Consumer perceptions of masculinity in advertising: the viewpoint of Generation Zand Millennials

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ABSTRACT [1]

The purpose of the research is to explore Gennerations Z's and millennials' perceptions of masculinity in advertising. This can help advertisers to understand what type of masculine character to focus on and whether advertisers' offered version of masculinity is in alignment with consumer preferences. Research methods consisted of an extensive literature review process and quantitative research methods such as survey research of younger consumer segments such as Generation Z and millennials. The empirical results were analyzed using the SPSS 23 statistical software program. The research found that consumers tend to approve of modern masculinity in advertising more than traditional ones, with women approving of modern in slightly more convincing numbers than men. The research also found that consumers give preference to the display of affection and love and depicting masculinity less stereotypically in modern masculinity advertisements.

Keywords: Advertising, masculinity, consumer, perception, marketing, communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

As gender role portrayal has become an important issue in international advertising, researchers have become more and more interested in how advertisers choose to depict masculinity in their communication to the consumer. It is argued that men, as a cultural entity and a market force, are undergoing rapid change due to a cultural shift taking place in Western society. In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in the topic of masculinity in advertising due to Gillette's controversial ad aiming against toxic masculinity and promoting inclusivity.

Consumer perception of changing notions of masculinity

is particularly important for marketing professionals because advertising is created based on assumptions about society. For instance, what does society appreciate and want to have, including material possessions and a preferable version of themselves. Many researchers of advertising argue that masculinity is now branded [1]. Masculinity in advertising is so prominent because it evokes a lot of emotions in consumers and, thus, generates more significant consumer engagement [2; 3]. Furthermore, researchers argue that men are increasingly marketed to and offered visions of masculinity for consumption. In other words, masculinity has become a product [4].

Masculinity in advertising helps the company connect with its audience and convince them that the advertised product is crucial to achieving such a version of masculinity as portrayed. The term masculinity refers to a socially- defined set of attributes, behaviors, and roles associated with boys and men [5]. What is considered masculine changes over time and varies between and within societies [6], and that presents a problem for advertisers: consumer perception of masculinity is changing [7]. Therefore, advertisers can be confused about how to speak to consumers' changing perceptions. It is unclear what consumers think about this product, that is, masculinity, and what consumers think about various approaches that advertisers are using to sell their version of masculinity alongside the actual product.

For the purpose of determining whether masculinity is being presented effectively to consumers, it is necessary to research consumer perceptions of masculinity and their approval of the current methods used by advertisers. Therefore, the research questions are: What is the current consumer perception of masculinity in advertising? Which type of masculinity in advertising is more favorable and resonates more with consumers? And finally, is there a discrepancy between what men and women think about masculinity in advertising?

This research article consists of six major parts. First, there is an introduction to the topic and a literature review with a summary of the two major masculinity

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types. Then there is the Research methods section with an explanation of how the research was carried out and the reasoning for the surveys as well as the structure of them. The fourth part shows the results of the research, and finally, in the fifth part, there is a discussion of the results followed by conclusions of the research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The authors started the research back in 2018 with an extensive literature review process. The authors chose the literature overview method from the literature review methods, which included identifying the topic for review, conducting a literature search, reading the research that was found, and taking notes. Finally, the process included organizing the notes and creating the literature review itself, incorporating it into the research. The authors used the Scopus database to search for relevant latest research (years 2018 and 2019, the years when the study was started) with the keyword "Masculinity" in the article title, abstract, or as a keyword of the article. In the subject area checking social sciences and business management, the database provided 2558 articles. By going through the search results, the authors chose articles that extensively focused on masculinity, defining masculinity, and concentrating on various types of masculinity.

There were 32 articles that were selected at first based on the criteria, but by reading through the articles, 26 more articles were chosen for additional analysis. Later, there were several more articles added by analyzing other sources. These articles helped the authors to first understand and then analyze traditional, hybrid, and modern masculinity and various other important elements for this research. Moreover, to analyze masculinity in the context of branding and advertising, there was a new literature review conducted. For that, the authors also used the Scopus database and put keywords as "Masculinity" and "Advertising" and selected years of 2018, 2019, and 2020. In the subject area, the authors checked social sciences and business management. The database provided 46 articles, out of which 18 were selected as relevant. By reading these articles, additional 39 articles were added that seemed relevant to the research. Later on, more articles from the year 2021 were added by reading relevant theories and other sources.

After conducting an extensive literature review, the author concluded that researchers mainly distinguish two very different types of masculinity, such as traditional masculinity and modern or inclusive masculinity. Traditional masculinity is most commonly associated with physical strength and athleticism [8], wealth [4], bravery [9], patriotism and emotional stoicism [10], power and aggression [11], dominance, and a sense of entitlement [12], decisiveness and risk-seeking [13], and being a breadwinner, in other words providing for the family [14]. In contrast, modern masculinity is most commonly associated with progressive thinking [10], having an interest in culture [11], being apologetic [15], being emotionally expressive [16], open-minded [14], narcissism and immaturity [17], interest in fashion [11], being sensitive and compassionate [18], inclusiveness [14], and being brave enough to be whoever the man wants to be [15].

Advertisers want to depict masculinity in a way that fits the consumer perception of it because that will increase the chance that the ad will resonate with the audience. However, these efforts have had a wide range of success; for instance, Orth and Holancova [19] have found that consumers tend to approve of more stereotypical role illustrations in advertising, which translates into a more positive ad and brand attitudes [2]. Similarly, Putrevu [20] concluded that men and women are likely to respond more positively to communication that is in tune with traditional gender stereotypes. In addition, several other researchers concur, saying that, for instance, competitiveness, a muscular physique, and other symbols of conventional masculinity can help advertisers achieve positive consumer feedback [21].

On the other hand, other studies have come up with opposite conclusions, namely that gender stereotyping results in negative ad and brand attitudes [22; 23]. This can be explained by the fact that counter-stereotypical appeals are more surprising and could therefore provoke more positive feelings [19]. In addition, researchers have found that advertising nowadays should promote a paradigm shift when it comes to gender roles [24]. Due to these inconsistent results from prior studies there is a need for a new and nuanced research on consumer perceptions of traditional versus modern masculinity depictions in advertising.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

The previous research by the authors on this topic mainly consisted of qualitative research methods, such as sentiment analysis, discourse analysis, and qualitative content analysis. However, to ensure the validity of the results by diversifying data collection and how the data is being analyzed, for this particular research, the authors focused on quantitative research methods. Quantitative methods can give precise and testable expressions to qualitative ideas. It was determined that quantitative methods that could help analyze the consumer perceptions of masculinity in advertising would be surveys because surveys provide a quantitative description of attitudes and opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population [25]. The survey aimed to understand whether consumers appreciate how masculinity is depicted in advertising, whether they mostly see men being portrayed in traditional or modern ways in advertising, and whether depictions of

masculinity have an effect on their buying behavior.

The process of creating the survey involved several steps based on theory [26], such as defining the purpose and objectives of the survey, selecting relevant questions using the knowledge gathered from the literature review process, and finding fitting advertisements to select as objects. The survey was done in two sections. In the first section, the respondents answered a few questions about who they are and their demographics, such as gender, age etc. In the second section, the respondents answered sixteen survey-type questions (multiple choice). There were various questions about their preferences, opinions, and attitudes when it comes to masculinity in advertising.

The time period of the surveys being filled out was ten months, from May 2021 to February 2022. The process of getting the respondents for the survey was long and difficult. The reason for that could have been the fact that it took around 15 minutes to fill out the survey. The surveys were first sent out across Europe through various colleagues and acquaintances, but the response rate was very low. Then the focus was solely on Latvian consumers and all age groups, but that also gave a very low response rate. Finally, the authors started to focus on students. The authors surveyed bachelor's students from the Academy of Culture in Latvia as 1st and 3rd-year students and bachelor's and master's level students from Riga Technical University. The students studied various programs such as business administration, logistics, quality management, safety engineering, etc. (first, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th year Bachelor students and 1st year Master students). This strategy yielded positive results in terms of the surveys being filled out with a much higher response rate because the authors were personally there in the classrooms and auditoriums during the process of students filling out the surveys.

Since the focus of respondents became students, the population which was the main focus of the survey became Millennials, who were born between 1977 and 2000 [27], and Generation Z, who were born after 2000, although many analysts include people born after 1995 in this group [28] as one group and the core demographic of this survey. These groups as the core demographic of the research are interesting and relevant because these two groups are the future of consumerism due to millennials and Genneration Z entering their financial prime in the near future. They are also interesting to analyze for this particular research because younger audiences in Latvia have been influenced by their conservative parents, who are grown up during Soviet Union times, but they also have influence from modern-day American and Western Europe pop culture (movies, music, TV shows), which depicts different values and gender norms. Furthermore, the younger audience is also interesting for the reason that many scholars now suggest that the millennial generation has promoted a culture that is much more

inclusive and cohesive (McCormack 2012; Thurnell-Reid 2012; Robinson, 2019). Therefore it is interesting to see whether this claim by several authors is accurate. In other words, determining whether younger generations in Latvia overwhelmingly select the advertisements depicting modern masculinity where inclusiveness, equality, and rejecting gender stereotypes are the key elements of this masculinity type became one of the goals.

The sample size of the Latvian population between the ages of 18 and 30 is approximately 207 000 people (Central bureau of statistics in Latvia). The necessary sample size was calculated using a sample size formula (Ryan, 2013). The confidence level, which is the percentage that reveals how confident a researcher can be that the population would select an answer within a certain range, was selected at 95%. While the margin of error, which is the percentage that tells how much one can expect the survey results to reflect the views of the overall population, was selected at 5%. Both chosen values are standard values for sample size calculation.

According to the formula, the required sample size that would accurately reflect the views and opinions of the selected population was 384 respondents. The total amount of respondents was 483. However, after taking out a few surveys that were filled out by older generations than the ones selected and people from other European countries outside Latvia (because the focus was shifted to only the Latvian population), the number came down to 420 respondents. Since the authors wanted to focus on analyzing the differences between men and women and their preferences towards masculinity in advertising, the three surveys where respondents selected "other" as their gender (people who do not identify as either male or female) were excluded. That was done because three respondents were too few to reasonably be able to make conclusions about the entire subgroup in Latvia. Therefore, the final count of eligible surveys (Latvian youth, age 18-30, men and women) for the analysis resulted in 417 (n=417), with 142 being men and 275 being women.

The analysis was done using SPSS 23 statistical software program. The survey was created in a way that every question had a 100% response rate because, in either of the two sections of questions, respondents could not go on to the next question if the previous one was not answered. However, in the first section, there were some answers that simply did not make sense. For example, to the question, "Do you generally like the way masculinity is depicted in advertising?" four respondents answered both "yes" and "no." Therefore, these results were taken out. Although invalid answers were very rare, every question had some answers that had to be taken out from consideration for the analysis.

The analysis of the results started with a cross-

examination. The authors wanted to see whether respondents had fulfilled the surveys carefully and in good faith. For this reason, a few questions were intentionally similar or revealed similar characteristics in different questions that the respondents could choose. For example, the authors selected two questions from the survey in SPSS: "Which display of masculinity in advertising would resonate more with you?" and "Do you agree with the statement "A man should be the main provider for the family" (be the breadwinner)?" By choosing the SPSS's Cross tabulation feature, the authors found that of the respondents who selected "breadwinner" as one of the masculinity characteristics displayed in an advertisement that would most resonate with the respondent, 87% of the respondents answered yes to the question of whether a man should be the breadwinner (main provider for the family). Due to examples like this, the authors determined that respondents filled out the surveys carefully and comprehended the questions, and filled them out in good faith.

Regarding the differences between men's and women's responses the authors wanted to analyze whether there is a statistical significance of the data collected from the respondents. For that there was a need to make a hypothesis.

H0: there is no difference between men's and women's response
H1: there is a difference between men's and women's response

To accept or reject the hypothesis, there is a need to calculate the p-value. A p-value less than 0.05 (typically ≤ 0.05) is statistically significant. It indicates strong evidence against the null hypothesis, as there is less than a 5% probability the null is correct (and the results are random). Conventions (p value being 0,05) helps having a common language in science.
In order to calculate the p- values of the empirical data, the author followed the necessary steps:
1st step: take the empirical values of the surveys that were summarized using SPSS 23 program and put them in easy to read table.
2nd step: determine the calculated values by taking the empirical values and following the formula (sum of the row * sum of the column/ the total). This is done for the every value of the empirical values table.
3rd step: calculate the X2 empirical values following the formula:
(empirical value- calculated value)2/ Calculated value
This is done for every value in the table.
4th step: calculate the sum of X2 values, thus getting Empirical X2 value, which does not have any meaning on its own, but is necessary for further calculations.
5th step: calculate the degree of freedom based on the formula
Degree of freedom= (amount of rows-1)*(amount of columns -1)
6th step: use "CHIDIST" function on Excel and adding the two necessary values for this function (first adding the X2 empirical value and then adding the degree of freedom value).
7th step: comparing the value with 0,05 to confirm or reject the hypothesis.

4. RESULTS

One of the main questions of the survey was, "Do you generally like the way masculinity is depicted in advertising?" Of the respondents, 41% (35% men and 45% women) do not like how advertisers show masculinity in their advertisements, which means that only 59% (overall) like masculinity's depiction in advertising. Furthermore, only 2% (overall) say that they like very much how advertisers depict masculinity. The authors argue that it is a very low number, considering that it is the goal of advertisers to connect with the audiences, to be liked by it, and for the character of the advertisement to resonate with the consumers.

Interestingly, when this question is paired (SPSS's Cross tabulation feature) with another critical question of the survey, "Can depictions of masculinity in advertising affect your buying decisions?" then of the people who say that they do not like the way masculinity is depicted in advertising 49,7% say that depictions of masculinity in advertising affect their buying decisions. In addition, of the respondents who strongly dislike the way masculinity is depicted in advertising, 72,3% say that depictions of masculinity in advertising affect their buying decisions. This points to a problem or rather a lost opportunity, meaning that if companies manage to depict masculinity in a more appealing way in their advertisements to the consumers, the consumers might respond favorably to these companies with their purchases.

Regarding the statistical significance of the difference between men's and women's responses, considering that the calculated p-value is 0,155457, the H0 hypothesis cannot be rejected. Therefore, the result does not show statistical significance between men's and women's responses in how different they are from each other.

Based on the literature review, the authors found it essential to discover whether consumers see mostly traditional or modern masculinity in advertising. To the authors' surprise, most of the respondents still see traditional masculinity as a more common occurrence in advertising (55% overall, with 49% men and 59% women).
Using SPSS's cross-tabulation feature the authors discovered that of the ones who like how masculinity is depicted in advertising, 47,8% think that advertising mostly shows traditional masculinity, compared to 33%

who think it is the modern masculinity mostly depicted in advertising. Therefore, the results can be interpreted that among the young Latvian population, traditional masculinity is favored by 14,8% over modern masculinity. On the other hand, of the respondents who do not like the way masculinity is depicted in advertising, 61% think that advertising mostly shows traditional masculinity (compared to 21% who think that modern masculinity can be seen more often in advertising). This result shows a 40% gap between a dislike for traditional masculinity over modern masculinity. Overall, both groups (who like and do not like masculinity's depiction in advertising) think that traditional masculinity can be viewed more often than modern masculinity, although the results from cross-tabulation of these two questions show a slight preference to modern masculinity. That confirms the statements of researchers discussed in literature review process, who suggest that Gen Zers and millennials are more inclusive and open-minded, indicating a similar preference regarding masculinity type.

Concerning statistical significance of men's and women's responses, considering that the calculated p-value is 0,087171 which is slightly higher than 0,05, H0 hypothesis cannot be rejected. In other words, we would be wrong 91% of the time if we reject H0 hypothesis. Therefore, the result does not show statistical significance between men's and women's responses in how different they are from each other.

The preference for modern masculinity is more significant when considering the results of a question, "Which display of masculinity in advertising would resonate more with you?" (Figure 1). The results show an overwhelming preference for key modern masculinity characteristics over the traditional ones, with the natural assumption that what resonates with consumers is what they consequently prefer.
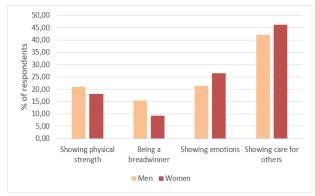

Figure 1. Characteristics mostly resonating with consumers (Authors' original work)
Respondents said that "Showing care for others" would resonate most with them (42% men and 46% women), with "Showing emotion" being the second element most likely to resonate with them (21% men and 27%

women). Compared with the results for the key traditional masculinity elements, one could see a rather significant preference for modern masculinity characteristics, especially among women. Furthermore, while the differences between men's and women's responses are not enormous, it still shows that men favor traditional masculinity traits such as "Showing physical strength" and "Being a breadwinner" more than women.

With respect to the statistical significance of men's and women's responses, considering that the calculated p-value is 0,056263 which is slightly higher than 0,05, H0 hypothesis cannot be rejected. In other words, we would be wrong 94% of the time if we reject H0 hypothesis. Therefore, the result does not show statistical significance between men's and women's responses in how different they are from each other.

As shown in Figure 2, respondents reported a similar result to the previous question, in their responses to the question, "Do you agree with the statement "A man should be the main provider for the family" (be the breadwinner)? While a slight majority of respondents rejected the statement that a man has to be the main provider for the family, a key traditional masculinity characteristic, the rejection of this idea was not an overwhelming one (37% versus 33% overall).
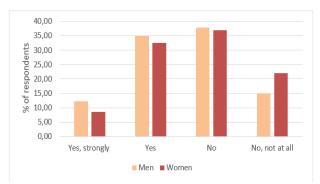

Figure 2. Approval rating for men's role as the breadwinner (Authors' original work)

A slightly more convincing result shows in responses "No, not at all" versus "Yes, strongly" with 20% versus 10% overall. The results are similar and consistent with previous results in another way. That is, women again show less support for the breadwinner role for men than men themselves. However, it has to be noted that the difference between men's and women's responses to this question is rather insignificant.

As for the statistical significance of men's and women's responses, considering that the calculated p-value is 0,296269 which is considerably higher than 0,05, H0 hypothesis cannot be rejected. In other words, we would be wrong 70% of the time if we reject H0 hypothesis. Therefore, the result does not show statistical significance between men's and women's responses in

how different they are from each other.

Finally, an essential question that the authors found necessary to find answers to was the question, "Can depictions of masculinity in advertising affect your buying decisions?" Some of the results were already discussed earlier in this chapter with a different question using SPSS software's cross-tabulation feature, but here are the results on their own. Men reported higher confirmation of the statement, with 44% saying that masculinity depiction in advertising affects their purchasing decisions and an additional 14% saying that it has a strong effect even. That makes a total of 58%, while women reported 47 % of being affected by masculinity depictions in advertising (6% of them being greatly affected).

Regarding the statistical significance of men's and women's responses considering that the calculated p-value is 0,008186 which is lower than 0,05, H1 hypothesis cannot be rejected. Therefore, the result does show statistical significance between men's and women's responses in how different they are from each other, indicating that there is a significant difference in how masculinity depictions in advertising affect men's and women's purchasing decisions.

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Overall the survey part showed the great importance of masculinity depictions in advertising in the eyes of young Latvian consumers, both men, and women. As suspected, men proved to see it as more important than women and were more affected by the way masculinity is presented. Furthermore, the survey showed a

consistent preference for modern masculinity over traditional, although, at times, it did not seem to be an overwhelming preference. Finally, men seem to prefer traditional masculinity characteristics more than women, including the man's role of a breadwinner.

5. DISCUSSION

Prior studies have noted the importance of analyzing masculinity in the context of advertising. However, prior studies have not summarized all the characteristics that traditional and modern masculinity entail and used them in a detailed study of consumer perceptions of it. In this research, the authors conducted a thorough literature review and surveys to understand consumer preferences on the matter of masculinity in the context of advertising.

Due to an extensive literature review process, the authors were able to classify the three major masculinity types and related concepts to them as well as key characteristics that define these types of masculinity. There was some overlap between hybrid masculinity and traditional on one end and modern on the other. However, the differences between traditional and modern are stark both in scientific literature and in advertisements, which is also proved in the respondents' survey responses.

The survey results showed that Latvian Generation Z and millennial men and women are rather evenly split on whether they like or dislike how masculinity is depicted in advertising. Of the people who say that they do not like the way masculinity is depicted in advertising, 49,7% say that depictions of masculinity in advertising affect their buying decisions. In addition, of the respondents who strongly dislike the way masculinity is depicted in advertising, 72,3% say that depictions of masculinity in advertising affect their buying decisions. The survey results also show that while being a breadwinner is a less important characteristic of modern masculinity characteristics, nearly half of the consumers surveyed still consider a man's role as the breadwinner (provider for the family).

The survey results also show that both groups (who like and do not like masculinity's depiction in advertising) think that traditional masculinity can be viewed more often than modern masculinity, although the results from SPSS's cross-tabulation of these two questions show a slight preference for modern masculinity. That confirms the statements of researchers from prior studies who suggest that Gen Zers and millennials are more inclusive and open-minded, indicating a similar preference regarding masculinity type.

Overall the survey part showed the great importance of masculinity depictions in advertising in the eyes of young Latvian consumers, both men and women. As suspected, men proved to see it as more important than

women and were more affected by the way masculinity is presented. Furthermore, the survey showed a consistent preference for modern masculinity over traditional, although, at times, it did not seem to be an overwhelming preference. Finally, men seem to prefer traditional masculinity characteristics more than women, including the man's role of a breadwinner.

Regarding statistical significance, calculations of p-values showed that men and women surprisingly have similar views of masculinity in advertising, and no statistically significant differences were found in the answers of respondents.

Further research will expand the research methods for assessing consumer perceptions of masculinity in advertising by conducting focus groups with consumers and interviews with advertising industry experts.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This research aimed to understand the current consumer perceptions of masculinity in advertising and how advertisers should depict masculinity in order to get consumer approval. The research concluded that advertisers and researchers mainly distinguish traditional and modern masculinity, with traditional entailing strength, success, power, and aggression and modern entailing sensitivity, compassion, caring, and emotionality.

Advertisers mainly focus on traditional masculinity as it is the most common masculinity type used in popular advertising in the last decade. Consumers are nearly evenly split on whether they like or dislike how men are being portrayed in advertising, furthermore suggesting that depictions of masculinity in half of the cases have an effect on their buying decisions.

Consumers tend to approve of modern masculinity in advertising more than traditional one, with women approving of modern in slightly more convincing numbers than men. Consumers give preference to the display of affection and love and depict masculinity less stereotypically in modern masculinity advertisements. There are no statistically significant differences in men's and women's preferences when it comes to depictions of masculinity in advertising.

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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