotistical.”

Interviewee #4: “*Es una creencia social generalizada donde se cree que el hombre tiene más valor y derechos que una mujer y que la mujer debe dedicar su vida al servicio sobre su hombre y los hijos.*” This translates to “It is a generalized social belief that a man has more value and rights than a woman and that a woman should dedicate her life to the service of her man and children.”

Q2: Is There Any Instance of Machismo That You Have Witnessed in Your Family or in Your Daily Life?

Interviewee #1: “The women in my family have always been expected to clean and cook.”

Interviewee #2: “Yes, within my home. For example, my Mom gets off of work at 4:30pm every day and feels like she has the responsibility as a wife to create home-cooked meals. If she does not cook and clean before my Father gets home, he gets angry that she did not do what she was expected to do.”

Interviewee #3: “*Si, los hombres en nuestra familia nada mas hacen lo que se les pague la gana.*” This translates to “Yes, the men in our family do what they want to do.”

Interviewee #4: “*Si como cuando el hombre se niega a apoyar en las labores domésticas y que las mujeres se dedican al hogar y al trabajo como si fuera responsabilidad absoluta de la mujer.*” This translates to “Yes, as when men refuse to help with housework and women dedicate themselves to the home and work as if it were the woman’s absolute responsibility.”

Q3: Do You Feel the Men in Your Family Act As if They Are Superior to the Women in Your Family? Why?

Interviewee #1: “No, because my Dad always says that my family would not be the same without my Mom bringing us together.”

Interviewee #2: “Yes, because at my family parties the men in my family always talk about how they have more responsibility than the women do because they are providing a roof over the family’s head. They always try one upping the women.”

Interviewee #3: “*Siempre, los hombre piensan que son mas mejores de las mujeres. Que son la mayoría de las mujeres. Yo experencia esto en mi con mi ex-esposo.*” This translates to “Men always think they are better than women. They believe that they are the majority. I have experienced this with my Hispanic ex-husband.”

Interviewee #4: “*Se consideran que por ser hombres tienen derecho hacer cosas como salir de fiesta a deshoras de la noche y no permiten que la mujer vista ropas que al hombre no la parecen a él.*” This translates to “They consider that because they are men, they have the right to do things like go out partying late at night and not allow women to wear clothes that they do not find appropriate.”

Q4: From Your Antecedent (Prior) Knowledge, How Would You Differentiate the Way Women are Treated in America Compared to a Latinx/Hispanic Country?

Interviewee #1: “Truthfully, I do not know because I was not taught much about women’s rights other than in American culture.”

Interviewee #2: “American Women are more respected by their husbands. They are more recognized for what they do than a Hispanic woman for the

work they do within and out the home. Hispanic and Latina women have restricted freedom due to their husbands' expectations."

Interviewee #3: "*En los Estados Unidos, mujeres veo que hay más justicia comparada a otras países. Esto depende de cada persona, pero aquí los hombres tiene miedo a los niños que ellos crean porque tiene obligaciones legales que pueden destruir sus vidas. En la instancia donde un hombre está en su propio país hacen lo que se les pegue la gana pero en los Estados Unidos tienen más respeto y cuidado con sus acciones.*" Which translates to "In the United States, I see women receive more justice compared to other countries. It depends on each person, but here the men are afraid of the consequences that come with having a child due to legal obligations which can destroy their lives if they do not cooperate. In the situation where a man is in his own country, he will do as he wants but in the United States they have more respect and are more careful with their actions."

Interviewee #4: "*Sí como la libertad de poder vivir sola, viajar solas, el despertar sexual en América del Norte. Las situaciones de feminicidios y las leyes más flexibles. En México el abuso sexual en los trabajos y la inseguridad pública es mayor entre otras cosas, la trata de blancas.*" This translates to "Yes, like the freedom to live alone, to travel alone, the sexual awakening in North America. The issue of femicides and more flexible laws. In Mexico, sexual abuse in the workplace and public insecurity is higher, and among other things, sex trafficking."

Interview Results: Making Machismo Visible

My interviewees were all asked the same questions and I tried to answer any questions that they had. All my interviewees understood machismo except my Caucasian interviewee. All four of them saw forms of machismo in their families. The Mexican interviewees had and seen more experiences with toxic masculinity than the Caucasian interviewee. Interviewee #3 and #4 were both from older generations and responded in relatively similar ways. Although interviewee #2 is younger and lives in the United States she still encounters elements of machismo within her family.

What follows are some of the takeaways I got from these interviews, but of course I can't claim that these four people represent all the possible understandings of machismo. However, I hope they will spark some conversations for readers:

- To me, interviewees #1 and #2 both show that machismo also exists in the United States and even Americans experience machismo.
- Interviewee #3 and interviewee #4 displayed how institutions in Mexico maintain machismo in the large scale through laws that do not hold

men accountable and do not protect women as much as they should. To me, these responses highlight ways that Institutions in Mexico enable individual machista behavior, thus linking large scale machismo to small scale machismo.

Why Does This All Matter??

Women empowerment is on the rise in Mexico. More than ever, Mexican women are attending college and entering the workforce. But it's concerning to see all of this improvement while still seeing how prevalent machismo is as a cultural genre for understanding gender. The prevalence of machismo in the family dynamic is what hinders the progress for Mexican women's equality. Creating a government that upholds feminismo rather than machismo will end gender inequality, domestic abuse, and lack of representation in the work force and improve women and men's daily lives in the Mexican family. Discussing the effects machismo has had on generations of Mexican women and men is vital to stopping the cycle. The P-CHAT terms used, and ISU Writing terms have allowed me to express the root problem that is machismo using an understanding of how genres are formed and maintained in the world to help me illustrate the ways gender norms become stable within a culture. I hope my readers will use this article to build different kinds of antecedent knowledge as they try to make a change within their own actions and make a change in the world.

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Emily Reynoso-Romero is a senior at Illinois State University majoring in exercise science. She plans on pursuing a graduate degree once she gets her undergraduate degree. Emily comes from a big Mexican family thus she is fully aware of the problems surrounding machismo. She strongly believes in the empowerment and equality of all women worldwide. She is excited to become a clinician one day and help low income minority communities by promoting health and fitness.