Media and Masculinity

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There is no shortage of work or research, either in the scholarly or in the popular press, regarding how advertising and the mass media affect the development and the maintenance of femininity. Almost as much as ads bombard us, it seems that we are also bombarded by messages that the images of women and girls in the media are unrealistic and unhealthy. There is very little uproar, however, over how the media portrays men. Perhaps, some might say, it is because men are “tough enough” to handle it. Nevertheless, it seems that just as the media influences how women think and act, surely the media also exerts similar influence over the masculine masses as well. Exactly what are the prevalent images and ideas of men and masculinity in the media? How do these images affect men? Should there be a new wave of “masculinism,” or is there already?

Feminism is, of course, a familiar term to most of us today. There have been three major waves of feminism in the United States. The first wave occurred in the latter half of the nineteenth century through the first decades of the twentieth. This wave centered mainly on women’s suffrage – and in this respect, it was successful – however it also attempted to break down the idea of “separate spheres” for men and women, to little success. The second wave of feminism in America took place from the 1960s until the 1990s. This wave was extremely diverse and included many different sub-movements that may have had completely different goals. The most common and well known was liberal feminism, which advocated general equality for men and women in all spheres of life. Unfortunately, for feminists, those who wished to maintain the status quo hijacked the term "feminism"; thus, “feminism” became identified in many people’s minds with radical feminism, mythological bra burning and an atmosphere of altogether un-femininity in women. There is currently what is being a called a
third wave of feminism in the United States, which is as yet not completely focused in on only one or a few goals or areas (Wood, 2007). However, the recent (27 March 2007) reintroduction of the Equal Rights Amendment (now called the Women’s Equality Amendment) in Congress and the actual attention that it is receiving may be a sign of things to come.

In response to feminism, there has been a spate of various men’s movements. Some are staunchly anti-feminist, calling for the return of women to their subservient domestic roles and the maintaining of the patriarchal society. Others, though, are more feminist-friendly, accepting that feminism should be accepted and calling on men to practice introspection and self-examination in order to become more accepting of feminism (Wood, 2007). Unfortunately, the stereotypes of masculinity have been created and reinforced over millennia and still possess a strong hold over the typical Western male psyche. Our ideals of masculinity are rooted in the mythologies and stories of gods and heroes among ancient Indo-Europeans, are present in the medieval ideals of chivalry and the warrior-knight, and are reinforced still today through the mass media, especially Hollywood and Madison Avenue (Blazina, 2003). Being masculine means being strong, independent, aggressive, agentic, and almost above all else, not being feminine.

Today, these ideals of masculinity are pervasive, as is the mass media. This paper examines the effects of advertising and the mass media on the development and maintenance of masculinity today.

Male Objectification and the Female Gaze

Presumably, nearly everyone is familiar with the cliché of the group of construction workers who ogle the attractive female who happens to walk past their work site. In 1994, a television commercial for Diet Coke reversed these roles, as a group of female office workers
ogled and objectified a male construction worker as he removed his shirt and cooled himself with a can of diet soda (Kilbourne, 1999). Most considered this ad to be quite humorous and by others to be quite controversial. The idea that men could be objectified in much the same way that women had been objectified for centuries seemed almost offensive to some. However, this particular ad was just one symptom of a phenomenon that had been building for quite some time. As feminism gained acceptance and the roles of women gradually advanced in society, the roles and ideas of men began subtly to change. Since men were no longer always the breadwinner or provider, then perhaps they too could be ogled and objectified (Rohlinger, 2002).

This is exactly what research has shown. Over a forty-year span, women’s magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* gradually began placing more and more advertisements in their pages that depicted men in various states of undress (Pope, Olivardia, Borowiecki & Cohane, 2001). During the same period, the number and proportion of ads that featured women stayed the essentially the same. This phenomenon emerged primarily in the 1980s, as more and more ads depicted men in various states of undress shilling products that were irrelevant to the appearance of the men (e.g., electronics, furniture, liqueurs, etc.) (Pope et al., 2001). It seems clear that the physical appearance of men’s bodies has increased greatly in value over the last few decades, particularly to advertisers. Indeed, even in men’s magazines, ads depicting men more often than not depict men in eroticized fashion. Of nine categories of masculinity that could be depicted in an ad according to Rohlinger (erotic, hero, man at work, consumer, quiescent, family man, outdoorsman, urban, or other), almost 37% of the ads inspected in issues of *Sports Illustrated*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Men’s Health*, *GQ*, and *Business Week* from 1987 and 1997 depicted men in some eroticized fashion. The second-highest category was “hero” at just over 18% (Rohlinger, 2002). It is increasingly clear that at least as far as Madison Avenue is
concerned, the male form has become commoditized just as much as the female form. This objectification of the male form can only lead realistically to the creation or perpetuation of masculine beauty ideals.

Ideals of Masculine Attractiveness

The promotion of false and/or unrealistic beauty ideals for women is a well-known and well-documented phenomenon. Advertisements, television, magazines, movies and the internet are full of airbrushed, perfectly lighted, cosmetic-laden women who are presented as the norm if not the ideal to which to strive. Elective surgeries such as liposuction, collagen injections, breast augmentations, hair removal and depilatory products, diet plans, “light” food, cosmetics, beauty aids, and magazines that contain more advertisements than content (and what content there is in them is usually controlled by the advertisers) – all directed at women - account for billions of dollars of revenue every year (Kilbourne, 1999). Barbie dolls, with their insanely unrealistic figures, give girls as young as five years old negative self-images (Dittmar, Halliwell & Ive, 2006). However, what is less well known is that these same forces act on men, too. As the male physique has become more and more the standard by which men are judged (as opposed to their status as husband, father, breadwinner, provider, etc.), increasingly advertisers and the media have focused in on exploiting men and men’s insecurities (Horrocks, as cited by Reichert & Lambiase, 2003). The ideal masculine body type is typically the muscular mesomorph, which is an average but well-proportioned build. This is as opposed to the ectomorph, which is thin and weak looking, and the endomorph, which is fat. The mesomorph has well-developed arms and chest, wide shoulders, a narrow waist, and considerable upper body strength. There are also ideals of facial attractiveness, including clear tanned skin, abundant healthy hair, non-prominent ears, and other well-defined features (nose, jaw line, etc.) (Reichert & Lambiase, 2003).
In 1992, men spent $88 million on various elective surgical procedures, including liposuction, rhinoplasty and eyelid surgery. This number increased to over $130 million in 1997. Additionally, in 1996, men spent $12 million on penile and pectoral implants. Men also now account for almost 10% of those patients suffering from eating disorders (that is to say, of 10% of those people actually diagnosed; there are presumably many others) (Fraser, as cited by Rohlinger, 2002). As ideals of masculine attractiveness have been foisted upon the public, increasingly men have become unhappy with their own appearances and dissatisfied with their bodies.

These ideals of masculine attractiveness are even aimed at children sometimes (whether or not this is intended is another question). For most of the history of animation, cartoons have promoted the idea that being physically attractive is a requirement for social acceptance. In their study of cartoons from the 1930s through the 1990s, Klein and Shiffman (2006) found that socially desired traits were almost exclusively confined to those characters that could be considered physically attractive, while socially disapproved characteristics were confined to those characters who were either ordinary looking or unattractive. Their analysis also showed that criteria that are valued in our culture were more often associated with attractive characters. Their examples include: youth is valued in our society, and youthful characters were more likely to be attractive than older characters; thin characters were more likely to be attractive than those who were overweight (in fact, overweight characters were nearly three times as likely as others to be shown as unattractive, whereas thin characters were about twice as likely to be depicted as above average in attractiveness); characters who were happy or loving were more attractive than those who were angry or uncaring. Indeed, Klein and Shiffman also showed that attractive
characters in animated cartoons were far more likely to perform pro-social acts than unattractive characters (2006).

What about more adult forms of media? Millions of people watch prime-time television every night, and there are certainly some messages in television programming in regards to masculine ideals. Television is a socially preferred and pervasive medium. Previous research has shown that below- and above-average female characters are over- and under-represented, respectively, in television situation comedies compared to their presence in society (Fouts & Burggraf, as cited by Fouts & Vaughan, 2002). Furthermore, the combination of modeling and vicarious reinforcement on television is perhaps one of the most powerful influences on viewers, especially women (Bandura, as cited in Fouts & Vaughan, 2002). This likely accounts for the internalization of the thin ideal in young women. Fouts and Vaughan have shown that this modeling and vicarious reinforcement does not apply only to women. In a study of television sitcoms, Fouts and Vaughan show that over-weight male character are under-represented when compared to their presence in society, and that under-weight male characters were over-represented (2002). These programs present an inaccurate view of male body image. In addition, they also show that the heavier the male character, the more negative self-references he made regarding his appearance, and that these references typically preceded audience laughter. This reinforces the idea that being overweight and male should lower one’s self-esteem. Moreover, these programs reinforce the idea that it is okay to “put down” someone (especially men) for their weight (Fouts & Vaughan, 2002). Unfortunately, this oppression sometimes can have severe results.

One particularly unfortunate result of the masculine thin ideal in the media is the increase in the occurrence of a disorder called muscle dysmorphia. This psychological disorder is a form
of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and sometimes is referred to as “bigorexia” (Davey & Bishop, 2006). Like anorexia, with muscle dysmorphia, men are irrationally unsatisfied with their body image and wish to change it. Unlike anorexia, which is the striving for a thin ideal, muscle dysmorphia is the striving for an ever-larger ideal. Men who suffer from bigorexia believe that, despite their current build, they need to increase their size and muscle strength, and get ever bigger and bigger. Muscle dysmorphia was found mostly in body builders in years past, however it is becoming increasingly common among younger males. College counselors report an ever-increasing number of young men who seek advice because they feel inadequate or have low self-esteem. Men with muscle dysmorphia often have strained relationships because of their low self-esteem and miss many social, work, or school functions because of an over-rigorous workout schedule. Olivardia, Pope and Hudson (2000) claim that like anorexia, socio-cultural forces may cause muscle dysmorphia (as cited in Davey & Bishop, 2006). It does not seem a stretch to presume that one of the dominant socio-cultural forces could be advertising and the media.

Standards of Masculine Behavior

The media, in addition to objectifying men and promoting standards for masculine attractiveness, is also instrumental in promoting standards of masculine behavior. Men in our society are pressured to behave and act in certain ways, by society as well as (if not more so) by the media. Moreover, more often than not, the media prescribed forms of behavior are unhealthy at best (Kilbourne, 1999). Advertising affects men’s gender-role attitudes, especially in those men who may have what are considered “non-traditional” gender-role attitudes. In addition, alcohol advertising uses “lifestyle branding” to espouse many standards of masculine behavior,
including various degrees of misogyny, a lack of emotions or of expression of emotion, and a
disdain for work. The media even promotes certain masculine standards when it comes to diet.

Garst and Bodenhausen have shown that men’s ideas regarding gender roles are not, in
fact, inflexible and concrete, but that they can be influenced greatly, even if for only short period
(1997). They exposed men of various gender attitudes (described as “traditional” or “non-
traditional”) to view print ads that depicted men in either traditionally or non-traditionally
masculine pastimes, poses, and activities. They discovered that typically non-traditional men,
when exposed to advertisements that presented more traditional forms of masculinity, “reverted”
to more traditionally masculine gender-role attitudes themselves immediately following their
seeing the ad. Conversely, men who held more traditional gender-role attitudes typically did not
vary in their attitudes after viewing the ads, regardless of whether the ad was more traditionally
masculine or if it was androgynous. Although previous research has shown that more and more
ads are depicting men in less-traditionally masculine pastimes, Garst and Bodenhausen show that
in fact, this is only true in typically feminine or gender neutral magazines (1997). Typically,
masculine magazines still depict men in advertisements in traditionally masculine pastimes
(Skelly & Lundstrom, as cited in Garst & Bodenhausen 1997). Additionally, these typically
masculine advertisements encourage men to adhere to a “masculine ideal” and “exude an aura of
physical strength, power, dominance, and detachment” and to “repress, and loath, their
‘feminine’ traits” (Jacobson and Mazur, as cited in Garst and Bodenhausen, 1997). Even men
who do not strictly adhere to traditional norms and mores of masculinity are vulnerable to the
pressures exerted in contemporary media.

Alcohol advertisements are especially adroit at promoting socially acceptable behaviors
and attitudes for men. Not only are beer and liquor ads guilty of being tacky and in poor taste,
but they also promote very negative ideas and standards for men to follow. Alcohol forms part of the “high holy trinity of alcohol, sports, and hegemonic masculinity” (Wenner, as cited by Messner and de Oca, 2005). Beer and liquor ads exercise what is known as “lifestyle branding,” in that rather than depict their product in some form of crisis resolution (beer does not help you clean up Spot’s mess), they depict their products as an instrumental part of creating an ultimately masculine lifestyle. This masculine lifestyle is the expected social norm, and men are expected to strive for it. Interestingly, Messner and de Oca point out that alcohol advertisements in the 1950s and 1960s usually depicted white, middle-class, heterosexual couples enjoying their beer together – something foreign and alien to today’s alcohol ads. Contemporary ads

… primarily construct a white male ‘loser’ whose life is apparently separate from paid labor. He hangs out with his male buddies, is self-mocking and ironic about his loser status, and is always at the ready to engage in voyeurism with sexy fantasy women but holds committed relationships and emotional honesty in disdain (Messner & de Oca, 2005, p. 1882).

The primary purpose of the lives of the men in these ads, it seems to the reader or viewer, is not to work but to engage in recreation.

Messner and de Oca go further in their examinations of contemporary alcohol advertisements, and they differentiate four primary gender roles depicted in alcohol ads (2005). There are the Losers – men whose masculinity is precarious, and who are typically not very intelligent, and are always on the verge of being humiliated in some way. There are Buddies – in which the safety of a group of men offsets the precariousness of their masculinity. Their solidity, primacy and emotional safety are often the centerpiece of alcohol ads. Then, for women, there are Hotties – highly sexualized fantasy objects that serve as potential prizes for men’s victories (such as drinking the right beer), that can also validate a man’s masculinity or humiliate him as a loser. Lastly, there are the Bitches – wives, girlfriends and other women to whom men are
emotionally committed and, when in ads, are depicted as emotional or sexual blackmailers who threaten to undermine individual men’s freedom. These four primary gender categories are depicted in alcohol ads, and it is clear exactly what type of negative impacts these sorts of messages might have (Messner & de Oca, 2005). The latent (or is it outright?) misogyny in these ads is disturbing, to be sure. As Messner and de Oca state, the alcohol industry seems intent on making men distrustful of women and in making them see women as sexual objects to be conquered with no emotional attachment or as bitches who are trying to restrict their freedom and ensnare them (2005). In doing so, advertisers keep men more open to the marketing strategies of their industry.

There is another potentially dangerous aspect of hegemonic masculinity as well. This is the traditionally masculine attitude that nutrition and dieting are typically feminine domains and that “real men” do not participate in these exercises. Typically, men eat much more high-caloric foods, fewer fruits and vegetables, and do not typically concern themselves with such minutiae as nutrition labels, calories, or fat content (Gough, 2007). Such concerns are considered primarily feminine, and one of the main tenets of hegemonic masculinity is to avoid - at almost any cost - being the least bit feminine. Gough has shown that there is widespread adherence to these aspects of hegemonic masculinity, particularly health-defeating diets, hearty meals (especially on special occasions), and a general distancing from the realm of dieting (2007). Indeed, where women are considered experts in the arenas of diet and nutrition, men are viewed as naïve and vulnerable. In fact, even when men may be experts in the “feminine” arenas of cooking, nutrition, and the like, it is often on more “masculine” terms (such as in positions of power like an Executive Chef, or in more masculine outdoor domains such as grilling,
barbecuing, or other forms of outdoor cooking) (Gough, 2007). In these instances, hegemonic masculinity is reinforced, rather than disputed, and traditional gender roles are maintained.

Conclusions

It is clear that the media has a great impact on society’s ideals of masculinity as well as femininity, and this impact is typically negative. Unfortunately, there has been little attention paid to these negative impacts. Compounding the situation is an educational culture that has become corrupted by the media itself and refuses to teach such vital skills such as media literacy and critical thinking (Kilbourne, 1999). The more jaded and cynical may be tempted to declare that the current climate of latent misandry is just desserts for several millennia of male domination and the oppression of women. Unfortunately, such attitudes are not constructive. As gender roles have evolved over the years, we now live in a time when both men and women have become objectified and manipulated. Though feminism has made and continues to make strides for the cause of women’s equality (though the actual effectiveness of these strides may be open to debate), it does seem that perhaps it is time for a more pronounced and visible wave of masculinism to take the stage. On the other hand, perhaps it might be more practical to impose greater regulation on the media and on advertisers. Nevertheless, before either of these can happen, there needs to be greater understanding of how the media affects our attitudes, ideas, and beliefs as they pertain to gender roles. Certainly much more research into these phenomena is warranted.
References


