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## Web Roundup: Marketing, Masculinity, and Commodity Activism

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By Katherine Warren

On January 13th, Gillette, a razor blade brand, released a [new ad campaign](#) called, “We Believe.” The video ad opens with a collage of news clips that—unlike the voiceover narrator—explicitly use the words, “toxic masculinity” and “#MeToo movement.” The narrator then asks, “Is this the best a man can get?” In the short film, Gillette plays on their [decades-old slogan](#) by replacing it with a new tagline: “The Best Men Can Be.” The video shows scenes of men stepping in to confront one another and intervene in everyday acts of cyber bullying, physical fighting, and sexual harassment. The ad plays like an inspirational sports video, with a musical score that builds in a crescendo towards the finale. The campaign’s injunction is explicitly collective, trading the singular “man” of its official motto for the plural “men.” The [campaign website](#) notes the time has come for brands to “acknowledge” their responsibility in “promoting positive, attainable, inclusive and healthy versions of what it means to be a man.” Gillette, who pledged a million dollars to the campaign, released the digital-only ad on Twitter by asking, “Isn’t it time we stopped excusing bad behavior?” The ad ends by superimposing the razor brand’s original motto, “The Best a Man Can Get,” over the faces of young boys as the narrator concludes that “the boys watching today will be the men of tomorrow.”

The [responses](#) to the ad have been swift and polarized. Following its release, a [Wall Street Journal headline](#) read, “P&G Challenges Men to Shave Their ‘Toxic Masculinity’ in Gillette Ad.” While some [publicly supported the new ad](#), others [threatened to boycott the company](#). Just two weeks after its initial release, the online ad has nearly 30 million views on YouTube with the 1.3 million “thumbs down” reactions eclipsing the 800,000 “thumbs up.” Television host [Piers Morgan declared on Twitter](#) that the ad might drive him “away to a company less eager to fuel the current pathetic global assault on masculinity.” Gillette’s [competitors were quick to capitalize](#) on such a sentiment. Shortly after the video was released, rival [Dollar Shave Club tweeted](#), “Welcome to the Club.” When one commenter asked what the rules of the “Club” entailed, the [company responded](#), “Take care of yourself. Respect others. Buy our stuff.” As marketing sites debated whether this would be a win or loss for the brand financially, Proctor & Gamble (P&G), the company that owns Gillette,

stated publicly that [sales were “in-line with pre-campaign levels”](#) in the days following the ad’s release.

Meanwhile, others criticized the company for attempting to profit off of a set of ongoing movements like #MeToo. As [reporter Kaitlyn Tiffany of Vox wrote](#), “[I]t is inherently nonsensical to use feminism to sell men’s grooming products, or any products.” Whatever good intentions individual advertisers might have had, Tiffany and others suggested, Gillette released its ad alongside the rush of [pre-Super Bowl campaigns](#) that compete for online views in the weeks leading up to the National Football League (NFL) championship—a sport and franchise replete with [accusations of toxic masculinity](#) as well as many other [controversial ads](#). P&G has a history of “[commodity activism](#),” which communications professor Sarah Banet-Weiser describes as the merging of “consumer behavior with political or social goals.” Though the practice predates Twitter, [commodity activism has been on the rise](#) over the past two years of the Trump presidency, particularly through the use of social media platforms. When [Nike’s “Just Do It” campaign](#) featured Colin Kaepernick, the NFL quarterback whose protests over racial injustice and anti-black police brutality ultimately led to his unemployment within professional football, there was backlash over the appropriation of political movements for commercial gain. The more egregious efforts to link consumer products to social movements have spectacularly backfired, such as [Pepsi’s ad](#) featuring reality star Kendall Jenner amidst imagery of Black Lives Matter protests. Regardless of their success, brands have caught on to digital marketing by viral hashtag. Its predominance in consumer marketing today—in addition to concerns about corporate and consumer “slacktivism” and “clicktivism”—have only amplified such discussions.

As Gillette’s ad campaign makes clear, the role of gender in such marketing has featured powerfully in recent years. P&G’s [“Like a Girl” campaign](#) for Always tampons in 2014 sparked similar discussions about gender and personal hygiene marketing. The gendering of [commodity chains](#) and late modern marketing are far from new. The selling of gendered hygiene products also has a long and [ongoing history of anti-black racist tropes](#) upon which such brands are built. In some arenas, it appears that commodities—toys and toiletries in particular—are [growing increasingly divided by binary gendered marketing](#). Commodity activism is no exception. In 2017, Unilever released an [ad campaign for AXE body spray](#) called, “is it ok for guys...” that took the most common search engine queries beginning with the title’s question to normalize such subjects. Nike’s “girl empowerment” [campaigns](#) began as far back as 1992 with the ad, [“If You Let Me Play.”](#) The film features a set of close-up shots of girls describing the benefits that playing sports might bring them. The majority of the promises are health-related, including a decrease in prevalence of breast cancer (by “60%”), depression, and adolescent

pregnancy. Again, the grammar is suggestive. The use of the conditional, “if,” and pointed, “you,” puts a strong emphasis on the adult caretakers—and consumers—who are the targets of such an ad. These campaigns reflect a parallel history of marketing a certain (narrowly-defined) conception of empowered femininity.

Toxic masculinity made a later entrance into the world of commodity activism. Further, Gillette’s ad raises bigger questions about who is responsible for addressing expressions of masculinity deemed “toxic.” For example, in August 2018, the [American Psychological Association released clinical guidelines](#) for “Psychological Practice with Boys and Men,” warning against certain elements of “traditional masculinity.” The guidelines received renewed attention in the aftermath of the Gillette ad. As Talia Gordon describes in the [Web Roundup of October 2018](#), politics and pathology have long gone hand in hand. Indeed, psychological and psychiatric providers have been active players in these popular debates. The Trump presidency has galvanized debates over the [Goldwater Rule](#), the text within the American Psychiatric Association’s Principles of Medical Ethics that states it is unethical for psychiatrists to offer professional opinions—say, about presidential candidates—without ever conducting a psychiatric examination of the person. The Association reaffirmed its commitment to the rule in a [statement calling for an “end to ‘armchair’ psychiatry”](#) in January 2018. Other psychiatrists have [rejected such rules as irresponsible](#). Similar discussions have emerged for toxic masculinity.

This is not the first time that elements of “masculinity” have been subjected to a psychopathologizing eye. The 1970s saw the rise of a concept called “[testosterone poisoning](#),” which has at times served as part-parody, part-pop psychology. Though perhaps originally intended as satirical in the *Ms.* magazine article that popularized the term, elements of such testosterone-thinking exist today within evolutionary psychology. Psychologist Steven Pinker, for example, [criticized the recent American Psychological Association guidelines](#) addressing “traditional masculinity” for failing to mention the word “testosterone” and the possibility of biological etiologies of binary gendered personality differences. The concept of testosterone poisoning has been used in popular psychology to explain everything from [employment challenges](#) to [extramarital affairs](#). Others push back against a perceived sense of the pathologizing of masculinity itself. In the wake of the Gillette ad, one [Wall Street Journal opinion article](#) from a psychotherapist read, “Masculinity Isn’t a Sickness.”

As the pushback suggests, Gillette advertisers tapped into a sense that masculinity is somehow both [intrinsic \(“boys will be boys”\) and precarious](#). Some have argued Gillette’s turn to toxic masculinity reflects something

hopeful about the dialogue around the performance of certain gendered norms of masculinity in the U.S. Advertising, after all, is often described as a [crude cultural “litmus test”](#) of sorts, as marketers—like anthropologists—[study people closely](#). The potential of this progressivist narrative of commodity activism, however, is one curtailed by the narrow frameworks within which consumer desire is contained. Though social life may be [fundamentally mediated](#), as William Mazzarella suggests, such mediation is volatile. Not all politics are as “[equally ‘brandable’](#)” as the [particular masculinity](#) that the Gillette ad portrays. The incident involving the Covington Catholic students shortly after the release of the Gillette ad, for example, has sparked a number of conversations about the distinctiveness of [toxic white masculinity](#). Ultimately, the frenzied attention around the Gillette ad has quickly retreated as other multi-million-dollar commercials dominate the pre-Super Bowl marketing cycle. Even at Gillette, “The Best A Man Can Get™” remains the official tagline beneath the brand’s logo. As the debates continue over the campaign’s wins and losses—measured in more longitudinal metrics than click rates and sales figures—an anthropological eye toward what kinds of aspirational politics that are for sale will be an important piece of the conversation.

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