

What are Gen Z's and Millennials' opinions on Masculinity in Advertising: a Qualitative Research Study

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Abstract

The aim of the research is to explore young audiences such as Generation Z's and millennials' opinions on traditional and modern masculinity in advertising. The researchers used the YouTube platform for opinion mining on several advertisements selected to find out what themes emerge from these discourses. By using Nvivo 11 qualitative data analysis software researchers conducted qualitative content analysis, sentiment analysis, and discourse analysis. The results showed that masculinity in advertising gets a lot of Gen Zers' and millennials' attention while the product discourse does not get any noteworthy importance in the discussions about the advertisements. In addition, the research found that when commenting on the advertisements consumers take into consideration the entire context of masculinity and the contemporary notions of it in society, media, popular culture, and competitor's advertisements. The study also concluded that that consumers are more emotionally expressive and opinionated when viewing modern masculinity advertisements than traditional.

Keywords: *Generation Z; millennials, advertising; masculinity, gender.*

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in the changing notions about masculinity in advertising, largely 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 (Daechun & Kim, 2007), what does the society appreciate and want to have including material possessions and preferable version of themselves. This question is particularly relevant when advertisers and researchers want to better understand younger audiences such as millennials and Generation Z because many scholars now suggest that the millennial generation has created a much more inclusive culture (McCormack 2012; Thurnell-Reid 2012; Robinson et al., 2019). Nevertheless, marketing to Gen Zers and millennials presents special challenges. While traditional media is still important to these groups, it cannot be compared to the importance of social media and YouTube, which are the main channels to reach Generation Z (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). That is why this research used YouTube as a platform to gather data from consumers which according to marketing professionals and analysis consist mainly of younger audiences. The data was in a form of YouTube comments on advertisements where masculinity is presented as the key concept. The research question is: What are the current Generation Z's and millennials' opinions on masculinity in advertising and what themes emerge from these discourses?

2. Literature review

After conducting an extensive literature review, the authors concluded that researchers mainly distinguish two very different types of masculinity: traditional masculinity, and modern masculinity. Traditional masculinity is most commonly associated with physical strength (Pollack, 2017), bravery (Smith, 2012), patriotism and emotional stoicism (Ging, 2013), wealth (Zayer et al., 2020), dominance, and a sense of entitlement (Connell, 2014), decisiveness and risk-seeking (Jaffe, 1990), and being a breadwinner, in other words providing for the family (Kimmel, 1996). In contrast, modern masculinity is most commonly associated with progressive thinking (Ging, 2013), being emotionally expressive (Ging, 2019), open-minded (Kimmel, 1996), being sensitive and compassionate (Lalancette & Cormack, 2018).

The characteristics of traditional and modern masculinity go hand in hand with two theoretical concepts that helped authors distinguish brand archetypes and masculinity archetypes in the advertisements selected for this research. Masculinity archetype theory (King, Lover, Magician, and Warrior) is developed by Carl Jung to classify masculinity archetypes and their key characteristics (Moore & Gillette, 1990). Similarly, brand

archetype theory (Mark & Pearson, 2011), which includes twelve different archetypes with their distinctive characteristics and features helped authors notice the differences in selected advertisements' main features and their behaviors.

3. Methods

Since this research is based on qualitative methods, the focus, therefore, was on analyzing consumer engagement, consumer feedback, sentiment, and discourse, by using qualitative content analysis, sentiment analysis, and discourse analysis.

3.1. Data collection

Based on the reason that YouTube comments provide a certain level of authenticity (Tolson, 2010) the authors decided to use online data collection by extracting YouTube comments as data. YouTube is a key site where the discourses of participatory culture and the emergence of the creative, empowered consumer have been played out (Benson, 2016). What is more, researchers argue for the academic value of using YouTube comments as data, saying that YouTube has attracted academic interest in emerging literature that tends to view YouTube as a technological, media, or cultural phenomenon (Jones et al., 2015). On YouTube consumers such as Generation Zers and millennials willingly give their opinions on specific ads where masculinity is at the centre of the advertisement. The data collection was done using a YouTube comments downloader tool. This tool nor any other cannot help understand the researchers what age are the commentators nor any other information about them. The researchers assumed that majority of the commentators would be Generations Zers and millennials based on common sense and data about the average YouTube user. There were six advertisements selected from different brands (Gillette, Barbasol, Old Spice, Axe, National Football League, and Dos Equis), selling different products, such as shaving products, deodorants, shampoos, beer, and so on. The reason for choosing these specific advertisements were because they had a lot of comments for the analysis purposes; they had a variety of masculinity archetypes and brand archetypes; and they provided researchers with different young audiences and their unique feedback about the advertisements due to the audiences the advertisers were communicating to. Three of the advertisements had traditional and the other three had modern masculinity at the core of the ad. The authors of this research took a sample of 400 YouTube comments from each advertisement, making a total of 2400 comments.

3.2. Data analysis

At the beginning of sentiment analysis and discourse analysis, there was qualitative content analysis which was conducted using Nvivo 11 qualitative data analysis software to help with the process of organizing, analyzing, and finding relevant insights in the YouTube

comments. The authors chose to have a mixed content analysis of conventional and direct content analysis. That means that some codes were defined before the analysis of the data based on the theoretical framework and some codes were defined during the analysis of data making it a partially open and partially preconceived coding. After the coding process was done with 198 different codes, the codes were sorted into larger categories based on how they are related and what they reveal. These larger categories were formed into themes that emerged from the YouTube comments. Themes were later merged into larger discourses. Discourse analysis was conducted with the intention to get a deeper understanding of what consumers are experiencing when viewing these ads and to get valuable insights in consumer perception of the masculinity depicted in the particular advertisements. Discourse analysis helped the researchers to pinpoint the key characteristics, behaviors and opinions of consumers. Discourse analysis consisted of larger categories where multiple themes were combined into, but at the same time there was a greater focus on what specifically consumers appreciate about the advertisements in question and what consumers dislike about them.

4. Results

4.1. Results of qualitative content analysis

The results of the qualitative content analysis showed the themes that emerged from each of the selected advertisements, showing how dominant was the masculinity theme and how much did the consumers approve or disapprove of the advertisement and its depiction of masculinity. An example of the qualitative content analysis end result can be seen in Figure 1. Gillette's "We Believe: The Best Men Can Be" advertisement's comment section presented researchers with a variety of themes, where many of them were negative towards the brand. It suggests the researchers that the advertisement and its depiction of modern masculinity and its caregiver brand archetype were not appreciated at all by the young consumers that commented on the advertisement. When combined all the negative themes together, it makes an astounding disapproval rate of 65%, which cannot even be compared with the score of other advertisements analysed in this research, which normally received a 3% or 5% disapproval rate. To make matters worse for Gillette, the theme of Ad appreciation was evident only in 4% of the comments. The combined percentage of masculinity being involved in the advertisement's comment section is 28%, while product discussion did not get any noteworthy attention.

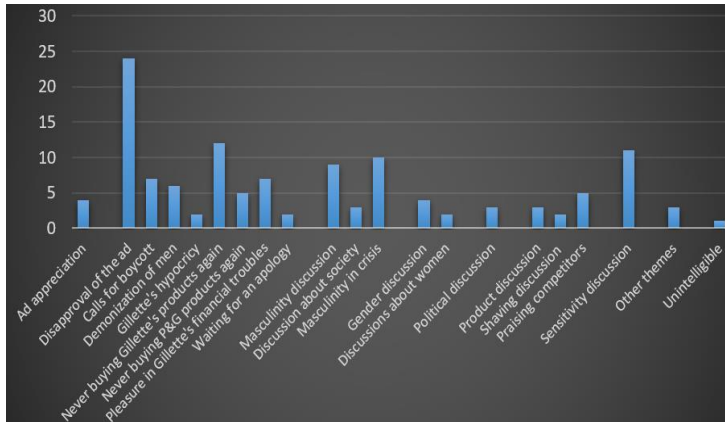


Figure 1. Themes from Gillette's "We Believe: The Best Men Can Be" advertisement's comment section, in % (Source: Authors' original work based on YouTube comments)

However, it has to be pointed out that Gillette's advertisement was an anomaly in the research. Qualitative content analysis of the remaining five advertisements showed very different results, suggesting greater importance in the main character of the advertisement and the displayed masculine characteristics and a greater appreciation of the advertisements where masculinity was at the core of the ad.

Another advertisement as an example of qualitative content analysis for this research is Axe's "Is it ok for guys?" (Figure 2), which unlike Gillette received very positive consumer engagement and feedback with 41% ad appreciation.

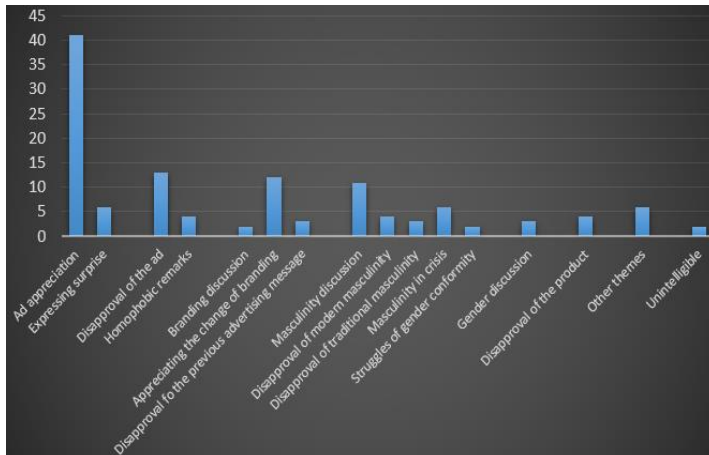


Figure 2. Themes from Axe's "Is it ok for guys?" advertisement's comment section, in % (Source: Authors' original work based on YouTube comments)

The advertisement had a total masculinity discourse of 24% with only 4% of the comments discussing the actual product. A more detailed summary of all six advertisements' qualitative content analysis results are provided in the Table 1. The table shows the top 10 most common themes in all of the six advertisements. As evident by the table the most consistently common theme is Ad appreciation and humour appreciation, while other themes have highly inconsistent frequency in the YouTube comment sections.

Table 1. The results of qualitative content analysis

| Theme | Barbasol | Old Spice | Dos Equis | Gillette | NFL | Axe |
|--------------------------|----------|-----------|-----------|----------|-----|-----|
| Ad appreciation | 32% | 31% | 21% | 4% | 38% | 41% |
| Humour Appreciation | 13% | 16% | 16% | 0% | 20% | 0% |
| Disapproval | 3% | 1% | 5% | 65% | 8% | 17% |
| Competitor discourse | 31% | 0% | 2% | 5% | 0% | 1% |
| Masculinity discourse | 15% | 2% | 3% | 19% | 3% | 24% |
| Main character discourse | 2% | 7% | 31% | 0% | 4% | 0% |
| Product discourse | 14% | 1% | 7% | 10% | 7% | 4% |
| Branding discussion | 1% | 0% | 2% | 2% | 1% | 17% |
| Satire | 1% | 24% | 29% | 1% | 8% | 0% |
| Popular culture | 0% | 22% | 6% | 0% | 5% | 0% |

Source: Authors' original work based on YouTube comments

4.1. Results of sentiment analysis

The sentiment analysis measuring likeability or how positive, negative or neutral were each advertisement's comment section showed that of the selected ads traditional masculinity's advertisements comment sections were on average more positive than modern masculinity's, with an average of 56% positivity rate to 46% positivity rate (Figure 3). However, that might be due to the significant discrepancy between Gillette's positivity rate and NFL's and Axe's. For instance, only 8% of Gillette's "We Believe: The best man can be" comments were positive, with 78% being negative. While on the other hand the rest of the comment sections, especially NFL's "Touchdown celebrations" (70% positivity rate) had a high level of positivity rate, despite what people mostly associate internet comment sections with. Due to Gillette's "The best man can be" advertisement's high negativity rate, the average negativity rate of the selected modern masculinity ads (39%) is notably higher than the average negativity rate of traditional masculinity ads (8%).

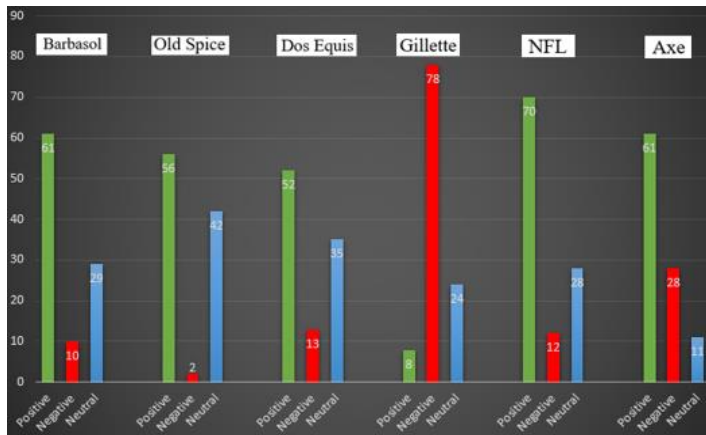


Figure 3. Sentiment analysis results of selected advertisements (Authors' original work)

When it comes to the neutrality of comments, suggesting consumers' lack of emotional involvement, the traditional masculinity ads had much higher neutrality (35%) in their comments than modern masculinity ads (21%). This indicates that consumers are more emotionally expressive and opinionated when viewing modern masculinity content than traditional.

4.1. Results of discourse analysis

Discourse analysis also provided authors with valuable insights into what consumers think about the advertisements in question and their versions of masculinity depicted in both, modern and traditional ways. The masculinity discourse was more evident in Axe's and Barbasol's advertisements. In the case of Barbasol, the discourse analysis revealed how much consumers liked this advertisement and expressed their opposition to Barbasol's competitor Gillette and their advertisement against toxic masculinity. Gillette's comment section had a very negative discourse with consumers showing their distaste for the advertisement and calling for a boycott of the brand. Dos Equis advertisement's discourse analysis of the YouTube comment section revealed a significant debate about the main character of the ad displaying traditional masculinity characteristics. Consumers expressed their appreciation for the original character and distaste for the new, who is not displaying so much traditional masculinity as the original character, also signalling consumer preferences on the matter.

5. Discussion

First, on one hand, the qualitative content analysis, as well as the discourse analysis, showed that masculinity in advertising gets a lot of attention from the young consumers who are the primary commentators on YouTube videos, in this case, advertisements.

However, it also showed very little attention paid to the actual product being advertised. Discourse analysis showed that consumers perceive the advertisement in a larger context of masculinity that is influenced by the society, media, and other competitors of the brand as well as indicating the importance of the main character and his masculinity characteristics in an advertisement. Second, on one hand, the sentiment analysis showed that contrary to a popular belief the discourse in internet comments concerning masculinity is more positive rather than negative. Nevertheless, it has to be pointed out that these advertisements are considered to be quite effective by research done earlier on this matter, determining the effectiveness of advertising. Finally, after analyzing masculinity and brand archetypes in advertising as well as combining the research with traditional and modern masculinity characteristics, the researchers found that traditional masculinity in advertising is rooted in somewhat old-fashioned stereotypes about men and masculinity that perpetuates the idea of gender conformity. While modern masculinity, on the other hand, in advertising is rooted in equality, inclusiveness, opposition to masculine stereotypes.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to understand the current consumer perceptions of modern and traditional masculinity in advertising and how should advertisers depict masculinity in an effective way so it can resonate with consumers. The study found that masculinity in advertising has such a significant interest for the Gen Z and millennials, that the product discourse does not get any noteworthy importance, suggesting that consumers might be too distracted on the main character and depiction of masculinity to pay attention to the product. The study also concluded that when presenting traditional masculinity in advertising, the main character is notably important as evident by the qualitative content and discourse analyses. And finally, the research found that when commenting on the advertisements consumers take into consideration the entire context of masculinity and the contemporary notions of it in society, media, popular culture, and competitor's advertisements. Further research will expand the methods for assessing consumer perceptions of masculinity in advertising by conducting surveys and focus groups as well as interviews with the experts of the advertising industry.

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