

The Development of Male Gender Roles Depiction in American Commercials--Taking *Old Spice* as an Example

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ABSTRACT

Advertisements are projections of social values and representative glimpses of the cultural background of periods of time, and one of the apparent changes in commercial narratives is the common perception of gender roles. In this paper, several commercials of American male grooming brand Old Spice are selected and analyzed to study the change of their portrayal of men for the past 40 years. The examples come from three different periods, 1985-1995, 2010-2019, and 2020-2022 respectively. It is indicated that the depiction of men and the message behind it have been changing throughout the decades under the influence of decreasing gender stereotypes in Western society. This research will hopefully advance the field of reverse sexism and male gender portrayal in commercials.

Keywords: *Advertisement, Gender roles, Reverse Sexism, Social Marketing, Masculinity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Advertisement is the embodiment of brand values that have been carefully tailored to attract the target audiences, by carrying out messages that can resonate with their sense of identity. As humanity steps into the information age, advertisement forms are no longer limited to pictures in newspapers or break time during a radio program. TV and internet commercials became the new highlights because of the broadcast range and the frequency of exposure make them the most efficient way in mass media advertising. A crucial trait of commercials is they reflect the current cultural trend and political climate of a society and most of the time, cater the content to keep up with the mainstream since the audience's perception of a commercial directly affects their willingness to consume. The ideology of gender is a permanent hot topic, and as a marketing strategy, the representation of gender roles in advertisements is consistently changing as social norms evolve. Notably, there have been numerous studies of female portrayal in commercials, but little about the evolution of male portrayal. Thus, this paper will focus on the development of the depiction of male gender roles in the history of American commercials, taking Old Spice as an example. As a popular male grooming brand, Old Spice's advertisements are linked to reverse sexism which is

relatively rare and is therefore worth exploring. The representatives are from three different time periods: 1985-1995, 2010-2019, and 2020-2022. This research is designed to dig up on the changing perceptions of gender roles in the U.S. over the past decades and the progress of male representations in Old Spice commercials. It is also hoped that this paper will contribute to the future of gender study in new media.

2. CONSUMING MASCULINITY IN A FRAME

Gender roles, unlike the biological sex assigned to a person at birth, are socially constructed to serve and maintain certain cultural, sometimes even religious, or political purposes. Traditional gender roles position people into the set binary system that has a strict division between masculinity and femininity, in which males are expected to be tough, aggressive, and dominant while females, therefore, fall into a passive and subordinate place. A common misunderstanding is that patriarchal gender roles only harm women, but in fact men, too, are victims under the social pressure of unrealistically high expectations. Studies have shown that men are struggling from conforming to the hyper-muscular role and the meaning of men's social role and they desire to break free from the hegemonic constraints [3][5]. Gardiner also

points out that men are being harmed by the culturally idealized form of toxic masculinity because it limits men's freedom of career choosing, emotion expressing, and forces them to act in an expected way around both the same and the opposite sex and distorts their social and self-cognition [4]. Nonetheless, a surprising fact concluded by intergenerational research published in the *Psychology of Women Quarterly* journal is that in the U.S., people's gender stereotype in 2014 has not changed much from 1983, which is the last time researchers sampled from young adults, and the 2014 participants were even more likely to believe in gender-based psychological traits and occupation choices [14]. According to this research, men today have stronger beliefs that they should avoid everything atypical for their gender roles, but the question of how advertisement culture changes through the decades and if the advertisement or new media, in general, helps deepen the biases still needs to be studied.

There has been a long-term debate between the "mirror" argument and the "mold" argument, which hold opposite notions of the relationship between advertisement and cultural concepts. Holbrook's "mirror" argument suggests that advertising simply reflects existing values and advertisement adapts the changes in cultural concepts, such as gender expectations, and portrays them in a way to please the majority [7]. The "mirror" argument views the influence of advertisement as nearly negligible due to the fact that the real power of value impact lies in other social systems [2]. The "mold" argument suggested by Pollay, states that advertising molds and frames cultural values and cultivates the growth of the beliefs amongst target audiences because the expose of repetitive content promotes certain perceptions from the audience, which reinforces biased beliefs [13][6]. In the matter of male gender roles, advertising can be interpreted in both models above since the gender portrayal does reflect social values that already exist, but the exaggeration and repetitiveness of biased themed commercials carve more stereotypes into audiences' memory and gradually become a default standard for their judgment. Old Spice, a famous old name in the male grooming industry in the U.S., has a rather intriguing journey of its depiction of men's gender roles for the past 40 years that can bolster both the "mirror" and the "mold" argument.

3. THE ANALYSIS ON MALE GENDER ROLES IN OLD SPICE COMMERCIALS

Old Spice was founded in 1937 by William Lightfoot Schultz, and manufactured by the Shulton Company, but now owned by Procter & Gamble. Interestingly, the first Old Spice was designed for women, and men's products came out a year later. Before the 1970s, Old Spice mainly sold shaving products only but gradually broadened its

collections to deodorant, antiperspirant, shampoo and body wash, and even cologne.

3.1. Old Spice Commercials from 1985-1995: The Family Man

"What kind of man whistles the Old Spice tone?" this 1986 commercial narrative asked, with the Old Spice theme music in the background. "He's my daddy." Answered a boy. "My practically perfect husband." Said a woman, saying goodbye to her husband before he went to work. "You can count on him. He's the captain of my ship. He's a friend. An Old Spice man? A man's man." Answers from different voices, interweaved with scenes of men camping in the forest, sailing a boat and so forth while whistling the theme tune. "It's the favorite scent of the American men." Commented the narrator. As a commercial from the mid-1980s, it might seem more old-fashioned compared to contemporaneous ads from other brands such as Nike and Coca-Cola, due to its heavy tone on traditional values and family image which made it more similar to 1960s commercials. The definition of "a good man" in this commercial is being a trustworthy provider to his family and friends and therefore spreading out a message that Old Spice is the choice of capable all-American men with high morals.

Physical appeal is also subtly featured, implying that men should be familiar with sports and outdoor activities, which is typical for male products commercials, linking masculinity with danger and adrenaline. In a 1995 commercial, they montaged two scenes of a man applying aftershave lotions and a man showing off his surfing skills, with intense music in the background. By the end of the commercial, the narrator called Old Spice "the mark of a man". Similarly, in another early 90s antiperspirant commercial, the hero was a first responder who completed a rescue mission in a mountain and came home to his wife with confidence. It is worth noting that commercials during this period mainly focused on men's role of being dependable and useful for their families and society and having good qualities as a person in general. The "mirror" argument undoubtedly fits in better than the "mold" argument here, because commercials from this period were evidently reflecting the social values that had been existing for centuries.

3.2. Old Spice Commercials from 2010-2019: The Stud

On February 8th, 2010, Old Spice released a commercial called "The Man Your Man Can Smell Like", starring actor and former NFL athlete Isaiah Mustafa. It went phenomenally popular and later became the most representative advertisement from Old Spice and it was seen as the worth learning example of perfect branding by marketing teams around the globe. In this 30 seconds commercial, a topless Mustafa started off with light-

hearted jokes that the female audience's men would never look like him, but at least they could smell like him if they stop using "lady-scented body wash" and switch to Old Spice, followed by quick and dazzling transitions through sets from the bathroom to a yacht then to a horse, with visual effects such as oysters and diamonds, and lastly, Mustafa conveyed, "anything is possible when your man smells like Old Spice and not a lady" [8]. The catchphrase at the end, "smell like a man, man", became the slogan of Old Spice for a whole decade since the extremely high publicity of this particular piece, even though it is on the very edge between being humorous and being offensive since it openly insults and humiliates men who do not have a perfect body.

Two of David's main components of masculine expectations are "the sturdy oak", which emphasizes on physical and emotional toughness; while the other is "no sissy stuff", which sets rules for men to avoid feminine traits, which is usually interpreted as borderline homophobic [1]. Sexism is the base of toxic masculinity because it considers femininity as lesser, weaker traits that males, as the superior sex, should not come near to. The two components are both exploited to the fullest in this commercial: an alpha man should look and smell like pure masculine power, whilst the men who fail at that would not be reckoned worthy for women or his manhood. The trend of overselling toxic masculinity and sex to both male and female customers stayed with Old Spice throughout the 2010s. Unlike the 80s commercials, moral standards are precluded in the majority of 10s advertisement, indicating that Old Spice took a sharp turn in marketing strategy which reflect the change of the cultural concepts of brand values.

Most of the commercials in the period heavily focused on the importance and necessity of being physically perfect and attractive to the opposite sex, which is more of a "mold" argument feature since instead of simple reflecting, all these ads put out a view that if a man does not use grooming products specifically designed for male-only, then it is a show of immaturity of his gender expectation. Taking figure 3 as an example, it is proclaimed that Old Spice products help "boys", the ones who use gender-neutral or female products, step into their "adult phrase", grooming in a more "manly" way. Male gender portrayal during the 10s is forced into a macho heteronormative frame under the impact of the booming era of smartphones, social media and represents a retrogression in gender that also reinforce the over-accentuation of reverse sexism in the real world.



Figure 1 The Man Your Man Can Smell Like [12]



Figure 2 The Package [15]



Figure 3 Gift a Boy into a Man [11]

3.3. Old Spice Commercials from 2020-2022: Your Best Self

Although it is only the beginning of a new decade, Old Spice already cut from a new angle for its advertising. In two of its 2020 commercials, they brought back the legendary "Old Spice Guy" Isaiah Mustafa, but this time as the father to the main character. In both two ads, Mustafa tried to convince his "son" to use the classic Old Spice products he liked, but the young man rejected him. "I'm not like you, dad", he explained that he preferred the new "Ultra Smooth" collection. The tagline of "smell like a man, man" was also altered to "smell like your own man, man".



Figure 4 Your Own Man [9]

A series from 2020 to 2022 delivered another new slogan, “men have skin too”. These commercials showed how women loved Old Spice and tried to keep all their male partners’ products to themselves by sneakily using them or hiding them away but eventually got caught. The men softly complained to the women for stealing their Old Spice and emphasized men have skin too. In this series, the major focus is on the product efficacies and benefits, which is the nature and basic function of advertisements. For example, they pointed out that their antiperspirant and deodorant are long-lasting, and their body washes and lotions are so moisturizing that the ladies prefer them rather than the brands that are exclusively designed for females. In addition, one of the newest Old Spice collections is lavender-scented, which is comparably rare since lavender is usually regarded as a feminine scent. These combined messages propose to the female audience a change in shopping choices for both themselves and their partners.



Figure 5 Man Have Skin Too [10]

Those two series of long-running commercials to a certain extent, liberate male gender roles from its constraints by expressing two perspectives: Firstly, there is no shame for a man to take care of his skin and body and it is not considered as “sissy”; Secondly, there is no longer idealized standards for men needing to be followed and obeyed because every man is their own person and shall follow his preference. There is significantly less objectification of men and borderline body shaming in the 20s commercials too, besides the still topless Isaiah Mustafa, which is only a tribute to his original commercial from 2010, most of the other advertisements do not feature perfectly built bodies anymore. It is a big leap forward in the progressing male gender portraying as Western society becomes more inclusive on gender identity and less sexist gender roles, and hence also backs up the “mirror” argument by projecting the new culture concepts on gender-related ideologies.

4. CONCLUSION

Reverse sexism in advertising is a field that is easily ignored and seldomly discussed, but just as stereotypes and discriminations against females, males are facing pressure and exploitation as well. For the past 40 years, the definition of gender roles has been dramatically changing like never before in history and the audiences

witnessed an evolution of male gender depiction in Old Spice commercials of how it transformed from traditional conservative masculinity to toxic masculinity and finally stepped into a more open space for the diversity of gender roles without forced expectations. Although both the “mirror” and the “mold” argument are observed to be shown in the transformation since the social concepts and the advertisements are shaping and reinforcing each other and formed a closed loop, the “mirror” argument embodiment is more commonly seen in Old Spice’s marketing strategy which manifestly keeps reflecting the current cultural background and social values at times. More meta-research on reverse sexism in marketing could be done, focusing on a large scale in statistics than one brand at a time, but hopefully this paper does contribute to this rarely discovered domain.

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