The Phenomenon of Traditional Masculinity and Its Impact on Advertising: a Qualitative Study Based on Consumer Engagement in Digital Environment

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the research is to explore consumer perceptions of traditional masculinity in advertising, determining the effectiveness of these advertising efforts of offering brand’s version of masculinity to men. The scientific literature on the subject of masculinity in advertising is increasingly suggesting a cultural shift taking place in Western society and the need for brands to adopt more inclusive depictions of masculinity. This research, however, is analyzing the traditional versions of masculinity and the impact of that through advertisers’ perspective, by developing a methodology of analyzing consumer perceptions through statistical, sentiment, discourse and qualitative content analysis. The results show that contrary to what significant amount of scientific literature suggests, traditional masculinity can be well perceived by consumers, especially if the advertisement is presenting traditional masculinity with humor. The results also indicate correlation between likeability and consumer engagement and the importance of the main character and characteristics displayed in the advertisement for receiving positive consumer feedback.

Keywords: Advertising; traditional masculinity; gender roles; marketing; branding; communication; brand narrative.

1. INTRODUCTION

Advertising is created based on assumptions about the society [1], what does the society appreciate and desired to have including material possessions, and preferable version of themselves. Many researchers of advertising have discovered that masculinity is now branded [2] and men are increasingly marketed to and offered visions of masculinity for consumption, in other words, masculinity has become a product [3]. However, it is unclear what consumers think about this product, that is masculinity, and what consumers think about various approaches that advertisers are using in order to present their version of masculinity alongside the product. For the purpose of determining whether masculinity is being presented effectively to consumers, it is necessary to research consumer perceptions of masculinity and their approval of the current methods used by advertisers. Since there are multiple ways how to depict masculinity in advertising, this particular research is focused on the traditional masculinity in advertising.

The research question: What is the current consumer perception of traditional masculinity in advertising and how should traditional masculinity be depicted in advertising so it resonates with consumers thus potentially increasing advertising effectiveness?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Masculinity

While there are many different definitions of masculinity, the authors have chosen one that combines most of the core elements that can be found in the scientific literature: “Masculinity is both a product of social learning and a process, subject to ongoing construction in social interaction [4]. This description of masculinity is echoed by large number of researchers saying that masculinity is a social construct rather than a biological phenomenon, and it is manifested through social displays, competition and position in social hierarchy [5]. Moreover, there are three different types of masculinity such as traditional masculinity, hybrid or implicit masculinity and modern or inclusive masculinity.

When it comes to the traditional masculinity, this ideal masculine figure is competitive in the sense that he tries to be better than others [6]. In short: he is a winner, not a loser, which means that subordination of others (women, homosexual men or less successful men) is implicit in this concept of traditional masculinity (ibid). This classification of men is called “hegemonic masculinity” by Raewyn Connell and it is being associated with the negative traditional masculinity ideals. Other characteristics that traditional masculinity is most commonly associated with are physical strength [7], bravery [8], patriotism and emotional stoicism [9], power and aggression [10], wealth [3], dominance and sense of entitlement [11], decisiveness and risk seeking [12], athleticism [3], and being a breadwinner, in other words providing for the family [13]. In contrast, modern masculinity is most commonly associated with progressive thinking [9], with an interest in culture [10], being apologetic [14], being emotionally expressive [15], open minded [13], narcissism and immaturity [16], interest in fashion [10], being sensitive and compassionate [17], inclusiveness [13], and being brave enough to be whoever the man wants to be [14].

2.2. Traditional masculinity in advertising

According to the scientific literature, the results of advertisers depicting various versions of masculinity have a wide range of
effectiveness, including traditional masculinity, which can focus largely on perceived stereotypes of men. For instance, Orth and Holancova [18] have found that consumers tend to approve more stereotypical role illustrations in advertising, which translates into a more positive ad and brand attitudes [19]. While, other studies have come up with opposite conclusions, namely that gender stereotyping results in negative ad and brand attitudes [20; 21]. This can be explained by the fact that counter stereotypical appeals are more surprising and could therefore provoke more positive feelings [18]. Furthermore, it is noted that the use of stereotypes has come under increased scrutiny, due to the fact that gender roles in society are changing, thus marketers are in danger of alienating people by using traditional gender stereotypes [22; 19]. In addition, the strategies that advertisers deploy when depicting traditional masculinity could also be characterized as potentially alienating. For instance, one of the most common strategies when presenting traditional masculinity to consumers is the crisis in masculinity brand narrative. Brands often want to create a conflict or drama in their communication with consumers, because conflict and drama is exciting, it gets attention from the audience and keeps them engaged. Subsequently, to spot this advertising tactic researchers have made a theme called “Manning Up” which indicates ads that show that men have succumbed to the “enemies” and thus lost their sense of manliness and must reestablish their power [2].

2.3. Advertising effectiveness
How to advertise the product is an important marketing issue that can increase company’s competitiveness. Advertising is defined as the placement of announcements and persuasive messages in time or space purchased in mass media [23]. Another researcher defines advertising as something that is influenced by the context in which it is placed [24]. Nevertheless, the importance of advertising in today’s entrepreneurship cannot be overstated, due to the fact that advertising can increase a product’s sales volume and introduce new products to the market by making it known to the brand, which ultimately will determine sales. Sentiment analysis. In advertising sentiment is defined as the opinions expressed by followers [28]. It is proclaimed that sentiment has a direct impact on how consumers will perceive the brand, which ultimately will determine sales. Sentiment shows how much the respondents, audience, consumers agree or disagree with the message of the ad, and how positively or negatively they speak about the content in question [24].

Discourse: Considering that masculinity is a construction that emerges in the meeting of a variety of discourses and ideologies [29], it is crucial to discover what exactly these discourses are all about from a consumer perspective. Discourse is best viewed not as an abstract system but as ‘situated’ language use in the contexts in which it takes place [30], in this case the context is the specific advertisements posted on YouTube where consumers express their approval or disapproval for advertisements focused on masculinity and potentially other relevant topics.

### Table 1
Methods for Data analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Strengths for the method</th>
<th>The use for this research method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discourse analysis</td>
<td>Takes context of the phenomenon into consideration. Analyses patterns in the text. [31]</td>
<td>For analysing consumer perception about various types of masculinity in advertising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative content analysis</td>
<td>Identifies themes or patterns. Helps validate or extend a theoretical framework. [32]</td>
<td>For analyzing YouTube comment sections on the selected advertisements, using coding and identifying patterns.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Textual and video content analysis</td>
<td>The method is used to describe, interpret and understand texts and content.</td>
<td>For analysing advertisements, the visual representations of masculinity and their rhetoric.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sentiment analysis</td>
<td>This method is used to analyse the attitudes, moods, and opinions in texts [33]</td>
<td>For analyzing the consumer feedback in terms of how positive or negative was their opinion about the advertisement.</td>
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3. METHODS

3.1. Criteria for assessing advertising effectiveness

**Awareness:** An important factor to determine the effectiveness of advertising is assessing the amount of awareness that the particular advertisement has generated [24]. That was assessed by looking into how many views the advertisement has on YouTube or when was the brand particularly searched for on YouTube and Google and if it coincided with the release of the advertisement, determining how impactful was the advertisement for the brand. Furthermore, assessing how much media coverage there was about the advertising campaign.

**Consumer engagement:** A vital part of this research was analyzing consumer engagement for the selected advertisements. The eighty year old leading trade publication Advertising Age boldly published the article “The Ad Age Is Over”, where the experts of advertising heavily argued that now advertising has the future on internet with consumer engagement. In the article, the experts argued that the way the world is heading is voluntary engagement [23] explaining that advertisers are moving away from push marketing to more interactive consumer engagement marketing (ibid). Therefore, this research mainly focused on consumer engagement.

**Consumer feedback and sentiment:** Consumer engagement as advertising effectiveness metric is quite relative [24], because the engagement can be positive or negative, in other words, some consumers can overwhelmingly criticize the advertisement while others can celebrate it and show support.Advertisers have considerably less influence over the messages that consumers read, hear, and watch about their brands [23]. Therefore, it is about the content of the consumer engagement that matters, which means that a researcher must conduct sentiment analysis. In advertising sentiment is defined as the opinions expressed by followers [28]. It is proclaimed that sentiment has a direct impact on how consumers will perceive the brand, which ultimately will determine sales. Sentiment shows how much the respondents, audience, consumers agree or disagree with the message of the ad, and how positively or negatively they speak about the content in question [24].

3.2. Data collection

Based on the literature review of possible methods used for the analysis, the authors decided to use online data collection by extracting YouTube comments as data. In YouTube consumers willingly give their opinions on specific ads where masculinity is at the center of the advertisement, which can help the researcher to determine the success of this ad. The data collection was done...
using YouTube comments downloader. Using YouTube comments as data also means that there has to be a large amount of comments analyzed with the interest of getting insightful understanding of consumers’ perception of masculinity in advertising. There were three advertisements that were analyzed in this research to determine consumers perception of masculinity in advertising. The authors of this research decided to take a sample of 400 YouTube comments from each advertisement, making the total of 1200 comments that were analyzed with discourse analysis method. The reason for choosing YouTube comments is that it provides a certain level of authenticity. It is argued that user generated material on the Internet, particularly YouTube has its ‘freshness’ and ‘spontaneity’ that offers a new form of ‘authenticity’ in mediated communication, where users are more open and speak freely by posting text comments (ibid).

Many researchers argue for YouTube as the platform where to get insightful idea about what consumer truly care about and appreciate. YouTube is a key site where the discourses of participatory culture and the emergence of the creative, empowered consumer have been played out. What is more, researchers argue for the academic value of using YouTube comments as data, saying that YouTube has attracted academic interest in an emerging literature that tends to view it as a technological, media or cultural phenomenon.

3.3. The selected advertisements depicting traditional masculinity
In order for the methods to be used appropriately, there was a need to select the right advertisements that will provide content to YouTube commentators to express their approval or disapproval of the advertising tactics when depicting traditional masculinity. The authors selected three advertisements that heavily focus on traditional masculinity in their efforts to get consumer attention and communicate their brand narrative. The criteria for selecting these advertisements were the following:
1. Focus on traditional masculinity in the advertisement
2. Large amount of YouTube comments (that provides material for qualitative content, sentiment and discourse analysis)
3. Large media coverage about the advertisement
4. Variety of products being advertised
5. Timing of the advertisement (released in the last decade)
6. Variety of brand narratives
The advertisements selected were from three different brands (Barbasol, Old Spice and Dos Equis) selling different products, such as shaving products, deodorants and shampoos, and beer, therefore, providing researchers with different audiences and their unique feedback about the advertisements.

3.4. Qualitative content analysis
Qualitative content analysis was conducted using Nvivo 11 qualitative data analysis software to help with the process of organizing, analyzing and finding relevant insights in the text. Researchers took a sample of 400 comments from each of the advertisements YouTube comments (total of 1200 comments analyzed).

The authors chose to have a mixed content analysis of conventional and direct content analysis. That means that some codes were defined before the analysis of the data based on theoretical framework and some codes were defined during the analysis of data making it a partially open and partially preconceived coding. Content analysis using a directed approach is guided by a more structured process than in a conventional approach, however, there was also the process allowing new categories and codes to emerge from the data as a conventional content analysis with open coding. After the coding process was done with 108 different codes, the codes were sorted into larger categories based on how they are related and what they reveal. These larger categories were formed into themes that emerged from the YouTube comments. Some comments had more than just one theme, that is why the percentage of combined themes displayed graphically have more than 100%.

4. RESULTS
The results of video content analysis, statistical analysis, sentiment analysis and discourse analysis are discussed and analyzed in the discussion part of this paper, however, the findings of each advertisement’s qualitative content analysis are presented in the results chapter.

4.1. Barbasol’s “Shave like a man” advertisement’s YouTube comment section’s qualitative content analysis
The most common theme that emerged from “Shave like a man” YouTube comments were ad appreciation (Figure 1.), where consumers expressed how much they appreciate the advertisement and provided some reasons of why that is. This theme was evident in 32% of the comments. Most often the reasons for approving the ad were not given, but other times the reasons were associated with humorous script and tone of the ad, which was evident in 13% of the comments. Some of the comments (6%) expressed interest in becoming a Barbasol’s customer, which indicated approval of the ad as well, therefore could be combined with the other 32% and the 13%, making a strong approval rate of 51%. Comments that were negative of the advertisement were only 3%, which is a remarkably good score for any ad to get, particularly on the internet. However, there were many negative comments directed to Barbasol’s competitors and the customers and supporters of Barbasol’s competitor, Gillette. Criticism of Gillette was evident in 26% of the comments and additional 5% were directed towards Gillette’s supporters. These themes are also related to criticism of political correctness and rejecting liberalism, which got 3% and 2%, respectively.

![Figure 1. Themes from Barbasol’s “Shave like a man” advertisement’s comment section (%)](image-url)

There were also rather significant amount of debate over masculinity. For instance 12% of the comments showed strong support for traditional masculinity. Therefore, these comments in a way could also be put together with the support of the ad itself. Furthermore, 3% of the comments were about “crisis in masculinity” theme, however, that was mostly directed towards Gillette, not Barbasol, which, therefore, is mostly connected to the criticism of competitors. Finally, product appreciation was
mentioned in 5% of the comments, and shaving discussion was evident in 9% of the comments, which was related to the product in question. 1% of the comments argued for the effect that advertising has on the society and referenced the relevance of this debate. While other themes that did not help answering the research question made the total of 4%.

4.2. Old Spice’s “The man your man could smell like” advertisement’s YouTube comment section’s qualitative content analysis

The qualitative content analysis revealed that most common themes in the Old Spice advertisement’s comment section (Figure 2.) were Ad appreciation with 31%. These comments were not providing the authors with reasons of why they appreciate the advertisement though, but they should be summed up with Appreciation of the humor theme (15%) and expressing the idea of Becoming a customer (2%). That makes the total comments that express consumers’ appreciation of the advertisement to 48%, which is a very good score for any advertisement to receive on the internet. Additionally, the comment section did not show any signs of disapproval of the ad from consumers, which makes the results even more monumental. The only criticism (1%) were questions about how realistic is the advertisement, although it is fair to say that Old Spice were intentionally exaggerating the sequence of the advertisement.

A significant amount of comments (24%) were categorized as Satire. In these comments the consumers were trying to extend the humor depicted in the ad with one of their own humorus ways how to make the advertisement even funnier. These comments also show an appreciation of the advertisement, specifically of the humor, in a more subtle way. There were notable amount comments where the main theme was popular culture and discussing how the consumers were drawn to the advertisement, to watch it again. These themes of Referencing pop culture and Leading up to the ad were 22% and 6% respectively. Discussion of masculinity was only evident in 2% of the comments, where consumers talked about the masculine characteristics of the main character. Two themes that were rather unique for an internet comment section were Internet revolution (2%) and Nostalgia (4%), where consumers were reminiscing about the time when this advertisement was made and that it revolutionized the internet and that those were better times to be on the internet according to some consumers.

4.3. Dos Equis’ “The most interesting man alive” advertisement’s YouTube comment section’s qualitative content analysis

“The most interesting man alive” advertisement’s YouTube comment section presented a variety of themes (Figure 3.), which were a combination of several codes and categories. The most common of them was satire, with 29% of the comments containing this theme. This is where consumers were extending the humor presented in the advertisement with their own unique take on the main character and the traditional masculinity traits. Ad appreciation was found in 21% of the comments with additional 16% of the comments where consumers were more specific in their praise for the ad and provided humor as the reason for the ad appreciation. In addition, one might argue that ad appreciation comments also consists of appreciation for the main character (18%) who is the central figure of the ad. Consumers also expressed nostalgia for the character in question (since he has recently been replaced with a new “The most interesting man alive” character) with the category “missing the character” being evident in 4% of the comments. Moreover, analysis showed results of “preference of the character” meant to be the character in these ads in comparison with the new character in 6% of the comments and additional 3% of comments showed results of consumers shaming Dos Equis brand for changing the character. All of these results show support for the advertisement in question.

A direct discussion about the masculinity was not popular among the consumers in the comment section, with only 3% of the comments consisting of consumer discussion of masculinity and showing support for traditional masculinity. However, one might argue that since traditional masculinity is at the core of this advertisement, then comments displaying appreciation for the ad and the character also show support for traditional masculinity from the consumers. The advertisement received also some disapproval (3%) among the consumers, mainly about the rationality of the ad and the obvious sales pitch to consumers, while 2% of the comments showed consumers lack of understanding the advertisement. The comments showed also signs of consumers desire to make references to popular culture (6%) as it has been established is an important factor of how consumers perceive various concepts in our society, even masculinity. Finally, the consumers discussed the product (beer) and showed some support for it (3%), while some also arguing for other beer brands (2%) and some plainly calling Dos Equis product awful (2%).

5. DISCUSSION

As discussed in the Introduction part, prior studies that have noted the importance of masculinity in advertising. However, previous studies evaluating traditional masculinity in advertising observed inconsistent results on whether, consumers appreciate it or not, in other words whether the stereotypical depictions of
men in advertising is getting positive feedback from the consumers indicating advertising effectiveness or not. There are many individual differences (e.g., attitudes, personality, values, motivations; that affect consumers in the decision making process [37] one of them clearly is consumer perception of masculinity and advertisers’ depiction of it. The results of this study further support the idea of researching masculinity, including its traditional form in the context of advertising. This study examined which parameters to look for and analyze for the purpose of assessing advertising effectiveness, and then set out to harvest data that would indicate consumer engagement and consumer feedback expressed in their attitudes and opinions.

The video content analysis was consisted with many other studies in this subject, finding various established and perhaps even overplayed brand narratives that advertisers use when depicting traditional masculinity, the most common one being “Crisis in masculinity” brand narrative. “Crisis in masculinity” indicates that men are becoming “soft” (too gentle), or inferior to women or other men and the way to regain their masculinity and power is by purchasing the product that is being advertised.

The statistical analysis of this research showed that the advertisement with the largest like/dislike ratio (indicating the likeability of the ad) corresponded with the largest consumer engagement, taking into account the awareness (views divided with comments). That shows a link between consumers liking the advertisement and feeling compelled to interact with the brand and others by becoming more engaged in the conversation about the advertisement, brand, and the concept that the advertisement depicts, in this case masculinity. The statistical analysis examining the timing of the brand awareness on YouTube showed the significance of the three advertisements for the brands, indicating that traditional masculinity could get major popularity boost for the brand.

The qualitative content analysis showed various themes emerging form the YouTube comment sections, many were related to the appreciation of the advertisement in general, and many provided specific reasons for that. For instance, the main character, the concept of traditional masculinity, humor, the stance against political correctness and other themes indicating consumer appreciation and, thus, advertising effectiveness. However, the qualitative content analysis also showed that in some cases while the consumer engagement might be large, the content of that engagement is often not about the brand or the advertisement, but about satire and references to popular culture or other themes that are not so relevant for the advertisers. On one hand, these results indicate consumers’ interest in a humorous content, which is not significant for traditional masculinity, but on the other hand, it shows that joking about traditional masculinity is something that consumers feel interested and want to be engaged in. Traditional masculinity as a separate theme was evident in a rather small amount of comments, but it was often evident when discussing the main character of the advertisement signaling appreciation for the character and thus the advertisement as a whole.

Similarly, with qualitative content analysis, discourse analysis also provided researchers with valuable insights of what consumers think about the advertisements in question and their versions of masculinity depicted in a traditional way. The masculinity discourse was more evident in Barbasol’s advertisement where masculinity was presented in a less ironic and more serious way. In addition, the discourse analysis revealed how much consumers liked this advertisement and expressed their support in opposition of Barbasol competitor Gillette’s advertisement against toxic masculinity. Dos Equis advertisement’s discourse analysis of YouTube comment section revealed a significant debate about the main character of the ad displaying traditional masculinity. Consumers expressed their appreciation for the original character and distaste for the new, who is not displaying so much traditional masculinity as the original character, also signaling consumer preferences on the matter. Discourse analysis showed that consumers perceive the advertisement in a larger context of masculinity that is influenced by the society, media and other competitors of the brand as well as signaling the importance of the main character and his masculinity characteristics in an advertisement.

The sentiment analysis showed surprisingly similar results between the three advertisements with positive comments ranging from 52% to 61%, negative comments ranging from 2% to 13%, with the best result of just 2% of negative comments of Old Spice’s advertisement and neutral comments ranging from 29% to 42%. The results, therefore, also suggest traditional masculinity as a rather effective way to depict men in order to get positive feedback from the consumers. An unexpected finding was how positive was the feedback of these advertisements, particularly considering that the environment where the data was collected was the internet, which usually is associated with extremely negative place where consumers are harsh in their feedback.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to understand what are the current consumer perceptions of traditional masculinity in advertising and how should advertisers depict traditional masculinity in an effective way so it can resonate with consumers. This study, based on scientific literature, has identified certain parameters that determine advertising effectiveness such as awareness, consumer engagement and consumer feedback and based on the research developed a methodology to meet the criteria. This study has confirmed most of the existing brand narratives in depicting traditional masculinity in advertising, such as Crisis in masculinity, Gender conformity, The Hero narrative, The Sophisticated man and The Breadwinner narrative. The contribution of this study has also been to confirm the characteristics that are typically associated with traditional masculinity in the scientific literature, making it easier to identify for further research.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the present study:
(1) Focus on the traditional masculinity can be very effective in advertising by generating awareness, compelling consumers to be engaged and receiving positive consumer feedback.
(2) When commenting on the advertisements consumers take into consideration the entire context of masculinity and the contemporary notions of it in the society, media, popular culture and competitor’s advertisements.
(3) Masculinity in advertising has such a significant interest for the consumers, that the product discourse does not get any noteworthy importance, suggesting that consumers might be too distracted to pay attention to the product.
(4) When presenting traditional masculinity in advertising, the main character is notably important as evident by the qualitative content and discourse analyses.
(5) Traditional masculinity in advertising is rooted in somewhat old-fashioned stereotypes about men and masculinity that perpetuates the idea of gender conformity.
(6) In order for the advertisement depicting traditional masculinity not to receive backlash and controversial response from the consumers about promoting stereotypical thinking, the advertisers should present traditional masculinity with humor in an ironic way, even exaggerating the notions of masculinity.
(7) If done right, an advertisement can become a popular cultural phenomenon, with consumers referencing the advertisement and praising it a decade later.
(8) Likeability of the advertisement is linked with consumer engagement. The advertisement that had the highest like/dislike ratio had also the highest consumer engagement.

This study lays groundwork for further research into masculinity in advertising, analyzing other types of masculinity and their depictions in advertising, as well as the effectiveness of these efforts from a consumer standpoint for the purpose of comparing these results. The further research will also expand the methods for assessing consumer perceptions of masculinity in advertising by conducting surveys and focus groups as well as interviews with the experts of advertising industry.

7. REFERENCES


