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Is advertising a barrier to male movement toward gender change?

James Gentry
University of Nebraska, USA

Robert Harrison
Western Michigan University, USA

Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to investigate male (and father) role portrayals in advertising from a masculine theoretical perspective. We note that the traditional masculine hegemony in the US is still seen almost exclusively in television commercials, even at a time when masculine roles in society are changing rapidly. We summarize the literature on masculinity, noting its changing nature, and discuss the role of advertising in maintaining the status quo. We then present results from three content analyses of commercials during programs targeted to adult males, females, and children. Results suggest that portrayals of gender roles in commercials have not become more gender neutral. While women are being shown in less stereotypically traditional roles, male portrayals still reflect a very traditional masculine perspective. We conclude that male confusion concerning what masculine roles are expected of them is being exacerbated by their portrayals in commercials. Key Words • family roles • gender • masculine hegemony • masculinity

While the field of marketing has been somewhat slow in responding to the emergence of the feminist perspective, developments in this theoretical approach indicate growing attention in the discipline (Catterall et al., 2000; Stern, 1993). Men’s studies are theoretically rooted in critical and feminist theory. Critical theoretical perspectives are concerned with empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender (Fay, 1987). Like critical and feminist theory, the masculine theoretical perspective seeks out the voices marginalized by traditional forms of masculinity. Conventional thinking suggests that masculinity could never be marginalized because it lies in the center of power.
dynamics as men remain privileged in society, controlling most institutions known to ‘man.’ The nature of the masculine hegemony is such that even men who favor egalitarian perspectives are somewhat unaware of how deep male privilege runs globally throughout the fiber of most societies.

The idea of men’s studies is often considered ridiculous, a step backwards, a redundancy, and a threat to the progress women have made (Sommer, 2000). However, Gardiner (2002) notes that some men are being marginalized as well, as the culturally idealized form of masculine character, or hegemonic masculinity, harms them because it narrows their options, forces them into confined roles, dampens their emotions, inhibits their relationships with other men, precludes intimacy with children, limits their social consciousness, distorts their self-perception, and dooms them to living in fear of not living up to the masculine ideal.

We will investigate advertising presented to different segments (men, women, and children) through a critical masculine lens. Masculine perspective studies in marketing have largely been limited to a focus on the male body image in advertising (Harrison, 2008; Patterson and Elliott, 2002; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004). In research investigating social role depictions in advertising and in television programming, the discussion of masculine roles has often been a subtext to the larger discussion about women. This is logical, as female role portrayals have been in far greater need of change.

When middle-class women entered the workplace en masse in the US in the 1970s, gender roles became much more dynamic. Much of society’s focus was on improving the status of women in various domains, but some attention was also paid to the resultant change in the status of men. Pleck (1981) noted that men in all societies were being subjected to an unprecedented number of pressures due to social, economic, historical, and political change, resulting in serious male identity crises as men attempted to meet the many conflicting and contradictory demands made of them due to their male sex role. Holt and Thompson (2004) discuss some men’s attempts to use consumption to avoid the ‘emasculating’ occurring due to these changes. They promote a new definition of masculinity, which they label as the Man-of-Action Hero, after conducting interviews with informants who successfully handled the identity crises.

Some men, however, are having problems handling those crises. Lemon (1995) noted the mounting evidence of the declining physical and emotional health of men as supporting the contention of a crisis of masculinity. For example, 2004 suicide rates among US men aged 25 to 34 in 2001 were double those in 1980, and males now account for one in five cases of anorexia nervosa, up from one in ten in 1980 (Salzman et al., 2005: 189). Garcia (2008: 8) reports a study from the Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism in 2007 that found a population-wide decline in men’s testosterone levels over the past 20 years. Garcia (2008: 129) also cites a National Center for Disease Control and Prevention report that found that 86% of all adolescent suicides are committed by boys.

Numerous scholars have noted that males are facing tensions in the marketplace between conforming to social expectations about what it means to be a man and the desire to break away from the constraints of hegemonic masculinity through
consumption (Elliott and Elliott, 2005; Holt and Thompson, 2004; Kimmel and Tissier-Desbordes, 2000; Otnes and McGrath, 2001; Ourahmoune, 2009; Tuncay and Otnes, 2007). For example Ourahmoune (2009) discussed how male lingerie options in Paris have expanded to include thongs and g-strings, mainly targeted at metrosexual males, creating more complex ‘acceptability’ boundaries than the traditional boxer versus brief conundrum. Cultural change monitor Sarah Boumphrey (2007) suggests that cultural trends have advanced to the point that metrosexual behaviors will be seen as ‘normal’ by today’s young males as they mature.

There are multiple explanations possible for the changes being seen in society in the status of men but, as Lemon (1995: 62) noted, men today, more than ever before, are confused about what it means to be a man. Thompson (1996: 404) notes that this had indeed been an issue for some time as he refers to the ‘unsettled longstanding cultural conceptions of manhood and fatherhood.’ Thompson and Fletcher (2005) cite a Leo Burnett study finding that 61% of French men, 53% of Brazilian men, and 50% of American men say that expectations of men in society are unclear. Advertising’s role in creating this level of confusion may be quite influential. Lemon (1995: 63) pointed out that ‘while social, economic, historical and political change has rendered traditional male roles obsolete in some respects, the mass media … still propagate the old stereotypical roles for men and women. Men are thus confronted with contradictory and conflicting images of themselves.’ Garcia (2008: 114) described this phenomenon in a more damning fashion:

In an age where sex, power, and materialism rule, it’s not just men but masculinity itself that has become commoditized, packaged, and predigested for the masses. Lulled into complacency by Budweiser ads – and Budweiser itself – most men are all too happy to gorge on reassuring platitudes and pretend that the mindless violence and materialism engulfing their gender has nothing to do with them.

This confusion about ‘masculinity’ creates complexities for marketers as well. For example Avery (2008) discussed how the traditionally masculine brand icon Porsche encountered problems with its feminine brand extension, the Cayenne SUV. While Porsche’s promotional strategy attempted to androgenize the brand, male purchasers of the SUV were found to display hyper-masculine behaviors in order to avoid exclusion from the ‘Porsche in-group.’ Another example of marketer confusion was the original targeting of the microwave oven to men (Catterall and Maclaran, 2002: 415).

A specific context in which this confusion is encountered by male consumers was investigated by Harrison and his colleagues (Harrison and Gentry, 2007; Harrison et al., 2009) when they looked into the transitions that single fathers make to become truly involved parents (to ‘mother’ in Risman’s [1986] terms). A major difficulty in the reprioritizations of their lives was the need to accept a modified ‘masculine’ self-identity, in order to become a caring parent. This redefinition of their masculinities was made more problematic by advertising that seemingly embeds the status quo in terms of traditional gender norms. Most informants were too time-pressured to watch much television, but those that did were generally offended
by the male (and especially father) portrayals which they saw. Increasingly, men are facing the ‘juggling lifestyles’ discussed by Thompson (1996), but with a far weaker background in terms of family responsibilities, as well as facing advertising emphasizing traditional roles often inconsistent with current expectations.

**Masculinity in the household**

West and Zimmerman (1987: 169) define ‘gender’ as the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category. The definition implies that existing social norms tend to reinforce status differences between the sexes, which fits within Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony. ‘Hegemony’ describes the ability of the dominant social group to obtain consent from those being subjugated; most often the subjugated can be led to consent to their own oppression. David and Brannon (1976) noted that recorded history is almost literally His-story.

Prinsloo (2006) notes that the hegemonic frame tends to constitute a ‘good’ father as the responsible breadwinner/provider and protector. Similarly, Bernard (1981) noted that gender identity for men has traditionally been associated with the competitive rationality of work rather than the intimate emotionality of family. Thus, masculine gender identity has been tied to the family generally only in terms of how well a man provides for his family.

The 1980s, with the mass entry of middle-class women into the workplace, saw academic controversy in terms of what roles fathers should play. Some scholars, aided by portrayals of a more caring, sensitive father in television programs, made optimistic projections of changing gender roles. Ferber and Birnbaum (1980: 269) suggested that since ‘there is a diminishing utility for professional and housework, spouses are likely to find a more balanced sharing of housework beneficial, and the husband may enjoy getting to know the children better.’ Sussman (1993: 312) predicted that changes within the family would not revert to the old superordinate/subordinate pattern, but rather that equity and sharing would grow in both prevalence and incidence in the coming years. Pleck (1987: 93) suggested that a new image, summed up in the term ‘the new father’, was clearly on the rise in print and broadcast media. The new father differed from older images of involved fatherhood in several key respects: he was present at the birth; he was involved with his children as infants, not just when they were older; he participated in the actual day-to-day work of child care, and not just play; he was involved with his daughters as much as his sons. To some extent, this optimistic perspective of father parenting may have been based on domestic comedies on television (Cantor, 1990), which showed women as more independent than previously and fathers as more caring and more domesticated. The message presented was that middle-class men are kind, gentle, loving, just, and supportive husbands and fathers and therefore worth getting and keeping. Working-class men were more likely to be portrayed as buffoons, but at least they were easily manageable. Wife battering and child abuse did not occur, and divorce was rarely observed (Cantor, 1990). Like many
television portrayals, these family ones in the late 1980s and early 1990s did not represent the reality of American lifestyles.

Evidence (Gardyn, 2000) from the 1990s indicates that fathers spent more time with their children than previous fathers had, but also that the time was spent in play and not the type of activities expected of mothers. There is little evidence that fathers in the 1990s and since have taken over traditionally ‘female’ household roles. Further, some scholars in this time period were adamant that men would not become nurturing fathers. Day and Mackey (1989: 402) proposed that ‘the roles of father and mother are complementary rather than interchangeable and thus that the standards of evaluating the role performance of fathers and mothers should be different.’ Pruett (1993: 46) warned men against trying to be like mothers:

Obviously, fathers are not mothers – never will be and shouldn’t try … the mother-mimic tactic soon falters. It feels wrong at all levels, because it is. The child doesn’t expect it, and the father can’t do it … Fathering is not mothering any more than mothering is ever fathering.

As one mother in Russell’s (1986) study noted, ‘I am still the Executive Director of children.’ No quick changes took place in this role, as Maume and Mullin (1993) found that 94% of mothers said that they made all or most of the childcare arrangements. Coltrane (2000) concluded that research in the area of household duties has almost invariably assumed that women will take the manager role, with men occasionally serving as their helpers. This was true even with childcare, the household duty found to be the most enjoyable by most fathers. Thompson’s (1996) informants felt that, even when they received help from their spouses and children, the domestic responsibilities remained their own.

Therefore, men’s roles as fathers are often discussed in terms of the first three stages of Russell’s (1986) developmental model (i.e. moral teacher, breadwinner, and sex-role model), but seldom in terms of the fourth stage – the nurturing father. It has been repeatedly noted that while fathers saw themselves as being involved in their children’s lives, their contributions were not hands-on as were those by mothers; rather they involved playfulness, the transmission of life skills, and conversational dominance (Lareau, 2000). Lareau also noted that most fathers, unlike mothers, did not know the names of their children’s friends.

In part, the mixed representation of males (and fathers) is due to the very different images of fathers being seen by women and by men. Frequent research has found that the portrayal of men in male media is quite different from that shown in female media (Barthel, 1992; Coltrane and Allan, 1994; Coltrane and Messineo, 2000; Kaufman, 1999; Kervin, 1990; Prinsloo, 2006; Sabo and Jansen, 1992; Wenner, 1991). More specifically, Cantor (1990) found that only a small portion of the current barrage of television images contains positive models of men as nurturing parents, and even those provide very mixed blessings about fathering. Thus, despite the illusion of a nurturing, helpful father that got much air play (in programming targeted at women and children), research has consistently indicated that husbands are not doing much more housework than they ever did (although they are on a relative basis, as wives are doing much less; Robinson and Godbey, 1997).
Types of masculinity

Before investigating differences in gender portrayals across commercials targeted to different segments, we are going to summarize the literature on masculinity, as the primary finding of Harrison and Gentry’s (2007) study of single fathers is their need to redefine their masculinity as they become involved parents. Traditionally (or at least in the 20th century), only one form of masculinity was conceived; this masculinity is non-feminine (or anti-feminine), independent, heterosexual (or ‘anti-homosexual’), tough, and takes risks. However, what’s ‘male’ has varied, shifting over time from the ‘genteel patriarch’ and ‘heroic artisan’ of the 18th and 19th centuries, figures who did not compete with each other, to the ‘marketplace man’ of the later 19th and 20th centuries who competed directly with other men (Kimmel, 1996, 1997). Stearns (1994) described the transition from the 19th to 20th centuries as from passionate, Victorian era masculinity to the impersonal but friendly, emotionally inexpressive masculinity of today.

David and Brannon (1976) identified four main components of such masculine expectations: the big wheel (a preoccupation with competition, achievement, and success); the sturdy oak (an emphasis on physical toughness and emotional stoicism); no sissy stuff (homophobia and an avoidance of all things feminine); and give’em hell (an emphasis on being aggressive and forceful). Similarly, Deaux and Major (1987) noted that any behavior that can be perceived as feminine in a given context constitutes a role violation for heterosexual men. For example Campbell (1997) noted that for some men at least, public expression of distaste for shopping is seen as a confirmation of their manhood. Similarly, Thompson (1996) suggested that male identities are structured by themes of differentiation, separation, and autonomy, whereas female identities are structured by themes of identification, connectedness, and forming relationships. Males are predisposed toward a self-focused and autonomy-driven orientation.

More recently, Smiler (2004) noted that sociologists (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 1997; Messner, 1992) have categorized many different models of masculinity, including Average Joe, Business Man, Jock, Nerd, Player, Rebel, Sensitive New Age Guy, and Tough Guy. A more parsimonious perspective was provided by Wetherell and Edley (1999), who listed three categories: Heroic, Ordinary, and Rebellious. The Heroic category would seem to resonate with such positionings in consumer research as the Mountain Man (Belk and Costa, 1998) and the Man-of-Action Hero (Holt and Thompson, 2004), although Holt and Thompson positioned this category as a combination of the best of the Breadwinner (which we associate with Wetherell and Edley’s Ordinary category) and Rebel categories. The Ordinary category positions self as normal, moderate, or average. It represents a disavowal of the imaginary position of the celebrated and exalted male hero, but very much incorporates the protector and provider notions common to nearly all traditional perspectives of masculinity. The Rebel category looks superficially like resistance to hegemonic masculinity. These men define themselves in terms of their unconventionality, and the imaginary position involves the flaunting of social expectations. The Harley Biker (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), seek-
ing liberation from any kind of confinement, would fit within this category.

Within consumer research, though, Patterson and Elliott (2002) did discuss the ‘new man,’ a sensitive soul in touch with his feminine side. This less traditional masculinity allowed men to join in the feminine worlds of parenthood and housekeeping and yet seemingly retain the power of masculinity (Segal, 1993). Other recently minted labels for new types of masculinity include ‘telemasculinity’ (aggression is experienced through ‘male toys’ such as video games; Fiske, 1987; Tuncay and Otnes, 2007); ‘buddydom’ (celebration of masculinity through relationships with men, just as between Australian mates or the bonding found by Belk and Costa (1998) with informants participating in enactments of the Mountain Men experience; Beynon, 2002; Tuncay and Otnes, 2007); and ‘metrosexuality’ (Ourahmoune and Nyeck, 2008; Simpson, 1994).

To some extent, the point raised by Boumphrey (2007) earlier reflects a separation in ‘masculinities’ across generations, as she suggested that young males are growing up to see metrosexuality as ‘normal.’ Older males rely on the ‘unmarked’ nature of hegemonic masculinity to generate power (Kaiser et al., 2008) or, as Ostberg (2009: 12) described it in terms of apparel, on ‘an eternal style based in a taken for granted stance toward clothing,’ Kaiser et al. (2008) noted the challenge facing clothing stores in providing apparel for the older generation that allows them to look good while not standing out, but yet appealing to the younger generation of males who are not driven by a desire to ‘fit in.’

Harrison et al. (2009) found that many of their single-father informants discussed a less traditional type of masculinity after reaching the level of involved parent. But the transition to this type of masculinity was painful, as might be expected. Russell (1986: 45) noted that cultured stereotypes of masculinity do not include nurturing and care-giving behavior, and Eisler and Skidmore (1987: 124) hypothesized that ‘men will experience stress when they judge themselves unable to cope with the imperatives of the male role or when a situation is viewed as requiring “unmanly” or “feminine” behavior.’

As noted earlier, the social changes in gender norms in developed societies are creating confusion as to how males are to do gender. Salzman et al. (2005: 147) noted that:

society is asking men to become sensitive and emotional, but only when it is convenient, and only to a certain vaguely defined point. If teenage boys open up and assume more ‘girlish’ traits, they are going to be called gay; if they stay strong and silent, exhibiting traditionally masculine traits, they are accused of being antisocial or even violent.

Seidler (2006: 26) observed that boys’ confusion may be due in part to their growing up and taking their superiority for granted. Seeing that their sisters are treated differently, they take for granted their advantages as men. This can help to sustain rigid forms of masculinity which young men may feel they continually have to defend. Sometimes trapped into feeling they are not ‘man enough,’ they may feel that it is through risky behavior that they can affirm their masculinity. Thus, the world of men is changing, and some males are finding it very confusing.

This confusion carries over to the fatherhood role. Hill (2004: 9), citing Marian
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Salzman, argues that fatherhood is becoming a mild form of depression for the modern-day man, and that there is grey cloud hanging over it. Similarly, Holt and Thompson (2004: 427) note that Breadwinners are now readily being coded as ‘failed fathers,’ ‘sell outs, petty bureaucrats,’ ‘cowardly sycophants,’ or ‘broken men.’ The disappointment and feeling of failure is resulting in men shutting down emotionally because they no longer have the old central role in the family and don’t know what other role is available to them. Men reported feeling swamped by the multiple duties of work and home, with three out of four saying that they are not in control of their lives and one-third feeling desperate to reduce stress (Garcia, 2008). This sense of being overwhelmed reveals significant changes in the notion of male identity, and reflects the difficulties individuals experience in sustaining a sense of self and the risk of losing direction and feeling out of control.

Advertising’s role in supporting the status quo

As noted early in the paper, several critics argue that advertising perpetuates a very traditional male gender norm, despite much evidence that those norms are in a state of flux. At this point we want to investigate the interface of advertising and the family, noting the role played by advertising in the change (or lack thereof) in norms. What is the portrayal of men in commercials? The following review of the literature generates the ubiquitous response to most questions in the realm of marketing: ‘it depends.’ In this case, it depends on what kind of medium one is watching or reading. In general, if it is female-oriented, it is somewhat egalitarian. If it is male-oriented though, it depicts gender roles that we would like to think have been put behind us, as far, far more violence is observed than nurturance.

There is little question that media affect our perceptions of gender relations. Goffman (1979) noted that advertising picturing men and women educates the viewer about conventional modes of gender interaction and sex roles, a point made repeatedly since (Garst and Bodenhausen, 1997; Knill et al., 1981; Schroeder and Borgerson, 1998; Shields and Heinecken, 2002; Stern, 2003). The differential media representations of individuals influence the ways audience members perceive and react to members of the groups represented. These representations ‘regularly contribute to the social ‘knowledge’ media users cultivate about the ‘real world’ and the wide-range of individuals who live there’ (Gross, 1994: 144). Such assertions have been used primarily to protest the portrayal of women in commercials.

Literature in the 1970s found that women were portrayed in subservient roles, or in a ‘relatively unfavorable manner’ (McArthur and Resko, 1975: 209). Female central figures in commercials were more likely to be portrayed in a role defining them in terms of relationships to others (a spouse, parent, girlfriend, or housewife). Men were more likely to be portrayed in an independent role (a worker, professional, celebrity, or narrator/interviewer). Perloff et al. (1982: 265) concluded that ‘recent content studies have continued to find that women are underrepresented and stereotyped in television commercials.’ They reported that the National Advertising Review Board and the National Association of Broadcasters
had developed a checklist to see if advertisements were egalitarian; all items dealt with female status alone.

More recent literature has generally indicated that female role portrayals have become more favorable. For example Coltrane and Allan (1994) found that women’s symbolic roles in TV commercials have undergone much transformation in the past few decades. On the other hand, Kacen and Nelson (2002) found little change to have taken place in terms of positive female role portrayals. While there is little doubt but that women were demeaned through their portrayals in commercials, that has been rectified to some extent, at least in those commercials shown to target markets including women and children. But, as Wenner (1991: 405) noted in the ‘sanctum sanctorum of male beer-and-sport commercials,’ women occupy tangential and servile positions if they are represented at all.

Male roles in commercials and advertisements have changed very little over time, largely because ‘men’s roles in media have been tacitly viewed as unproblematic’ (Sabo and Jansen, 1992: 169). Wilson (1988) noted that most gender literature has dealt with a feminist perspective of seeking equality for women. The limited literature that has looked at male roles in commercials over time has found little change. Kervin (1990) looked at the 50-year advertising history of *Esquire*, and reported that the masculine stereotypes found in the 1930s were still in use five decades later. Thus, it appears that, while the advertising industry was sensitive to the portrayal of women in ‘more positive roles,’ there was little change in how men were portrayed. Kervin (1990) noted that the overtness of a threat to traditional masculinity was practically nonexistent. In fact, there is evidence that, if anything, the accusation that men are portrayed in violent roles (Esack, 1999) is truer in recent days. Coltrane and Allan (1994) found that the biggest change in male portrayal in commercials was in male aggressive roles (measured by displays of forceful, competitive, antagonistic, or possessive behavior). Only one in six men was shown in such roles in commercials in the 1950s, as against one in two in the 1980s. Coltrane and Allan (1994: 55) concluded that ‘images of autonomous and controlling men were, and still are, the norm for television commercials, and emotionally expressive or vulnerable men are still a rarity.’

More recently, men have begun to criticize their portrayals in advertising. Thompson and Fletcher (2005) reported that a Leo Burnett survey found that 74% of men globally (and 77% of the US sample) said that images of men in advertising were out of touch with reality. British writer Paul Fraser, cited in Salzman et al. (2005: 132), noted,

Advertising’s negative portrayal of men annoys me because it’s lazy. The idiot husband who doesn’t know how to wash his own clothes. The dishwasher that’s so simple, even a man can use it. This does not reflect most men. It’s out of date.

If we restrict male portrayals to those in a family context, we find far more limited research, as men are not commonly portrayed in the father role in commercials. Vigorito and Curry (1998: 135) argued that ‘men were frequently treated as if they had no gender, a fact that rendered their privileged position invisible.’ Esack (1999) criticizes the media more for the omission rather than the representation
of fathers, noting that articles, radio stories, or television programs on fatherhood are rare. Wilson (1988: 10) noted that ‘whilst fatherhood has a very long history, it boasts few historians.’ We argue that advertisements, especially those more likely to be seen by men, do not portray fathers accurately in terms of their current roles within the family. When the authors have asked their classes how many of them have fathers who cook better than their moms, at times nearly one-third of them respond positively. Such behavior is not seen in commercials. Schroeder and Zwick (2004: 33) described the typical male portrayal as the ‘hero shot’ – an ad containing an image of a lone man, conquering some territory, villain, or at least underarm odor. One of Salzman et al.’s (2005: 130) informants gave a quote similar to several provided by Harrison et al.’s (2009) informants: ‘not all men, but fathers are portrayed as bumbling boobs, totally clueless about their wives’ and kids’ lives, simply going to work and having nothing to do with anything substantive happening in the home.’ Very similar quotes were given in blogs responding to Cooper’s (2009) editorial about dads being dumb jocks in ads. Kaufman (1999: 456) noted that the image of the involved family man is rarely seen in commercials, and that the chance of seeing a father baking cookies is exceedingly small. Figure 1 portrays our representation of the interface of advertising and gender norms.

Thus, the male who has a non-traditional perspective of his masculinity (for instance many of the single fathers reported in Harrison et al. (2009)) may have trouble finding media representations of males pertinent to his status. Clark (1969) identified chronological stages of media representation of social groups in his study of media depictions of African Americans. In the first stage, non-recognition, the group simply does not appear. In the second stage, ridicule, the group is presented as buffoons. In the third stage, regulation, the group is presented in roles that pro-
tect the existing social order (e.g. police officers). In the final stage, respect, group members are presented in the complete range of roles that their members actually occupy in life. We will use this framework to evaluate the portrayals of men (and their father roles) in the commercials we view.

The studies

We investigate the portrayals of males in advertisements targeted to different segments. Many criticisms of poor portrayals of men in advertising, including those discussed early in the paper, appear to be based on casual observation. Thus, we make more systematic observations across target markets in order to investigate the validity of those criticisms.

Content analyses

In order to see if media portrayals of men, women, and children have changed, we content analyzed commercials targeted at the three groups. Content analysis is a research methodology that is often used to describe trends in communication content (Weber, 1985). First, we conducted a content analysis of commercials during sports programming during spring 2007. In all, 1392 commercials were viewed during the NBA and NHL playoffs and during Major League Baseball games, all assumed to have predominantly male audiences. The sports events were shown on Fox, TNT, ESPN, ABC, and NBC. The commercials were recorded and coded for a variety of phenomena, including violence, domestic roles, and family presentations. If a commercial aired more than once, each showing was coded, because this process accurately exemplifies cultural cultivation through repetitive images (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). In addition, this procedure adds stability to an analysis when content is coded more than once by the same coder (Weber, 1985). Both authors coded the advertisements used in the analysis and they agreed 90% of the time. Consistent with Schneider and Schneider (1979), disagreements among the codes were resolved via discussion and consensus.

A second content analysis was conducted during the winter of 2008, observing 200 commercials shown during afternoon television directed at the female market. An identical coding scheme was used in the first two studies, resulting in similar levels of coder agreement (90%). Channels viewed were CBS and ABC.

The third study dealt with advertising conducted toward children. Risman (1998) noted that a household is a ‘gender factory,’ but the consumer socialization literature has largely ignored advertising’s role in the learning of gender norms. For example the topic was not covered in John’s (1999) classic review of consumer socialization. In early spring 2008, we conducted a third content analysis of 225 commercials on children’s television (after school, Saturday morning, etc.) aired on Fox, CBS, and the KidsWB. The third study used a coding scheme that included representations of nurturing and violent behavior, the inclusion of parents (mothers and/or fathers), and the gender mix of kids. Similar coding procedures
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Table 1

Coding Table

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<tr>
<td>Medical issues</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>75</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1392</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

were used in all three studies, such as multiple-airing commercials coded individually and seeking inter-coder agreement through active dialogue. Through this dialogue, the authors developed summary themes to categorize the general natures of the commercials seen. Descriptive statistics from the three studies are shown in Table 1 and theme summaries are shown in Table 2.

Results of study one

Of the 1392 commercials observed during sports coverage, only two showed a man in an indoor-domestic role. Sixteen did show men in the traditional domestic role of Do-It-Yourselfer. Despite Patterson and Elliott’s (2002: 235) conclusion that consumption and shopping were deemed to be part of the feminized sphere of life and incompatible with masculinity, 13 commercials did show men shopping. However, they were either shopping for beer or auto parts. Meals and food were portrayed in 177 commercials, all in the context of dining out. Nearly 10% (118) showed men in violent roles. Over 100 ads showed men with family, but only seven with any kind of emotional ties to the children. Thus, in 2007, advertising clearly targeted at men, such as on sports programming, did not stress the nurturing father to any extent whatsoever.

Thus, men were not portrayed in positive fathering roles, nor were they shown handling domestic work. They ‘cook’ only in the sense they take the family out for dinner, most often for fast food, according to the commercials. Previous research has identified (as discussed in the literature review) the growing problem of men seeing advertising as a barrier to their transition to becoming involved parents.
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme Table</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Description</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Study 1: Theme – Stoic Macho Man</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoorsman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breadwinner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Study 1: Theme – Horse’s Ass</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undomesticated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

continues
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Representation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study 2</td>
<td><strong>Mother as healer</strong></td>
<td>Medicinal products. In a medical products ad, the mother is shown as procurer of pharmaceuticals for the entire family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 2</td>
<td><strong>Mother as cook</strong></td>
<td>Food for meals. In a food products ad, the discussion emphasizes the mother needs to be aware of healthy aspects of food and ease of preparation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 2</td>
<td><strong>Father as eater</strong></td>
<td>Man just shown eating with family. A food products ad shows the families contentment with their repast.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 2</td>
<td><strong>Father as inept</strong></td>
<td>Man hurts himself when doing chores. An advertisement for an emergency clinic shows dad screwing up and needing care.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 3</td>
<td><strong>Buffoon</strong></td>
<td>The father is the butt of the joke. In a fast food ad, the father locks himself and the family out of the house. 'Way to go, Dad.'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 3</td>
<td><strong>Invisible fathers</strong></td>
<td>In general and particularly in the home, fathers are unseen family members. In a toy ad, girls are shown playing with toys, dressing up their toys. A voice says, 'You can have your own [toy] birthday party, just ask your mom and go to the website.'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 3</td>
<td><strong>Heroes and villains</strong></td>
<td>Boys are brave heroes, who violently defeated villains. In a shoe ad, a boy is attacked by a monster. He then gets new shoes and becomes a hero to vanquish the monster.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 3</td>
<td><strong>Violent</strong></td>
<td>Boys are violent. In a food products ad, a boy turns into hungry monster and destroys the refrigerator. 'Only [food product] can tame the beast within you.'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 3</td>
<td><strong>Outside play</strong></td>
<td>Boys play together outdoors. Girls play together outdoors. Boys and girls play together outdoors. [Outdoors – Boys] In a food products ad, two boys get into a cartoon roller coaster and the voiceover says, 'The longer you chew the more you go (on the coaster ride).' [Outdoors – Girls] In a food products ad, girls playing sports together (basketball and soccer) they need more, get more energy with the food product. [Outdoors – Mixed] In a public service announcement, a boy is spitting melon seeds at his older sister who is sitting next to him reading a book outside ... he is spitting them one at a time. He pauses to reload a seed and she spits a dozen seeds at him at once. She smiles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 3</td>
<td><strong>Inside play</strong></td>
<td>Girls play together indoors. Boys and girls play together indoors. Boys do not play together indoors. [Indoors – Girls] Girls playing in the house feeding and taking care of toy children. [Indoors – Boys] N/A [Indoors – Mixed] In a toothbrush ad, a boy is bored while brushing his teeth; his sister comes in with toothbrush that plays music and she dances while brushing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This study further investigated how this happens, by critically viewing the advertisements that specifically target these men.

In sum, the results highlight two thematic representations of men in television advertisements: the stoically macho man and the horse’s ass. The stoically macho man is the embodiment of rugged masculinity. He is career-oriented and hard-working both in his home and in his work life. At home, he works outdoors, in the garage, on the lawn, and on cars. Family is important because he is responsible for providing both physical and financial security, to ensure his family’s safety. He gives his children a hug when they run to greet him when he comes home from work, but otherwise he is distant, having very little social connection with his children. He may show his love by calling his young daughter while on a business trip, but he is not at home taking responsibility for her.

The other representation type is that of the horse’s ass. In a Kodak advertisement the father in the family is literally replaced by a horse’s rear-end. The tongue-in-cheek attempt at humor is actually symbolic in that it is this representation that dominates many of the advertisements seen in this study. The horse’s ass is immature, incompetent, and everyone knows it. His employers know it, his wife knows it, his children know it. If it is his ‘turn’ to cook meals for the family, they know what to expect, i.e. take-out, delivery, or drive-through. If he contributes to household labor, accidents are expected and he is greeted by his family with a wry smile because they understand that his incompetence is partly their fault. Why would they expect dad to do anything right? The horse’s ass is destructive and violent when presented with any sort of dilemma. Even in play, a game of paper, rock, and scissors may result in an asinine response, wherein the man literally throws a rock at his opponent to solve his problem. He is not only a jackass, but a violent one.

In terms of Clark’s (1969) stage framework, father roles went largely unrecognized (stage one) while male roles in general were part of the second and third stages (i.e. ridicule and regulation). The ridiculing and hegemonic (regulation) images seen by men serve to maintain traditional perspectives that fail to provide any encouragement for men to perform traditionally atypical roles associated with alternative definitions of masculinity.

Results of study two

In the second content analysis of 200 afternoon commercials, a surprising number of commercials (75) dealt with medical issues. None of the commercials during the sports programming dealt with medical issues, so advertisers have clearly identified the mother as the family member in charge of health. Food was a frequent topic, with 33 commercials promoting food to be eaten at home and 22 promoting dining out. Again, all of the food-related sports commercials shown during the advertising targeting men focused on dining out. Seven afternoon commercials showed males shopping for groceries, compared to none (except for beer) among the commercials shown during sports coverage. Only two commercials showed violence, both of which showed a male being violent. At the same time, there were two commercials providing information on what women can do if there is violence
within the home. Only two commercials showed the father in a nurturing role with his children, but that still constituted a higher percentage than those in the sports commercials. One cannot conclude that men are shown as new age parents in daytime television commercials, but the roles are quite a bit different from what is shown in commercials targeted at men in terms of being less violent, and showing men eating at home and even shopping for food to be eaten at home.

The representation of men in afternoon commercials is one of a background figure. The mother is the healer and the provider of loving resources. In the commercials during the day, the mother is not shown in professional roles, whereas the father is shown relatively little. Dad can grocery shop, but apparently he does very little else around the house except eat. In terms of the Clark (1969) framework, the stages are much more fluid than they are distinct. Some representations approach the respect stage, while non-recognition and ridicule are also evident. The regulation stage is not the dominant one that it is in the sports commercials and, in fact, is not even prominent.

Results of study three

In the third content analysis of 225 commercials on children's television, only seven of the commercials showed fathers, three of them eating with family at McDonalds. One showed a father talking to his son about driving after drinking, but none of them showed the father in a nurturing role. At the same time, none showed the father in a ‘Bad Dad’ role. Twenty of the commercials showed mothers, nine in a nurturing role. None of the ‘nurturing’ commercials showed a male child.

We defined ‘action’ as including the presence of animation, fast music, speeding vehicles, etc. If the vehicles collided, we also classified it as ‘violent.’ Of the 56 commercials that included children and were action-oriented, five had girls only, 35 had boys only, and 16 showed both sexes. Of the 32 commercials including children that showed violence, two had only girls, two had boys and girls, and 28 had boys only. The traditional girl-nurturing stereotype appears to have lessened some, but the boy-violent stereotype is still very evident.

In sum, the children in the third study lived in a child-centered world without parents for the most part and without fathers almost entirely. For boys, it was an action-filled, violent, animated, video-game world where heroes emerged after vanquishing monsters and villains. Boys often played with girls in action games, but were not shown participating in nurturing activities. To that end, boys were not allowed in the house without being accompanied by a girl. Girls lived and played indoors with other girls, but boys did not play indoors with other boys. For girls, there was balance between nurturing and action scenes, which involved far less violence than the scenes with boys. Girls went camping and played sports (with both boys and girls), but were also shown indoors playing dress-up, baby care, and with dolls. In terms of Clark’s (1969) framework, the first stage of non-recognition of men (and fathers) dominated.
Results summary

The portrayal of gender in commercials in 2007 and 2008 does not appear to have improved greatly, despite a couple of decades of political correctness. Women are being shown in less stereotypically traditional roles, but male portrayals still reflect a very traditional masculine perspective, including the portrayals shown to boys.

Discussion

In this study, a masculine theoretic approach such as that highlighted by Kimmel and Desbordes (2000) was employed, emphasizing the specific focus on the topic of men, taking account of feminist and critical scholarship, understanding that men and masculinities are socially structured, produced, and reproduced, and seeing masculinity as varying across time. If scholars are to effectively challenge issues of gender roles in advertising, it is important to critically examine the discursive frameworks that shape our understanding of such topics. To leave masculine perspectives unstudied, leaves the male gender role neutralized, rendering it less permeable to change. Empirically, we found that the non-traditional male role was unseen by men, rendering it less permeable to change.

Clark’s (1969) framework for social group media representation offered a guide to understanding how representations progress and change over time. However, our data suggest that advertising representation is not a single process, but a multi-layered one. Our snapshot of gender role depictions highlights different stages of the representational process for different target segments, as the stages differed for each target audience. Unless the target market was clearly male, non-recognition is the dominant representation status for men.

These results again raise the issue that, while there may be television programs and commercials showing men in more egalitarian roles, men are not likely to see these representations. Vigorito and Curry (1998: 98) noted that men are likely to come away from reading their magazines with traditional identities reinforced, while women are likely to come away from reading their magazines with more nurturing visions of men in their minds. Given that gender roles in society itself are becoming confused, the varying images presented through advertising only exacerbate that confusion. Our findings indicate strong differences in how men and women are represented in commercials, depending on to whom the messages are being directed. Women do not see much violence in commercials, but men and children do (though the violence is largely limited to commercials targeting boys). In sports commercials and in commercials targeted at children, males are not shown in ‘inside the home’ roles, whereas that is still the prime setting for commercials targeted at women. While commercials directed to women have increasingly shown them in more egalitarian roles, we suggest that there should be pressure to do so with male portrayals in media directed to men as well. While women have been depicted in more independent roles, real men (like those watching sports on TV) are not shown as being active fathers. Garst and Bodenhausen
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(1997: 555) discussed a quote from Barbara Durham, an advertising executive, noting that advertisers are aware that gender roles are changing, but they have found it is important not to rob men of their masculinity.

From a pragmatic point of view, the protection of the male ego is understandable. However, there needs to be socially responsible consideration of what the underlying messages are. The frequently observed violence may perpetuate norms that violence is acceptable; clearly, spouse and child abuse are not acceptable. Further, what is wrong in showing a man as a loving, caring, responsible father? This might not be appropriate in the context of selling beer, but there are many products and services for which a nurturance portrayal might be. Fathers’ portrayals in the media should facilitate active parenthood, not sustain the more distant perspective from the past. There are indications that improvements are occurring, as we now are seeing promotional messages on sports network ESPN encouraging dads to spend more time with their children.

Future research should go beyond content analysis to perform reader response analyses (Scott, 1994; Thompson, 2004) to investigate how individuals’ personal, cultural, and gendered perspectives frame the context from which they make meaning. For example men and women may respond differently to the same textual stimulus.

Western society is in a state of flux in terms of gender roles; wives are the main providers in more than 30% of US households and the literature is replete with observations of confusion among males as to what ‘being male’ constitutes. Most attention has been focused on raising the role of women in society. Fischer and Gainer (1994) warned that, if feminism research focuses solely on women, there is a risk of reinforcing the notion that men are the ‘norm.’ Further, we assert that for gender roles to become more egalitarian, it is necessary for change to take place in both men and women.

As men have traditionally been favored by the status quo, giving up their privileged status is not a straightforward process. Garcia (2008: 93) recounts the demise of that veritable icon of 19th century masculinity, the Western cowboy. The cowboy had become ‘the embodiment of the American spirit: steadfast, fearless, dependable, quintessentially male.’ But the summer drought of 1886 and the winter blizzards of 1886 and 1887 decimated the cattle herds that had provided cowboys their work responsibility. By the 1890s cowboys had begun stealing the same cows that they once vowed to protect. In the Montana State Prison, between 1870 and 1896, the number of convicts who described themselves as cowboys or herdsmen increased by a factor of 24. Between 1892 and 1896, the number of cowboys in the Wyoming prison in Laramie more than tripled. Kimmel (1996) noted the difficulty of the transition from this very ‘independent’ notion of manhood to that of being monitored while working on the production line after the Industrial Revolution occurred in the US. Today, Garcia (2008) argues that men are losing ground to women at home and at work, and claims (2008: 42) that women are the decision makers in 85% of all consumer decisions, including 95% of home products and 89% of vacations. Men are no longer cowboys, and there is an increasing question as to whether they are still providers.
Marketers are not responsible for the changing gender norms, but they are adding to the difficulties faced by men during these changing times. While they have only modest control of programming contexts, they do control advertising content. Further, a secondary reason for the focus here on advertising content is that parental control of their children's television watching is primarily based on programming, with less attention paid to the advertising sponsoring the program. Portraying males in more gender neutral manners in commercials is a feasible goal for academic marketers to support, and it may well facilitate the gender role shifts by men that are necessary for gender roles to become egalitarian.

References


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**Jim Gentry** is the Maurice J. and Alice Hollman Professor of Marketing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He earned his doctorate from Indiana University. He has taught at Kansas State University, Oklahoma State University, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the University of Nebraska. He is the North American editor of the *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* and the former editor of the *AMS Review*. He has authored (or more frequently, co-authored) over 60 articles, 10 chapters in edited books, and over 200 conference papers. His current research interests are changes in consumption due to life-event transitions, family decision making, and gender roles. Address: University of Nebraska, College of Business Administration, Lincoln NE 68588–0492. [email: jgentry@unl.edu]

**Robert L. Harrison** is an Assistant Professor of Marketing in Haworth College of Business at Western Michigan University. He received his PhD from the University of Nebraska. His research interests include consumer culture theory, family consumer behavior, transformative consumer research, public policy in advertising, and qualitative and mixed method research.