THE ANALYSIS OF MASCULINITY IN ADVERTISING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY BASED ON CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract. The aim of the research was to explore Generations Z's perceptions of masculinity in advertising and determine which type of masculinity and which masculinity characteristics consumers favor in a masculine character or the advertising message centered around masculinity. The author conducted three focus groups with a demographic: Latvian Generation Z. Qualitative content analysis of the focus group interview transcripts was conducted using Nvivo 11 qualitative data analysis software. The research concluded that Latvia's Generation Z preferred modern masculinity depictions in advertising over traditional ones, and advertisers should not depict masculinity with stereotypes but rather emphasize diversity, self-acceptance, and emotionality and depict masculinity as an important topic.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, researchers have begun to analyze the significant effect masculinity has on advertising. Research suggests that masculinity is now branded (Scheibling & Lafrance, 2019), and visions of masculinity are offered for consumption. There is a term for this phenomenon called branded masculinity, a term defined by Susan M. Alexander (Alexander, 2003). Branded masculinity is rooted in consumer capitalism, wherein corporate profit can be enhanced by generating insecurity about men's bodies and consumer choices and then offering a solution through a particular corporate brand. Alexander argues that masculinity is constructed as a product available for consumption if one merely chooses the appropriate brand names. Masculinity is now considered to be one of the most prominently used social resources within advertising (Zayer et al., 2020). Masculinity in advertising helps the company connect with its audience and convince them that the product being advertised is a key element to achieving such a version of masculinity as portrayed. The problem is that consumer perception of masculinity is changing, which means that advertisers do not know how to speak to consumers' changing perceptions (Scheibling & Lafrance, 2019; Zayer et al., 2020). The research suggests that when brands understand the audience's

preferences, they can communicate more effectively and depict essential and sensitive topics in their advertising, such as masculinity, in a more favorable way (De Meulenaer et al., 2019). It is important because brands do not want to receive negative backlash but rather want their message to resonate with the audience. In other words, marketing communication will sync with what consumers think and appreciate. Furthermore, appropriate and contemporary depiction of masculinity in advertising also presents an opportunity since men now consume products that until recently were deemed as wrong to them because they were considered too feminine. This trend is particularly visible in the grooming product industry and younger generations, where men are spending much more money on these products and services than ever before, largely because of the increase in promotion in mass media. Therefore, emphasis on masculinity in advertising can impact purchasing intentions, thus indicating the vital relevance of this topic. This study is focused on masculinity in advertising and the changing consumer perceptions in answering these research questions:

    – What are the types of masculinity used in advertising, and what are their characteristics?

    – Which type of masculinity gets more approval from the consumers (Latvia's Generation Z)?

    – How should and how should not masculinity be depicted in advertising according to consumers (Latvia's Generation Z)?

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The author 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 author used the Scopus database to search for relevant latest research (2018 and 2019, the period 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 1100 articles. By going through the search results, the author chose articles that extensively focused on masculinity, defining masculinity, and concentrating on various types of masculinity. There were 81 articles that were selected at first based on the criteria. Later, there were several more articles added by analyzing other sources. These articles helped the author 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 author 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 author checked social sciences and business management. The database provided 72 articles, out of which 58 were selected as relevant. Later on, more articles from the year 2021 were added by reading relevant theories and other sources. These articles helped the author

understand the types of masculinity that researchers distinguish, essential concepts, and influencing factors of consumer perception of masculinity.

1.1. Types of Masculinity and their Signifying Characteristics in the Scientific Literature

When masculinity is involved in interdisciplinary research, for instance, in research about branding, advertising and psychology, the researchers mainly distinguish between two types of masculinity, such as traditional and modern masculinity (Table 1).

Table 1. Types of Masculinity and their Characteristics (Author's original work)

Types of masculinity	Characteristics	Authors
Traditional masculinity (including Hegemonic masculinity, and Toxic masculinity)	Competitiveness, having physical strength, virility, machoism, striving to be a hero, having financial success, emotionally strong, independent, rejecting displays of femininity or fear, ambition and self-reliance, being a breadwinner, athletic, decisive and taking risk, sense of entitlement, dominant, patriotic, powerful, wealthy, having privilege, aggressive, brave.	(Franz-Balsen, 2014), (Walters & Valenzuela, 2019), (Birch et al., 2017), (Smith, 2012), (Månsdotter et al., 2009), (Kimmel, 1996), (Jaffe & Berger, 1990), (Zayer et al., 2020), (Rogers, 2019), (Connell, 2014), (Montemurro & Riehman-Murphy, 2019), (Pollack & Todd, 2017), (Ging, 2013), (Oswald, 2007)
Hybrid masculinity (including Flexible masculinity and Complicit masculinity)	Having privilege, being strategic, sensitive, caring, open minded, emphatic, with an interest maintaining male dominance, having less rigid view of gender norms, being able to adapt, emotional availability.	(Montemurro & Riehman-Murphy, 2019), (Connell, 2014), (Ging, 2019), (Eisen & Yamashita, 2019), (Scheibling & Lafrance, 2019), (Gee, 2014), (Zayer et al., 2020), (Hirschman, 2003)
Modern masculinity (including Inclusive masculinity and New masculinity)	Having sense of equality, rejecting gender conformity, having feminine characteristics, emasculating, metrosexuality, choice based rhetoric, forward-thinking, progressive, having an interest in culture, emotionally expressive, sensitive and compassionate, narcissistic, immature, open minded, having an interest in fashion, being brave enough to be whoever the man wants to be.	(Rogers, 2019), (Coad, 2008), (Salzman et al., 2005), (Lalancette & Cormack, 2018), (Cheng, 1999), (Kimmel, 2006), (Branchik et al., 2012), (Kimmel, 1996), (Oswald, 2007), (Coad, 2008), (Ging, 2019), (Ging, 2013)

These two types are common for distinguishing how a man is portrayed in the advertisement, but also beyond advertising, research on society and psychology mainly focuses on these two types of masculinity. However, there are also a few scholars who talked about hybrid masculinity, whereby male identities are constructed through a combination of elements drawn from different and contrasting cultural doctrines (Scheibling & Lafrance, 2019). The author of this research has classified the three main types of masculinity (and other types that they include) and, through an extensive literature review process, assigned the characteristics that can be found in the scientific literature describing these types of masculinity. It is important to understand each of these masculinity types so that they can be accurately identified in advertisements for further research.

Since hybrid masculinity is between traditional and modern and has common characteristics with both types, there is some overlap between hybrid masculinity and traditional on the one hand and modern on the other (Fig. 1).
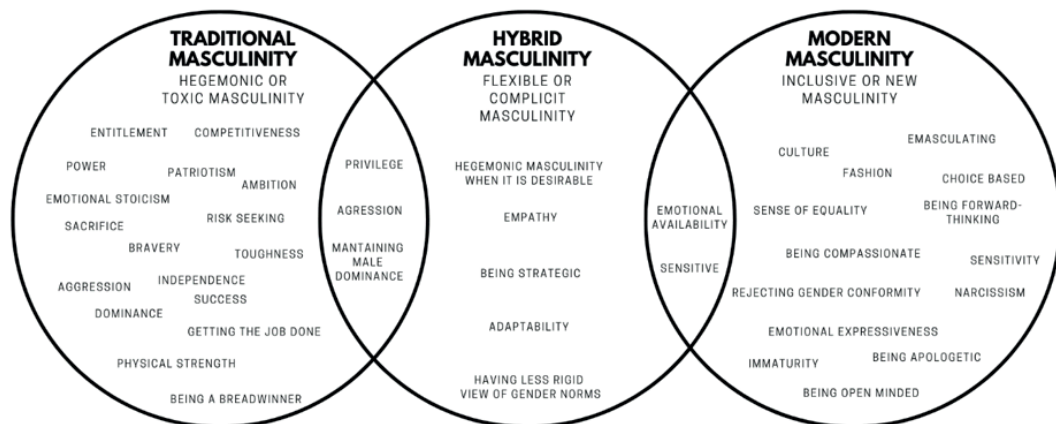
Fig. 1. Types of masculinity and their key characteristics, behaviors and rhetoric (Source: the author's original work).

In the scientific literature, there is a discussion of how traditional, hybrid and modern masculinity are portrayed in advertising and how consumers perceive these types. For starters, the results of these efforts have a wide range of success of approval; for instance, Orth and Holancova (2003) have found that consumers tend to approve of more stereotypical role illustrations in advertising, which translates into a more positive ad and brand attitudes (De Meulenaer et al., 2019). Similarly, Putrevu (2004) concluded that men and women were likely to respond more positively to communication that was in tune with traditional gender stereotypes. In addition, several other researchers concur, saying that, for instance, competitiveness, a muscular physique, and other symbols of traditional masculinity can be effective in advertising to get positive attitudes from consumers (Brownbill et al., 2018). On the other hand, other studies have come up with opposite conclusions, namely that gender stereotyping results in negative ad and brand attitudes (Bellizzi & Milner, 1991; Jaffe & Berger, 1994). This can be explained by the fact that counter-stereotypical appeals are more surprising and could therefore

provoke more positive feelings (Orth & Holancova, 2003). In addition, researchers have found that effective advertising nowadays should promote a paradigm shift when it comes to gender roles (Magaraggia & Cherubini, 2017). Furthermore, it is noted that the use of stereotypes has come under increased scrutiny due to the fact that gender roles in society are changing; thus, marketers are in danger of alienating people by using traditional gender stereotypes (Hupfer, 2002; De Meulenaer et al., 2019). Therefore, new and nuanced research on consumer perceptions of traditional versus modern masculinity depictions in advertising is relevant and necessary.

2. METHODOLOGY

In order to get a deeper insight into consumer preferences when it comes to masculinity in advertising, the author conducted three focus groups with a young demographic: Latvian Generation Z. Focus groups are formally organized, structured groups of individuals brought together to discuss a topic or series of topics (Marczyk et al., 2005). The reason for choosing a focus group as a method is because, in contrast to other unilateral methods of obtaining qualitative data, focus groups allow for interactions between the researcher and the participants and among the participants themselves (ibid). Conducting a focus group is also one of the key research methods that advertising agencies use to see consumer opinions and attitudes toward their advertising campaign before it is released to the public. The purpose of conducting the focus groups was to find answers to two of the research questions:

- Which type of masculinity gets more approval from the consumers (Latvia's Generation Z)?
- How should and how should not masculinity be depicted in advertising according to consumers (Latvia's Generation Z)?

There were three focus groups conducted: one entirely male, one entirely women and one mixed. Therefore, the composition of the focus group participants in total were 50:50 in terms of gender. The demographic group that was selected for the focus groups was Generation Z, who are born after 2000. However, many analysts include also people born after 1995 in this group (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018, 99). This group is interesting to analyze for this particular research because younger audiences in Latvia have influence from their conservative parents, who were 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, therefore proposing a challenge for the advertisers. 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, 2011; Thurnell-Reid, 2012; Robinson et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important to see whether this claim by several scholars 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 length of the focus groups varied from 58 minutes to one hour and 15 minutes. The focus groups were conducted in September of 2022 and were held at the Faculty of Engineering Economics and Management of Riga Technical University. Each focus group contained eight participants who signed up for the focus group voluntarily. It was important for the focus group participants to sign up voluntarily so that they were more motivated to express their views. The participants were students of either Riga Technical University or Latvian Academy of Culture in the age group of 19 to 24.

As with any focus group, there were some participants who were more active in expressing their opinions and attitudes as consumers and other participants that were more reserved and shyer about speaking. In some instances, the author encouraged the shy participants to express their views by asking them directly. Due to this reason, during the coding process, the author did not take the number of suggestions and opinions expressed by sheer quantity but considered who was giving these opinions. This is because for the active speakers to refrain from dominating the results, but rather the results being created through the variety of opinions of all focus group participants. If the focus group participant already mentioned the same idea about masculinity in advertising before, then it was not counted. It was done because participants who were most active expressed the same opinion multiple times, but it would not accurately reflect the opinion of the entire focus group.

The focus group consisted of three vital parts (Table 2), which were introductory or open questions, transition or exploration questions, and a ranking exercise. The study used cosmetics and hygiene product brands to have consistency and also due to the reason that these brands depict masculinity most frequently and as the central theme in their advertising.

**Table 2.** Structure and the Reason for Focus Group Interview Questions (Author's original work)

Types of questions	Methodological reason for these type of questions	Application of these questions for the study
1st part: Introductory questions (Open questions)	Introductory questions introduce the topic of discussion and get people to start thinking about their connection with the topic. The introductory questions are designed to be easy to answer (Krueger, 2015, 116).	Introductory questions were asked to get the respondents to open up for a discussion and feel comfortable. The questions were also asked to get the raw opinions and first impressions when respondents thought of the topic of masculinity in advertising.

Types of questions	Methodological reason for these type of questions	Application of these questions for the study
2nd part: Transition questions (Exploration questions)	Transition questions move the conversation to the key questions that drive the study. (Krueger, 2015, 117). The questions are open-ended with the goal of getting respondents to provide lengthy responses in great detail (Marczyk et al., 2005)	Transition questions included questions that were more specific about the topic and about four advertisements shown and discussed among the respondents.
3rd part: Ranking exercise	The ranking is a question-response format used when a researcher is interested in establishing some type of priority among a set of objects (Khan, 2006)	Respondents ranked the four advertisements on how much they liked them by giving them points.

Qualitative content analysis of the focus group interview transcripts was conducted using Nvivo 11 qualitative data analysis software to help with the process of organizing, analyzing, and finding relevant insights in the text using coding method. The codes were given in the text concerning how masculinity should be depicted in masculinity (68 codes), and how it should not (76 codes). The author 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. The preconceived codes were related to the theory about masculinity-related concepts, and open codes revealed themselves concerning how advertisers should depict masculinity in advertising and how they should not. Some of the codes that were too similar were combined with others into larger categories.

3. RESULTS

Respondents were actively engaged in the discussions, indicating their interest in the topic and something that they had thought about and discussed earlier, therefore showing relevance of masculinity in advertising. Throughout the three focus groups, the author intended to find out how advertisers and brand strategists should not portray men in advertising, meaning what would be the ineffective ways of communicating with consumers when depicting masculinity. The author asked various questions to the focus group participants that were aimed at answering this vital question. After the coding process and analyzing the data, it became clear that focus group participants considered using stereotypes as the absolute worst thing that advertisers could do when depicting masculinity in their marketing communication (Fig. 2).
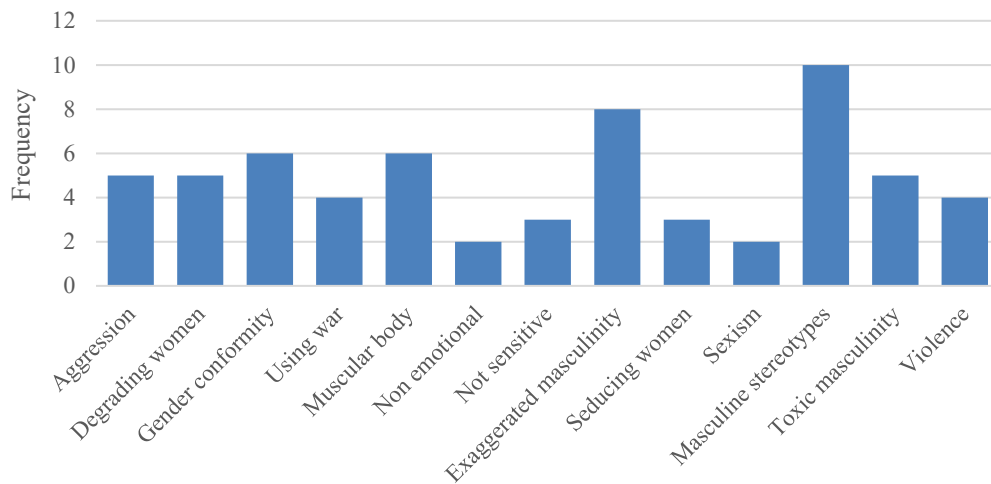
Fig. 2. Worst ways to depict masculinity in advertising according to focus group participants (Source: the author's original work).

A close second to the use of stereotypes was exaggerated masculinity which obviously is closely linked to stereotypes, but since focus group participants use different terminology to express themselves, these suggestions were counted separately. Other popular answers were using muscular bodies to portray men and gender conformity, which, from the theoretical part of this research, was already established as a concept where media or marketers, or society is trying to achieve that men conform to a single standard. In the case of masculinity, that would be one ideal type of man. Some of the answers that did not exceed the threshold were depicting men in unrealistic way, only perfect looking men and showing men as typical businessmen.

One of the fiercest debates when it comes to advertisers' tactics of depicting masculinity in advertising was the use of traditional masculine stereotypes. There were some participants like Edgars and Ivo who looked favorably to traditional masculinity and stereotypes in advertising because they thought that it was a motivation for men to grow and develop themselves. However, more often, the view of the respondents was very negative of this advertisers' tactic of deploying old-fashioned stereotypes when depicting men.

Varis: "I try to skip advertisements with stereotypes. These ads do not have any value in my eyes."

Other focus group participants concur. This quote was made after watching the Barbasol "Shave like a man" ad.

Izabela: "In my view, this advertisement shows toxic masculinity, where the man has to go to a war to prove his masculinity and being emotional or achieving results through a debate is not considered masculine."

The focus group participants were mainly positive about the Old Spice advertisement even though it is full of masculine stereotypes, but some participants see it as an intentional way to make fun of traditional masculinity and other advertisements that use stereotypes in a serious way.

Anna: "I think Old Spice ads work better than the serious masculine ones because it ironizes the other serious brands."

It shows that consumers might look upon stereotypes favorably as long as they are clearly presented as jokes in humorous content; otherwise, consumers seem to be against them.

Another key insight that revealed itself in the focus groups and one that was surprising to the author was the fact that some participants did not like when the ad did not include the product at all. Some respondents considered Gillette and Axe advertisements as confusing and something that they would not consider an ad. However, other respondents disagreed with them.

Līva: "I would like to disagree with the idea that the ad has to show the product. Nowadays, advertising plays on emotions, and each ad creates an aura and shows you who you can be. I think it is much more effective to tell the story through emotions instead of promoting the product."

Another focus group participant in a separate focus group agrees, saying that the advertisement has to show the human side more than the product. That corresponds to some of the scholars quoted in the literature review part that agrees with this premise of emotions and the human side over the product in advertising. Furthermore, depicting masculinity seems to get a lot of emotions which is proved in both the focus group interviews and literature review analysis.

The most important question to find answers to was, "How should masculinity be depicted in advertising to get consumer approval."

The most popular answers that the respondents provided were that masculinity and the issues related to it are important in society, and the advertisement focusing on it is a positive aspect and one that the consumers approve (Fig. 3).
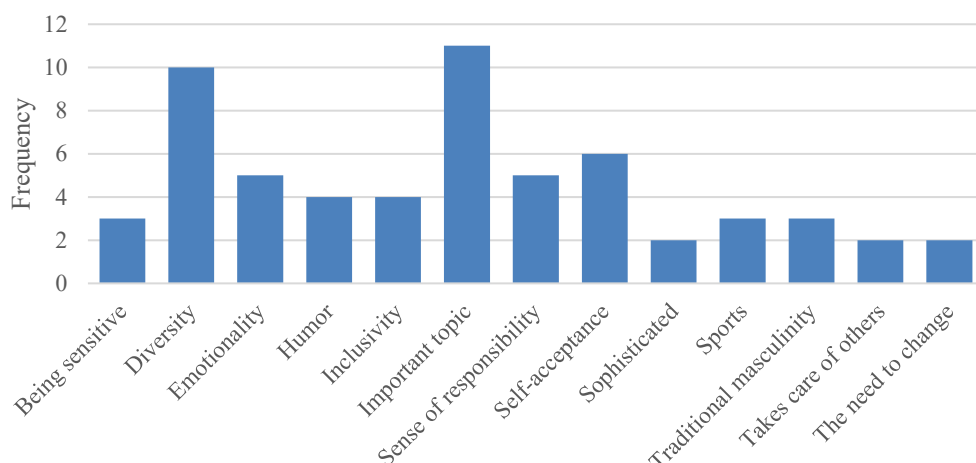
Fig. 3. Best ways to depict masculinity in advertising according to focus group participants (Source: the author's original work).

A close second in popularity among the focus group participants was diversity, in other words, showing men in diverse ways as women in advertising for over a decade now (opinion expressed in the men's focus group). Other popular answers

were self-acceptance, emotionality, and inclusivity as important elements to use when depicting men in advertising. Some of the answers that did not exceed the threshold to be included in the graph were authenticity, being well-dressed, focusing on mental health, and making fun of toxic masculinity as ways of how masculinity should be depicted in advertising.

The reason that respondents provided for their most popular answers concerning the importance of the topic of masculinity in advertising was gender conformity going on in society, particularly concerning men. Focus group participants thought that men were instructed and even pressured to act a certain way to be masculine in order to be accepted by their peers.

Rihards K (spoken about Axe's "Is it ok for guys…" advertisement): "I think that a good advertisement is about an important topic in society. They ask if it is ok that men are not stereotypically masculine. They bring up issues that men are too scared to talk about openly."

Even participants like Edgars and Ivo, who approve of traditional masculinity in advertising, agreed that there is a crisis in masculinity, although their view was that men are being overly criticized for both being too traditional and being called toxic and also for being emotional, which in their view is also not valid criticism and puts unnecessary pressure on men to always be stoic.

Some of the participants, particularly men, opened up about personal issues, especially Rihards J. He shared how he was raised and the issues that it caused him, and how important he thought Axe' "Is it ok for guys" advertisement was.

Rihards J: "I think it is good to take away the stigma of men showing their emotions. I was taught that men should never do that because it is a sign of weakness. I was raised that way. And then you ask yourself later, is it ok to be the way I am?"

Many participants agreed that Gillette's and Axe's advertisements (two of the four that were shown in all three focus groups) were a good example of how masculinity in advertising should be depicted. Their arguments mainly were centered around the idea that these ads take the pressure off men to always be the same and always be stereotypical men. Even women agreed that taking pressure off men is an important thing because when men are insecure and pressured, it negatively affects women. This opinion is echoed by social scientists and corresponds to the findings from the literature review about the harm of emphasizing traditional masculinity in advertising.

Focus group interviews were also an important research method to get clarity about some of the advertisements that received wildly inconsistent results between qualitative content analysis of YouTube comments and the A/B test results (previous research conducted in 2023 and 2022). The already mentioned Gillette and Axe advertisements received positive feedback, where respondents saw advertisers focusing on good values such as responsibility, self-acceptance, diversity, and inclusivity.

Dāvis (spoken about Gillette's "We believe: the best man can be" advertisement): "I really like this ad, it calls for responsibility from men to do what is right, like defending others against bullies. It helps get the message also to the kids."

Gillette's advertisement got overwhelmingly positive reviews, and it was also one of the ads that respondents selected as the one they would be most likely to share on their social media profiles, which according to researchers, is very important for an advertisement to get awareness and achieve advertising effectiveness.

Izabela: "I have shared the Gillette advertisement on my social media profiles because I think it sheds light on important problems about masculinity that society needs to move on from. I would also consider sharing the Axe ad because it is about a similar topic as Gillette one."

Gillette's ad in question, which was one of the subject ads in the mixed method analysis (previous research), received very negative consumer feedback, as proven by the discourse analysis, qualitative content analysis (4 % ad appreciation comments and an astounding disapproval rate of 65 % of the comments), sentiment analysis (78 % negativity), and statistical analysis (Likeability ratio of only 0.54). However, in the A/B test results, Gillette's advertisement was convincingly selected as the favorite one over their own traditional masculinity ad (63 % of men and 82 % of women). Therefore, it was difficult to assess the particular Gillette ad's consumer perception and determine how effective it was. This next positive consumer feedback in the focus groups does provide a deeper perspective of why there could be so much negativity directed at Gillette in the YouTube comments.

Izabella: "Maybe the ad triggered some men who teach their kids to be aggressive and to fight and who use the phrase "boys will be boys" (as it is used in the ad); thus, they see that the ad is a direct attack on them and how they were raised and how they raise their children."

The famous Old Spice advertisement was another interesting case for the author to use as a subject for discussion in the focus groups. The Old Spice ad had the opposite situation from Gillette (previous research), namely that the YouTube comments were very positive (56 % positivity in sentiment analysis and likeability ratio of 42.6) but struggled to get a positive result in the A/B test results (61 % of men and 32 % of women chose it over the modern masculinity ad). Here the focus group participants, while appreciating the humor to some extent and saying that it piques their interest in trying the product, mainly criticized the ad as one that does not add value and is pressuring men into conforming to one smell that men would have and degrading women. Therefore, creativity and humor proved to be not such an important factor after all. However, the gender conformity, specifically about the one standardized smell that all men must have seem to irritate the focus group participants.

Beāte: "This ad makes you wonder about that one smell that men have to smell like. I think it is illogical that all men have to smell the same way."

The second criticism of the Old Spice advertisement was that it is insulting to women, suggesting that all women want the same material things, which are old-fashioned ways to view women's needs. However, some admitted that they had not thought about it before, only now when the issue was raised by one of the focus group participants.

Unlike Old Spice and Gillette, Axe's "Is it ok for guys" did not have a vast disparity between mixed method analysis (for example, the likeability ratio was

only 13.52) and the A/B test results (men chose this ad at 71 % while women chose it 84 %); nevertheless, the disparity was significant enough to be included in the focus group testing. The overall findings indicate that consumers overwhelmingly favor this ad; some of them put it higher than Gillette because it does not judge anyone but is simply asking questions if it is ok not to be stereotypically masculine.

Ingmārs: "This ad shows masculinity in a modern way, it shows diversity. I think it is the right way to portray masculinity."

Others say that Axe advertisement is one that takes the pressure off men and advocates for self-acceptance from men, which turned out to be an important element for an effective masculinity advertisement to get consumer approval.

Rihards K: "This type of advertising does not tell the men how to be or how they cannot be. It shows that you can be who you are. I like this advertisement because it allows men to express emotions, cry and be more feminine or to have more feminine characteristics."

The worst feedback in the focus groups was towards the Barbasol ad, which had a very positive discourse and full of praise from the consumers in the YouTube comment section and a likeability ratio of 133 (previous research). However, the respondents thought that the ad was making fun of the soldiers of World War II and the main character displaying traits of toxic masculinity.

Finally, since there were significant differences between men's and women's answers in the A/B test results (previous research), the author wanted to find out whether ranking the advertisements that were subjects for discussion would also yield similar results showing significant differences between men's and women's opinions. At the end of the focus group interview, the respondents ranked the advertisements that they had seen in the focus group. They were instructed to give the one that they preferred the most 40 points, 30 points for their second preference, 20 for their third, and 10 points for their fourth preference.

Table 3. Rankings of the Most Preferred Advertisements among Focus Group Participants (Author's original work)

Advertisement	Men's focus group (average points)	Women's focus group (average points)	Mixed focus group (average points)
Gillette's "We believe: The best men can be"	36.25	27.5	32.5
Old Spice's "The man your man could smell like"	22.5	26.25	22.5
Barbasol's "Shave like a man"	12.5	12.5	13.75
Axe's "Is it ok for guys"	28.75	33.75	31.25

The results show a rather similar pattern in the answers among the three focus groups. For instance, the fact that in all three focus groups, the most preferred and liked advertisement was either Gillette's ad or Axe's ad. In all three focus groups,

Old Spice's ad was the third preferred one, and Barbasol was by far the most disliked one, even though it had the highest Likeability rating among all of them in the statistical analysis based on the YouTube data. There are, however, a few differences that stand out more from the results. For instance, while men ranked Gillette's ad as the most preferred one, women chose Axe's. The difference between the average points between men's focus group and women's is 24 % when it comes to choosing Gillette's ad and 15 % when it comes to Axe's ad. Interestingly, the mixed focus group results were right in the middle of men's and women's focus group results (Gillette and Axe's ad preferences), showing consistency in how men and women think about these advertisements.

4. DISCUSSION

Prior studies have noted the importance of masculinity in advertising to capture consumer attention (Scheibling et al., 2019; De Meulenaer et al., 2019; Zayer et al., 2020). With this research, the author intended to get a deeper insight into consumer preferences with regard to masculinity in advertising, particularly with the Latvian Generation Z demographic. There are many individual differences (e.g., attitudes, personality, values, motivations) that affect consumers in the decision-making process (Lee et al., 2020). One of them is consumer perception of masculinity and advertisers' depiction of it. The study was limited to advertising as a form of marketing communication and also limited to the consumer perceptions of traditional and modern masculinity in advertising. The limitations of the study also included the research methods that were focused on qualitative methods, such as conducting a thorough literature review and focus group interviews to understand consumer preferences on the matter of masculinity in the context of advertising.

The author noticed that the focus group participants had an easier time telling how masculinity should not be depicted in advertising than how it should. The students were taking longer time to think and had more difficulty expressing themselves and what they meant when answering these questions and also providing their opinions in different related questions aimed at understanding consumer preferences. Perhaps it indicates that consumers do not always know what they want but are surer about what they do not want.

There were some focus group participants who expressed that traditional masculinity could inspire men to reach their potential and become the ideal man – physically strong, muscular, competent, and powerful, which might suggest that focusing on traditional masculinity could be beneficial for brand strategists and advertisers, as suggested by several previous studies (Orth & Holancova, 2003; Putrevu, 2004; Brownbill et al., 2018).

On the other hand, the vast majority of focus group participants rejected traditional masculinity and argued for the more sensitive, inclusive depiction of men in advertising. In other words, the respondents expressed their approval of advertisers and brand strategists using modern masculinity in advertising to portray men. These results corroborate the findings of a great deal of the previous studies (Magaraggia & Cherubini, 2017; De Meulenaer et al., 2019; Zayer et al., 2020). The answers were focused on quite serious factors that advertisers should consider

when portraying men, such as inclusivity, diversity, a crisis in masculinity, the relevance of the topic in society, and so on.

Regarding the theoretical implications of this study, the author was able to classify the three masculinity types and related concepts to them as well as key characteristics that define these types of masculinity due to an extensive literature review process. There was some overlap between hybrid masculinity and traditional on the one hand and modern on the other. However, the differences between traditional and modern are stark both in scientific literature.

Managerial implications of this study include a better understanding for advertisers about what type of masculine character to focus on and whether advertisers' offered version of masculinity is in alignment with consumer (Latvian Generation Z) preferences as well as which masculine characteristics consumers perceive more favorably, thus helping brand strategists and advertisers to create a more meaningful, effective and resonating male brand persona or to choose a male brand ambassador. Further research will include conducting interviews with advertising industry experts.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed at understanding the current consumer perceptions of masculinity in advertising and how advertisers should depict masculinity in order to get consumer approval. The study concluded that researchers mainly distinguished three major types of masculinity: traditional, hybrid, and modern. Traditional masculinity is associated with competitiveness, physical strength, striving to be a hero, having financial success, emotional stoicism, rejecting displays of femininity, ambition, self-reliance, being a breadwinner, dominance, and aggression. Hybrid masculinity shows displays of both types of masculinity, and modern masculinity is associated with a sense of equality, being emotionally expressive, rejecting gender conformity, being sensitive, having feminine characteristics, metrosexuality, progressive thinking, having an interest in culture, immaturity, having an interest in fashion, and being brave enough to be whomever the man wants to be.

The author concludes that masculinity in advertising is an issue that evokes emotions in consumers, especially men, and it makes people think and talk about the advertisement. It also shows that the issue of masculinity and rejecting gender stereotypes are important for society and that advertisers, as suggested by the stakeholder theory, have a social responsibility to talk about what is important for their stakeholders, especially society. Furthermore, it demonstrates that it could be beneficial for the brand itself to show that they care about issues concerning society since consumers approve of such advertising, known as social marketing, where companies create added value with their marketing, not just focus on selling their product. The focus group participants called the regular cliché attempts of selling products "an old-fashioned way to do advertising." Finally, the author concludes from focus group interviews that Latvia's Generation Z prefers modern masculinity depictions in advertising over traditional ones, and advertisers should not depict

masculinity with stereotypes but rather emphasize diversity, self-acceptance, and emotionality and depict masculinity as an important topic.

The results obtained could be of particular importance for advertisers and brand strategists who are looking for ways to communicate with consumers about controversial topics such as masculinity. The results can help advertisers understand how consumers perceive masculinity in advertising and how advertisers should depict masculinity in order to get consumer approval.

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