THE MASCULINITY MASQUERADE: THE PORTRAYAL OF MEN IN MODERN ADVERTISING

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The depiction of gender in advertising is a topic of continuous discussion and research. The present study adds to past findings with an updated look at how men are represented in U.S. advertising media and the real effects these portrayals have on the male population under the theoretical framework of hegemony and social cognitive theory. This research is triangulated with a textual analysis of the ads found in the March 2013 editions of four popular print publications and three focus group sessions separated by sex (two all-male, one all-female), each of which is composed of a racially diverse group of undergraduate journalism and communications students from a large Southwestern university. The results of the textual analysis reveal little ethnic or physical diversity among male figures in advertising and distinguish six main profiles of masculinity, the most frequent of which is described as the “sophisticated man.” The focus groups identify depictions of extreme muscularity and stereotypical male incompetence as the most negative representations, while humorous and hyperbolic portrayals of sexual prowess and hyper-masculinity are viewed positively as effective means of marketing to men.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</th>
<th>iii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.1 Hegemony</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.2 Social Cognitive Theory</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Women as Advertised</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.1 The Portrait of Femininity</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.2 Feminine Profiles</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Men in Media</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.1 Measures of Masculinity</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.2 Men on Display</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Unsatisfying Results</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1 This Is Your Body on Advertising</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.2 Ideal Image</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Research Question 1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Research Question 2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4 METHOD</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Textual Analysis</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Focus Groups</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5 RESULTS</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Textual Analysis</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.1 The Sophisticated Man</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.2 The Bodybuilder</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.3 The Athlete</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Tables

Table 4.1 Sample Magazine Circulation, 2012 ............................................................. 23
Table 5.1 Breakdown of Textual Analysis Sample by Masculinity Profile ............... 29

Figures

Figure 4.1. Sample magazine covers. The March 2013 issues of Maxim (top left), GQ (top right), Esquire (bottom left), and Men’s Health (bottom right) were used in this sample .................................................................................................................................. 22
Figure 5.1. The sophisticated man (GQ, 2013). .......................................................... 30
Figure 5.2. The sophisticated man (GQ, 2013). .......................................................... 31
Figure 5.3. The body builder (Men’s Health, 2013, inside back cover) ..................... 33
Figure 5.4. The athlete (Men’s Health, 2013, p. 41). ............................................... 35
Figure 5.5. The erotic male (Maxim, 2013, inside back cover). ............................. 37
Figure 5.6. The erotic male (Men’s Health, 2013, pp. 4-5). .................................... 38
Figure 5.7. The ladies’ man (Men’s Health, 2013, pp. 4-5) .................................... 40
Figure 5.8. The ladies’ man (Maxim, 2013, p. 36). .............................................. 41
Figure 5.9. The consumer (Men’s Health, 2013, p. 85). ....................................... 43
Figure 5.10. Ad for BodyBuilding.com (Men’s Health, 2013, p. 135). ................. 49
Figure 5.11. Ad for Etro (Esquire, 2013, p. 47) ...................................................... 50
Figure 5.12. Ad for Playtex Fresh + Sexy Intimate Wipes for Men (Maxim, 2013, p. 79). ........................................................................................................................................ 59
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

“Advertising is a very powerful form of social communication in modern society. It offers the most sustained and most concentrated set of images anywhere in the media system” (Jhally, 1989, p. 1). As society becomes increasingly saturated with media, the multitude of messages to which we are exposed daily—especially those used to persuade their audience to purchase products—play a substantial role in creating and reinforcing many societal concepts, including gender. This “concentrated set of images” is considered by many to be an inaccurate representation of men and women. Such critics contend these images play off perceived discrepancies as means of moving products, while promising to deliver the appearances and lifestyles so attractively depicted (Kilbourne, 1999).

While women have witnessed an increased presence in U.S. media over the last century, the manner in which they are portrayed remains a topic of continuous debate and critical analysis. Scores of research studies have been devoted to analyzing the implications behind the media’s representation of women and the effects that it has on females’ perception of themselves and their role in society.

However, studies that focus on this subject as it applies to men are more recent and fewer in number by comparison. I seek to supplement this research with my own that evaluates how men are represented in U.S. advertising media and the real effects these portrayals have on the male population. This study, based in the mass media theories of hegemony and social cognitive theory, examines how men are portrayed in modern advertising, men’s attitudes toward this portrayal, and the perceived effects
caused by exposure to messages with these kinds of visuals. It then considers how these findings fit into the theoretical dominance of men in society.

As seen with women, several studies have found that men are also experiencing mental and behavioral disorders related to body image that continue to grow in seriousness and number, making this kind of research useful in understanding the roles advertising and media play in perpetuating this phenomenon (Zelman, 2005). This information is valuable in the fact that it allows us to evaluate the practices of the advertising industry and the effects they have on audiences (Dittmar et al., 2009).

1.1 Theoretical Framework

1.1.1 Hegemony

Under the theory of hegemony, one group of people is identified as having a dominant position over others that is supported and reinforced in such a way that subordinate groups accept this power simply as “the way things are and have always been.” However, this system can only function with the participation of subordinate groups; in accepting and conceding to the dominant group’s power, hegemony continues to exist (Gramsci, 1971).

As this concept relates to mass media, it suggests that this hegemonic dominance is propagated throughout the culture by use of media messages projected to the masses. In the U.S. culture and most others across the globe, men are often identified as possessing hegemonic power over women, and many argue that the manner in which gender is depicted in media, including advertising, continues to uphold this status quo (Hearn, 2004, pp. 53-55).
1.1.2 Social Cognitive Theory

Another theoretical framework relative to this research is social cognitive theory. This theory of learning explains assumed roles and stereotypes as a result of repeated exposure to images and messages that support them.

A good example of this can be found in toy advertisements; boys are taught that their gender prefers the rough and tough—toy trucks and violent video games—while girls are told that their place is in the home with baby dolls and Easy-Bake Ovens. Acceptance of these identities is rewarded with social approval and thus positively reinforced. This process of socialization does not stop at adolescence but rather continues to define what is “normal” well into adulthood (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 677).

Understanding social cognitive theory is a crucial prerequisite in this kind of research. It provides insight into how the images used in advertisements actually have a cognitive and conative effect on the audience’s perception of themselves, the concept of gender, and how these messages fit into the real world.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

How powerful is advertising when it comes to influencing audiences beyond persuading purchase decisions?

Advertising does sell products, of course, but it also sells a great deal more.... It sells values; it sells images; it sells concepts of love and sexuality, of romance, of success and perhaps most important, of normalcy. To a great extent, advertising tells us who we are and who we should be. (Kilbourne, 1999)

Advertising is considered to hold a great deal of power in shaping how people view others and themselves, and thus, in shaping society itself (Kilbourne, 1999). The images used to portray men and women have a great deal of influence in signifying who holds the power and who does not, thus granting dominance to one group over the other under the theory of hegemony (Hearn, 2004, pp. 53-55). Advertising media can press upon people as early as childhood the roles of each sex through social cognitive theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 677).

2.1 Women as Advertised

While a bit dated, perhaps one of the better-known texts written on the subject of gender roles as signified through advertising is Erving Goffman’s 1979 book, Gender Advertisements. In it, he provides pages of advertising images that, through textual and content analysis, are found to exemplify how certain elements that many would consider to be the smallest subtleties can speak volumes about the assumed roles of men and women in our culture. Goffman (1979) explores how male dominance is established in advertisements through visual and communication devices such as height, touch, and instruction.
Comparisons featured in *Gender Advertisements* demonstrate how the simple concept of hand placement can be used in one way to convey a sense of weakness and vulnerability among females and in another to symbolize the strength and dominance that are supposedly characteristic of only males under the theory of hegemony. For example, women are usually shown only lightly holding, barely touching, or gently caressing the product; whereas men often grasp, manipulate, or control it (Goffman, 1979).

Men are noted to be almost always shown as taller than women in advertisements—either in physical height or by standing while females are shown sitting or lying down—another way that Goffman believes establishes male superiority. Men are also often the ones to direct action while women passively obey, further depicting females as subordinates and teaching them “their place” in society (Goffman, 1979).

2.1.1 The Portrait of Femininity

Kilbourne (1999), much like Goffman (1979), also provides a multitude of examples that demonstrate how vulnerable positions, passive expressions, and the objectification of female figures in advertisements send out a louder message to American women—one that tells them who they must be in order to live up to what the world expects of them. This depiction also shapes the standard by which men are taught to evaluate the worth of women, which typically focuses mainly on physical criteria (Kilbourne, 1999).

Kilbourne (1999) contends that advertising and media have essentially established women as visual stimulation existing solely for the viewing pleasure of
men—a concept quite similar to Mulvey’s (1975) “male gaze” theory. Male gaze theory argues that artistic media forms are presented to the audience solely through the male perspective, and many scholars have since extended this view to include other forms of media, such as advertising. It maintains that both men and women are forced to constantly view themselves, others, and the world in general from the male perspective—a concept that continues to give men power over women (Mulvey, 1975).

In a society where media messages constantly reinforce the idea that a woman’s worth is derived directly from physical appearances, women are put under enormous pressure to meet expectations—and the realization of ideal images does not come easily. The exclusively thin exemplification of women in fashion advertisements is considered to be a contributing factor of unfortunately common disorders like anorexia and bulimia, which are both attempts made by women to achieve a body that for most is genetically impossible or simply dangerously unhealthy (Dittmar et al., 2009). Even worse, these are typically disorders that most women keep to themselves and do not readily admit to possessing (Kilbourne, 1999).

The ideal female image generated by advertising is not only defined as slender and toned but also as bearing European features, light skin, and silky hair. This image has resulted in increased spending toward “remedies” like cosmetic surgery, skin-lightening treatments, and a long list of beauty and hair care products that women are convinced through advertising to be necessary in order to achieve ideal beauty (Kilbourne, 1999).

With the help of recent technological developments, digitally edited beauty ads have also helped to set an unreasonable physical standard for women, which even the
models in the ads themselves cannot achieve naturally. Several controversies have emerged in recent years regarding the extreme use of photo-editing measures to create visual representations of women that are not only inaccurate but also physically impossible (Kilbourne, 1999).

While Kilbourne briefly mentions the increased objectification of men in advertising, she quickly dismisses it as, in her opinion, less frequent and less harmful to the psyche of men on the grounds that their powerful position in society creates an environment in which they experience few consequences—a sentiment rooted in the theory of cultural hegemony (Kilbourne, 1999).

Others researchers have also examined the manner in which men and women are depicted in advertising and concluded that unlike women, men only have power and positive influence to gain from their portrayal in media (Ford, 2008).

In this heterosexual masculine world, a man dominates his personal landscape, including his possessions and the women in it, while he maintains both economic and personal freedom. Women, in this heterosexually masculine mis en scene, function as essential commodities for authenticating heterosexual manhood. (Ford, 2008, p. 64)

2.1.2 Feminine Profiles

Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) performed a content analysis of magazines targeted at both male and female audiences in order to determine the profiles of women as depicted by the advertising of that time. After reviewing hundreds of advertisements, they found that it was extremely rare for women to be shown in out-of-home working roles, including professional or high-level business positions. Women were rarely pictured alone and were often depicted as dependent on men for protection. They were
often framed as sex objects or as domestic servants at the service of men and were usually only present when cleaning products, beauty products, clothing, food, or home appliances were being advertised (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971, pp. 92-95).

This analysis, however, is over 30 years old. More recent research has used this study as a framework to provide an updated look at the portrayals of women in advertising. Using Goffman’s (1979) guide to analyzing gender roles in advertisements, Kang (1997) performed a content analysis on a sample of women’s magazine ads from 1979 and 1991 that featured female human subjects and compared his findings to those of the previous study when analyzing the results. This study, however, only confirmed past findings, and Kang (1997) concluded that “Overall, the extent of sexism in magazine ads remained approximately the same from 1979 to 1991” (p. 988).

Ford (2008) examined five ads from modern men’s magazines with an approach similar to that of Goffman (1979). The findings of this even more recent analysis implied that despite any social changes experienced by women in the U.S. since Courtney and Lokertz’s (1971), Goffman’s (1979), and Kang’s (1997) evaluations, modern advertising continues to depict a culture in which men have control and women are subordinates that serve as mere accessories in the male conquest for dominance. This study also revealed that many of the same techniques Goffman (1979) observed in his analysis are still being used to depict women as secondary beings (Ford, 2008).

Under the theoretical framework of hegemony, elite societal groups—in this case men—are alleged to use media as means of propagating their position of dominance. Thus, this school of thought is aligned with the notion that media, including advertising, support and reinforce the power of men in U.S. culture with each message, making their
dominance over women into an accepted social norm in which women also willingly participate (Gramsci, 1971).

As illustrated with these studies, much of the research found on gender advertisements frames women as the primary victims of idealized portrayals and ultimately concludes that men suffer very few negative consequences due to the hegemonic dominance bestowed upon the male population. But can this societal power granted to men though advertising and media have an adverse effect on them as well? And are men not also faced with images and messages that through social learning result in many of the same effects that women experience?

2.2 Men in Media

It is argued that the regular placement of women in advertisements for household products and beauty supplies is what further confines them to the roles of homemakers and sex objects, while men continued to be empowered by images and messages of freedom, power, and manhood exemplified in beer commercials and those of the like (Limpinnian, 2002). But are there consequences to this male “empowerment?”

2.2.1 Measures of Masculinity

Katz (2003) sets out to defend the idea that while the particular pressures placed on men by media differ from those that women face, men encounter extreme social expectations all the same. He points out that just as women feel pressured to fit the media’s definition of femininity characterized by physical beauty, delicate demeanor, and submissiveness, men are also surrounded by messages outlining the
characteristics that are necessary to possess in order to be considered a “real man” in society. Masculinity is often defined by physical toughness, control, and aggressive force, generating a rather violent role glamorized by representations like athletes, superheroes, action stars, and champions of war (Katz, 2003).

When projecting images of masculinity with which to target the male audience, advertisers often rely on these kinds of figures to appeal to men’s desire to “be a man”—a role that has been shaped and is constantly reiterated though advertising and media to stand for strength, aggression, and dominance. For men, there is not only pressure to look a certain way but also to be a certain way. A “real man” has a strong, athletic build; oversized muscles; a rugged demeanor; and the appearance of both inner and outer “toughness” (Katz, 2003). Katz (2003) believes that these societal standards are imposed on all men, regardless of race.

Rohlinger (2002) conducted a study that used the content analysis approach to determine the most prominent profiles of men in advertising and their frequency. She examined the advertisements found in the 1987-1997 issues of five highly circulated mainstream magazines that target men age 18-49: Sports Illustrated, Men’s Health, Popular Mechanics, Gentlemen’s Quarterly (GQ), and Business Week.

Through a coding process, nine key depictions of masculinity were identified in this sample:

1. The hero – one whose celebrity status is a result of professional athleticism, business success, political power, or military service
2. The outdoorsman – one who conquers nature, reigns over the animal kingdom, and has control over a “seemingly wild environment”
3. The urban man – a metropolitan figure who indulges in the luxuries of big-city living (i.e., fashion, social venues, outings with others)
4. The family man / nurturer – an active participant in the family as the father and head of household

5. The breadwinner – he who is primarily responsible for financially supporting the other members of the family

6. The man at work – one who is actively engaged in his career or area of expertise

7. The erotic male – a sensualized, idealized, and often nude representation of the male form put on display

8. The consumer – the “average man” who either is a user of the advertised product, needs the advertised product, or is presented as a “satisfied customer” of the advertised product

9. The quiescent man – one who participates in “light” recreational activity (i.e., video games, tourism) or is altogether inactive (Rohlinger, 2002, pp. 66-67).

These roles were identified as the common representations of men in advertising, but of the nine, the most prominent portrayals were found to be the erotic male, the hero, the man at work, and the consumer—with the erotic male standing as the single largest category, accounting for 36.9% of the total number of depictions examined in the study (Rohlinger, 2002, p. 68).

Findings like these make a strong argument for the increased presence of male objectification. Much like the objectified female figure, men are continually faced with images of models that make 5% body fat, little clothing, and suggestive demeanor seem like common occurrences in real life. They also provide insight into how men are also being sexualized in advertising (Rohlinger, 2002, p. 68).

2.2.2 Men on Display

As Kilbourne remarks in her presentation, advertising does much more than sell products; it sells ideas. Shepherd (2011) states that “There seems to be no question
that the use of sexuality in advertising helps to sell a product. …the data and the research studies support the concept that sex, indeed, does sell” (p. 7). The “sex sells” approach is a popular advertising treatment due to its perceived effectiveness. However, using sex as a marketing device seems to sell a lot more than just products (Kilbourne, 1999).

Again, this is an area where a great amount of research exists on “sexploitation” as it applies to women, but significantly less has been conducted on the subject as it relates to men. In more recent years, researchers have begun to take notice of the increased objectification of men in advertising. Reichert and LaCaze (2006) conducted a content analysis of the Polo / Ralph Lauren ads found in GQ Magazine from 1980 to 2000 that seeks to determine if and how men are sexualized in the marketing of clothing and lifestyle.

The results of this research revealed that over the 20-year time period examined, both nudity and intimate contact greatly increased, making the ads far more “sexually provocative.” Other key findings included the fact that Ralph Lauren advertisements had made a discernible transition from using clean-cut, “country club” male models to incorporating muscular, rugged male depictions to sell their products (Reichert & LaCaze, 2006, p. 186).

Rohlinger (2002) states that recent years have brought about an expansion of advertisements sexualizing and objectifying men, in which “the erotic male represents a physical and sexual ideal, whereby an attractive, muscular man is placed on display” (p. 62). However, Soldow (2006) argues that these kinds of images, where men are “on display,” fall under the male gaze theory as homoeroticism working as androgynous
marketing to both sexes (p. 333).

This is a complex concept considering that it is often difficult to clearly distinguish between eroticism and homoeroticism. While both homosexual men and heterosexual women can receive gratification from viewing an image featuring a sexualized male figure, women tend to be less voyeuristic in their viewing, thus making this suggestive display more for the pleasure of men, once again reinforcing the idea of male gaze and masculine dominance (Soldow, 2006, p. 324-325).

As the market becomes increasingly saturated with products and the millions of messages advertising them, attention-grabbing marketing devices like sex and nudity become even more frequent in order to compete with the clutter. As seen in these studies and others of the like, pressure to meet physical standards are no longer limited to women but have extended to men as well.

“You can’t call it sexism anymore if it is happening to both sexes. Excessive sexvertising, nudevertising and a bit of exploitation of the bodies of young models? Yes, maybe. But not sexism” (Trend Hunter, 2009). Whether or not the increased objectification of men and women has destroyed the concept of “sexism,” these idealized portrayals remain harmful in the fact that they continue to negatively impact societal structure and the socialization of gender.

2.3 Unsatisfying Results

As with women, modern advertising has been shown to create physical expectations for men in today’s society, and researchers are finding that the pressure to measure up can be just as great for men. Jhally (1989) refers to this quote from adman

13
Jerry Goodis: “Advertising doesn’t always mirror how people are acting, but how they’re dreaming... In a sense, what we’re doing is wrapping up your emotions and selling them back to you” (p. 2).

Under the social cognitive theory, it is argued that what these “dreams” are made of is a direct effect of the desires associated with ideal portrayals presented to the public through media and advertising messages. Therefore, in the context of this quote, the idealization of women and men has seemingly become a vicious cycle reinforced by both advertising and the audience itself.

“Instead of seeing a decrease in objectification of women in society, there has just been an increase in the objectification of men” (Ohio State University, 2006). Focusing on the effects of male and female body dissatisfaction, Schwartz and Tylka (2008) concluded from their research that that the muscular male ideal has become progressively present in media and advertising, and leads many men to feel that their own bodies do not measure up. This feeling of inadequacy can often result in “unhealthy and potentially dangerous behaviors taken on in an attempt to reach that ideal” (Schwartz & Tylka, 2008; Ohio State University, 2006).

Men who participated in the study and experienced body dissatisfaction were more likely to report symptoms indicative of eating disorders, such as an avoidance of certain foods, a fear of being overweight, and an obsessive preoccupation with becoming leaner and more muscular (Schwartz & Tylka, 2008).

2.3.1 This Is Your Body on Advertising

One of the most important aspects of advertising is the behavior that it
influences, usually in the form of purchase and continued consumption (Dittmar et al., 2009). As seen with research studies like the following, however, society experiences deeper effects as a result of these messages. In order to properly address the issue in the advertising industry, it is critical to understand what these repercussions are, along with how and why they occur.

Dittmar et al. (2009) investigated the effects on both men and women as an effort that they hoped would inspire nations worldwide to initiate a change in advertising policy. Their summary takes into account the effects on both women and men and makes several critical points regarding media-influenced eating behaviors:

There are over 100 published scientific studies on the impact of thin, ‘perfected,’ media images on girls and women, and there are also more recent scientific studies which document the impact of the muscular media ideal on boys and men. Not every single person is vulnerable to detrimental media effects, but negative effects do occur in the clear majority of adolescent girls and women.

There are fewer studies on men, but meta-analyses show that exposure to the muscular male ideal is also linked to greater body dissatisfaction, with an effect size comparable to that in women. Body dissatisfaction, the experience of negative thoughts and feelings about one’s body and appearance, is a powerful (in fact, the most potent) and consistent precursor of a whole range of unhealthy body-related behaviours. (Dittmar et al., 2009, p. 2)

Among these “unhealthy body-related behaviors” influenced by media ideals, the document lists starving, binging, purging, anorexia, bulimia, steroids and supplements abuse, unnecessary cosmetic surgery, overly extreme exercising, depression, anxiety, and sexual dissatisfaction. The positive reinforcement of ideal beauty in society only promotes these behaviors even more. Effects such as these are troublesome, and as these researchers point out, these negative responses, revealed through research to be directly linked to the media’s portrayal of body image, are not limited to women but now commonly extend to include men as well (Dittmar et al., 2009).
Constantly surrounded by ideal image, both men and women in the U.S. culture strain themselves to fulfill an unrealistic fantasy that is arguably not created by the members of the opposite sex, but rather by advertising (Dittmar et al., 2009).

2.3.2 Ideal Image

So why does the sexualization, idealization, and objectification of either sex carry any real importance? It may not be considered as serious of an issue if it elicited no actual effects, but this large and growing amount of research that demonstrates that these messages are responsible for some rather real repercussions makes this an extremely important subject.

Body dissatisfaction generated by ideal image seems to be associated with the poor self-image that men and women experience. Lavine et al. (1997) used an experiment to examine body dissatisfaction among the sexes by exposing one group to sexist ads, which portray men and women as idealized sex objects, while another was exposed to only non-sexist advertisements or none at all. The results of the experiment found that when compared to the women in the latter group, the women in the former perceived their own body size to be larger than it actually was, while when compared to the men in the latter group, the men in the former perceived their own body size to be smaller than it actually was (Lavine et al., 1997).

Essentially, the women who were presented with ads featuring idealized thin female figures experienced greater body dissatisfaction and had a more inaccurate perception of themselves. The same was also observed with the men who were exposed to idealized, muscular male models. While women were left with a desire to be
smaller, men faced the reverse problem of longing to be larger; however, both genders experienced a common side effect of sexist advertising: dissatisfaction and a sense of inadequacy (Lavine et al., 1997).

This research reinforces the idea that the expectations set in advertising and learned through social cognitive theory have the power to manipulate both the male and female audience’s perception of the reality about their own bodies. Agliata and Tantleff-Dunn (2004) conducted an experiment in which one group of men were shown media images featuring “the ideal male body,” while another was exposed only to non-appearance advertisements. The results indicated that:

…exposure to ideal images of attractiveness via television advertisements can significantly increase one’s muscle dissatisfaction, whereas [exposure] to non-appearance advertisements shows no effects on body dissatisfaction. Viewing ideal male images also was associated with a significant increase in depression, whereas exposure to neutral advertising had the opposite effect, with significant decreases in depression reported. (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004, p. 16)

Another study sought out to examine body dissatisfaction among men and women by administering a questionnaire to 45 female and 47 male Yale undergraduate students. The survey contained questions designed by the researchers to quantify self-esteem, attitudes toward eating, motivations behind exercise, and body dissatisfaction on three different levels: (1) perception of actual body size versus ideal body size, (2) their views on 35 aspects of physical appearance (body build) and bodily functioning, and (3) perception of current weight versus ideal weight (Silberstein et al., 1988).

These researchers found that after evaluating the responses from this questionnaire, “men exhibited no less body dissatisfaction than women.” The two groups did differ, however, in very much the same way as they did in the study mentioned earlier—with men desiring to put on weight while women overall sought to
Advertisements that focus on ideal image, however, have been shown to do more than just affect the way in which men and women view themselves—research has also revealed them to have a profound effect on the manner in which they view their relationships with both the opposite sex and the same sex.

Zurbriggen et al. (2011) examined the effect that objectification in media has on the quality of romantic relationships. Their method involved documentation of the amount of time participants spent with media and the channels of each medium with which they engaged. Self- and partner-objectification was measured with attitudinal surveys in which participants rated their self-perception and the current state of their relationship with their significant others. The majority of the sample (82.4%) was identified as heterosexual, but there were several participants that identified themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Zurbriggen et al., 2011, p. 453).

The results of this study showed that:

Men reported higher levels of partner objectification than did women; self- and partner objectification were positively correlated [especially for men]; partner-objectification was predictive of lower levels of relationship satisfaction; consuming objectifying media is related to lowered relationship satisfaction through... partner-objectification; [and] self- and partner-objectification were related to lower levels of sexual satisfaction among men.

(Zurbriggen et al., 2011, p. 449)

These findings were representative of the group as a whole, regardless of the sexual orientation of individual participants.

Studies such as this one offer insight into how objectification of men and women can have negative effects even in the context of romantic relationships. So not only are these images proving to have a profound effect on men and women internally, but they
are also affecting the behaviors influenced by these messages and adopted through social cognitive theory extend to also affect relationships with others (Zurbriggen et al., 2011).

A significant amount of time has passed since many of these studies, but in this time, has the manner in which men are portrayed in advertising changed? The following research provides an updated look at the current state of affairs and compares them to past findings to determine the difference, if any, between past male depictions and those of the present. It also seeks to determine the same regarding men's perception of their portrayal in media.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.1 Research Question 1

The present study is concerned with addressing two primary questions, the first of which is how are men being portrayed in modern advertising? Media is constantly evolving, and trends are always changing. While past studies have focused on this topic, a fresh perspective can always offer something new and help contribute to this research with updated information. The reoccurring themes observed in the textual analysis will help to build masculinity profiles to describe common depictions of men present in advertising media today.

3.2 Research Question 2

The second focus of this research is on how men and women perceive these portrayals of masculinity and the real-world implications of these messages. How do they make them feel, and how do they assume that they make others feel? Do they consider these portrayals to be an accurate reflection of reality? Are there any perceived social effects of modern portrayals of masculinity in advertising? These are the kinds of questions that are addressed in the focus group portion of this study.
CHAPTER 4

METHOD

The present study uses triangulation of two qualitative research methods to address each research question with the appropriate process. For RQ1, which focuses on the portrayal of men in modern advertising, I performed a textual analysis of a sample of print advertisements, using Goffman’s (1979) and Rohlinger’s (2002) past analyses as a framework for my own. To address RQ2, which is concerned with men’s and women’s perception of this portrayal, I employed the focus group method of research to discuss with individuals, separated in sessions by sex, their own feelings and assumption of others’ feelings toward advertising’s depiction of men. This second part adds depth to this research by providing insight and observation outside of my own and providing multiple views by which to consider the current state of male-targeted advertising and its perceived effects.

4.1 Textual Analysis

My textual analysis involved a thorough examination of the ads found in the latest issues of four major men’s print publications: Maxim (March 2013), GQ (March 2013), Esquire (March 2013), and Men’s Health (April 2013). Due to Men’s Health Magazine’s mid-month release, the issue available at the time of purchase was a month ahead of the others, but all four issues used were simultaneously on shelves in bookstores in the month of March in 2013.

For reference, the covers of each specific issue used in this study are included in Figure 4.1.
Figure 4.1. Sample magazine covers. The March 2013 issues of Maxim (top left), GQ (top right), Esquire (bottom left), and Men’s Health (bottom right) were used in this sample.

These specific publication titles were chosen for their popularity among men in the target group for this study (age 18-25) and for their lifestyle content.
(AllYouCanRead.com, 2013; Top Tens, 2013). The latest circulation numbers recorded for each is listed in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

**Sample Magazine Circulation, 2012**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paid &amp; Verified Circulation (2012)</td>
<td>2,543,563</td>
<td>947,511</td>
<td>710,627</td>
<td>1,901,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Replication Circulation (2012)</td>
<td>284,824</td>
<td>60,031</td>
<td>43,895</td>
<td>59,536</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2012; Alliance for Audited Media, 2012)

While some of these publications experience a higher circulation rate than others, these numbers do not include single-issue sales or the pass-along rate, the latter of which is impossible to accurately record. Magazines are, however, known for their high pass-along rate, therefore the true number of impressions is quite likely to actually be higher than these numbers would suggest. It is important to note that all four scored in the Top 25 for digital replication circulation in 2012 (Lulofs, 2012).

Every ad within the selected issues was studied, including those that did not specifically feature a male figure. Each element of the ad was analyzed, from the visual devices to the communication in the copy. Images were evaluated by a qualitative interpretation of the facial expressions, body positions, activities, dress, demeanor, and demographics of the men present (and women when applicable). If a male figure was not present, the framing of scenes or product shots and their accompanying messages were considered, while the meanings, symbolism, and persuasion techniques behind
each were evaluated to determine the lifestyle being advertised and the male profile that was being targeted.

After all ads had been analyzed, each was categorized according to reoccurring themes and similarities among the ads of the sample, much like Rohlinger’s (2002) study. These findings would then be compared to those of past studies like it, both those focusing on men and those that focused on women, to determine if these results were consistent with the theoretical framework of hegemony.

4.2 Focus Groups

Once the textual analysis evaluating the portrayal of men in modern print advertising had been completed, this research was then triangulated with three focus group sessions, two comprised of only men and one of only women. All three groups consisted of a volunteer sample of undergraduate students from a large Southwestern university who received extra credit for a journalism class for their participation in the study. Students were offered an alternative mode of extra credit in the form of a written assignment.

During the hour-long focus group sessions led by myself (the latter two supervised by my thesis committee chair, Dr. Tracy Everbach), I engaged the group in a discussion focusing on the manner in which men are portrayed in modern advertising. The first section of prewritten questions covered topics on male-targeted advertising like subjects’ most memorable recent advertisements, their favorite advertisements, their least favorite advertisements, and their feelings toward each.
The second section involved a slideshow of ads taken from my textual analysis with which I used to ask the group about their interpretation of each ad, their affinity for the message, and their perception of how others—especially men—felt about the ad. The outline of prewritten questions was designed to allow for flexibility, as each group discussion would inevitably take a different course due to its composure of different participants with different attitudes and beliefs.

An audio and audio-visual recording of each session was captured for post-analysis and evaluation. The comments and opinions expressed in each were compared and considered holistically to determine similar and/or conflicting views between sexes and reoccurring themes revealed in discussion. This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board.
CHAPTER 5
RESULTS

5.1 Textual Analysis

During the research process, 185 total ads were analyzed: 18 from Maxim, 71 from GQ, 37 from Esquire, and 59 from Men’s Health.

As each print advertisement in the textual analysis sample was examined, it was evaluated for the meanings behind certain elements, as assigned by past researchers mentioned in the literature review. Like Goffman’s (1979) study and others like it, this one took into account visual elements like body positioning, hand placement, gaze, facial expression, physical features, activity, and dress. Since many advertisements include headlines and sometimes supplementary subcopy that can affect the meaning of the advertising message, this text was also taken into consideration when determining the connotations behind visual elements. The category of the product being advertised also weighed into assessments of meaning.

Once the copy, its translated meaning (defining any euphemisms, nuances, or suggestions in the language), the product, its category, and all visual elements had been analyzed and recorded, it was studied for reoccurring themes and commonalities among advertisements in the sample. The findings helped to build different masculine profiles, much like those Rohlinger (2002) designed in her study, to describe the portrayals of men observed in the textual analysis process.

Each profile has been assigned a title that accurately describes the male in the image or lifestyle presented in each ad in that group. A small description has also been constructed to paint a picture of the collections in their entirety. Basically, these are the
kinds of men that are being portrayed in print advertising today, according to my sample:

1. The sophisticated man – Similar to the Rohlinger’s (2002) urban man, he is a metropolitan figure who illustrates an affinity for fashion, luxury, technology, travel, and the finer things in life. He has eclectic taste and indulges in relaxing social and personal activities. He is often shown alone, partaking in the activities of a sophisticated lifestyle, but is sometimes pictured with a few other men or women of the same social status demonstrating similar interests.

2. The bodybuilder – This profile features male models or products that encourage and praise body types that are muscular to overly muscular. Models under this description are usually shown shirtless to showcase their muscular physique and the outcomes of the bodybuilding supplement being advertised. While the build of these men suggest regular workouts and active lifestyles, these models are rarely shown participating in either, but rather displaying the subsequent results in a stationary manner that would appeal to those attempting to achieve such a body.

3. The athlete – Unlike the bodybuilder, the athlete is usually shown in the midst of physical activity. He is also more fully clothed in workout gear, and focus is not placed on physical results quite nearly as much as it is on performance results. This is also demonstrated in the fact that the model’s body is rarely put on display, but rather it is the quality of his activity that is highlighted in the advertising image.

4. The erotic male – While part of this description is based on Rohlinger’s (2002) erotic male, I felt that some of her qualifiers for this particular profile did not fit my personal research findings. Instead, I have defined this profile as men whose bodies are
put on display for the visual pleasure of the audience. They are shown either nude, shirtless, or with a dramatically unbuttoned shirt (half undone) and placed in a sexually suggestive position, often with emphasis on the crotch.

5. The ladies’ man – This portrayal usually features, and is target at, younger men. The ladies’ man has only has one thing on his mind: women. Everything he does down to how he looks and the activities in which he participates is for the sake of impressing and attracting women. His pursuit of female attention is the motivation behind most purchase decisions as well.

6. The consumer – Again, this profile was largely based on another one of Rohlinger’s (2002) profiles under the same name. He is just your “average guy” who is either a user of the product being advertised, could benefit from use of the advertised product, or is depicted as a “satisfied customer.” He is usually inactive, and his link to the product is often defined in the copy of the ad. His portrayal does not show any strong signs of belonging under any of the other profiles listed above but rather is simply that of a “generic” man.

Other minor masculine profiles were identified, but they appeared only once or twice in the sample, and therefore, did not merit their own category but instead were labeled as “other.” The six major profiles identified above make up the bulk of the sample.

The number of ads under each description, separated into those that actually feature human male figures and those that only feature product shots and messaging that embody the lifestyle, are provided in Table 5.1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculinity Profile</th>
<th>Number of Ads Featuring Humans</th>
<th>Number of Ads Featuring Products/Lifestyle</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sophisticated Man</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>54.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodybuilder</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erotic Male</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ladies’ Man</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16.22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.95%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each masculinity profile is described with further detail and visual examples in the following sections.

5.1.1 The Sophisticated Man

The sophisticated man is the most reoccurring depiction in the sample, accounting for approximately 54% of the total ads examined. Like the male models featured in Figure 5.1, the sophisticated man is usually well dressed and demonstrates an affinity for fashion. He looks polished, professional, and groomed, but he is never “on display,” but rather it is the clothing or accessories that he is modeling that are the main focus of the ad. His masculinity is established through the confidence and suaveness exuded through his body position; the copy reinforces this attitude.
Consider the tone of the text in Figure 5.1, “From Rookie to Pro.” The sophisticated man is often portrayed as a “pro” who has a handle on his personal style, “style” encompassing everything from how he looks to how he moves and what he does, and this confidence is fueled by the products he purchases.

While he is often portrayed as generally wealthy—at least enough so to own a new car and a designer wardrobe complete with exquisite accessories—the sophisticated man can also be a young man with spending savvy who knows how to get the best look for his money; he may not have excessive wealth, but he at least knows how to look the part and indulge in the lifestyle. The lifestyle depicted by the
sophisticated man, however, is one that realistically could only be afforded by members of the upper-middle class or higher.

The diversity displayed in the Van Heusen ad in Figure 5.1 is rare; the sophisticated man is usually Caucasian. He falls within the 25-34 age range and has a fit, well-maintained body, as shown in Figure 5.2. He is generally attractive and stylish, projecting the success of a man with a high-profile professional position and social charisma, but his specific look varies from ad to ad.

![Figure 5.2. The sophisticated man (GQ, 2013).](image)

Essentially there is no one look that manifests itself as “the look” of the sophisticated man, aside from the characteristics just mentioned. His hair may be long,
short, or shaved; he may have facial hair, scruff, or be clean-shaven; he may be serious, smiling, or neutral; he may have rugged, masculine features or softer, more effeminate features. Again, it is not the man that defines the ad, but the lifestyle being depicted—one of luxury and success.

Seventeen of the 100 ads categorized under the group had no male figure present at all but instead only involved product shots framed to fit the sophisticated man’s taste for finer living. Products like wristwatches, luxury vehicles, and cutting-edge technological devices are commonly advertised as necessities for the sophisticated lifestyle, with imagery and messaging focused on the attractive aspects of the product rather than its functionality, practicality, or affordability.

5.1.2 The Bodybuilder

This profile is very distinguishable from others in the fact that the message of the ads in this category is clear: use of this product will produce muscles like those pictured. Many of the images featuring the bodybuilder resembled that in Figure 5.3 – a shirtless model with much more muscle definition than the average male. The bodybuilder is always flexing, and his body is put on display—not in a sexual manner but rather in a way that showcases his commitment to the bodybuilding lifestyle. His masculinity is established through his large body and his strong physical stance, often with his arms crossed over his chest or firmly placed on his hips, or in a statuesque pose, as demonstrated in Figure 5.3.
Unlike the athlete, who displays a health-focused motivation for his fitness initiatives, the bodybuilder is portrayed as setting the ideal muscular body as the ultimate goal. Essentially, the effect his workout has on his exterior is of primary importance as opposed to any internal benefits, those would merely be secondary. While the subcopy found on ads featuring the bodybuilder speak to “a better workout,”
he is rarely shown in the act of working out, and when he is, he is captured in a situation where his muscles are only more defined.

The bodybuilder is usually shown when body supplements are being advertised and is accompanied with a message that talks to a “higher standard” or “the next level,” as seen in Figure 5.3. Most of the ads featuring the bodybuilder were found in Men’s Health, which seems logical considering the focus of this particular magazine places on physical improvement through fitness and nutrition. This profile made up approximately 5% of the sample studied.

These ads are targeted to those who are looking to achieve this high standard of muscular accomplishment; it is an aspirational image. This is also the kind of image identified by other researchers to create insecurity and foster body dissatisfaction among men. They see this physical form and compare it to their own, perceive discrepancies, and then as has been observed, experience negative feelings about themselves (Dittmar et al., 2009). Through social cognitive theory, this ideal is reinforced via society’s positive attitude toward men with muscles and strength. This concept is explored in further detail in the focus group portion of this study.

5.1.3 The Athlete

While seemingly similar, the profile of the athlete is much different than that of the bodybuilder. The athlete displays a higher concern for physical accomplishments through health and fitness, which define his masculinity. It is not so much about looks for the athlete, those are simply secondary results from his pursuit of a healthy lifestyle. It is much more about the feat itself, not the increase in muscle mass.
The athlete is instantly distinguishable from the bodybuilder according to a few important criteria. Firstly, the athlete is usually shown actively participating in fitness activity, like running, biking, climbing, etc. While he is sometimes pictured working out in a gym setting, he is more often found in an outdoor environment. Unlike the bodybuilder, who is often shown alone, the athlete is occasionally surrounded by others also participating in physical activity. It is his performance that is being showcased, not
his body, and it is usually the advertised product that is improving the quality of his performance, products like running shoes and sports drinks.

While he is not overly muscular, the athlete is physically fit with some lean muscle definition, but he is usually fully clothed in workout attire, leaving some mystery to the muscular details of his body. He often expresses victory or pleasure with what he is doing through facial expression or gestures, like the man in Figure 5.4 who has his arms raised high in a celebratory manner. The message being communicated through copy is also uplifting and inspirational, not pushing the audience to necessarily achieve what is being pictured but rather challenging them to reach their own personal best. These kinds of images and messages accounted for approximately 7% of the ads in the sample, and were present in each magazine studied. As one would assume, this depiction was observed several times in Men’s Health, but the athlete was actually featured in each of the other magazines as well.

5.1.4 The Erotic Male

While the erotic male only made up approximately 8% of the ads examined, it was still the second most frequent human depiction (excluding ads featuring only lifestyle or products). This percentage, however, pales in comparison to what Rohlinger (2002) found in her study as well as this specific study’s numbers for the sophisticated man. The difference between my findings and Rohlinger’s may just be a result of changing times, but it could also have something to do with in our different takes on what qualifies as “eroticism.”
The erotic male in my study, like Rohlinger’s (2002), is usually shown nude or partially nude, with an open shirt or no shirt on at all. He is also situated in suggestive positions, like lying down with his knees apart to expose and draw attention to his crotch, touching himself, or in the process of removing his clothing. The erotic male is shown either alone—caught in a private moment—or in a moment of intimacy with a female figure. However, even when a female is present with the erotic male, which was seldom seen in this sample, he is still the main focus of the image and is usually not looking at her but rather directly at the camera. His head is usually tilted downward, looking up at the camera, or tilted upward, gazing down into it. Essentially, he exists as sexual “eye candy” for the viewer, and his masculinity is defined by his sexual appeal.

Figure 5.5. The erotic male (Maxim, 2013, inside back cover).
Figure 5.5 is one example of the erotic male, and like this ad, many that fit under this description are used to sell fragrances. While several of the fragrance ads were scented to showcase the product, smell is simply not a visual element, therefore these ads often look to depict a certain lifestyle, one that is implied to accompany the use of the advertised product. The erotic male is marketed as desirable and sexually irresistible, and with this masculine portrayal, advertisers insinuate that the male members of the audience will be regarded in the same manner—only, of course, if they purchases the advertised product.

Figure 5.6. The erotic male (Men’s Health, 2013, pp. 4-5).
Rohlinger’s (2002) erotic male is tailored to encompass more than just the points outlined above. She includes ads that place the logo over the crotch, claiming that this is done to draw attention to this area, but in many cases where I observed this technique, the visual cues as a whole were not those of eroticism; the male figure was not being sexualized or put on display. Unless the model was in an unmistakably suggestive position or his crotch was blatantly the focal point of the image, as demonstrated in Figure 5.6, it did not appear that sexualization was taking place. In fact, most of the shirtless men observed in the sample were more aptly labeled under the bodybuilder profile according to the manner in which they were portrayed and the product and lifestyle being advertised.

Many instances of the erotic male displayed the androgyny discussed earlier in Soldow’s (2006) work. The models were framed in such a manner that men could want their bodies and perceived sexual appeal in an aspirational sense while homosexual men and heterosexual women could simultaneously want their bodies in a sexual sense. Even though the erotic male always demonstrated dominance, his sexuality was ambiguous and really left up to the imagination of the viewer.

Even in their suggestiveness, the erotic male was rarely ever depicted as vulnerable, as past studies have described sexualized females. As explained under the theory of hegemony, these men still exuded a sense of power and control with their body position and stance, much like the men pictured in both Figures 5.5 and 5.6. The erotic male may be on display, but he is still domineering, never submissive.
5.1.5 The Ladies’ Man

The depiction of the ladies’ man is nothing new to advertising; however, many cases in the sample that fell under this description had a new twist on this old marketing favorite. In the classic sense, the ladies’ man is the guy who always gets the girl. He is smooth, confident, and ready for action—usually thanks to the help of the advertised product. The more contemporary approach adds some hyperbole to appeal to its young audience’s affinity for humor and irony discussed later in the focus group sessions.

![The ladies’ man](image)

*Figure 5.7. The ladies’ man (Men’s Health, 2013, pp. 4-5).*

While the ladies’ man is usually a young man in his 20s, as pictured in Figure 5.7, he can also be a mature older man exuding experience, as seen in Figure 5.8. The ladies’ man has one goal: to get women. His decisions and actions revolve around this aspect, impacting the products he chooses to use. Most of the ads under this profile are
for body wash and other premium hygiene products, some of which focus on the freshness of sexual body parts with messaging that uses blatant innuendo to suggest the positive reaction this attention to detail will get from women. These ads were found in each of the magazines studied, but only accounted for approximately 3% of the total sample.

Figure 5.8. The ladies’ man (Maxim, 2013, p. 36).
Because the ladies’ man’s masculinity is defined by his ability to win over women, an attractive female figure is almost always an integral part of these types of ads. She is always submissive to his power and under the spell of his coolness, an aspirational image for the heterosexual male audience. Instead of showing a relatable representation, the ladies’ man is often a mythical creature of sorts, too perfectly smooth to be real.

As illustrated with the ads for Axe Apollo and Old Spice Wolfthorn, this portrayal is often humorously exaggerated with hyperbolic situations and characters that would never exist in real life. The man in a spacesuit held up and celebrated by a group of cheerleaders is a highly unlikely scene, whereas the man in the Old Spice ad baring a second head—a wolf wearing an eye patch—is even more implausible.

But despite the seemingly ridiculous nature of these ads, this treatment has become increasingly present in modern advertising, especially in the male hair and body care category. The effectiveness of this technique is explored further in the focus group sessions discussed in a later portion of the results.

5.1.6 The Consumer

The final major masculinity profile identified in the sample was that of the consumer. By comparison, this depiction is rather generic; there is nothing particularly telling about this man, his lifestyle, or his social status.

The consumer can be any age or race. In fact, many of the men in these ads could be replaced with a woman, and the meaning of the ad would stay more or less exactly the same, like in the ad featured in Figure 5.9. And for many of those that do not
feature a human figure, the same ad could run in a female-targeted magazine and be just as effective.

Figure 5.9. The consumer (Men’s Health, 2013, p. 85).

A wide variety of products are advertised in these ads, ranging from banks to cough drops to peanuts. If a man is shown, he is simply shown using the product to fill a
basic need, one that could almost apply to anyone.

Accounting for approximately 16% of the sample, these ads were the second most frequent category, but most were targeted at the consumer and did not necessarily feature a man portrayed as the consumer. As far as human portrayals, however, this profile was only the fourth most frequent, trailing far behind the sophisticated man (as did all profiles) and just a few behind the erotic male and the athlete.

5.1.7 Other Profiles

While the masculinity profiles outlined above cover most of the ads in the sample, approximately 7% consist of a few minor depictions that only showed up once or twice in analysis. Rohlinger’s (2002) Family Man profile, for example, appeared once in Esquire in an ad for Patek Philippe wristwatches, showing a father with his arm around his son at a train station. In no other ad in the sample was a male figure clearly presented as a father or head of household. This could be explained by the relatively young audience toward which these magazines are geared; most of these men are still in the “young professional” stage of life and quite possibly only in the early stages of family life, if they are to that point at all.

Another rare depiction was that of the Hero of War. This depiction was lumped into Rohlinger's (2002) Hero profile with athletes, but my own findings led me to separate the two. My only encounters with the Hero of War were an ad for Maximum Warrior 3, a game for Maxim's 360 app and website, portraying a soldier maneuvering across a battlefield, and one other time in the form of Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson in character for his role in the movie Gi Joe Retaliation.
Aside from these two images and those of the athlete and bodybuilder working out, there was overall very little activity observed among the male figures in this sample and practically no hard manual labor, as seen in Rohlinger’s (2002) study categorized under the Outdoorsman and the Man at Work. Although, this could possibly be contributed to the fact that the sample involved publications that focus more on fashion, lifestyle, and fitness and may not have audiences that would be an appropriate target for such ads.

5.2 Focus Groups

Three separate focus group discussions were conducted as a part of this research: Focus Group A, which took place on April 2, 2013, and consisted of three men; Focus Group B, which occurred on April 11, 2013, and was composed of three men; and Focus Group C, which also occurred on April 11, 2013, and consisted of 11 women. All participants were communications or journalism undergraduate students at a large, Southwestern university, and all sessions took place on the UNT campus.

5.2.1 Focus Group A

The first focus group, Focus Group A, was an all-male session that attracted the participation of three subjects, two Caucasian and one Hispanic, ranging in age from 22 to 25. Subjects were first asked about their familiarity with the publications involved in the textual analysis portion of the research. Only Subject A2 expressed any kind of regular interaction with any of the magazines, specifically *Men’s Health*. While he did
not have a subscription, he did admit to casual single-issue purchases of the title on an occasional basis.

Overall, the participants had little interaction with any print publications and could not recall any specific print ads from the last year. All three did, however, mention that online magazines were their preferred form.

Next, participants were asked to provide examples of recent advertisements, in any media form, that they had remembered seeing, as well as the brand or product being advertised if they could recall. While it took some time, each participant was able to recollect at least one; most were television ads with a humorous premise, while a couple mentioned billboards with messaging or visuals that they found clever or striking on their commute to campus. Product categories varied from hygiene products to local events to beer, and all of the ads mentioned were ads that the subjects themselves regarded positively.

As mentioned earlier, the general consensus of the group was that hyperbolic portrayals are funny; they demonstrate humility in the fact that the ad is self-aware of the fact that it is just that—an ad—and does not patronize the intelligence of the audience by assuming that they do not know the true intentions of advertising. According to the group’s responses, by being “over the top,” these ads were almost making fun of themselves and the situation of selling a product. Instead of marketing a product, Subject A3 noted, they were marketing an attitude, and that was something he could buy into.

All three subjects expressed an affinity for ads that made use of humor. They noted that these were the kinds of ads they not only enjoyed but that they would also
actively seek again on the Internet via YouTube. According to Subject A3, “Nobody really likes advertising, but when they [advertisers] actually try to make something entertaining, I think that’s the kind of stuff that people are going to react to—in a good way.” They also agreed that these advertisements would elicit a positive response in the form of trial, adoption, or continued use of the brand.

When asked about advertisements that they recalled not liking, all subjects immediately identified those that feature the muscular male ideal, much like that described under the bodybuilder profile in the textual analysis portion. All three agreed that this image was not only polarizing, but also dissociative, completely turning them off to the message. While the subjects explained that physical health was important to them, as Subject A2 expressed, “There is nothing healthy about those guys that look all bulked up like that.”

Subject A3 said that he was “insulted” that advertisers would assume that that form was his physical goal. None of the participants admitted to feeling any sort of pressure to meet this physical standard and highly doubted that the products in the advertisements featuring overly muscular male figures could even deliver such results. The participants of this focus group contested that this image, that of the bodybuilder, was the most inaccurate depiction of men and their aspirations and by far the most off-putting portrayal.

Participants were then presented with different ads from the textual analysis sample and asked their opinion of each. The first lined up was the image of the bodybuilder featured in Figure 5.3. When asked to describe the ad in one word, the subjects offered up terms like “fake” and “extreme.” Their take on the ad was quite
negative, not only in response to the male figure but also because of the group’s dislike of muscle-enhancing products like the whey protein advertised in the example. Subject A2 mentioned that while this kind of image did put him in a position to look at his own body and make comparisons, he still only considered the discrepancies between his body and his own personal fitness goals, not the ideal present in the image.

The next ad the group examined was another from *Men’s Health* featuring the bodybuilder, featured in Figure 5.10. But while this image also featured a fit, shirtless male with muscular definition, the subjects had a much more positive opinion of this portrayal. They attributed this to the fact that he was shown holding barbells, actually hinting at a workout, instead of just posing like the model in the previous ad. Subject A2 also noted that he felt the headline, “When I feel the weight of the world on my shoulders, I just add more,” was far more inspiring than the “Higher Standard” line in the last one. “It shows a sense of hard work, like he’s actually doing something to achieve that body.”

Subject A1 added that the product being advertised, a website called BodyBuilding.com, also attributed to his more positive attitude, saying that it seemed like something that would legitimately help those seeking the muscular ideal in a way that the whey protein in the previous ad did not. Both Subject A2 and Subject A3 said that this ad piqued their interest in the product (the website) and would actually lead them to consider trial.
The next ad was that of the athlete from Figure 5.4. All three subjects had a positive reaction to this portrayal and found it far more “inspiring” than either of the previous two. They liked the fact that it was just “an average guy,” to which they felt they

Figure 5.10. Ad for BodyBuilding.com (Men’s Health, 2013, p. 135).
could relate, participating in healthy activity. Subject A3 was attracted to the depiction of a physical goal that he felt he actually had the potential to achieve.

Next, participants were exposed to two different forms of the sophisticated man, the first being a fashion ad found in *Esquire* for Etro (see Figure 5.11). The second ad

*Figure 5.11. Ad for Etro (Esquire, 2013, p. 47).*

Next, participants were exposed to two different forms of the sophisticated man, the first being a fashion ad found in *Esquire* for Etro (see Figure 5.11). The second ad
was that in Figure 5.1 for Van Heusen. The men in the group all immediately gravitated toward the latter, citing the models as “more relatable” and the models in the Etro ad as offputtingly “effeminate.”

The erotic male image from 5.1.4.1 elicited a slightly negative reaction from the group, but they were mostly indifferent. As Subject A2 explained, “This just seems like another cologne ad. They all look the same and have this same kind of guy. I just figure it’s more for the girls to look at and decide if they want their man to smell like that.”

A couple of the men felt that these kinds of images, where men were sexualized, were just something that would always be present in advertising, but it did not make them feel any particular pressure to meet any kind of physical ideal. All three participants agreed that they had much more disdain for the muscular ideal images of the bodybuilder presented earlier.

Congruent with their positive attitude toward humor and hyperbole expressed at the beginning of the session, the men had a favorable opinion of the Axe Apollo ad from Figure 5.7 and the Old Spice ad featured in Figure 5.8. They felt that these ads “got” their sense of humor, and made advertising enjoyable. “They take a basic need, and they make it epic. It’s just funny,” said Subject A1.

Participants were more or less indifferent to ads featuring the consumer. Their interest in these ads depended upon the relevance of the product being advertised to the own lifestyle and needs.
5.2.2 Focus Group B

The second all-male focus group session also consisted of three university students, two Caucasian and one Hispanic, ranging in age from 22 to 24. The session again started with finding out whether or not the participants had any interaction with magazines, particularly those examined in the textual analysis. Unfortunately, much like before, subjects expressed very little involvement. Subject B3 admitted to occasional interaction with magazines, usually in the form of niche publications that catered to his interests, which for him were TransWorld Surf, Runner’s World, and National Geographic. Subject B2 said that he sometimes would look at ESPN The Magazine and Sports Illustrated as well.

When questioned about recent ads that the group could recall, it seemed that these subjects were also drawing a blank. When they could recall an ad, it was one toward which they had a negative attitude, identifying it as “patronizing” and “pandering” and citing their discontent with the message as the reason they had remembered it.

One such ad was a television commercial Subject B3 described for Red’s Apple Ale, where actors would be portrayed as “clueless” and then be hit in the head with an apple. He described it as “a really irritating ad campaign.” He later expressed his belief that his sense of humor was too sophisticated for the “campy” humor implemented in this ad. Subject B3 also caveated his opinion by mentioning that his association with the school’s advertising program through the school of journalism most likely inflicted bias in his assessment of ads. He identified himself as someone who would analyze ads more closely than the average person.
Another recent ad recalled by the group was Subject B1’s most recent advertising annoyance, a T-Mobile ad that he insisted insinuated that their highest priced data plan was the obvious choice for any individual. He felt that the creators of this ad assumed that their audience would simply take their word for it and blindly accept the ad’s message, something that he found insulting to his intelligence. Subject B2 mentioned Progressive Insurance’s long-running “Flo” campaign, which is in his opinion, had just become “really old.”

One ad that Subject B3 recalled enjoying was one for Oreo cookies, which involved the same ironic humor referenced in the first all-male focus group with the Old Spice “The Man Your Man Could Smell Like” campaign. Other favorable ads mentioned were those for Shiner Wild Hare (Subject B3) and Budweiser (Subject B2). The two participants cited these as examples of ads that elicited a positive response from them, and again, this was attributed to what they perceived as “creative and funny” advertising executions.

Subject B1 did not care for this “over-the-top” attempt at entertainment he frequently observed in modern advertising and felt that this technique did nothing to actually sell the product and therefore found this treatment to be off-putting. But even despite Subject B2 and B3’s positive attitude toward these kinds of ads, these subjects did not feel that they necessarily piqued their interest in the product nor led them to consider trial or adoption. All three did, however, did profess an inclination to intentionally avoid the products and brands advertised in the ads that they did not like.

When asked about the masculine portrayals that the group observed in modern advertising, Subject B3 referenced the married, overweight American “working Joe.”
Subject B1 elaborated on this portrayal by explaining that this everyman was usually depicted as “dumb” and incapable of performing simple tasks correctly. “There’s this one ad… and it basically just makes the guy look like an idiot. And I think that happens quite frequently, personally.”

Still, none of the men admitted to taking any kind of offense to this seemingly negative portrayal of men but rather dissociated themselves with it. They felt that that man did not represent who they were. Instead, as Subject B2 put it, “it’s just something that happens [in advertising].” Subject B3 cited the hyperbole involved with most of these portrayals to be what led him to not take this less-than-flattering masculine depiction seriously.

Subjects did not immediately identify any male depictions to which they related, especially when it came to celebrity endorsers. There were ones that they liked, such as professional athlete Shaquille O’Neal (Subject B2), actor John Hamm (Subject B3), and political comedian Stephen Colbert (Subject B1), but the involvement of these individuals only merited the participants’ attention, not necessarily their acceptance of the advertising message with which they may involved.

While the group overall did not feel that the general depiction of men accurately reflected the reality of the male population, Subject B2 noted that he believed that certain depictions were accurately representative of certain groups—like the athletic types depicted as participants of physical activity in Gatorade ads. Subject B3 contributed another example: the men recreationally playing football in a park in a recent Snickers television ad. He felt that men like the ones in that commercial do exist and that the situations portrayed on screen do occur in more or less the same form in
the real world, they just do not apply to all men.

Subject B3 mentioned runners in advertisements and how as a runner himself, he identified with this depiction. While it may not be applicable to everyone, he believes that it is to the specific target the advertisers are trying to reach. However, he felt that blanket representations of men, like the "stupid" portrayal mentioned earlier, was not a fair generalization of the male population as a whole. “There are plenty of men that are not stupid.”

This session, like the one before it, included a presentation of ads from the textual analysis, although this time a few ads had been added to those presented to the group before. So again, the first image presented was that of the whey protein ad featuring the bodybuilder from Figure 5.3. The group immediately displayed a negative attitude toward the image and dissociated themselves from the message. Subject B3 described the ad as “marketing to meatheads who go to GNC,” referring to a nationwide chain that sells nutritional supplements and body enhancers.

None of the men in the group were attracted to the image, and a couple expressed distrust of products like the one being advertised. Subject B2 said he had no desire to achieve the body portrayed by the model in the ad. Subject B1 felt that the kind of men that would be interested in this type of ad would be those who “were insecure about themselves.”

The group did, however, feel that this image was an accurate representation of the results the target audience—those that would consider purchase of a product like whey protein—aspired to achieve. According to Subject B3 “I think for the people that this ad is going after, this image definitely works for those kind of people.” He felt that
the imagery was what “those kind of people” would find most attractive. The copy would only be an afterthought after their attention had been seized by the visual.

Like the group before them, Focus Group B had a much more favorable opinion the ad from Figure 5.10 featuring the bodybuilder. Again, they gravitated toward the message, feeling that it provided real inspiration that encouraged the audience to work toward the goal and did not just glorify of the results of the product. No one in the group expressed any interest in the product despite their generally favorable opinion of the ad.

As also seen before, this group preferred the depiction of the athlete from Figure 5.4 to both of the previous ads for what they perceived as a real depiction of muscularity and a true-to-life display of physical ability featured in the image.

The men in the group were then presented with the two images representing the portrayal of the sophisticated man —the ad for Etro from Figure 5.11 and the ad for Van Heusen featured in Figure 5.1. All three subjects found the ad for Etro to be dissociative on the basis that the product being advertised, the suits worn by the two models, were not personally appealing to their personal style. But when asked if the models themselves had an effect on how the group perceived the brand and its message, all three subjects agreed that it did. The stoic expressions and deep camera-focused stares of the models made for a scene that Subject B1 did not care for, describing their look as saying “Oh, I’m so brooding and serious,” a disposition with which he had no personal connection.

Like the last group, the Van Heusen ad elicited a much more positive response from the group. They found the clothing to be more “wearable” and the models themselves to be more relatable. Subject B3 felt that the cultural diversity of the models
allowed the ad to appeal to a wider range of people. But even despite the fact that all three participants preferred the look of the models in the Van Heusen ad, they all felt that the appeal of the product itself was also stronger when compared to the ad for Etro.

For the erotic male, the group was presented with the images from Figures 5.5 and 5.6. The overall opinion for both was unfavorable, and the men expressed distaste for the presence of male nudity. With Figure 5.6 in particular, Subject B1 explained that “no guy wants to stare at a guy in his underwear.” Subject B3 expressed that the obvious focus placed on the model’s crotch in this ad made him feel uncomfortable.

The erotic male portrayal in Figure 5.5 was something that the group considered all too common for cologne advertising. While Subject B3 felt that this image was intended to be more appealing to women and that the female figure was the only one being sexualized, Subject B1 felt that the lack of focus on the face of the shirtless model holding the female figure allowed men to imagine themselves in that position and therefore was meant to attract the attention and interest of the male audience and sexualized both the male and female figure. None of the participants seemed particularly surprised to see this sexualized portrayal, especially considering the product categories of the two example advertisements (cologne and underwear).

The ads for the ladies’ man, as featured in Figures 5.7 and 5.8, again elicited a positive response from all three men. The general consensus of the group was that these ads were, in one word, “funny.” Subject B2 found the ad for Old Spice Wolfthorn to be striking in the fact that it did not look like anything else on the market, or anything else he had ever seen for that matter. Subject B1 professed that while he did like it, he
“just didn’t know why.” He did know that he preferred the “silliness” of the image in the Old Spice ad to the “sexual” nature of most Axe ads.

Those in the group that already used the product felt encouraged to continue their brand loyalty, while those that were not regular consumers still expressed an interest in the product as a result of the ad. While all three preferred the Old Spice Wolfthorn ad to the Axe Apollo ad, Subject B1 pointed out that he did feel that the male figure in the Axe Apollo ad was more relatable in the fact that he was perceived as an underdog achieving the success that any male underdog dreams of—female attention.

The next image was a new addition to the set—an ad for Playtex Fresh + Sexy Intimate Wipes for men that is featured in Figure 5.12. Unlike the others, this ad did not feature a human male figure in the image, but it was still classified under the ladies’ man profile in the textual analysis for the messaging’s heavy focus on the acquisition of female attention and approval. I was curious to see if this treatment, void of human representation, would be perceived in a different manner.

The lack of interest in the product led Subject B3 to be uninterested in the ad altogether. He felt that this kind of message appealed to the same men that he believed would be attracted to the whey protein ad from earlier. Subject B2 did not understand the sexual innuendo without explanation. Subject B1 was put off by both the message and the product. He felt that it insinuated that his attention to hygiene was lacking. He felt that as a product that none of the three participants had heard of before, this ad should have focused more on explaining the actual functionality of the product.

This last ad replaced the example of the consumer profile due to the lack of response it received in the previous session. The overall favorite of the group was the
ad for Old Spice Wolfthorn; the group’s least favorite of the set was the ad for Etro.

![Ad for Playtex Fresh + Sexy Intimate Wipes for Men](image)

*Figure 5.12. Ad for Playtex Fresh + Sexy Intimate Wipes for Men (Maxim, 2013, p. 79).*

5.2.3 Focus Group C

The third focus group session consisted of all female participants, six Caucasian, three Hispanic, and two African American, ranging in age from 20 to 25. Eleven subjects
participated in the discussion, which sought to determine the female perspective on the same topics and ads examined in the all-male sessions.

Unlike the men in the previous sessions, all eleven of the female participants claimed to be frequent consumers of magazines. Titles mentioned were People, Glamour, and Rolling Stone. A couple participants were familiar with the male-targeted titles examined in the textual analysis, although no one in the group had looked through any of them more than once or twice.

When asked about recent advertisements that had stuck out to participants, Subject C1 recalled Kraft’s “Let’s Get Zesty” campaign featuring what she considered to be a highly attractive male whose shirt gets burned off. When it came to male-targeted ads, Subject C2 referred to the ads for men’s body products, like Axe and Old Spice.

Subject C3 felt that most men’s ad she had seen lately featured one of two portrayals: the “stupid” incompetent male figure or what she referred to as “an ego boost.” Subject C4 mentioned that in one ad where she had observed the “stupid” male, an ad for a minivan, she had felt that this ad was not targeted to men at all, but rather targeting women as decision makers by making them feel superior as a result of their depicted capability and competence.

As far as the male “ego boost,” Subject C2 used a DirecTV commercial as an example of this concept. She believed that it provided an ego boost for men by including a beautiful woman whose only role in the ad was that of arm candy for the main male figure, insinuating that the depicted lifestyle could be achieved by any man and was as simple as purchasing and using the product.
Subject C4, like subjects in past sessions, brought up Old Spice's recent advertising. She cited it as an example of a humorous depiction of “hyper-masculinity” that she felt was more appealing to both men and women. For men, she felt that this depiction tapped into a common thread among millennial men—their affinity for “ridiculous” humor. Subject C1 felt that though their humorous depiction of men, these ads also appealed to women, who she considered to be the ones doing the majority of shopping. “It’s just guys being guys.”

While the female participants all agreed that Old Spice’s recent advertising was well-received by men and women alike, many felt that the humor of these kinds of ads achieved nothing more than a few laughs or increased commercial views on YouTube. A few still believed that this was an effective method of advertising, one that successfully encouraged increased trial and adoption among men. Subject C5 agreed with the latter group and based her opinion on personal experience. She had witnessed men that she personally knew incorporating the humor of ads into their own lives through purchase and use of the product.

When asked to list the male portrayals that they felt were the most negatively received among men, Subject C4 offered up her belief that men were turned off by ads that featured a powerful and domineering female figure. Subject C2 felt that men were most troubled by overly muscular representations, unless they were incorporated into humorous depictions of masculinity, like those in the Old Spice commercials. She felt that men would perceive these idealized images as threatening and turn away from the marketing message presented with such visuals. She felt that these images were more for the viewing pleasure of women. Subject C3 remarked on how she felt that these
images would have the same effect on men as thin, idealized female images had on women: a sense of insecurity.

Subject C3 said that she believed that body dissatisfaction was just as big of an issue among men as it was among women, and while men, like women, felt pressure to keep their body fat low, they also had the added pressure of achieving a muscular build—media’s ideal physical representation of masculinity. However, no one felt that the body image issues men faced compared to those that women encounter in media every day. Subject C5 explained how through treatments like the process of dismemberment, the act of showing models’ bodies in part, women were sexualized and degraded on a daily basis and to the point the she felt that this was an aspect of life that must simply be accepted. Subject C6 did feel that men were sexualized in media and advertising, but she identified it as a more recent phenomenon.

When it came to male issues of body image, Subject C3 felt that advertisements that compared one type of male figure with another, like the two men in Apple’s “I’m a Mac, and I’m a PC” ads from recent years, would also be unattractive to men in the sense that it caused them to reflect on themselves and identify their shortcomings. She felt that commercials like these blatantly addressed one male profile—in the case of the Apple commercial, an overweight “nerdy” male—and portrayed it as negative in contrast to a more desirable male profile—a more fit, younger, and tech savvy male portrayal—put men in a position to compare themselves to the more desirable depiction placed before them and focus on the discrepancies.

Of the male profiles discussed thus far among the group—including the incompetent male, the muscular ideal, the girl-crazed male, and the dopey dork—the
women were asked whether or not they felt that these portrayals and others they observed in media were accurate in portraying men as they exist in the real world. The group felt that there was some truth to these depictions, but as Subject C4 remarked, these representations are often exaggerated versions of men in real life, similar to caricatures.

Subject C2 brought up beer commercials as an example of common ground for all men in advertising. She felt that their portrayal the average male and their use of humor connected with men of all backgrounds. However, Subject C5 felt that this was not entirely true. She felt that minority groups that do not see actors in ads that share their ethnic background have a harder time relating to the men present in the advertisement regardless of the universal humor that might be present.

Next came the presentation of samples from the textual analysis. The ads shown were the same collection as those shown in Focus Group B, although not all of the ads were presented to this group due to time constraints.

The first ad was that of the bodybuilder from Figure 5.3. The women in the group described the image of the shirtless, muscular male as “strong” and “competitive.” Overall, they did not care for this ad. The fact that the ad was for whey protein weighed into the negative attitudes of a few women, viewing products like this as unnecessary supplements for the pursuit of unrealistic physical goals.

About half of the group felt that men would be turned off by this ad. The other half felt that the image was aspirational and therefore the image would appeal to the part of men that wanted to see the results of that image in themselves. Most of the women felt
that this ad was effective in selling the product, that those attracted to the visual of the muscular male would be inclined to buy it based on the results implied in by the image.

“I think that men are just more visual than women, especially with bodies,” stated Subject C7. The women in the group all felt that men assumed this form to be what was expected and desired of them from females and that exposure to this image would most likely lead men to view their bodies as smaller than they actually were.

The next ad was that of the erotic male from Figure 5.3. Just like the men in Focus Group B, the women in this group found the focus on the male model’s crotch to be an uncomfortable situation for both men and women alike. But several of the women believed that this type of image, where men were sexualized, would distance men more than women. Many agreed with a point made by Subject C6, who stated that she believed that “men are uncomfortable with male sexuality.”

When presented with the erotic male from Figure 5.5, the group immediately identified what they felt was objectification and sexualization of both the male and female figure in the ad. As far as the female’s objectification, however, Subject C8 expressed how this sort of portrayal for women was something that she had simply “become used to [seeing].” But regardless of how accustom the group had become of such images, they still felt that the woman was being sexualized more than the man in the image.

Like the men in Focus Group B, the first focus of the Etro ad from Figure 5.11 was on the clothes, which likewise elicited negative sentiments from the group. Subject C7 felt that this look could appeal to men of higher financial status with an affinity for fashion. “I feel like that’s a pretty niche style.” But many felt that the polarizing element
of the ad was not the clothing, but rather the way the models looked. Subject C6 felt that they were effeminate and not what most men would consider as a depiction of masculinity. “Those are just not your typical all-American guys.”

As with the male sessions, the women found the Van Heusen ad from Figure 5.1 to be more appealing and demographically diverse. Subject C2 felt that it was their casual body language and more everyday look that made this ad more attractive than the former. “Plus these guys look a lot more normal.” Although, the group felt that even if the outfits were switched between the models of this ad and those in the Etro ad that men would still gravitate toward the more appealing product—the more toned-down, less high-fashion clothing from Van Heusen.

For the Axe Apollo ad from Figure 5.7, women felt that the relatability of the underdog character and the aspirational appeal of him being shown coming out on top made this kind of ad attractive to men. However, they felt that this ad was not as effective as the Old Spice Wolfthorn ad from Figure 5.8. While some found this one to be more odd than funny, Subject C2 noted that the hyperbolic portrayal of confidence and sexual conquest would be appealing to millennial men and their unique sense of humor. “It’s the quirkiness of it. It’s not blatantly sexual.” Many felt that this treatment would be better liked among men because the creators of this ad took a less traditional approach at illustrating essentially the same message presented in the Axe Apollo ad.

Despite the perceived blatant sexuality of the ad for Playtex Fresh + Sexy Intimate Wipes, Subject C7 felt that this kind of product needed to rely on humor and sexual implications to avoid explicitly outlining the use of a product that most men would
find uncomfortable while still emphasizing the benefits of the product, which for men, would be increased intimate sexual contact with women.

5.2.4 Summary of Focus Groups

While there were many similarities among all discussion groups, there were several discrepancies between the women’s views on how certain depictions make men feel and how the men expressed that they actually felt. Plus, the men often felt that their own reactions to ads were different than what they expected from other men. But even between the two all-male focus groups, there were significant differences in the attitudes and opinions that were expressed as well.

A common element in all of the groups was their affinity for the over-the-top, hyperbolic humor found in the Old Spice ads and others of the like. The men found these ads to be extremely likeable, although several did not feel that their positive perception of the ads necessarily influenced their consumer behavior. The women from Focus Group C, however, provided several anecdotes of instances in which they had observed men that they knew who, perhaps unknowingly, had altered their purchasing patterns according to ads that had gotten their attention with a comedic and relatable message.

Both groups of men had a negative attitude toward the erotic male image and the sexualization of male figures in advertising, but this portrayal did not bother them nearly as much as others, like the bodybuilder (Focus Group A) and the profile identified as the “stupid” male (Focus Group B). As the theory of hegemony would anticipate, the women of Focus Group C, while acknowledging the increase in images of sexualized males, still
felt that the sexualization and objectification faced by women was stronger and much more of an issue.

Women believed that men’s biggest issue with male depictions in modern advertising would concern the muscular bodybuilder profile. However, only half of the men identified this as their biggest issue. While the men in Focus Group B dismissed this portrayal as irrelevant to their own lives and physical goals and therefore deemed it as easily dismissible, the men from Focus Group A did identify the muscular ideal as what they believed to be the most negative portrayal of men in media and advertising. The negative attitudes expressed by Focus Group A toward this depiction, however, were not due to pressures they experienced to achieve the form of the muscular ideal and the resulting body dissatisfaction but rather attributed the fact that they felt that this depiction was unrealistic and unhealthy and therefore found marketing of this message was “an insult to men’s intelligence.”
6.1 Discussion

While different, the masculinity profiles identified through the textual analysis do all have one thing in common: the ads categorized under each profile feature predominately white men. In all of the magazines in the sample, very few contained ads that displayed ethnic diversity. African-American men were a distant second as the most frequently observed race, and many of the instances in which they were featured, they were portrayed either as athletes or were actual professional athletes. Several of the Hispanic men featured were also well-known sports celebrities.

Another common element in these portrayals of masculinity lies in the exclusive use of lean, fit male models. The level of muscularity varied among groups, from the more average consumer and ladies’ man to the moderately muscular athlete and sophisticated man to the extremely muscular bodybuilder and erotic male, but no single ad in the sample featured a male void of muscular definition or with above-average body fat.

Considering past studies, these findings were not surprising but noteworthy nonetheless considering that this overall portrayal is not aligned with the actual demographics of U.S. males. The hegemonic dominance is not just bestowed upon men through advertising but rather muscular, fit, white men.

Through social cognitive theory, men and women have been taught that these are the physical descriptors of an attractive, desirable male. As revealed in the focus
groups, both men and women had a positive reaction to this general look, despite their own ethnic background or physical profile.

Also looking at the textual analysis sample, many of the ads under each masculinity profile advertise products in a certain category. For example, the sophisticated man is most often used in ads for fashion and accessories; the bodybuilder is seen most frequently in ads for body supplements; the ladies’ man is usually present when body or hair care products are being advertised; and the erotic male was observed exclusively in ads for fragrances and clothing. It appears that these archetypal male depictions have a specific use in advertising: to embody the aspirational image of men in the target audience.

“Target audience” in this sense is not simply referring to the men who read any of these publications but rather the kind of men who would actually be interested in the product and thus, be attentive and susceptible to advertising messages pertaining to it. These masculine portrayals represent how men in the target want to see themselves and how they hope purchase and use of the advertised product will make them appear to others.

Referring back to the studies examined in the literature review, this research does show some evolution in the portrayal of men in print advertising. Less focus has been placed on the sexual nature of the male physical form while there is now more attention on the muscul arity, strength, and ability of men, as seen with the bodybuilder and the athlete.

But overall, even less emphasis has been placed on any male representation that highlights the model’s physique; my research reveals that it is now what men cover
themselves in and surround themselves with that is the most defining aspect of their masculinity. It is not so much about what men look like, it is more about what they have and the products that they purchase. Sexualization and idealization are now illustrated through consumerism. Material possessions are portrayed as what makes a man sexually appealing. The ideal male form is now he who has the most and the most expensive “toys.” The sophisticated man is the new measure of masculinity.

The sophisticated man's mode of living revolves around luxury, fashion, and class, and through the imagery used to portray this profile as well as the products advertised to be a part of it, this depiction sets a high standard for wealth and success and emerged as the overall theme of the ads in the sample selection.

However, the responses from the focus groups did not touch on this portrayal at all. It could be because sexualization and physical idealization are typically considered the main topics when discussing portrayals of gender in advertising or possibly because this is a relatively new form of idealizing men. College-age consumers may not be exposed to this portrayal enough to consider it or perhaps they simply do not feel that it poses a threat.

When asked to recall recent advertisements, responses offered up by focus group subjects rarely involved print examples, but instead, they mainly focused on television commercials. This could be because of the lack of interaction with print media observed in each group or perhaps a result of the higher level of involvement associated with audio-visual advertisements.

Women suggested that men’s biggest threat in advertising was the over-muscular male representation. The men in Focus Group A also identified this as the
most negative depiction of masculinity. However, this portrayal was observed quite infrequently in the textual analysis sample. This could be something that is more prevalent in advertising and media featured outside of the print world. This could also be the case for the incompetent male, another negative depiction identified by subjects in both Focus Group B and Focus Group C, considering that this was not observed once in the print sample of this study; incompetency is a characteristic that would most likely come across more clearly in action rather than with a still image and copy.

The women in Focus Group C identified that their assessment of the muscular ideal and the belief that it would be perceived as the most problematic portrayal for men was based upon their own attitude toward idealized depictions of women. Because they found idealized physical portrayals of women to be the most bothersome, they assumed that the pressures to meet high physical standards would have the same effect on men.

But while the men in Focus Group A did identify the muscular ideal as the most negative portrayal of masculinity, they expressed that this was not a result of perceived pressure to achieve that ideal, but rather because they did not feel that this representation should be their physical goal. Like the men in Focus Group B, they felt that this standard was unhealthy, unrealistic, and unattractive, and dismissed advertisements that used these kinds of visuals as “insulting.”

This could very well be attributed to men’s theoretical dominance in society. The security bestowed upon men for simply being male could provide enough confidence to where men do not feel that they have to put forward the effort to achieve a certain physical ideal to reinforce their masculinity. The hegemony of men also appeared to be why the women of Focus Group C felt that media’s depiction of men was less offensive.
and degrading. Despite their acknowledgement of male objectification in advertising, the female subjects considered women’s strife with sexualization to have always been and still be greater than that of men and had accepted this as simply “the way things are.”

While humor was an attractive aspect of advertisements, there were several remarks from the focus groups that suggested that the gratification received from these kinds of ads and use of the products associated with them stemmed from positive reinforcement through social interactions, as described by social cognitive theory. The men of Focus Group B not only noted that they found ads like the ones for Old Spice to be “funny,” but that they believed this was the general consensus among men. The women of Focus Group C also found the humor of these ads to be appealing and felt that it was shared among men and provided approval for purchase and use of the product; it helped them fit in with other men and feel accepted by their peers.

The fact that all of the students in the focus group sample were communications and journalism majors most likely resulted in a sample with higher-than-average media literacy. This could be why sexualization and idealization of men were so easily dismissed, assumed by the men in the all-male focus group sessions to not affect them personally but perhaps affect other men. Male focus group subjects overall viewed sexualized and idealized male images negatively, but not because of any admitted effect on body satisfaction but rather because the perceived intent of the ad, which they felt was meant to elicit a sense of inadequacy. Male subjects found these ads to be more insulting to their intelligence than to their physique.

Sexualization and idealization, however, were more accepted by both sexes when they were framed with hyperbolic, humorous situations. The fact that ads using
this treatment received a positive reaction from the members of all three focus groups leads me to believe that this general acceptance is what makes it okay in their eyes—everyone is having a laugh and not taking it seriously, so they feel that there is no harm done.

I found it interesting that when humor was involved, these depictions were viewed as less threatening and seen as more effective in provoking positive attitudes toward the brand and encouraging trial and purchase. Negatively perceived portrayals, like the bodybuilder, conversely turned men off from the message immediately if they did not view it as aspirational, which none of the subjects present in this study did.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

As with any study, this one was not without its limitations. The overabundance of potential advertising samples forced me to narrow the sample down, which I chose to do by examining the ads found in four major print publications. Unfortunately, this did not include advertising present in other kinds of media, like television or online. Most of the ads brought up by focus group subjects were television commercials, so this created a bit of a disconnect between the two portions of research. Perhaps future studies on this subject could benefit by focusing exclusively on television advertising.

Also, as some focus group subjects pointed out, many people are now looking to the Internet for magazine content. Table 4.1 shows a substantial number of online subscribers for the magazines in the sample. The presentation of certain ads can vary between print and digital publications, so this sample was not representative of the ads present in the online versions of these magazines. While this study focused on print
advertisements so results could be compared to those of past studies, perhaps it is time for future research to shift focus to ads found in online forums.

Limitations to this research also lied in the availability of focus group subjects. Despite attempts to do so, it was rather difficult to recruit students from outside the journalism program. The fact that the participants all had a media-based educational background led them to analyze the ads on a more critical level than perhaps other students would.

Use of the focus group research method in itself somewhat limited the findings of this research. The all-male focus group sessions were small, with only the minimum number of participants, often making it difficult to get them to open up and divulge their feelings toward certain topics, especially when discussing the effect particular ads had on them personally. “Groupthink” was frequently observed where participants were hesitant to disagree with one another in the midst of such an intimate setting.

In the all-female focus group, there was the opposite problem; having such a large group led to the dominance of only a few speakers while many remained silent. The women were also more outspoken due to the fact that they were mostly referring to the perceived attitudes and feelings of men and not divulging their own feelings. Focus groups still stand as the most appropriate method for this kind of research, but a more effective number of participants with more diverse educational backgrounds could have yielded results more representative of the target population.

As seen with this study and others before it, the advertising landscape and concepts of gender are constantly evolving. Research on this topic should continue to
monitor the changes and how they affect men and women on a personal and social level.

6.3 Conclusions and Recommendations

These findings suggest that advertisers would be well advised to focus less on physical ideals and more on relatable lifestyles and humor. While not every lifestyle depiction or brand of humor will appeal to everyone, it is important to understand what will pique the interest of the target audience in a positive way. While men today are demonstrating niche interests, they enjoy sharing in universal experiences with other men and are attracted to the products that can capture this in their advertising. Depictions under this type of treatment also appear to inflict few to no negative effects on the body satisfaction of men.

The hegemony of white men appears to still be supported by advertising images, and this is more apparent to subordinate groups, like women and those of minority ethnic backgrounds. Men with less-than-idealized figures are also being turned off by the dominant portrayal of physically fit men used in advertising to provoke comparisons to one’s self. To avoid alienating these audiences, advertisers should attempt to better represent these groups with the models used in advertising images. Both men and women have expressed that relatable figures are more effective at eliciting a positive response and consideration of the message than unrealistically idealized portrayals that are meant to be aspirational.

Negative attitudes toward idealized and sexualized depictions of gender are shutting audiences off to advertising messages that use these techniques to sell and
can actually encourage avoidance of many products out of spite. The findings of this study support the notion that use of positive messages that do not discount the audience’s intelligence and consider their distrust of ads are proving more effective in building brand trust and thus increasing consumption of the advertised products. Both advertising effectiveness and body satisfaction could benefit from abandonment of old advertising techniques like sexualization and idealization and adoption of more genuine and “real” ways of representing the audience and speaking to their interests.
APPENDIX

FOCUS GROUP DEMOGRAPHICS
Focus Group A
Subject A1: Caucasian Male, 22
Subject A2: Hispanic Male, 23
Subject A3: Caucasian Male, 25

Focus Group B
Subject B1: Caucasian Male, 23
Subject B2: Hispanic Male, 24
Subject B3: Caucasian Male, 22

Focus Group C
Subject C1: Caucasian Female, 22
Subject C2: Hispanic Female, 22
Subject C3: African-American Female, 23
Subject C4: Caucasian Female, 24
Subject C5: African-American Female, 20
Subject C6: Caucasian Female, 20
Subject C7: Hispanic Female, 21
Subject C8: Caucasian Female, 22
Subject C9: Caucasian Female, 23
Subject C10: Hispanic Female, 21
Subject C11: Caucasian Female, 25
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