

Book Review

Baglia, J. (2005). *The Viagra Ad Venture: Masculinity, Media, and the Performance of Sexual Health*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing. ISBN: 0820474894 (paperback); 165 p., \$35.00.

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In *The Viagra Ad Venture: Masculinity, Media, and the Performance of Sexual Health*, Baglia offers an insightful study of how our conceptions of masculinity and sexual health are constructed by language and the media and by the institutions of medicine and corporate America. Through a critical, rhetorical analysis of media coverage and Pfizer's corporate marketing of Viagra, the "star" of erectile dysfunction (ED) medication, Baglia explains how the discourse defines and medicalizes ED, thus setting the stage to promote Viagra as its appropriate treatment. Baglia reveals how erections are represented as the "sine qua non" (p. 3) of male sexuality; by linking male sexual health to the ability to achieve erections, the discourse of Viagra upholds traditional ideals of masculinity.

Baglia builds on feminist and performance studies frameworks that implicate discourse in constructing male and female sex roles. His analysis adds to work that critically examines mass mediated representations of health issues and their potential effects on conceptions of health. Baglia employs architectural metaphors throughout the book, asserting that discourse constructs our notions of sexuality and masculinity. Moreover, the discourse suggests that structures hindering our sexual development must be "redesigned." For instance, Baglia deconstructs the discourse that perpetuates the "strong, silent," and "stud" (p. 77) male in control and defines intimacy narrowly in terms of intercourse. He terms this view of sexuality as a vertical architecture to emphasize that Viagra is not only a treatment for ED, but also an example of how social constructions in health are created. This narrow, phallic "vertical" view of sexuality is concerned with power and "towering" over alternative views. Additionally, this vertical view of sexuality advocates a mind/body split. Specifically, Baglia suggests that Viagra discourse represents ED as a purely physical problem that must (and can) be "fixed."

The book chapters develop Baglia's arguments through a discussion of theoretical and historical perspectives and through the use of textual analysis. Throughout, he explains the implications for sexual health and well-being.

Chapter 1 introduces the reader to the feminist and performance theoretical frameworks guiding the piece, explaining gender and sex roles as performances we "do" daily and how these performances are situated within and influenced by discourse. Baglia then discusses the discourse of Viagra as part of a "genealogy of factors" (p. 9) that promote and maintain a patriarchal hegemonic perspective on male sexuality. Baglia attends to the implications of defining normalcy as the male ability to achieve erections. He points out that the patriarchal hegemony constituted, reflected, and maintained in the Viagra discourse limits the possibility of new explorations of sexual pleasure and experience, may harm psychological and

physical health, and potentially undermines relationships. The chapter ends by outlining the chapters to come.

Chapter 2 reviews the concept of masculinity and the study of sexuality (i.e., sexology), explains their linkages, and defines terms, offering additional historical and theoretical context for the analysis to follow. The chapter details how the dominant ideals of masculinity are related to capacity and control, or the ability to control one's sexual performance at full capacity, that is, achieve erections.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine texts. In Chapter 3, Baglia analyzes the reporting on Viagra by the mass media in 52 news articles in the *New York Times*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *Newsweek*. His analysis reveals themes of debunking old methods of treating ED and welcoming the "noninvasive" solution of a pill. He describes how testimonials claiming a return to youthful virility promote the pill as a return to the masculine ideal. In Chapter 4, Baglia analyzes Pfizer's marketing materials, including television commercials, materials for physicians, and promotional videos, magazines, and pamphlets. This message content focuses on debunking presumed ED myths, especially the idea that ED is a psychological problem. In other words, the discourse constructs ED as a physical problem that requires pharmaceutical intervention.

The final chapter offers a review and discussion of these textual findings, as well as implications. Baglia argues that failing to question the discourse perpetuating notions of male sexuality and masculinity limits the possibility for sexual evolution. He proposes a reframing of the narrow, "vertical" view of sexuality and masculinity to a more open, "horizontal" view that emphasizes sexual education regarding pleasure for partners, communication between partners, and the notion of sex as play and pleasure rather than work to achieve a particular result.

A great strength of Baglia's book is its organization and elegant, witty writing style. For instance, when discussing the use of a professional baseball player to market Viagra, he connects the boyhood dream of becoming a professional player to a replacement fantasy of sexual conquest in the often-used metaphor of "getting to" the next "base" or, as most readers might know, the familiar idea of equating intercourse with a "home run." Baglia points out that Viagra allows the sports fantasy to continue into later years:

Professional baseball is used to sell sexual identity to men who are at an age when they have to admit that their childhood ambition of playing baseball in the majors can now only be fantasy. And yet, they still want to hit home runs. (p. 78).

The book will no doubt influence readers to examine the role of discourse in their views of masculinity and sexual satisfaction. It also may prompt readers to examine the manner in which advertising often creates projects of our bodies by offering products we didn't know we "so desperately needed."

Another strength of this book is the narrow focus on a particular pharmaceutical marketing effort, which allows a specific, close study of a case that potentially implicates other medical products and discourses in shaping and constructing our views of health and illness. This case study approach is also a potential weakness in terms of the book's use in the classroom, however, since courses tend to be more broadly focused. Still, the book would be a welcome supplemental text in a course in health communication, particularly one focused on mass media and health issues.

The book also would serve well as an exemplar text in a qualitative methods or gender and communication course.

Finally, in the discussion chapter, I would have liked to see a stronger, more explicit discussion of “where we go from here” in terms of research. For instance, the discussion might have addressed potential effects studies that attempt to link Viagra discourse exposure to users’ views of masculinity or explorations of the drug in entertainment media as an additional source of textual artifacts.

The Viagra Ad Venture offers health, mass, and gender communication researchers a close analysis of sexuality and gender discourse constructed through corporate and mass media texts. Hopefully, Baglia’s analysis will influence similar explorations of media, health, and perhaps the pharmaceutical industry. Thus, this book will be of interest to a range of scholars, particularly in terms of discursive presentations of sexuality. For health communication scholars, Baglia’s book is less about the pragmatic implications of analyzing discourse to contribute to the promotion of specific health practices (a tendency of health communication scholarship), and more about engaging in an exploration of the nuances of discursive practices that impinge on ideologies related to sexuality and health. To borrow from the sports metaphor Baglia invokes, the book suggests that a healthier sexual experience and view of masculinity should not be so much about the male “home run” and “winning,” but more about “playing the game.”