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Gillette and Positive Representations of Masculinity Ideals

The #MeToo Movement against sexual assault and new feminists have assisted in coining the term “toxic masculinity.” Although there is no exact definition to this term yet, I will be defining toxic masculinity as how the patriarchy is harmful to men due to the misunderstanding of masculine standards, or traditional masculinity. These misinterpreted norms give males negative traits of violence, apathy, sexual aggressiveness, and more. Along with the negative traits toxic masculinity gives, simple traditional masculinity standards have also given rise to the suicide rates among males. The American Psychological Association (APA) announced “new “Guidelines for the Psychological Practice with Boys and Men.” The new guidelines highlight the unique physical and mental health risks that boys and men face, including higher rates of completed suicide, violence, substance abuse, cardiovascular problems and early mortality. They also issue a warning against conforming to traditional stereotypes of masculinity....” (Hess). These warnings are very serious and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention gives the suicide statistics for 2017: “In 2017, men died by suicide 3.54x more often than women....White males accounted for 77.97% of suicide deaths in 2017” (“Suicide Statistics”).

The #MeToo movement was started based on the sexual aggressiveness trait, which raised awareness on sexual assault perpetrated by males. Companies are either using the movement to boost their sales in advertising, or staying far away from the topic. Gillette was one

of the former, however the response received may not have been what was expected. The response in the mediasphere to the commercial was astonishing. There were those who were in immediate agreement with the commercial. Qasim Rashid, Esq., a Muslim human rights activist, tweeted “Men: Watch this. Then watch it again. This is important. It’s long overdue we stepped up” (Hess). Others were outright hostile towards the commercial. Andrew Kaplan came onto Twitter saying that “The problem with the ad is its premise is insulting - the premise is that all men are bad somehow and need correcting. It’s actually quite offensive to men. Why are they lecturing us?! Most men are good. I will join the boycott. #gilletteboycott #GilletteAd” (Hess). In response to males being angry at the commercial, some men came onto Twitter to defend Gillette’s new message. John Lurie tweeted that “If you are a man who is upset about the Gillette commercial, you should smile more. You are so much prettier when you smile” (Hess). Lurie’s statement also highlights how men are the ones who harass females for being angry, but now that they are being “lectured for it,” they are the ones angry, correlating strongly with what Gillette is saying in their ad. In general, the commercial caused a lot of uproar, especially in males.

Gillette may have been intending good with their commercial, however, they may have done more harm. This commercial was also very different from the commercial that assisted in coining their slogan. They also recently made a new deodorant commercial, titled “Every Hero Sweats.” With this new commercial, “We Believe: The Best Men Can Be,” and the previous main commercial, I want to analyze how their campaign has changed and how it may have or will affect society. Gillette commercials, which have been geared towards males, may have been a guide to traditional masculinity standards, yet their ideals may cause toxic masculinity if misunderstood. However, the company is making a stand against toxic masculinity and hopefully

assist in changing the future of masculinity ideals. With this in mind, I will be addressing three specific questions: What gender stereotypes are present in these three commercials? Are toxic, or even traditional, masculinity standards apparent in the advertisements? How could both toxic and traditional masculinity impact society in general? In order to answer these questions I will be using Brian Ott's and Brian Mack's explanations of gender stereotypes in advertising and the consequences that may come from them in their "Feminist Analysis" chapter of their book *Critical Media Studies*.

Ott and Mack explain four gender stereotypes: active vs. passive, public vs. private, logical vs. emotional, and sexual subject vs. sexual object. The active vs. passive stereotype refers to how males are often shown in roles marked by activity while females are shown as still, supposed to "sit or stand beautifully to advertise [a] product" (Ott 198). The public vs. private stereotype relates to the "provider/nurturer" (Ott 200) stereotype in which males are depicted as the breadwinners of families in advertisements while females are shown in the home with the family. Logical vs. emotional stereotypes can be seen as having to do with gender traits - that being logical is a masculine characteristic while femininity calls for being emotional. The last stereotype, sexual subject vs. sexual object, is another one related to what society sees as traits for each gender. Masculinity ideals often show males as sexually dominant while females are supposed to be sexually submissive. Ott and Mack explain that the consequences of these stereotypes and masculinity and femininity traits have caused eating disorders in women and body dysmorphia. With these things in mind, one could wonder how these traits could further affect society. Trends of masculinity have been affecting women for years, but one may not know how exactly those same trends could affect men.

Throughout this essay, the terms traditional and toxic masculinity will be used quite often. As stated above, there is no exact definition of the term “toxic masculinity,” however, I will be defining it as the way traditional masculinity ideals are misunderstood in a negative way and have a negative impact on society and relations with others. Traditional masculinity, on the other hand, has many ways in which it can be defined. Kenneth Clatterbaugh gave insights as to how traditional masculinity can be understood in his book, *Contemporary Perspectives on Masculinity: Men, Women, and Politics in Modern Society*. Within this book he defines the masculine gender role as “a set of behaviors, attitudes, and conditions that are generally found in the men of an identifiable group,” the stereotype of masculinity as “a general idea of what most people consider to be the masculine gender role,” and the gender ideal as “a widespread notion as to what the gender role for men should be” (Clatterbaugh 3). He also explains that there are six perspectives of masculinity: conservative, profeminist, men’s rights, spiritual, socialist, and group-specific. Mark Moss spoke in his book, *The Media and The Models of Masculinity*, how traditional masculinity can be misunderstood and cause toxic masculinity. He stated that “Violence and aggression are significant features in many men’s communities and are celebrated in numerous media and popular culture portrayals” (Moss 123). Since toxic masculinity was addressed in the #MeToo movement against sexual assault, one can see how the masculinity standard of violence, mixed with sexual dominance and those gender stereotypes, can cause such an issue.

A men’s razor company has to be able to appeal to its target audience. Through the three texts being analyzed, one can see how Gillette thought of ways to draw its audience in - what influenced them and how their campaigns changed over time, whether a long span of time or a

short one. The first Gillette commercial being analyzed is the one that could be seen as the advertisement that helped in coining their slogan “The Best Men Can Be,” or “get.” This commercial is a montage of what one could assume Gillette thinks are standards of masculinity. With the almost immediate blasting of their jingle which sings “the best a man can get,” the audience is bombarded with images of males succeeding, in sports, the workforce, with females, and in life in general (Oonai5000). With that in mind, one can see right from the onset three gender stereotypes present: active vs. passive, public vs. private, and sexual subject vs. sexual object. The active vs. passive stereotype is present through the use of the men in the different sports. The men are shown participating and succeeding in the sports of track and field, soccer, surfing, football, boxing, cycling, and even as astronauts. In contrast, the few scenes where females are present show them sitting, standing, or walking. One scene shows a female running, however, it is framed in slow motion and it is towards the male. Still, one must remember that this is an advertisement geared towards males, yet, the stereotype is still present. The second stereotype shown, public vs. private, is shown through the use of workplace elements and settings. The men in the ad are the only ones shown within the workplace, taking telephone calls, winning a pitch, or even working within the famous Wall Street. However, the men also seem to embody the “private” aspect of the stereotype with scenes of them with their own sons when they are teaching the sports, assisting them with a shave, or even cradling a newborn. This stereotype example present shows both the positive and negative aspects of what Gillette could see as the traditional masculinity ideals. Males being active within the home - the private aspect of spectrum - is something that feminists are in support of, so Gillette embodying this with their commercial is a good thing for how males could conduct themselves. However, the lack of

females within the workspace could deter men from seeing women in that light of succeeding as well, especially when paired with the last stereotype present: sexual subject vs. sexual object. Since the commercial is geared towards males, there are not that many women present. However, in the scenes they are present in, they are shown to be there simply to highlight the idea that men succeed in the realm of women. The advertisement shows wedding scenes, a scene where a woman is helping a man with his tie, the scene where a woman is running into the arms of a man, a scene where a woman is kissing a man sitting, a scene where we just see a close up of a man and woman possibly about to kiss, and a scene of a man pursuing a woman walking. These scenes may seem wholesome, or even romantic, however, the advertisement could be misunderstood to assume that women are only good to be pursued by men and highlight the successes of men.

The second ad being analyzed is the famous “We Believe: The Best Men Can Be” commercial which, in itself, is a statement of the bad correlations of toxic masculinity. It begins with close ups of males, along with references to bullying, the #MeToo movement, and toxic masculinity. The narrator poses the Gillette slogan in the form of a question and shows a scene of their previous advertisement before taking the audience through some distressing scenes: older boys chasing a younger boy, a mother holding her son tightly as demeaning words in text bubbles appear around them, young boys flipping through television shows that sexualize and demean women, a businessman undermining a businesswoman, and two little boys fighting in the grass while the males around them say “boys will be boys.” After these scenes, close ups of adolescent males and news clips about the #MeToo movement are shown. The commercial ends with scenes of other males holding their counterparts accountable for their actions and telling

them when what they are doing is not alright as well as adult males stepping in to stop bullying and wrong male stereotypes. Close ups of young boys are shown as the finale (Gillette). Since this commercial is to raise awareness of toxic masculinity and how it affects both males and females, the four gender stereotypes are present, although, one could presume that they are placed on purpose due to Gillette's overall message. Therefore, one must be careful in assuming that the ad resulted in toxic masculinity.

Through the use of bullying and the stopping of potential toxic masculinity, Gillette shows the active vs. passive trope. They show boys chasing another boy throughout the entire commercial. They also demonstrate the stereotype with the use of the phrase "boys will be boys," where they show two boys fighting as well as a row of men grilling. Lastly, the commercial shows men playing an active role in stopping actions that are deemed a part of toxic masculinity - fighting, bullying, sexual harassment - and building up women. The second stereotype, public vs. private, is shown in a different light. It is shown in the workplace scene since there are mainly males in that scene, yet there is a female there, however, she is being demeaned. This stereotype is shown in another area, except it can be seen as a reversal of roles. A father is with his daughter in front of the mirror encouraging her to be the strong woman he knows that she can be. This scene shows the father, the male, in a private, or nurturing, light. The commercial shows the logical vs. emotional stereotype through the scene in the beginning where we see a mother holding her child, whom one can assume was being cyber bullied. This scene can also fit into the public vs. private stereotype, however, it fits the logical vs. emotional stereotype because it is showing that females are more emotional, yet is also breaking it down to show that the son, a male, also has emotions. The logical vs. emotional stereotype is also shown

in the workplace scene, since the businessman is undermining the woman's voice, which can be seen as an attempt to prove to his peers that he is logical one. The last stereotype, sexual subject vs. sexual object is seen throughout the video in scenes of males catcalling, but especially in the sitcom scenes. One of the actors of the show gropes a female servant and then the host makes gestures about it and laughs it off. All the while the same female is not showing any reaction to what is happening to her. Again, one must remember that these scenes, and quite possibly the stereotypes, are purposely displayed to highlight their overall message of the aspects of toxic masculinity.

The last commercial being advertised, "Every Hero Sweats," came out a little over a month after "We Believe: the Best Men Can Be." The advertisement follows the life of a soldier in the military, who is living the double life of a family man as well. It shows glimpses of his life in the military that intersect with the life he has with his family, whether it be on his home leaves, or after his service when he is also attempting to find a job. This commercial shows the gender stereotypes, minus the sexual subject vs. sexual object stereotype. Since the man is in the military, he is shown in scenes where he is doing drills and other active military work with his squadron and on his own, which shows the active vs. passive stereotype. He is also shown being active with his children when he is playing with them. The scenes with his children also feed into the public vs. private stereotype, however, even though it is mainly his wife playing the nurturer role, he can also be considered as the private portion of the stereotype since he is a part of the nurturing. The public vs. private stereotype is also shown through his endeavours to obtain a job. The wife is still shown at home, helping him in the process, and he is shown in the workplace setting. His time in the military can also be seen as his public aspect since it is a job in a sense.

The last stereotype shown, logical vs. emotional, is shown in the scene where the man and his wife seem to have an altercation. However, the scene shows them both as upset, not just the wife. Also, the commercial itself could also show the wife as logical since she assists her husband in his efforts to land a job.

This advertisement seems to have good aspects of what Gillette constitutes as ideal masculinity standards, and not many that could be misunderstood and grow into toxic masculinity. However, the use of military could cause some issues. Moss explained that violence and aggression are traits that are held in high esteem when it comes to traditional masculinity standards. However, these traits are also the cause of why toxic masculinity is a thing and have caused the unfortunate instances that brought about the #MeToo movement and even the suicide rates in males who may not “measure up” to those ideals. The military is a focal point for violence due to what it is connected with - guns, war, prisoners, hatred, etc. However, it should not be, since the main point of our military is for protection, but, unfortunately, American history has proven different and has caused these misunderstandings.

Gillette has actually done a good job in maintaining a positive kind of ideal for males. Although the gender stereotypes are there, they also show them in gender reversals. Since they are a company geared towards males, traditional masculinity ideals are present, yet, they have tended to continue with a good image of them. In looking at their previous commercial and “Every Hero Sweats,” one can, however, see how toxic masculinity could be shown. Still, the overall messages of Gillette’s commercials are positive. This is interesting due to the way their previous campaign is addressed in “We Believe: The Best Men Can Be.” One would think that their previous commercial may have had more demeaning or apparent gender stereotypes that

had to do with the #MeToo Movement or the oppression that feminists are fighting against. However, Gillette has shown a pretty positive view of what masculinity standards should look like, which is an amazing feat for a company geared towards men in American society. One can see “We Believe: The Best Men Can Be” as the company’s way of strengthening what they believe the ideals for traditional masculinity are.

Clatterbaugh also explained in his book that “Gender roles are social roles that belong to identifiable groups of men who exist in reasonably specific historical, ethnic, or religious situations” (Clatterbaugh 3). This means that traditional masculinity ideals are can vary depending on the social group a male belongs to. With that in mind, further research could be done to examine how the ideals differ within them. The unfortunate thing about the Gillette commercials is that their main focus is on Caucasian middle class males. Gillette started to shy away from that in “We Believe: The Best Men Can Be” with their inclusion of males of all walks of life, however, they seem to have gone back to their previous model in “Every Hero Sweats.” One could research how masculinity ideals look in the different social classes and whether those ideals are present in Gillette advertisements, or any other advertisement in general.

The topic of traditional and toxic masculinity is especially important in society today, especially in light of the #MeToo movement. Not only that, but toxic masculinity, and traditional masculinity standards, are affecting the young males in today’s society. Another problem with Gillette advertisements is how “perfect” the males seem in the ads, with their chiseled jaws and fit bodies. Females have attributed to this mindset with their views of an attractive male, and this set of attributes is discouraging young males, especially because they are not attainable. In fact, conforming to traditional masculinity ideals and toxic masculinity are “detrimental to the mental

and physical health of boys and men” (Hess). Society must lift up attainable masculinity ideals, and not push males to embody them, especially if they are not able to. Masculinity ideals are changing as well, so certain traits that may have seemed okay a couple centuries ago may not be applicable today. Society needs to also stop holding violence and aggression as a masculinity norm, as well as making excuses to why bad things happen as a result of it. The #MeToo movement as well as Gillette’s “We Believe: The Best Men Can Be” are perfect examples of why that is. Males should have a better understanding of good masculinity ideals and the difference between toxic masculinity and positive masculinity ideals. If these types of changes are made, young males will not be expected to conform to ideals that affect their physical and mental wellness, women will not be oppressed, harassed, and assaulted, and the world could be a much better place.

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