

Selling Masculinity: The Perpetuation of Fragile Masculinity in Advertising

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Abstract: *In the United States, advertising companies use techniques that involve playing into the insecurities of men to sell their products. This creates a culture of fragile masculinity that leads to destructive results, like the high rates of suicide amongst men and domestic violence against women. Advertising companies target vulnerabilities in men to make them feel as if they must protect their masculinity, which creates destructive behaviors that perpetuate fragile masculinity on a public and personal level. Research was conducted by analyzing and breaking down traits of fragile masculinity present in advertisements to better link them to examples of how these traits contribute to real-life consequences. The research led to the conclusion that fragile masculinity does have destructive results on two levels. On a public level, it was found that advertisements led to the perpetuation of violence in school shootings and in violence against women. On a private level, advertisements perpetuated harmful self-images of men that led to mental health concerns and the loss of healthy masculinity. Advertising companies should aim to portray healthy masculinity that does not show violence as masculine, does not objectify women, and supports men seeking mental health resources. This research aims to bring attention and explanation to how advertisements can contribute to fragile masculinity.*

Keywords: masculinity, advertisement, gender, culture

In 2012, the United States faced the fourth-deadliest mass shooting in history when 20-year-old Adam Lanza shot and killed 20 children and seven adults during the Sandy Hook shooting. Through the heartbreak and trauma, the families of the deceased and survivors of the shooting sought legal action against gun manufacturers and gun legislation. A major company targeted by these legal actions was Remington, a gun manufacturing brand whose advertising and video game campaigns are known to target “troubled men” and promote violence (Bell-

ware). One of their most controversial advertisements is a picture of a Bushmaster rifle, which has been seen in violent video games, with the words “consider your man card reissued” written at the bottom (Rojas et al.) The families of the victims turned to the court to file suit against Remington, whose AR-15-style rifle was used in the massacre, claiming that Remington’s advertising campaign for its line of AR-15s “tapped into anxieties of masculinity” and pushed the shooter to go through with the violent crime (Bellware). In February of 2022, Remington paid out a settlement of \$73 million to the families of the Sandy Hook shooting victims (Rojas et al.). The Remington lawsuit is a prime example of the catastrophic repercussions that result when companies target masculinity, but they are not the only corporation to capitalize on masculine vulnerability (Bellware).

From beer to bath products, advertising companies have targeted and portrayed “pervasive cultural ideas” about “dreams and wishes of better lives” for as long as they have been around to attempt to engage the largest consumption group possible (Knudsen and Anderson 64). Owing to this, they have created ads that feed off the “experience of inadequacy” their consumers feel (Knudsen and Anderson 64). These ads strongly suggest that people can overcome their personal shortcomings by purchasing specific products. This destructive, inadequacy-driven consumerism feeds into fragile masculinity.

Fragile, or toxic, masculinity is defined by Terry Kupers as a “constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence” (714). This concept largely comes from generations of men who were raised in shame for feeling any emotion except for anger. According to this theory, since men have been taught that to be a man, they must only express anger, they may feel threatened by any comparison to minority groups that reflect the opposite of masculinity, like women or the LGBTQ community. Discriminatory and misogynistic actions by men mark some of the main characteristics of fragile masculinity.

With the recent revival of fragile masculinity, the ads that target masculinity have increased. Fragile masculinity has become a driving force of aggression among men. An understanding of how advertisements and culture portray masculinity helps mitigate the effects of toxic stereotypes and the encouragement of violent manliness. This essay employs a cultural lens to study two main levels at which fragile masculinity can be observed. The first section focuses on a public level of results, showcasing how fragile masculinity may become destructive and be expressed in a public way, as in the Sandy Hook shooting. Fragile masculinity also manifests dangerously in predatory behavior and the “sexual and domestic violence committed by men,” which usually happens behind closed doors (Waling 366). The second section focuses on the manner in which toxic masculinity perpetuates harm for people of all genders. Fragile masculinity discourages men from being vulnerable and encourages them to suppress their emotions, “leading to emotional and mental health issues such as depression and anxiety” (Waling 366). Companies target vulnerabilities in men to make them feel as if they must defend their masculinity, which creates destructive behaviors that perpetuate fragile masculinity on a public and personal level.

Fragile Masculinity and Its Public Destructiveness

Fragile masculinity is made up of traits that are “socially destructive, such as misogyny, homophobia, greed, and violent domination” (Kupers 714). On a public level, this manifests in traits that are presented in public settings or that are easy to spot, for example, the “readiness to resort to violence and the stigmatization and subjugation of women, gays, and men who exhibit feminine characteristics” (Kupers 717). In a study, Kupers analyzes mental health in men’s prisons and how toxic masculinity is a contributing factor not only to the resistance to treatment but also to the violence that happens in these facilities. Kupers describes fragile masculinity as looking like an in-

dividual who does not “display weakness of any kind, does not display emotions other than anger, does not depend on anyone, is never vulnerable, does not snitch, does not cooperate with the authorities, and suffers pain in silence” (Kupers 718). These traits can lead to public outbursts, fights between prisoners and staff, and a greater urge to turn to violence instead of simply walking away. Kupers’ research shows how the need to be a dominant male inside of prisons can escalate fragile masculinity and force men to turn to their primitive nature of being the “alpha male.” These public outbursts of violence are also catalyzed by years of seeing toxic masculine traits in men around them, on television, and on social media.

The Sandy Hook shooting is one extreme instance of public violence that resulted from fragile masculinity, providing an example of how media can affect the brains of youth. The gun company “targeted [...] those who want to appear more intimidating, more powerful and more masculine though their use of their AR-15s” like Lanza, who showed serious violent emotions toward women (Bellware). Found among Lanza’s records was a piece he had written about the “inherent selfishness of women,” showing his aggressive feelings towards women (Farr 85). Lanza’s main target in the shooting was his mother, against whom he held violent feelings. In the case of this shooting, a young man chose to be violent towards his mother and the children at the school because he saw advertisements that made him feel that he was not a man unless he used force. Another Bushmaster advertisement is portrayed in their catalog with a picture of their gun and the slogan “control your destiny” written on the top (Violence Policy Center). The use of the Remington gun advertisements provided Lanza a way to assure his masculinity and an answer for resolving conflict with his mother. Research suggests that “advertising [...] has either constructed or manipulated and spread the false need into the lifestyle of young people,” meaning the false need to “appear like the figure in the picture” (Sarwono and Fayardi 5). The

targeting of younger, more susceptible audiences can be destructive because it greatly impacts young developing minds. The repression of emotions caused by insecure masculinity can also lead to such violent results. Harrington suggests that “emotionally absent fathers [were] likely a factor in the Columbine shootings,” showing that these violent actions are not a one-time happening and are truly ingrained in the violence of fragile masculinity (4). Research finds that this is because men who commit vicious crimes are “subconsciously motivated by a desire to escape and retaliate against gendered shame and humiliation” (Joseph and Black 489). These toxic traits are seen in the way politicians, actors, reporters, and people in positions of power talk about and direct themselves toward women. One of the most prominent examples of this is the 2016 presidential election, in which political parties played into the destructive traits of masculinity.

The Lincoln Project, a political action committee founded by Republicans to hold others accountable, retaliated against a sexist comment made by President Donald Trump by releasing an advertisement that made comments directed at his masculinity. Instead of calling Trump out for his rude language towards women, they released a commercial attacking his manhood. “We know. It’s different now. You’re tired. It’s hard to keep your ‘ratings up’” the commercial stated, making a sexual suggestion about Trump (“Ratings”). This ad campaign, while innocuous at first glance, implied that it was okay to poke fun at and belittle men. This kind of public advertising is harmful as it perpetuates a cycle of fragile masculinity and the need to prove their manhood from the victim. President Donald Trump was often a perpetrator of toxic masculine traits, referring to women by derogatory terms and “talk[ing] about committing sexual assault as ‘locker room talk’” (Kurtzleben). His campaign capitalized on fragile masculinity and the degradation of women as well as the demasculinization of other men, “saying they are ‘cryin’ or ‘litttle’ or ‘low-energy,’ whereas he often insults wom-

en's looks or casts them as hysterical" (Kurtzleben). The cycle of fragile masculinity begins with men being made to feel vulnerable through advertisements, campaigns, and other people, and leads to retaliation and violence. In the case of Trump, the ridicule of his abilities did not stop him from perpetuating sexism but instead encouraged it. Whether it is a public figure or a young man who feels called out by an advertisement, men perpetuate the cycle by retaliating against the presentation of their vulnerabilities.

Fragile masculinity also leads to violence against minority groups. This happens when advertisements "depict violent behavior towards both men and women as natural, socially-rewarded, masculine behavior" (Vokey 47). One Dolce and Gabbana clothing advertisement portrays a young woman on the ground, clothed in a tightly fitted dress. A shirtless man is positioned over her, and three other men surround her, staring at her body. (Duncan). The advertisement received backlash for its depiction of what looks like a gang rape. Examples like this show how advertising can normalize sexual and domestic abuse towards women. In a study conducted by Lauren Joseph and Pamela Black on clients of sex workers, they found that men whose answers showed "insecure [...] masculine identities" were more likely to "believe in rape myths and to have committed sexual assault in the past" (499). Essentially, men who showed signs of fragile masculinity were more likely to justify and commit rape. Joseph and Black find that "men who feel uncomfortable around women, unattractive to women, and rejected by women [...] pose a greater threat to women, based on their reported support for rape myths and past commission of sexual assault against women" (488). This study justifies how advertisements that depict violence as normal can have destructive effects. When companies pose domination and objectification of women as a way to regain their manliness, they in turn risk women's lives. Many men who commit sexual assault may believe their relationships to be normal, when truly, they have

turned to violent masculinity. The violence has been quantified: 1.2 million women experienced domestic violence in 2016, and “two women a week are killed as a result of domestic violence” (Bola 24). As of 2023, the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence finds that one in four women are victims of abuse from their partners (“Statistics”).

Furthermore, stereotypes depicted in advertising can be damaging “when they lead to expectations about one social category over another or restrict opportunities for one social category” (Grau and Zotos). Unrealistic representations of women in advertisements create violent repercussions as men consume and expect these representations to be the norm. Research finds “men are likely to come away from reading their magazines with traditional identities reinforced,” which includes seeing women as submissive and as sexual objects (Gentry and Harrison). This is particularly dangerous when considering how women’s autonomy may be viewed by men whose identities “are structured by themes of differentiation [and] separation” (Gentry and Harrison). Not only do advertisements pose women as objects and set unrealistic standards for women that men expect, but it also reinforces the notion that women are to be subservient to men. This restricts the opportunities of women as they struggle to move past these stereotypes while facing perpetual threats of harm or violence from men.

Fragile Masculinity and Its Personal Destructiveness

A report from the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention finds that “86% of all adolescent suicides are committed by boys” and “suicide rates among US men aged 25 to 34 were double those in 1980” (Curtin). This section on personal destructiveness focuses on how fragile masculinity harms both emotional and mental health of men themselves. A key reason for this is the masculine stigmatization of getting help as a sign of weakness. In his book *Mask Off*, author J.J. Bola explores what it means to be a man and how “aggression, vio-

lence and mental health are interrelated”(31). Bola shares his personal narrative and confesses to having gone through bouts of depression where he did not know how to react or how to speak out, describing the pain he was going through as not only physical, but also emotional. He specifically calls out the media for suggesting “that men should not talk about their feelings, that men should suffer emotionally and mentally in silence” (Bola 32). Bola provides strong examples for how toxic masculinity can impact men’s mental health and their ability to ask for help. Advertisements “exploit men’s feeling(s) of not living up to masculine ideals, and of not being strong, tough, or violent enough” to promote their products with no regard for how this affects the way men view themselves (Vokey 47). Research also finds that these noxious representations of masculinity that men are subjected to “forces them into confined roles, dampens their emotions, [...] distorts their self-perception, and dooms them to living in fear of not living up to the masculine ideal” (Gentry and Harrison).

The way companies represent men and masculinity plays a substantial role in how men view themselves. This is especially the case in younger crowds because “[a]dolescence and young adulthood are believed to represent developmental periods when hyper-masculine behavior is most likely to be enacted” (Vokey 51). Advertisements can be harmful because they repeatedly present toxic views of what a man should look and act like. Many advertisements will use “intentionally excessive displays of masculinity” to convince men to buy products that they might not otherwise out of fear of being seen as less of a man (Barber and Bridges 43). For example, Old Spice began rebranding in 2008 to gear its products toward younger audiences. They did this by “offer[ing] young men something they are presumably lacking—manhood—embodied by the cowboy, the biker, and the lumberjack” redefining masculinity from “steady paychecks to sudsy products” (Barber and Bridges 41). By presenting these manly figures using their soap, Old Spice has changed how men

view body soap from something that was once seen as feminine to a masculine product, showing how easily advertisements can change a consumer's point of view. The sway that ads can have is increasingly dangerous when used to promote unrealistic views of what a man should be because it makes average men question their masculinity and results in fragility.

These displays of masculinity are toxic as they create a representation of what a man should be that is far from attainable for the average man. In a study about advertisements displayed in *Flex* magazine, it was found that there were three predominant themes: "(a) positioning of the reader as if they lacked power and had no control in life (43.1%); (b) the promise of transformation of power and control over the reader's life situation through turning the reader's skinny, small, and feminine body into a large, muscular body (64.8%); and (c) representing the muscular body as a sign of dominant masculinity, that real men are muscular men (70.6%)" (Vokey 45). The study finds that these common themes may be used by advertising companies to push the inadequacies that men feel. These ads send the message that "[b]y buying the product, readers will ultimately gain control over their life and reconstruct their self-identity. Essentially, the product will turn them into men" (Vokey 45). By making the watcher feel shame and self-doubt, these advertisements sell the idea of toxic masculinity as an answer to their shortcomings. This can be emotionally taxing for men as they might see themselves as less of a man for not buying the advertised product. This form of advertisement that preys on the weaknesses of men may lead men to see "emotional distress as shameful and, consequently, to hide their symptoms from others," which leads to feelings of isolation and self-doubt and contributes to the high suicide rate among men (Addis and Cohane 638).

Education and Prevention

The reality of fragile masculinity is becoming more prominent in the U.S., but so is the growing number of solutions to

the destructiveness it causes. The first step is prevention of these toxic traits by calling attention to and encouraging companies to change their advertising techniques. For example, the Gillette commercial "The Best Men Can Be" depicts several scenes of toxic masculinity and follows with scenes of men actively stopping actions of hyper-masculinity. The 2019 commercial questions what it means to be a man as Gillette calls out "men [for] being representatives of toxic masculinity." In the ad, different men are shown looking at their reflection in the mirror while "a chorus of voices presents problems of bullying, sexual harassment and #metoo," leading to a final voice that asks "is this the best man can get" (Knudsen and Anderson 69). This is followed by a series of clips depicting harmful masculinity like "boys fighting, catcalling, a man groping a woman, mansplaining and a long line of men barbecuing saying 'boys will be boys'" followed by clips of other men interrupting the harmful behaviors (69). The ad ends with a banner that reads "IT'S ONLY BY CHALLENGING OURSELVES TO DO MORE THAT WE CAN GET CLOSER TO OUR BEST" (Knudsen and Anderson). The commercial takes one step in the right direction by calling out toxic masculinity and encouraging men to do better at mitigating it, but now these advertisements must avoid playing into fragile masculinity by portraying a different type of man (Petersen and Hvidtfelt). Showing men who are not afraid of behaviors that are typically coded feminine is the first step for younger generations to change their insular view of masculinity. Making men in advertisements more relatable to men who do not fit the portrayals of hyper masculinity will also help by not making men believe they have to buy a specific product to be manly. Advertisement companies must find new ways of appealing to men that do not play into their insecurities or encourage violence as a solution.

Another step that must be taken is the accessibility and normalization of mental health treatment for men. Media and consumers must work together to change the stigma around mental

health as “toxic masculinity makes mental health treatment very problematic” (Kupers 720). Educating young men on resources and how to ask for help is an important first step towards destigmatization. Advertisement companies can do their part by presenting treatment and the sharing of emotions as a positive element of masculinity. They must also avoid presenting men as “emotionally stoic, self-sufficient, and without significant mental health problems” as this creates the illusion that men must be free of mental health problems to be masculine (Addis and Cohane 641). Although it is hard to change the minds of men who are conditioned by generations of patriarchal messaging, portraying psychological treatment in a positive light will enforce its value to younger generations. Advertisements must aim not only to represent healthy masculine traits and role models, but also to avoid shaming men and belittling them to drum up consumerism. Redefining masculinity is not an easy feat, but it is necessary for eradicating fragile masculinity which can lead to further insecurity or even violence.

Conclusion

Advertising often needles the vulnerabilities of audiences to sell products. For men, one vulnerability is their masculinity, and advertising can render masculinity perpetually fragile and unstable. This can lead to destructive behaviors on a public and personal level, which harm not only men themselves but also those around them. The high rates of suicide among young men and the alarming number of cases of domestic abuse quantify how much damage toxic masculinity can and will continue to cause. The depiction of men in advertisements directly affects the way men view themselves; these effects can be combated by advertising companies’ discouraging hyper-masculinity and promoting healthy relationships with mental health treatment.

Although advertising has recently shifted to trying to call out toxic masculinity and stop the objectification of women, there is still progress to be made. As discussed earlier, the Gillette ad

“The Best Men Can Be” represents this as it calls out toxic masculinity by displaying and shaming men for hyper-masculine actions. This advertisement, along with several others, is part of the wave attempting to change the narrative of what it means to be a man. While heading in the right direction, advertisements must make a change to be more sensitive to their depictions of masculinity in order to mitigate the destructive effects that the singular ideal of fragile masculinity holds. The production of these advertisements can give hope to the rise of a new type of representation that is free of shaming and inclusive of healthy depictions of vulnerability, actions not ending in violence, and behaviors typically coded feminine. These advertisements can not only depict a world that men and women can hope to live in, but slowly create and develop future generations’ views of masculinity.

Note: This essay was originally composed in Professor Steven Berry’s AWR 201 class and revised for publication under the guidance of Dr. Sucheta Kanjilal.

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