“We Wear No Pants”: Selling the Crisis of Masculinity in the 2010 Super Bowl Commercials

“Hello friends, we have an injury report on Jason Glaspie,” sportscaster Jim Nantz informs us in a soft, deep voice as he casually approaches the camera. Behind him, we see Jason in the apparent torture chamber of the masculine psyche: the mall. His shoulders slump from carrying dozens of shopping bags, while a bright red bra drapes his shoulder. “As you can see, his girlfriend has removed his spine, rendering him incapable of watching the game.” Just as Jason catches a glimpse of the big football game on TV, his girlfriend snatches him away, dragging him to the perfume counter. Jim Nantz guides our judgment, voicing disgust at Jason’s actions. “That’s hard to watch.” In the end, Nantz implores: “Change out of that skirt Jason.”

—Flo TV (2010)

Jason Glaspie, in his proverbial skirt, exemplifies the mass marketing of the crisis of masculinity in the commercials shown during the 2010 Super Bowl—the most watched event in television history (Nielsen Company 2010). Viewers were bombarded with images of feminized, aging, and ultimately powerless male bodies, images that both implicitly and explicitly signaled a much broader crisis wherein the constitutive ingredients of hegemonic masculinity have supposedly been lost, stolen, or otherwise altered. “Take off that skirt!” “Put on the pants!” “Man’s last stand!” These were the rallying cries of Super Bowl 2010. While the discursive terrain of the so-called crisis of masculinity has emerged in other cultural and political arenas, in 2010 the crisis overtly pervaded a substantial portion of the Super Bowl programming.

Our interest in the representation of gender within advertising, and specifically men and advertising, follows a long lineage of social and feminist scholars who have called for greater attention to the role that institutions of consumer culture play in the construction of masculine identities (e.g.,

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In particular, we build on the work of Michael A. Messner and Jeffrey Montez de Oca (2005), who trace the different narratives of masculinity in Super Bowl beer commercials and *Sports Illustrated* print advertisements from 2002 and 2003. Messner and Montez de Oca analyze the then newfound emergence of the lovable happy loser trope of masculinity in advertising, which depicted scrawny, nerdy men who fail to get the girl but who can still have a good laugh and a cold brew with their buds. For instance, one commercial in their analysis shows two men getting caught spying on a women’s yoga class, as well as a man getting punched in the face by a woman after delivering an unintentionally offensive pickup line. Messner and Montez de Oca claim that this happy loser is “caught between the excesses of a hyper-masculinity that is often discredited and caricatured in popular culture and the increasing empowerment of women, people of color, and homosexuals [and is] simultaneously undercut by the postindustrial economy” (2005, 1905). But how does this character hold up eight years later?

While the lovable loser trope continues to hold sway in popular TV shows like *King of Queens* or “bromance” movies like *Knocked Up* and *Forty-Year-Old Virgin*, the 2009 and 2010 Super Bowl commercials show a shift in how that trope is deployed. In 2009, men are both physically and emotionally vulnerable, but supposedly okay in the end. Distinct from the men in Messner and Montez de Oca’s (2005) commercials, these men are not losers only in their inability to attract women, who are notably absent as sexual objects here, but also in relation to more general expectations of normative masculinity concerning physical prowess and economic security. The 2010 commercials, in contrast, express a profound aggression in reaction to the supposed failure of attempts to properly perform masculinity. The loser, instead of appearing endearing or laughable, is illustrated as a delusional dope—pitiful, stupid, and downright disgusting. No longer lovable despite his flaws, the male loser becomes in 2010 a frighteningly pathetic victim of collective delusions.

Our goal for this article is to examine the narrative of the crisis of masculinity in the 2010 Super Bowl commercials. We begin with a review of literature on advertising, gender, and the body. Next, we discuss a few commercials from 2009, highlighting the distinct ways in which elements of the crisis narrative begin to emerge through humorous injuries and nostalgia for childhood joys. We then engage in detailed analysis of three key commercials from 2010, in attempts to illuminate their strikingly overt attempt at mass marketing a crisis of masculinity. While advertising does not generally undergo such drastic shifts, instead moving along with slow-changing
social norms, we find a surprising distance between the discourse Messner and Montez de Oca examine in 2003 and what we observe in 2010.

The discursive structure of advertising
In studying commercials we seek to explore the meaning attached to the products being sold and how advertising not only caters to but produces a particular group of consumers. Advertising has served as a key site for the dissemination of dominant discourses on masculinity. As Michel Foucault explains, discourse can be understood as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (1972, 49). We focus on how discourse guides the meanings of certain images—like the portrayal of the lovable (male) loser. This approach does not treat advertising agencies as the sole creators of discourses on gender. Rather, they play a key role in filtering and disseminating discourse, and in doing so, they aid in stabilizing and building upon existing public sentiment. As Raymond Williams writes, “It must not be assumed that magicians—in this case, advertising agents—disbelieve their own magic. They may have limited professional cynicism about it, from knowing how some of the tricks are done. But fundamentally they are involved, with the rest of the society, in the confusion to which magical gestures are a response” ([1980] 2005, 193).

When looking at the crisis of masculinity theme within the 2010 Super Bowl commercials, we do not argue that the crisis of masculinity exists as an objective fact of the social world that is merely reflected in advertising. In fact, we generally agree with Rosalind Gill, Karen Henwood, and Carl McLean (2005), who criticize crisis-inspired analyses for reifying the crisis of masculinity by grouping together a number of social forces not necessarily related. Judith Halberstam similarly excoriates men’s studies scholars for not “taking apart the patriarchal bonds between white maleness and privilege; they are much more concerned to detail the fragilities of male socialization, the pains of manhood, and the fear of female empowerment” (1998, 19). Drawing from these critiques, we by no means give full credence to the idea of the crisis, any more than we argue that the crisis of masculinity is simply the construction of a puppet-master media. Rather, we treat the crisis of masculinity, especially as it comes together in the Super

1 “Discourse” is a term that is often used but less frequently understood. This is in part due to the varied usage of the term by different methodological and theoretical approaches. We understand discourse analysis as a study of power that explicates how knowledge and ways of seeing the world are organized. See Mills (1997) for an excellent introduction to the term and its varied use.
Bowl, as a prominent discursive construction that is a powerful force in commonsense understandings of masculinity.

In popular culture, sport has long been viewed as a bastion of masculinity and a site for the transmission and reproduction of what it means to be a man (Messner 1992; Burstyn 1999; Connell 2000), which makes sporting events singularly attractive to advertisers seeking the elusive young male demographic. For instance, the symbiotic relationship between beer, sports, and hegemonic masculinity has reached such heights that Lawrence A. Wenner and Steven Jackson (2009) described it as “a holy trinity” (25). Football, and the Super Bowl especially, serves as a particularly popular site for advertisements targeting men. We therefore treat the emergence of a discourse within Super Bowl advertisements as a seal of approval—a moment where the discourse ascends to the realm of other dominant discourses about what it means to be a man.

Crafting the crisis of masculinity as a consumable trope

Advertising, as a function of discourse, shapes what is knowable about social life and gender relations (Jhally 1987, 135). A large body of scholarship critiques the way advertisements depict women as passive subjects, needy girlfriends, or sexual objects to be consumed or won over by active men. Women are active only to the extent that they must constantly monitor their bodies and work to make them more attractive. Even when women appear to defy gender roles, through drinking, smoking, or wearing masculine clothing, they are shown as merely imitating rather than challenging dominant masculinity (Barthel 1989). Thus, advertising largely reinforces sexist depictions of women.

Since the 1980s, however, advertisers have paid increasing attention to men as consumers of identity-related products (Patterson and Elliott 2002; Schroeder and Zwick 2004). In particular, there has been an exponential growth in advertising that seeks to build upon insecurities by encouraging men to view their own bodies as inadequate and in need of consumer-based improvements (Atkinson 2008). Advertisers have shaped masculinities to embrace styles and pleasures that were previously viewed as socially undesirable (Nixon 1996); beyond the “holy trinity,” products like body wash, weight loss supplements, deodorant, and clothing are now being mass-marketed to male consumers. Whether this is an inversion of the male gaze (Patterson and Elliott 2002) or an expansion of it (Schroeder and Zwick 2004), it is clear that John Berger’s famous observation that “men act and

women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at (1972, 45) no longer rings as true.

Susan Bordo’s tour de force examination of the male body, *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private* (1999), chronicles the increasing visibility of and societal pressures on men. To be a man is to be hard in body and emotion, never showing pain, emotion, suffering, or physical weakness. The increased presence of nearly naked male models in advertising and the proliferation of men’s “health” magazines ensure that eating disorders affect more than just women (Bordo 1999, 218). However, unlike the all-but-naked women that have become ubiquitous in television and print, the pressure is not for men to invoke sex through vulnerability. Rather, with men, dignity and strength remain: “the bodies are a kind of natural armor” (Bordo 1999, 30). The men of advertising are not objects ready to be simply enjoyed; their muscular exoskeleton and aggressive posture ensure that the audience does not forget that even in their current state of undress, the potential to dominate remains.

The current rendition of the crisis shares elements with the men’s movements that arose during the 1980s—another time of insecurity that was more directly linked to the success of the feminist movement (Patterson and Elliott 2002, 235). Although not a uniform collective, with various subfractions like men’s rights, mythopoetic, and profeminist men’s movements, the cohesive element was a stated desire to repair the damage that had been done to men and their masculinity within the United States. The participants, often affluent, white males, attempted to restore the power, control, and independence once afforded to them by mainstream society by returning to a “lost era when men were men” (Kimme and Kaufman 1995, 18). And again advertisers were quick to capitalize, presenting images in leisure magazines of hypermasculine men with bulging muscles (Connell 1987; Rutherford 1988). Of course, the idea of a crisis of masculinity in the United States is not a new concept now, nor was it a new concept in the 1980s. It would be a fallacy to suggest that advertisers had never recognized the potential to shape, and cater to, particular masculinities by emphasizing a return to traditional power dynamics.

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3 Muscular Christianity and the founding of the Boy Scouts serve as two examples of attempts to save white masculinity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. See Kimme (1996), Putney (2001), and Denny (2011).

4 The historical reach of the marketing of the crisis of masculinity is demonstrated in Kenon Breazeale’s examination of how *Esquire* grew by packaging and selling misogyny during the Depression era (1994). Leisure became “a buzzword among Roosevelt braintrusters who hoped that commodifying the free time attendant on a reduced work week would lead to more consumer spending,” but *Esquire* simultaneously had to underline women as objects of desire,
In this study, we therefore seek to add to existing literature on gender and advertising by conducting a close, critical reading of the 2010 Super Bowl commercials. What does the marketing of masculinity look like in this contemporary moment? Which discursive tropes remain unchanged, and which new elements are being brought to the fore? What might these media strategies mean for gender relations in the United States? We illustrate the drama and the sensationalism advertisers use in these commercials to narrate a renewed crisis of masculinity, with a fierce emphasis on the importance of the physical body.

**Methods**

For this project, we watched every Super Bowl commercial presented from 2008 to 2010. We paid particular attention to the company, type of product, characters portrayed (in terms of race, class, and gender), dominant messages and themes, and discursive strategies employed (i.e., violence or humor) in the commercials. In analyzing our commercials we draw inspiration from semiotic analysis, and in particular from Judith Williamson’s now classic semiotic study *Decoding Advertisements* (1978). Semiotics approaches focus on understanding signs, which are, in most simple terms, objects or images imbued with social meaning. Semiotic analysis allows us to pay attention to the ways in which layers of meaning become mapped and remapped onto the mundane, and as such, we see ourselves as archeologists of meaning, peeling back the layers of signs. These archeological formations are always changing, albeit slowly, while other images and meanings stick together for longer periods of time.

Advertising plays off of culturally agreed upon signs and attempts to transfer those meanings to products (Rose 2001). As gender scholars, we must read back these semiotic messages to trouble the everyday assumptions they make about gender and social relations. We seek to understand how signs operate within the broader discourse(s) present in the commercials, and, similar to journalists and cultural commentators, we analyze both individual ads and the way they relate to other Super Bowl commercials to create a larger narrative package.

It follows that our sampling is theoretical and purposive rather than representative in nature, since we seek to analyze a significant discursive theme and its semiotic workings. We analyze three paradigmatic commercials whose attempts to prepare dinner could not match male *Esquire* readers’ sophisticated and refined (but certainly not feminine) palates (3). In that case, however, the male body was not emphasized as a key element of masculinity.
from 2010 and two from 2009, chosen because they all strongly suggest a broad crisis of masculinity of some kind. Traces of similar themes may be found in Super Bowl commercials from other years, but our viewing of commercials from a wide range of years, combined with other existing research on Super Bowl advertisements, suggests that the prominence of the crisis of masculinity trope in 2010 is indeed highly notable.

We do not argue that our semiotic-based reading of the commercials is absolute, nor do we suggest it is the only correct one. No semiotic analysis can achieve this level of objectivity, as different viewers will bring differing histories and orientations to the project of interpretation. We approach the commercials as two individuals trained to be sociologists, each with an interest in gender and its intersections with other social categories. We agree with visual studies scholars Jonathan E. Schroeder and Janet L. Borgerson that “for describing complex, sexually infused representations, symbols and signs offer a more comprehensive method than discrete content analysis” (1998, 163). What semiotics lacks in scientific objectivity, it makes up for in its in-depth focus on meaning and context, drawing on a variety of theoretical traditions, including Marxism, literary theory, and psychoanalysis (Rose 2001). We additionally turn to queer theory to more fully understand the role of sexuality in our sample. We hope that through a rich analysis of these Super Bowl commercials, we can demonstrate their significance and stimulate further conversation about contemporary constructions of gender and sexuality in the United States.

2009: Don’t worry, the men are fine
In the few years prior to 2010, the commercials were marked by a dominant humorous theme: men get hurt in an extremely violent manner but rise at the end to claim that they are okay. Margaret C. Duncan and Alan Aycock (2009) previously examined this theme’s emergence in the 2008 Super Bowl commercials, and below we highlight a similar case from 2009, Pepsi Max’s “I’m Good.” These commercials begin to hint at men’s lack and insecurity: men everywhere are being challenged, here even being physically injured. In 2008 and 2009, after suffering a direct and painful affront, they reassure the audience that they are okay (although the damage is such that survival, much less escape from injury, is difficult to believe). Our second example, Universal Studios’ “Universal Heroes,” criticizes the monotony of the corporate ladder, telling men to seek temporary escape, with their families, to a land of physical play. The messages here remain somewhat restrained, and only in 2010 will the men of the ads explicitly acknowledge their collective displacement in the American gendered imaginary.
Pepsi Max’s “I’m Good” (2009)
Pepsi Max offers a commercial with variations on a simple plot: three male friends are hanging out, one gets hurt (either because of his own stupidity or that of his friend), but he ultimately claims he is okay. The commercial starts with three men in a suburban garage, full of tools and complete with a stuffed fish adorning the back wall. Two hefty men stand on one side of the garage talking, while their friend on the other side saws a long piece of wood. The wood suddenly flies out from behind the saw, shoots across the garage, and hits a man in the back. A close-up shot shows the plaid-shirted, messy-haired victim raise his hand and say, “I’m good!” Queer theory is helpful here in describing how hegemonic masculinity relies on displacing men’s penetrability onto others, especially women and homosexuals (Thomas 2002). Throughout the commercial, the men repeatedly get blasted from behind, often with phallic objects like the piece of wood or a golf club, which likely signify threats that heterosexual men face to their masculinity on a daily basis.

The theme repeats in various traditionally guys’-club locations—the golf course, the bowling alley, the limo during a guys’ night out—until finally we return to the first bastion of masculinity, manual labor. A white man stands on a ladder with an electrical cord hanging from his mouth. “Ready, go!” yells a friend, as a man on the ground flips a switch. The man on the ladder is subsequently shot backward, yelling frantically until he hits his backside on a trailer with a loud thump. “I’m good,” the man assures his friends as smoke billows out with each word. The narrator explains, “Men can take anything. Except the taste of diet cola. Until now! Pepsi Max. The first diet cola for men.” The audience is presented with the soda can, which shrivels from an imaginary male fist crunching it into submission. The screen returns to the latest injured man, holding the cola can in front of him, soot streaked along his face. “Yeah,” the man says to his friend who holds the can to his head. “Feels good.”

The Pepsi Max commercial presents a familiar narrative of the funny, lovable loser, much like those sketched out in earlier years (Messner and Montez de Oca 2005). The audience sees men fail repeatedly after engaging in foolish activity. The taste of diet cola, something long associated with women and dieting, is something that will not satisfy men. Yet the images in the commercial do not show men being dissatisfied but physically attacked from behind, therefore linking men’s feminine behavior or metrosexuality (here synonymous with drinking a diet drink) with the more devastating effects of homosexual assault. Semiotically speaking, diet cola is usually part of a sign for femininity, either of women or queer men. Pepsi
Max must first alter the figure typically associated with diet cola by focusing the commercial on men. To keep the men from being read as feminine, which they dangerously approach in being assaulted from behind, they must also show men being okay, drinking Pepsi Max and displaying power by crushing the can.

But even as they are threatened, men can always revert to the safe space of regular (not diet) cola, wherein safety connotes something that is soothing (as the cool can comforts the injured man) in its very ability to be dominated (as the can is crunched). These images likewise signify the safe space of patriarchal domination, in which men can seek comfort in women while still being able to dominate them. This precise combination allows men to find safety in an apparently unsafe world. As men struggle to maintain their masculinity in other arenas, as the injured men humorously depict, Pepsi Max offers a place to seek comfort without admission of any pain. In fact, they assure us they are okay. And like Messner’s lovable losers, the men suffer, or deny suffering, with their buddies. However, unlike the case of the lovable losers, their assurance that they are okay seems forced, an act of denial rather than true satisfaction. Of course, this denial is the source of the comedic value of the commercial, as it unveils how men are expected to hide their pain. Since the men here do not yet explicitly suffer from a crisis, as we will see in 2010, there is no explicit call to action.

**Universal Studios’ “Universal Heroes” (2009)**

While Pepsi Max shows, but denies, male vulnerability, the Universal Studios’ 2009 Super Bowl ad links vulnerability more directly to men’s dissatisfaction with the corporate world. In this commercial a young, pudgy boy wanders a busy city street dressed as a superhero. The ad sets up a heavy-handed opposition between play and the business world—the colorful child wandering against the tide of faceless, nondescript businesspeople dressed in drab gray and black who walk briskly in the other direction. In his make-shift costume, he engages in fantasy in the few urban spaces not oriented toward business, leaping from a bench in an empty park and running down a dark alley. We soon learn that he represents a powerful businessman’s inner child. A grown man stares out of his office window, brow drawn, lips clenched. The two stare at each other with eerily similar blue eyes, but the man looks forlorn. The man embodies the capitalist success story, yet something is clearly lacking, and the child reminds him of a time when dreaming about being a hero was fun. After the businessman answers the call of his inner child, we see him enjoying the thrills of a roller coaster ride with his wife and daughter. And the bright colors, here clearly invoking the excite-
ment and vitality of a youthful outlook, are once more present for the adult man. Universal Studios is a place where men can once again discover their inner superhero, whether flexing like the Hulk or arm-wrestling Popeye.

Like the Pepsi Max commercial, Universal Studios portrays men as having lost something they need to reclaim. Similar to what we will observe in 2010, there is a disconnect between social pressures and the unhappiness that results from trying to meet those expectations. However, the commercial calls not for a return to power and seriousness but for a temporary escape to a liminal space where childhood joys can be recaptured (and where the family is brought along on the ride). The man regrets something about his success but is not running scared. What he lacks are the simple joys one can experience outside of the quest for power. The semiotic meaning of the successful businessman and that of the playful child, normally mutually exclusive, are here linked through the body as both man and child flex their biceps in the classic bodybuilder pose. The theme park is not simply a place where men become children; it is also a place to enforce a corporeal brand of masculinity by testing their strength against superheroes as their children watch. The 2010 Super Bowl commercials build on this orientation toward the body, offering a much sharper narrative of individualism and crisis.

2010: The year of men
The Super Bowl, of course, has always been about men. The commercials, long filled with objects of desire (like beer and attractive women), have made little room for anything else. In 2010, though, men do not relish in their masculinity but instead scramble to salvage it. Numerous blogs and media outlets also caught on to the strong gender messages: feminist gossip blog Jezebel said the commercials sung the “woes of bros” (Smith 2010), Slate thought the misogyny was “rawer and angrier than usual” (Stevenson 2010), and the Washington Post pondered the “perpetual fear of emasculation” (Shales 2010).

The nuances of the crisis crystallize when situated within a broader socio-political context. Dominant masculinity in the United States is intertwined with nationalism and patriotism (Connell 2000), and in turn the 2010 Super Bowl commercials cannot be analyzed without taking into consideration the lingering economic recession. Beginning in 2008, the most recent economic crisis in the United States has shaken individual lives, knocking millions out of their jobs and onto the streets. Numerous studies emerged in 2009 and 2010 claiming that the downturn more strongly hit men, with more women in the service sector holding onto their jobs, going so far
as to dub the recession the “mancession” (Thompson 2009). Psychological studies pointed to increasing depression among men, stemming from their anxiety about maintaining their breadwinning role (Daily Mail Reporter 2009; Dunlop and Mletzko 2011). However, we now know that a veritable he-covery is taking over the supposed mancession, with women more slowly regaining employment (Kochar 2011). The mancession concept likewise obscures the extent to which men of color have long faced higher unemployment levels than whites (Lui et al. 2006; Cawthorne 2009), allowing us to reiterate the extent to which the crisis of masculinity as we see it in these Super Bowl commercials is a crisis of almost exclusively white middle-class masculinity.

In such a moment of perceived crisis, popular media could either place a newfound value on minority masculinities (see Halberstam’s 2005 analysis of British masculinity, the unstable economic climate, and The Full Monty) or it could continue to use humor as a tool for attempting to uphold a masculinity now in peril. Part of the reason the 2010 Super Bowl commercials followed the latter path may also have something to do with an unmistakable right-wing backlash, most notably through the rise of the Tea Party movement. Not surprisingly, in addition to the commercials we analyze below, the 2010 Super Bowl included a pro-life advertisement from conservative football player Tim Tebow, while denying commercial airtime to a gay online dating service (CBS News 2010; Plocher 2010).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, nostalgia served an important role in comforting the aging male population through humor while reminding them of better times. For instance, a cell phone company remade the “Super Bowl Shuffle” rap, which was originally performed in 1985 by that year’s Super Bowl champions, the Chicago Bears. Only this time, instead of rapping about being smooth or protecting their neighborhoods, the aging men, once revered for their strength, power, and unmatched ferocity, joke about their failing bodies. One player raps: “I still could play, if my groin didn’t feel like paper maché. But it does. Ain’t gettin any better.” Even as older viewers laugh, their physical failure is brought to their attention. The younger generation is provided a warning of their bodies’ impending failure, setting the stage for calls for more active and immediate action to reinforce their dominance.

The following three 2010 Super Bowl commercials serve as exemplars of the crisis, highlighting the theme of the diminishing power of men and men’s bodies in contemporary society. The significant differences in the commercials lie in how this crisis is explained. The first commercial, Dockers’ “Wear No Pants,” makes implied assumptions about class and body power. Next, Career Builders’ “Casual Fridays” more explicitly lays blame
on contemporary economic structures and cultures of flexibility and informality. Finally, Dodge Charger’s “Man’s Last Stand” overtly points to a combination of economic, cultural, and familial relations in disempowering middle-class men. It is in this last instance that the men most aggressively blame women for their unbearable pains.

**Dockers’ “I Wear No Pants” (2010)**

A stout, pantless, middle-aged white man marches across the savanna. “I wear no pants!” he sings. Another pudgy man proudly sings along from another spot in the grass. “I wear, I wear, I wear no pants!” (fig. 1; Dockers 2010). Finally, the group coalesces. The pack of fifteen pantless men march and shout, alone in the prairie. They are oblivious to their location, or the fact that birds ominously soar above their heads, cawing in warning. “Calling all men,” an authoritarian narrator interrupts as the shot sweeps to a faceless, statuesque man standing in front of a brick wall. “It’s time to wear the pants.”

A closer reading of this commercial reveals the importance of men’s bodies and their relationship to success. The failed men have soft, unkempt bodies. And while nature has long been seen as something for male domination, here the men roam aimlessly, as if they are animals themselves. The discursive implication is clear: the pantless men symbolize the professional class of men suffering from a shared delusion. They celebrate without shame, enjoying the open air in untucked dress shirts and underwear, an image usually used in movies to depict women following sex. These bodies signify failure on various levels: their middle-class status offers them no protection from the more primitive dangers of the natural world; their lack of pants implies their inability to head their families; and finally, the homosocial men quite literally dance on the border of homosexuality.

Most broadly, the failed bodies act as a sign of middle-class failure, leaving the men unable to dominate their surroundings or maintain their ideal muscular physique. The juxtaposition of the failing group of middle-class men with the clearly working-class single figure at the end—who is muscular, wearing a T-shirt and jeans, and safely bounded by the man-made brick wall—might initially be read as a desire to return to working-class status. However, we argue that the working-class man is less a sign of the working class itself than a sign of a particular masculine lifestyle. Men can still make money and wear Dockers, as will Williamson writes: “Products are thus set up as being able to buy things you cannot buy. This puts them in a position of replacing you. They do things you can’t do, for you” (1978, 38). Thus middle-class men can still retain their capitalist gains without sacrificing the patriarchal power of wearing the pants. So while this commercial implies a
waning of power for middle-class men, it calls on men to renew their power precisely through the capitalist system that failed them.

Finally, the failing bodies in the Dockers’ commercials are used as a caution against homosexuality. As the men are oblivious to the dangers of wandering the field, their pantlessness presents an even more immanent danger in their unprotected derrieres. Advertisements commonly focus on female rear ends, as women and queer men have long been associated with penetrability (Thomas 2002). In this commercial, Dockers transfers that semiotic meaning onto common men, which comes into full view with the shot of fifteen saggy male butts in close contact with each other, signifying the growing acceptance of homosexuality and its outed presence in daily life.

This shot, of course, juxtaposes the solitary idyllic figure at the end, who rotates like a car on display, signifying straight masculinity. More important, though, the model figure never rotates in a complete 360-degree turn; never is his butt—the ultimate signifier of vulnerability, penetrability, and homosexuality—revealed. In 2009, the men in Pepsi Max were assaulted from behind but were ultimately okay. In 2010, though, Dockers instead creates crisis by unequivocally associating men with penetrability and queerness, only to juxtapose them with the sign of “real” manhood, an impenetrable man in Dockers. Contrary to the portrayal of lovable losers and mythopoetic men, who sought solace in male friendship, Dockers tells men to be wary of homosocial behavior; only individualism can ensure total protection from homosexuality. While previous research indicates that mass
media has in some ways become more queer friendly by showing more queer or potentially queer images (Schroeder and Zwick 2004; Tsai 2010), the Dockers commercial aggressively responds, signifying that successful masculinity is not only white, strong, and middle class but also unequivocally straight.

**Career Builder’s “Casual Fridays” (2010)**

Career Builder, an Internet-based job search company, provides another humorous presentation of the erosion of traditional values in “Casual Fridays” (fig. 2; 2010). The commercial opens with Terry, a rather ordinary-looking white man in a blue polo shirt, drinking a cup of coffee. His shoulders slump, his goatee shows signs of grey, and his body is beginning to sag. In the background we see a typical office, except the employees are wearing only their underwear. As the main character begins to explain his plight, his tone conveying defeat, “when I first started here . . .,” an old man in his underwear pushes a mail cart up to his desk and stops to sort the mail. The main character shields his eyes and explains, “I was like, casual Friday, awesome.” From this opening scene we learn that the man is embarrassed by those who have embraced comfort and no longer make an effort to hide their failing, out-of-shape bodies (top panel of fig. 2). The commercial successfully invokes a sense of body horror so often seen in advertisements geared toward women, in which average bodies are repulsive and shameful. The lovable loser, we see, is not so lovable in old age but is in fact a cause of disgust.

In another scene, our narrator is greeted by a scrawny man who suavely rests his elbow on the water cooler (middle panel of fig. 2). Terry bends down to grab his water but avoids grabbing the white cup, which is placed suspiciously close to the other man’s white briefs, succeeding in what Williamson identifies as “connecting an object to a person” (1978, 22). The color of the cup and underwear perfectly match, and our narrator decides the risk is too great, for he might mistake the man’s crotch for the cup and fall into a possibly queer space. Here, for the first time, we see the coworkers poking fun at the main character for being a prude and not letting his rigid heterosexual guard down. Our viewer response is guided by the reaction of the main character, who, instead of being swept along in the fun, is embarrassed and revolted.

The scene shifts to the conference room, where the boss announces, “we’ve decided to make casual Fridays . . . all week.” Everyone in the office, save Terry, cheers and jumps. Two men sandwich Terry’s head between their crotches while they stand to high-five, and our narrator again shows physical repulsion at his close proximity to another man’s penis. A queer
reading of this commercial might point out the joy of the men slamming crotches together, but the underlining point remains Terry’s disgust at such behavior. Career Builder cashes in on a conservative backlash, as Terry longs for a return to normative, conservative, and hetero spaces.

“Of course, if it’s mandatory, it can’t be casual,” notes the narrator, now standing alone with his coffee cup. The water cooler coworker begins to walk by, stops, and leans in: “Nice pants, Terry.” Terry looks down at his pants and up again at the audience in despair (bottom panel of fig. 2). The tension has reached its climax, as the coworker points out that Terry no longer belongs. “Wearing the pants”—and, in particular, nice pants—comes to stand for everything Terry holds onto: manners, formality, tradition, and control (over his body, his space, and his sexuality). A voice-over states: “Expose yourself to something better. Career Builder. Start building.”

As in “I Wear No Pants,” the scantily clad men here are semiotically associated with a new masculinity and vulnerability. The underlying message is about a return to “real” masculinity, as Terry, alone in his pants, symbol-
izes classic hegemonic masculinity, old-time homophobia, and heterosexuality. In one telling scene, the main character is confronted with a fat woman in pearls who rushes past him, flesh and necklace bouncing, into the meeting room. He rolls his eyes as he makes a “go ahead” motion with his hand. He appears as disappointed in this woman’s body as in the failing male bodies entering his space. The stripped figure thus generally signifies the failure of the strong, male physique, of his presumed heterosexuality (as in the water cooler scene) and of his ability or desire to act on his heterosexual urges (as with the woman in pearls). At the same time, though, Career Builder also equates the semiotic meaning of the near-nude men with what is wrong with corporate America. Instead of job insecurity, increasing hours, and declining wages, corporate disappointment is now linked with the changing social order. Universal Studios’ “Universal Heroes” (2009) hinted at corporate dissatisfaction but told men simply to take a break, go to an amusement park, arm-wrestle with Popeye. In 2010 a more serious call is made: put the pants back on, or at least find—or “start building”—a place where wearing the pants is respected.

**Dodge Charger’s “Man’s Last Stand” (2010)**

Dodge offered the most explicit example of men’s call to action in 2010 (figs. 3 and 4). Here, instead of suffering from the delusions of Dockers’ feminized field frolickers, the men individually reclaim what they think is rightfully theirs. The commercial presents head shots of diverse men, all disheveled, standing in traditionally feminine locations: the bedroom, the kitchen, the living room. Each man remains motionless while a narrator laments the daily struggles that men endure in modern life. The narrator, Michael C. Hall, also plays the doctor and serial killer in the TV series *Dexter*. As in Williamson’s famous analysis of Catherine Deneuve and Chanel No. 5 (1978), the ad displays an assumption that the product and the celebrity are the same, when in fact the product gains its meaning precisely through the celebrity. In “Man’s Last Stand,” the Dodge Charger becomes synonymous with aggression through Michael C. Hall (as Dexter)’s voice. While the men in the commercial steer clear of murder, the semiotic association communicated in Hall’s narration is obvious, highlighting the dangerously misogynistic tones of the advertisement.

The commercial begins with a shot of an attractive white man lying in bed, eyes open (bottom panel of fig. 3). The man looks straight into the camera and remains motionless as the narrator says, monotonously: “I will walk the dog at 6:30 am. I will eat some fruit as part of my breakfast. I will shave. I will clean the sink after I shave.” Here, even the most basic do-
Figure 3  From Dodge’s ad “Man’s Last Stand” (2010). Color version available online.

Figure 4  From Dodge’s ad “Man’s Last Stand” (2010). Color version available online.
mestic responsibilities, cleaning up after oneself, are presented as unreasonable burdens and affronts to masculinity. In general, fruit implies a pressure to be concerned with one’s health and appearance, but here fruit further signifies both the feminine—delicate and unreasonable—and the threat to heteronormativity, as fruit is a classic sign for homosexuality.

The body here again signifies middle-class masculinity, but in a slightly different way than in the Dockers or Career Builder commercials. In those instances, the flabby, fleshy bodies are torn down in favor of a hard masculinity. This Dodge Charger commercial warns that, perhaps in response to the rising metrosexual image of recent years, too much concern with the body likewise throws men too far into femininity and queerness. These messages about appearance, when taken in tandem with the Dockers and Career Builder ads, illustrate somewhat contradictory tensions surrounding the male body. The body, as signifier for patriarchal, heteronormative power, must exude hardness, but not hyperawareness of itself (see also Bordo 1999).

The commercial continues, showing two other equally phlegmatic men (top panels of fig. 3) while the narrator recites the daily drudgeries of conforming to the demands of work and women: “I will be at work at 8 a.m. . . . I will be civil to your mother.” The final scene shows a fit man in a suit standing in front of a fireplace (bottom right panel of fig. 3). “I will carry your lip balm,” the narrator enunciates with indignation. By now, all the audience can see are his furrowed brow and piercing eyes, a symbol Erving Goffman (1979) links to male aggression and power. “And because I do this . . .”

An engine revs, and the view of the camera switches from being on the men to being from their fantasy viewpoint, inside the car. “I will drive the car I want to drive.” As in the Dockers commercial, the ideal man is never fully revealed; his humanity, his emotions, can never be fully accessible. The car speeds away into the distance. “Charger. MAN’S LAST STAND” (fig. 4).

In this commercial, the sports car is a sign of status and escape, a phallic remedy to castration anxiety; men charge their way out of domestic life, running over everything in their path. The relationship between men and car advertising has been well documented (Barthel 1989), but in “Man’s Last Stand” Dodge offers a narrative that differs in its level of bitterness and its astonishingly explicit call for escape (rather than getting the girl). The subtitle of the commercial on the Dodge Charger’s website is clear: “You’ve sacrificed a lot, but surely there is a limit to your chivalry. Drive the car you want to drive.” While the message presents a call to arms, the conclusion of this commercial is ultimately a sad one; the only solution to men’s rage is individual consumption. The men are not shown coming together in
resistance, and significantly, the war cry is not men’s last stand, but man’s last stand.

The relationship between the narrative message and the images is key to understanding the semiotic sleight of hand that attacks women. The linking between the narrative audio and the images should make a clear symbolic connection between the modern men and domesticity—“I will clean the sink after I shave”—but the anger in the narrator’s voice undermines that semiotic connection; men aren’t really meant to perform these frivolities. When the commercial turns in its conclusion to frantic anger as the engine revs, Dodge breaks the connection between men and femininity, relinking the men with traditional manhood and Dodge Charger. What’s more, this semiotic move also points to modern women, who want men to perform a bigger share of housework, as the source of men’s anger: “Surely, there is a limit to your chivalry.”

While “Man’s Last Stand” stands out in its inclusion of women as a source of suffering, it is not the only commercial to emphasize this variable. For instance, Flo TV’s “Spineless” commercial, presented at the beginning of this article, serves as a suitable, although less intense, companion. Like the bodies of the men in the Dodge commercial, Jason’s body is stationary, lacking any focus of attention. His lone moment of interest, when he sees a football game being shown on a television mounted on the wall, is only temporary as his girlfriend drags him over to an escalator. In this case, instead of escaping to a fast car, the solution is a mobile, handheld television, so that no matter what personal affront he faces, he retains his individual escape to a world of proper masculinity—live sports. Also, similar to the Dockers commercial, a change of clothing is imbued with meaning as Jason is urged to “change out of that skirt.”

Consumerism, anxiety, and the body

In this article we argue that an explicit discourse of a crisis of masculinity emerges within the 2010 Super Bowl commercials. By providing in-depth analysis of the commercials, we are able to explicate a number of central themes involved in this crisis, including discontent over the loss of traditional patriarchal status and heteronormative family values, diminishing confidence in failing bodies, and uncertainty over the economy. In 2009,

5 Following Foucault, we do not see history as a steady, linear march. As Sara Mills explains, for Foucault “there is not a seamless narrative which we can decipher underlying history, not is there any continuity at all. He argues for seeing history as shifting and lurching” (1997, 23). We see this Super Bowl as a moment of discursive rupture.
we only see hints of a crisis. Pepsi Max men have their sexuality threatened symbolically, as they are physically assaulted from behind, but ultimately they are okay. Universal Studios shows a man feeling a sharper disconnect between his current position and the fun, but still masculine, freedom of childhood. In this scenario men are reinserted into the family structure, but the goal is joy. The collective call to action in 2010, however, is more obvious: men, we are shown, have been tricked into submissive roles, ultimately wearing away at the once well-established heteronormative patriarchy.

Beyond the collective body, the crisis also operates at the microlevel of the physical body. The protruding midsections and flabby buttocks become signs for insecurity at multiple scales—the nation, the job, the family, and sexuality. The cult of hardness remains the underlying goal; however, it is now emphasized through a critical gaze toward failing bodies in “We Wear No Pants” and “Casual Friday” in addition to the metrosexuals implied in “Man’s Last Stand.” The wandering Dockers men, so fully human in their flawed bodies and flamboyant emotions, are called to imitate the anonymous final figure in all his physical glory, albeit through clothing purchases rather than through actual body-modifying lifestyle changes. Career Builder’s “Casual Friday” tells aging, soft bodies to be ashamed of themselves, to hide their flaws and again any signs of happiness or excitement. These particular manifestations of the crisis are attributed to a separation from the body itself, a result of middle-class men being “increasingly defined as bearers of skill” and “separated by an old class division from physical force” (Connell 2005, 55). The separation from manual labor, combined with decreasing leisure time and increasingly unhealthy diets (Critser 2004), writes itself onto bodies that fall short of the traditional image of the powerful, dominant male (Bordo 1999).

Dodge Charger fosters anxiety by inverting the typical mode of men acting and women appearing (Berger 1972), instead narrating a tale in which frozen men succumb to the duties of modern domesticity, where the only acceptable emotional response is rage. But in contrast to the middle-class men of Dockers and Career Builder who have lost touch with their bodies, Dodge says that women have forced men to become all too aware of their physiques, and men now must maintain strength but not slip too far into metrosexuality. Nevertheless, throughout this group of commercials, the male body acts as the semiotic bedrock on which these messages about the crisis of masculinity rest.

While we provide in-depth discursive analysis of the commercials in the 2009 and 2010 Super Bowl, we are unable to know the extent to which the magic of the advertising succeeds in bedazzling the consumer. Millions of
people tune in precisely to view the commercials, becoming active consumers who vote on the best and worst ads of the year. Do the men watching the game heed the call to “wear the pants” or take their “last stand”? Or has their attention already shifted back to their chips and salsa before the final call to arms? To what extent does humor influence the interpretation of these ads? How do women, queer people, or men of color watching these commercials interpret, embody, or resist these messages? How do the images we analyze take on different currencies in contexts outside the United States? Although we feel that these commercials in themselves bear examination, future research should examine reactions to this widely consumed advertising event.

We place the emergence of the discourse in relation to a larger narrative that we trace across Super Bowl commercials in recent years. While we do not have the data to construct a complete narrative arc, we argue that 2010 draws upon preexisting discursive threads, weaving them together to create a particularly powerful representation of a crisis and a call for action. In particular, the 2010 commercials mark a reworking of two preexisting themes: the happy loser of Messner and Montez de Oca’s 2005 article and the tradition- and rite-seeking men of the mythopoetic men’s movement.

As we have noted, the commercials we examine here abandon the happy loser. Built up as someone for average Joes to empathize with, this figure is now torn apart. Men do not just comically fail in attempts to get the girl but are pathetically lost in everyday life. The male viewers are not expected to laugh alongside the losers, but they should rather show disgust and join in the demand for change. These 2010 characters remain distinctly interesting in terms of how they situate themselves so firmly in opposition to women, femininity, and queerness, calling out failing heteronormative masculinity as a social problem and painting consumption as the ideal, individual solution.

While the 2010 Super Bowl commercials rehash many of the ideas about masculinity found in the men’s movements, consumption is now woven into the discourse, offering itself as a solution and replacing the emphasis on spiritual growth. In this shift, many of the binaries established during early forms of the discourse are altered. Nature no longer has restorative powers; instead, as seen in the Dockers commercial, it represents confusion and lack of purpose, where the men wander in the fields like cows. Instead of fol-

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6 Jonathan E. Schroeder and Detlev Zwick (2004) include a thoughtful discussion of how their study of images of men is also limited by the US context. While they admit that the images they analyze might be read differently in a different context, they emphasize the importance of the intended viewing in the United States, in which the images are meant to uphold heteronormative gender relations.
ollowing Robert Bly’s (1990) prescription of guys’ clubs, drum circles, and sweat lodges as productive outlets and a chance for spiritual growth (Magnuson 2008), the 2010 solution is individualized, as seen in the lone rotating figure in the Dockers commercial, the rage-filled Dodge Charger driver, or even the prescription for Jason to watch football on a viewing device made for one.

The 2010 Super Bowl discourse is a simpler, angrier one, crafted to galvanize men to buy. Dockers uses everyday white-collar men to signify collective idiocy and failing masculinity. Career Builder amplifies men’s anxieties and semiotically links them with the failing economy, in which solving the crisis of masculinity will also renew faith in the corporate world. Dodge Charger, in the brashest communication of these worries, ultimately pins the crisis of masculinity on women and changing gender roles. Viewed together, these three commercials from 2010, along with advertisements showing women dragging their hubbies away from the big game or once powerful football players rapping about their aging bodies, create a strong intertextual message with men’s bodies acting as the semiotic foundation on which this crisis is mounted. The 2010 Super Bowl tells men not to laugh with their buddies, but more importantly, to take charge of their bodies, change out of that skirt, and put on the pants.

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