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### Toxic Masculinity and Super Bowl Advertising

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Toxic Masculinity and Super Bowl Advertising

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**Abstract:**

The purpose of this study was to understand how commercials in the modern era are slowly becoming parts of social movements and are being used as mediums for advocacy. The main topic of the study, toxic masculinity, is important to get involved in because it is an issue that extends beyond just Super Bowl viewership. Toxic masculinity occurs in multiple aspects of society, including the workplace, school, and the household. Discourse, power, and the gaze are several prevalent concepts from this study and show how commercials really can be used to create awareness for any sort of social movement.

**Introduction:**

This analysis is meant to show how large corporation advertisements have changed to align with the cultural beliefs of the United States. A few of the artifacts that will be looked at in this analysis come from the company Gillette. For several decades, Gillette has been a national leader in male skincare. We will look at Gillette of 1989 and of 2019. The Gillette Super Bowl XXIII advertisement is probably what most people would consider a typical male-dominant society advertisement. On the other hand, for Super Bowl LIII, Gillette released their headlining advertisement prematurely to get more attention. This commercial ran with the tagline “We Believe: The Best Men Can Be” (Sands, 2019). Both advertisements can be accessed online; as can several other complimentary commercials that will be looked at eventually in the same way for comparison.

In terms of sports advertisements, advertisements can have important roles in allowing researchers to analyze the evolution of societal values and consumerism, two guiding topics in this visual analysis. An additional topic to this study is how Gillette, an organization known for

their emphasis on male needs, has evolved to the point of attempting to raise awareness for gender equality. In general, this analysis is important for research in visual persuasion because it connects to shifting societal values. Super Bowl advertisements have become less facilitated by corporate ideals and goals and more so by consumer beliefs. With the world getting more and more progressive every day, and advertisers becoming more aware of consumer emotions and values, we want to see how far we have come in the market of American advertising, especially on television's largest stage. The key topic surrounded by these changing societal values is how visuality influences peoples' perception of toxic masculinity.

### **Purpose Statement:**

Can large scale advertisements be indicators of trends and cultural norms in the United States? The primary goal of this analysis is to understand how an industry leader can alter the norm of commercials with large viewership such as those featured during the Super Bowl. More specifically, how do visual images in mass advertising reinforce or resist toxic masculinity?

### **Conceptual Framework:**

A prominent theme in two of our three visual examples, from 1989 and 2019, is power. In his view point of power, Michel Foucault claims that "where there is power...there is resistance" (Rose, 189). Representation of men in the 1989 add very much gives us an emphasis on male power, whereas the more recent Gillette advertisement is the resistance to this idea of male power. Foucault tells us that since communication exists everywhere, so does power. Is the power of toxic masculinity equal and opposite to the power of resistance, in this case, though? The way our country is run implies not quite yet. Rose tells us that particular discourses are more

prominent than others because they are “located in socially powerful institutions – those given coercive powers by the state...but also because their discourses claimed absolute truth. The 1989 Gillette commercial indicates to us that men are meant to be powerful, rich, and strong. The “best a man can get” involves working on Wall Street, being a champion boxer, and the household bread winner. In second twenty-two of our advertisement, for example, we see a man’s wife running to him after he has come back from a long business trip. As subtle and innocent as the advertisers may have intended it, we can see that the imagery created the idea that men should always be working and are therefore unsuccessful if they are not the main provider in their life.

The resistance to power Foucault brought up is present in the 2019 advertisement, “Gillette: The Best a Man Can Be”. According to Foucault, power cannot exist with accepted knowledge: “that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.”

Knowledge is created in the 2019 advertisement, consisting of anti-bullying and women’s advocacy. For example, within ten seconds of the advertisement we are presented with a question of value. The exact advertisement’s beginning from 1989 is shown on a movie theatre screen. As the first scene begins, a young boy, probably in the age range of 13-17, jumps through the screen. He is chased by numerous peers as they yell at him. Their utterances are unclear, but what is clear as the commercial progresses is that this boy was running away from, in a nutshell, toxic masculinity. The power to resist the knowledge that men must be a certain way always had potential to arise, but never really has until society started accepting toxic masculinity as a

knowledgeable topic. The fact that Gillette decided to feature this imagery in potentially advertising's most powerful medium gives toxic masculinity more resistance.

The second theme we will use in this analysis is “Reading Images as Ideological Subjects” (Sturken and Cartwright). Anti-bullying movements and female advocacy have recently become part of general American ideology but are still not yet the dominant ideologies we are seeing. Karl Marx is referenced by Sturken and Cartwright under this topic of ideology creation, whose beliefs of ideology, that it was based on capitalist oppression, were made to be somewhat incorrect. Instead, Antonio Gramsci offered an alternative perspective: that dominant ideologies are often presented as “common sense” and that these dominant ideologies are in tension with other forces and are therefore constantly in flux. The term *hegemony* emphasizes that power is not wielded by one class over another; rather, power is negotiated among all classes of people” (Sturken and Cartwright 76).

This perspective of hegemony is relevant to this research the visuality in the 2019 commercial is a portrayal of the negotiation of power. Similar to our other theory of power, this theory specifically looks at the way ideologies are always being exchanged and struggled over. Complementary to this hegemony is negotiation, which tells us that images are constantly taking up different meanings and that viewers are active in the creation of meaning, as images cannot have meaning without human interpretation (Sturken and Cartwright 78).

### **Method:**

Discourse analysis is intended for this study, being that it seems the most comprehensive for the body of this case. This analysis includes a look at audience reception as well as visual imagery and social truth. This is the intended form of analysis because the given artifacts extend

beyond semiotics. The semiotic analysis more so looks at signs within visual persuasion, and not as much on the social influence or audience thought process in images. Discourse is also helpful for this analysis because most of the theories looked at involve communication processes and how they are influenced by societal values. Additionally, semiotics may not help if we are looking at shifts in consumer influence on advertising for sporting events, as semiology involves the usage of symbols and their visual meaning (Rose, Semiotics 107). The medium used in this research is television advertising. Opinion pieces of relevant commercials will also be used to help analyze the consumer interpretation of our examples. We will also be using super bowl advertisement studies to be provided with some context of the impact that a program of this caliber has on viewership. Additionally, the late twentieth century theory involving the gaze will be looked at, via Sturken and Cartwright.

### **Analysis:**

Our Gillette commercial starts out with three men in tuxedos hugging one another and smiling. This is followed by another male with his female counterpart behind him, helping him with his tie. After this comes a man in a shirt and tie on the land line phone, as a hand of another suited man calls his attention with a tap on the shoulder. This is followed by an athlete with a number on his chest running in what seems to be a certain track meet. By second ten we see the actual Gillette razor and cover of the boxing. Other than the Gillette name itself, the entire phrasing cannot be made out as this clip is so short. Following the razor feature is a father showing his son how he shaves, wiping off some shaving cream from the young boy's face. Followed by this is a married couple; as the wife stands by the car, we see an older gentleman putting a shoulder on the husband and giving him a hug.

At second sixteen we see a group of football players cheering on the field after scoring a touchdown. Next, a father helps his son lift weights, followed by another father showing his son how to comb his hair. A father drops his keys in the hands of his son, whilst leaning against a car. A man holds a baby up to his shoulder. The Gillette razor appears again in a half second close up shot, followed by a man with wavy hair and board shorts surfing the ocean. At second twenty-five, a woman runs to her male counterpart who is walking from an airport terminal, then they embrace. The Gillette product is shown again for a split second, then we are presented with three men in tuxedos again, this time dancing with their arms around one another. Numerous clips are shown after this of muscular men, turning towards the camera. A group of men in white shirts run along the beach in formation. At second thirty-eight, a man shaves and following this clip is a baseball player swinging at the ball, two football players tackling one another, and a group of male astronauts walking toward the camera, helmets in hand. Following this clip is one of two suited men walking down a staircase with papers in hand, preceded by a showing of the “Wall St” sign.

This is followed by lines of computer screen numbers, then another short clip of the razor, followed by three men in suits conversing amongst a crowd of other people. A man hunches over toward a sink and washes his face, more men in suits are on the phone, fist pumping at second forty-five. Immediately after this is a male sprinter lunging over hurdles; after him another athlete with a firm face tosses a discus. The Gillette razor runs through some water and is then preceded by a clip of a boxer celebrating and being lifted by his trainer. After this, we see a man, kissing then lifting a trophy. For a second or two after, the Gillette razor is shown again, splashed in water. After this, a man and his bride run toward the camera through a crowd

of wedding-goers. The Gillette label appears one last time, with the famous caption “The Best a Man Can Get” as the commercial fades out, ending the minute-long advertisement.

The second and more current advertisement we are analyzing is titled “We Believe: The Best Men Can Be” (Sands 2019). The commercial opens with shorts clips of different men looking in the mirror, intently at themselves, with faces of disdain. We hear radio reports involving words like “bullying” “the Me-Too Movement” and “masculinity” whilst the men’s faces are shown; all of this happens in the first six seconds of our advertisement. The narrator asks, “is this the best a man can get”? Following his question, a half second image of a more 1989 style Gillette ad is shown, but immediately is literally ripped apart, as a boy with a backpack runs through the theater screen, chased by a pack of angry and slightly older looking boys. At second thirteen, “Freak!” in iMessaging form pops up on the screen following this. A boy is held by his mother. More iMessages pop up around them; “You’re such a loser.” “Sissy!” “Everyone hates you.” Another boy is chased by his peers, in the same room as the mother and son embrace. Chaos is ensuing. After this, three boys flip through the TV channels. The first is a rather old looking cartoon – the males are whistling at a smiling, red-dressed woman. Next, a suited man grabs the butt of his maid, presented in a sitcom stage setting. Finally, a shirtless man with sunglasses throws up a few signs with his hands. The scene looks modern-day. He sticks out his tongue with chains on his neck. A clip of a few women in bikinis shows up in the same video. This sequence from second thirteen to second twenty-four is narrated with phrases like “We can’t hide from it” and “It’s been going on far too long”.

We skip a few repetitive clips to move on to the next scene of our artifact. Gillette takes the opportunity in second thirty of their 2019 advertisement to bring awareness to workplace silencing. We see what looks to be a board room in a corporate office holding a meeting. A man,

at one end of the table, cuts off his female co-worker, saying “What I...actually think she’s trying to say is...”. As his statement fades away, the camera pans to a close-up shot of the woman, looking down almost in shame. We also can see several newsroom scenes on the television at the same time, a good majority of them mentioning the #MeToo movement, which was meant to let women talk about their encounters with sexual assault. Later on, in second fifty-five, Terry Crews is shown advocating for women in a courtroom, on a similar topic.

The end of the commercial presents with several young boys, staring at the camera. The narrator tells us, as the boys stare, “Because the boys watching today, will be the men of tomorrow.” This is followed by a blue background with the caption “It’s only by challenging ourselves to do more that we can get closer to our best”. It seems here that Gillette is asking men to advocated more for the women around them, and only then will men get closer to their “Best a Man Can Get” potential.

Starting analysis with the commercial from 1989, we see that male values are communicated almost exclusively throughout the advertisement, as opposed to including any female values. This Super Bowl XXIII commercial has a clear theme; the male lifestyle. The commercial involves sports, the paternal side of marriage, fatherhood, brotherhood, and financial success (Gillette, 1989). In a sense, this commercial is telling us that the male lifestyle is of the utmost importance. One could even make the assumption that the theme indicates men being the primary bread-winner of the American family. At the time, it was almost completely expected throughout the nation that this was the case, so the commercial was very fitting for its placement. During second forty-three, we are directed towards Wall Street, symbolizing how male individuals who work with money and are financially savvy go to run the country. Gillette might be saying here that they wish to appeal to the cream of the crop of American consumers. The

most successful type of man in the country should be purchasing from Gillette. Gillette is telling viewers in this advertisement that they want to provide a shave for a happy, successful, driven man.

The headliner for Super Bowl commercials this year, despite being intentionally pre-released, was Gillette's "We Believe: The Best Men Can Be" (Sands, 2019). Gillette decides to campaign for men of America to act out of empathy, compassion, and awareness. This artifact has emerged out of concern for sexism, bullying, and paternal stereotypes. This is not the norm for current Super Bowl commercials though. In fact, Jeanine Poggi states "While Super Bowl advertisers leaned in to the political climate in 2017 following the inauguration of President Trump, most reversed course in 2018" (Poggi, 2019). This is where the exchange of power from Foucault comes in to play. There were a number of individuals and groups, political and non-political that did not receive this commercial well. Further emphasizing Poggi's statement. Donald Trump hold's America's most powerful position, and in this the ideas he spreads are taken as knowledge by many American citizens. In an attempt to fight some ideologies that Mr. Trump may or may not hold, Gillette decided to use their own figure of influence to hold power and distribute knowledge.

At second fifty-five, Gillette shows a clip of actor Terry Crews speaking on the topic of the "Sexual Assault Survivors' Rights Act". Crews is not just a popular well-known face to the general populous; rather, he can often be seen as one of the manliest men out there. Crews is former NFL player, formidable in size, and often holds acting roles with rather intimidating attributes. The usage of his image in this commercial is powerful because he should be a manly and authoritative force, but he is taking on the role of an advocate for the vulnerable, specifically victims of sexual assault. Despite being an advocate, Crews is still an imposing figure with

cultural influence. Crews telling us that “men need to hold other men accountable” is a piece of truth in this commercial, which gives power to the movement against toxic masculinity. With Crews, viewers also must negotiate their own interpretation of the commercial. A viewer might ask themselves if Terry Crews, one of the most intimidating figures in Hollywood says so, should I be accountable of myself and my peers? This tactic is one that in all reality should put some emphasis on endorsement from significant figures in society. Despite this tactic of using the power of Crews’ image, there comes active reception from viewers who do not agree with Gillette’s new campaign: Sad day when the best a man could get is a company calling out males for being men” (Sam Radd via Twitter).

Clearly, the visuality that disregards images of razors and emphasizes a social movement has hegemonic implications. No matter what tactics a party uses to create image-based persuasion, there will always be an opposing force trying to equal it out, especially in this world allowing easy access to opinion through social media.

Since we are on the topic of social media, let us get back to visuals of technology usage in the 2019 commercial. Due to an immense rise in technological integration, social media discourse is a short, yet apparent theme in our 2019 commercial. At second sixteen, we see a mother holding her crying son with text-bubbles surrounding them, reading “You’re such a loser” “Sissy!” and “Everyone hates you” as the narrator claims “We can’t hide from it”. Here, viewers are able to negotiate meaning that social media makes bullying so much more accessible than ever before. Gillette is taking its opportunity convince as many viewers as possible that toxic masculinity is enabled by technology by creating this image in their commercial. This imagery is appropriate for the times because it creates such an immediate reaction. The Super

Bowl is one the most high-profile events of the year and in so absorbs all sorts of social media-based reactions, negative and positive.

There are obvious differences in imagery being used for female representation in both commercials. Typically, Super Bowls are an extremely male-dominant event, and are not seen as a medium for gender equality to be fought for. Gillette takes the opportunity in second thirty of their 2019 advertisement to bring awareness to workplace silencing. We see what looks to be a board room in a corporate office holding a meeting. A man, at one end of the table, cuts off his female co-worker, saying “What I...actually think she’s trying to say is...”. As his statement fades away, the camera pans to a close-up shot of the woman, looking down almost in shame. She represents all the women out there in corporate America whose voices are not being heard, and who with this commercial should be given the power to speak up. A concept relating to this shot from *Practices of Looking* is the gaze, which is defined as “Whereas a glance is quick, a gaze is sustained. In its verb form, to gaze is to look intently” (Sturken and Cartwright, 103). The woman’s gaze looks to be a sign of sadness, feeling inadequate, and unheard. This clip is likely meant to appeal to the masses who also feel these ways in greater society. For anyone watching the Super Bowl at the time who feels this way, it is a message that there are people in power out there who are trying to represent them.

### **Conclusion:**

The usefulness of images in commercials has evolved to the point that they enable social movements. Social movements have both support and opposition, though. The #MeToo movement and toxicity in social media are two major themes. Clearly, between 1989 and 2019, there have been opposing forces of power in toxic masculinity discourse. I also found that

visuality can be used in dramatic ways to express emotions, especially to express them for people who go unheard in real life. Toxic masculinity is hegemonic in that it is a topic constantly being discussed between different parties, and power dynamics between those parties are always changing. Gillette is showing us that Super Bowl advertisers have changed in the last thirty years, moving towards visual statements more than product promotions. Super Bowls are slowly becoming a potential medium for All in all, toxic masculinity is a topic that is getting more exposure, and it seems clear that it really is up to men to create solutions to their own problems.

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