



Refashioning Masculinity: An Exploratory Study of Men's Interpretations of Fashion Advertisements

Ben Barry, Ryerson University, Canada

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Women have been socialized all their lives to interpret models in fashion advertisements. Extensive research has subsequently studied women's perceptions of fashion imagery (e.g., Gill, 2007). Men have not been socialized in the same manner; a stereotype still exists that "real" men do not care about fashion because it is seen to jeopardize their masculinity (e.g., Connell, 2005). Men's fashion consciousness has therefore been largely ignored in consumer research. The few existing studies restrict themselves to content analyses of men's fashion magazines (Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000) as well as to empirical research on men's shopping behavior (Reilly & Rudd, 2007) and body image (Halliwell, Dittmar, & Orsborn, 2007). Yet a growing segment of men are interested in fashion (Edwards, 2006) and men's luxury apparel is the fastest growing sector of the fashion industry (Strauss, 2012). This research contributes to the emerging scholarship on men and fashion by exploring how men interpret male fashion advertisements.

To guide my study, I draw upon the framework of masculinity. Western culture restricts men to conform to *hegemonic masculinity*: normative standards that serve as a yardstick against which men scrutinize themselves. These standards are expressed through various discourses, including sexuality (e.g., homosexual vs. heterosexual), behavior (e.g., violent and assertive) and appearance (e.g., strength and size) (Connell, 2005). The pressures of contemporary consumer culture compounded with feeling of inferiority due to the feminist movement have fueled a shift in the importance of the body and fashion in the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. Men of a variety of ages and sexualities have been compelled to focus their attention on self-presentation (Edwards, 2006). Men's focus on appearance, however, is coupled with a particular gendered anxiety; while they are expected to confirm to the current lean and muscular masculine ideal promoted by male models, they are also expected to be silent about the activities undertaken to achieve this physique in order to uphold their masculinity (Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000).

I employed a qualitative methodology because it best allowed me to explore men's feelings towards fashion advertisements by examining a topic from their perspective. My purposive sample was comprised of twenty male fashion consumers in Toronto, Canada who were recruited by snowball sampling. When assembling this sample, I aimed to maximize heterogeneity in terms of age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and body type to allow for a broad range of responses. I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews in which participants were asked to discuss their feelings towards and understandings of a series of current men's fashion advertisements. The advertisements displayed different fashion brands and diverse male models. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed following the techniques of data reduction, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

My analysis revealed an interesting interplay between participants' identification of distinct advertising elements and the strategies that they used to interpret them. I therefore identified two key themes that provided a structure for my analysis: the *advertising objects* and men's *interpretative strategies*. I define advertising objects as the specific executional elements that trigger men's feelings towards fashion advertisements. These include the model's physical features, the creative direction of the advertisement and the model's visual cues. I define interpretative frameworks as the core values that explain men's assessment of particular advertising objects. These include men's feelings of achievability, inspiration and desire. Following this typology, I found that men interpret fashion advertising according to the physical resemblance between the models and themselves; the messages of power and status conveyed by the model's styling and the setting depicted in the advertisement; and the openings for sexual fantasy and imagination conveyed by the model's body position and facial expression.

These results provide a preliminary framework to explain how men interpret male fashion advertisements by delineating the advertising objects that trigger their understandings and the interpretative strategies that guide them. My findings suggest that contemporary Western men possess a more fluid conception of masculinity than past scholarship has identified. The men in my study—of a variety of ages, backgrounds and sexualities—actively challenged hegemonic masculinity through their interpretations of fashion advertisements. While they subsequently revealed a notion of masculinity that embraced non-normativity and promo-sexuality, they also continued to value dominance and power. My results suggest that fashion marketers need to strategically plan how their advertising executional elements reflect men's physical realities as well as concurrently subvert and uphold hegemonic masculinity. Given the globalization of the fashion marketplace, I invite researchers to expand upon my work by replicating my study with men in other Western and in non-Western countries.

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