

The tragedy of machismo media essay



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“ The tragedy of machismo is that a man is never quite man enough.”

(Greer, 1987) - This is a quote that could serve as a metaphor to describe how man can never be as “ ideal” as portrayed by advertisements. The modern portrayal of men in advertisements is the one in which they all appear to be ultra masculine, and researches have shown these images to have a negative impact on the self-esteem of men, especially “ boys and young men” (“ Constructed bodies, deconstructing ads: Sexism in advertising”, para 2). This could be explained by the fact that men is trying to pursue the “ norm”, of which they should be ultra masculine, leaving them under excessive emotional stress as they try to model after these stereotypically male attributes; or for some, especially feminine and androgynous men, to simply stay “ relevant” within their social circle and essentially, the society-as discussed in “ Is the Marlboro man the only alternative? The role of gender identity and self-construal salience in evaluations of male models”. (Gnoth and Brett, 2009)

The objectification of woman by modern advertising has been debated upon for many years since the start of the post-feminist era as women slowly gain their foot & “ power” in the society. As far as the apparent diminishment of advertising campaigns targeted to promote product & services through the use of women’s sexual appeal goes, there has also been a significant increase in the objectification of men in advertising. Unlike women who are shown as being excessively thin, men are shown as being over muscular and athletic. A 2002 study by the University of Wisconsin suggests that this “ new focus on fit and muscled male bodies is causing men the same anxiety

and personal insecurity” that women have been feeling for years. (“Masculinity and Advertising”, 2010)

In the United Kingdom, one of the very worrying causes of death among men is suicide, which stands at a proportion of 1 out of 100 deaths. It is postulated by Mulholland (2010) that depression is one of the main causes of suicide, which main cause is poor self-esteem.

Self-esteem is a concept that can “ only be measured by self-report”. (Frost and McKelvie, 2004) It is measured by how much people value themselves and how worthy they feel their beings are. Poor self-esteem, therefore, occurs in people whose self-values or self-priorities are not met. So, where do these values and priorities come about? Why is value placed on certain things as opposed to other things? Several reasons that could have influenced how and what values and priorities people, mainly men, are adopted come to mind: Advertisements, social and cultural trends and the perception of men by the opposite sex. All factors: Advertisements, social and cultural trends and women’s perception of men should be considered equally and not be discounted in any way.

Hence, this paper shall seek to prove that the extent to which that modern advertising is negatively affecting men’s self esteem is larger than the other factors.

Advertisements vs Women’s Perception of Men

A quote by Ray Lewis, a professional football player featured in a viral television commercial for Old Spice, from the television commercial “ Old Spice | The Man Your Man Could Smell Like” goes:

“ Hello, ladies, look at your man, now back to me, now back at your man, now back to me. Sadly, he isn’t me, but if he stopped using ladies scented body wash and switched to Old Spice, he could smell like he’s me.”

This particular television commercial (“ Old Spice | The Man Your Man Could Smell Like”, 2010) was posted onto YouTube, a video sharing website, and has garnered almost 31 million views, 37 thousand comments, 114 video responses and umpteen reposts by other YouTube channels since its release in February, 2010. These staggering figures were also reflected in their sales figure: a 106% increase in sales (“ Old Spice Campaign Smells Like a Sales Success, Too”, 2010) within 4 months of the start of the marketing campaign, “ Smell Like A Man, Man”.

The videos in this campaign, which seem to be targeted mostly at women, all feature a hunky man promoting the Old Spice products while reading a script which humorously brings across the point that no man is like him; no man can ever be like him; and the closest you can get to be ‘ like’ him is to smell like him. Judging by the fact that Old Spice had chosen women as the main target audience for their marketing campaign—which they should have done extensive research to determine—it can be inferred that women’s perception of men, or particularly “ her” man, has great power in deeply affecting men, influencing them in their decision making; in this context, the kind of “ smell”

they use. This inference can also be further proven by the actual increase in sales of the Old Spice products.

However, to conclude that it is actually the women's perception of men that is affecting how men view themselves is a very narrow-minded act because the images displayed explicitly to the public through the form of advertisements are what are influencing women's perception of men. Hence, it can be concluded that advertising is and takes precedence and relevance over women's perception of men in lowering men's self-esteem.

Next, this paper will explore this question: Is modern advertising following social and cultural trends, or is it going ahead of them?

Advertisements vs Social/Cultural Trends

Advertisements have always been known to be able to cause an impact, fulfilling their purpose to influence, urge and compel the public to purchase or engage the goods and services they are endorsing. In this context, it is no doubt that by doing so, they are also influencing the way people think about which are “popular” products or services and which are not, albeit subconsciously. However, what are the things that “inspire” advertisers in the way they advertise their products? Do they safely follow social conventions or do they actually set the standards?

While it is easy to argue that since the sole purpose of advertisements is to persuade people to buy or engage goods and services, advertisements must surely conform to social standards; however, the possibility of it happening in reverse also deserves consideration. The following example presents evidence that supports the statement that advertising does go ahead of social trends; however isolated an example it is.

In an interview conducted by CNN with Donatella Versace (“ Donatella Versace, CNN Interview, Part 1/3”, 2009), designer for fashion powerhouse, Versace, it was mentioned that Versace was the first ever luxury brand to have entered China. Before 1979, the year China introduced Versace into its market, the idea of a luxurious lifestyle was not widespread, partly due to the then still low living standards. However, over the years, it was the upbeat advertising of the luxury goods & lifestyle that started the notion of “ living life luxuriously”. Since then, China has surpassed the United States of America to become the second-largest luxury market in 2009 (“ Luxury Brands in China”, 2010). China is also set to become the second largest consumer of luxury by 2015 (“ China Luxury”, 2007).

The above-discussed point has proven that advertising and social trends both influence each other in a way or another. They are also factors that have in one way or another negatively affected men’s self esteem. However, if we were to consider the extent to which has more direct effect on lowering men’s self esteem, it will be advertising, since the visual representation in the form of images is straightforward and clear, unlike social trends, which sometimes can be unobvious, leading men to be oblivious about their existence.

The Importance of Context

When discussing the effect that modern advertising has on men’s self-esteem, the context of the circumstances also has to be considered in depth. Across time and space, the set of priorities of men changes and is different. Therefore, we can assert that advertisements may not actually affect men’s

self-esteem as images portrayed by advertisements at a present time or place may not be what they desire to emulate or copy.

For example, in the early to mid 20th century China, value might be put on people who had good martial arts skills because in those days, that was one of the few things people associate success with. However, nowadays, value seems to be put on wealthy people with social stature because of the change in what people associate success with—from life skills, or skills in general, to economic wealth. In addition, since martial arts originated from Asia, Westerners may lack familiarity to it and find it hard to relate to it, even though they are living in the same era. Hence, if an advertisement featuring a martial arts master were to be shown to the men of today, the effect of this advertisement on their self-esteem might actually be minimal to none.

It might be true that the context in which advertisements are being displayed for public view and what they are actually about might not be applicable to some people due to the differences in each individual's set of values and priorities, but without factoring in external factors such as globalization, it will be unfair to come to the conclusion that advertisements have little to do with the lowering of self-esteem of men.

With globalization, and the rise of computers and the Internet, the myriad of pages, websites and even programs are tools that have been connecting people, communities and even nations together. The exposure to advertisements online is abundant since usually, one of the key revenues for web and program developers is the endorsement of products through advertisements on their web pages and programs. The convenience and high

accessibility of the Internet has enabled companies to broaden their customer market, and in the same way also helped expose people to a huge and limitless array of advertisements. Under the influence of these advertisements, which include references from both the present, past, and also all around the world, people start to learn more about the cultures of others, past and present. By accumulating more real world knowledge over time, advertisements will now be more relatable and relevant. Hence, advertising will, again, present the risks of lowering men's self esteem.

Conclusion

All in all, although the social and cultural trends and also factors such as the women's perception of men have in a way or another contributed to the negative change in the way men view themselves, they are in fact caused by the extensive exposure to advertisements that have been making use of the objectification of men to sell their goods and services. Therefore, it is with huge certainty that I conclude that advertisements is to a large extent the main cause of the decreasing self-esteem of men.