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**Option 1 – Masculinity and male
gender identity in advertising**

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Media Literacy**

Introduction

This essay proffers a critical discussion of masculinity and male gender identity in South African advertising. This will be done by, firstly, looking at how masculinity or – more correctly – *masculinities* are defined and understood. Secondly, this essay will look at how these ideas of masculinity are portrayed in advertisements. This will be done with specific reference to a number of advertisements.

This discussion is situated within the ambit of media literacy. Potter defines “media literacy” as “a perspective from which we expose ourselves to the media and interpret the meanings of the messages we encounter” (1998:5). Because the media largely construct our ideas of reality, we – as media consumers – need to be able to understand these messages so as not to develop “faulty beliefs” of the world (Potter, 1998:38). This essay will critically analyse how advertising – a major component of the media as we know it today – portrays masculinity and male identity. The aim of this is to understand the meanings of the gendered messages that we encounter in the media.

Masculinity and male gender identity

Much has been written about the portrayal of women, female gender identity and stereotypes in the media and in advertising. And rightly so. Masculinity and male gender identity, however, should also be included in this kind of analysis since the media also buy into and shape our ideas of these concepts.

Before one can discuss this, one must first understand the concept of “gender”. It must be stressed that gender is a cultural construct and refers to “the behaviours, attitudes, values [and] beliefs ... which a particular society expects from, or considers appropriate to, males and females on the basis of their biological sex” (Watson & Hill, 2003:115). Through its messages, the media play an important part in the forming and reinforcing of gender stereotypes and the expectations about gender roles (*Ibid*).

What, then, is the traditional idea of male gender identity? Masculinity is usually associated with aggression, independence and activity (Abercrombie *et al.*, 2006:238). To

this one might add masculinity connotes “courage, inner direction ... autonomy, mastery, technological skill, group solidarity, adventure and considerable amounts of toughness of mind and body” (Sexton quoted in Donaldson, 1993:644).^{*} It has been argued that masculinity in contemporary societies is in crisis because modernisation means that gender roles are more relaxed and men now have to compete with women in nearly every aspect of life (Abercrombie *et al.*, 2006:238). Furthermore, gender identity has never been homogenous and in recent years a greater variety of masculinities – from the jock to the sensitive guy – have been visible in the media (Martin & Gnoth, 2009:354).

Advertisements

Within the South African context, portrayals of the traditional idea of masculinity have been most evident in alcohol advertisements, particularly advertisements for beer. The advertisements for Carling Black Label and Castle Lager all make use of the traditional idea of what men should be like.



Picture 1 – An advertisement for Carling Black Label

For example, the above advertisement for Carling Black Label illustrates this idea perfectly. This advertisement ties in with a whole series of advertisements which were printed and broadcasted; these advertisements depict strong, well-built men working in construction and building something together. At the end of the day they reward

^{*} Traditional ideas of female gender identity, by contrast, have defined “femininity” as being “caring, warm and sexually attractive, as well as passive, weak and dependant” (Abercrombie *et al.*, 2006:144).

themselves by enjoying some ice-cold beers together. Ideas of male (physical) strength and team-work are quite evident here.

Another example of a beer advertisement that plays on male stereotypes is that of Castle Lager (see Picture 2). These advertisements depict a group of friends drinking beer and fooling around in different situations. Both of these beer advertisements reinforce the ideas of male camaraderie and adventure.



Picture 2 – Stills from the advertisement for Castle Lager

In a similar vein, many advertisements for motor vehicles have been loaded with extremely gendered messages and have been aimed specifically at a male market.



Picture 3 – An advertisement for Jeep

For example, the Jeep advertisement (Picture 3) reinforces the stereotype of men as brave and independent adventurers who can escape the constraints of everyday life and be free. What we see emerging in all of these advertisements is a variety of different facets of male stereotypes: physical strength, team-work and camaraderie and adventure are particularly evident. What is particularly important here is the fact these are not advertisements for any gender specific products; anyone can drink beer or drive a Jeep. The decision to pair these products with traditional masculine lifestyle choices lends a specific gendered quality to these products.

This has, however, not been the only “face” of masculinity appearing in the media. In recent years, the figure of the “metrosexual” – heterosexual men who usually use so-called beauty products traditionally reserved for women – has emerged and become a particularly pervasive image in the media, not to mention a lucrative market (Martin & Gnoth, 2009:354). Much has been made of the metrosexual market as an alternative to the traditional construction of masculinity and a breaking-down of male stereotypes.

This essay, however, argues that this image of the metrosexual in advertising does not represent the polar opposite of the traditional idea of masculinity. Rather, the figure of the metrosexual in the media is a compromise between the male market's demands for new products on the one hand and the traditional expectations of what it means to be a man on the other.



Picture 4 – Men's fragrance advertisements. From left to right: Hugo Boss XY, Sean John's Unforgivable and DKNY's Red Delicious.

This is most evident in advertisements for “metrosexual” products such as men's fragrance, facial products and lotions. For example, in advertisements for men's fragrance (see Picture 4), the male figures are still quite masculine. In many of these advertisements, the male models are chiseled and scruffy – signs of their virility and strength – and are usually depicted with women. The inclusion of women in these advertisements implies that men's fragrances can be used to attract women. The recent tendency to use vey “masculine” celebrities – such as Sean John above – is meant to make these products seem manlier. Recent research has shown that the market respond better to “masculine” male models than to feminine or androgynous male models (Martin & Gnoth, 2009:356-357). The use of the word “fragrance” – rather than feminine “perfume” – in these advertisements should also be noted.

Even though these advertisements aim to sell products that are traditionally regarded as “women's products”, the images in these advertisements quite explicitly reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. Most obviously, these advertisements suggest that men

have a kind of aura or magnetism that makes them irresistible to women. The traditional idea of the man as conqueror is apparent in this regard. Moreover, this also reinforces the stereotype of men as active and women as passive since these advertisements suggest that women cannot stop themselves from being attracted to the male figure in these advertisements.



Picture 5 – Advertisements for *Nivea for Men*

The same can be said about the advertisements for *Nivea for Men* – a range of “beauty” products such as face creams and body lotions marketed directly towards men. One of their television advertisements for a “revitalizing oil” depicts a number of different men, each of whom have had a rough night: one has fallen asleep at his desk while working and another one has been out partying until late. They all wake up, apply their revitalizing oil and then they are ready to take on the day and all its challenges.

Despite the fact that these advertisements market metrosexual products, they still carry messages that portray men as active, brave and independent figures who can tackle any problem or challenge. Similarly, the advertisement for *Nivea for Men*’s anti-aging cream work with the idea of men as responsible and take-charge types who take care of the appearance because it is an investment. What is interesting here is that these advertisements reinforce the stereotypical idea of men as more practical-minded than women. This is because these products are made out to be functional products with a purpose rather than merely “beauty products”.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it appears that the traditional stereotypical ideas of masculinity and what it means to be a man are still pervasive in South African advertising and the media. This essay has argued that, despite the recent rise of the metrosexual, advertising still reinforces the belief that practicality, activity, independence, strength and camaraderie are inherently masculine qualities. These qualities are even visible in advertisements for metrosexual products such as fragrances, face creams and body lotions.

In terms of media literacy, people should be made more aware of these underlying messages regarding gender roles as they appear in the media and advertising. People should not just be educated about the negative portrayal of women in the media but also of how men and the values traditionally associated with them, are perceived. By cultivating an awareness of these images and addressing them, better gender relations and equality can hopefully be fostered.

Sources cited

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