Gender Values and Brand Communication: The Transfer of Masculine Representations to Brand Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Through a socio-historic perspective we show how the masculine identity is evolving from monolith masculinity to contemporary masculinities. This research seeks understanding if and how these new cultural values are transferred to brands communication. Using a semiotic approach, masculinities, femininities and their relationships are underlined by using a Reason-Emotion semantic axis. A corpus of twenty brands communication of masculine and feminine sectors is analysed with a past/present perspective (historical). Study reveals an evolution of men’s representations in brands communication. The theoretical implications of the findings are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Masculine identity is an issue since gender is a “blurred” construct that is changing depending on time and context (Kacen, 2000). Roles and representations of men are evolving today in western societies (Welzer-Lang, 2004; de Singly, 2001) posing significant challenges for marketers and researchers. This paper discusses changes in men’s representations in brand communications understood as the result of changing social and cultural practices -or the result of “historical contingencies” (Schroeder and Zwick, 2004). Changes in contemporary society among masculine conceptions of private life, as well as appearance and beauty are of a growing research interest as they are accompanied by changes in the marketplace (Kimmel and Tissier-Desbordes, 1999, Dano, Roux. and Nyeck, 2003). Companies are developing the male cosmetic market, the jewellery and fashion. This paper seeks to understand how brands communications targeting men adapt to this cultural postmodern trend of a shift from a traditional monolith masculinity founded on virility to new representations of the masculine in touch with some traditional feminine values linked to beauty and emotions.

First, the paper describes the conceptual framework of masculine identity, explaining how the later is moving from a traditional masculinity to multiple masculinities. The method, based on analysis on historical secondary data allows portraying masculine representations evolution. A semiotic analysis of past and present brands communication among different products categories (watches, fashion, and skincare) is performed. Finally, the theoretical implications of the findings are discussed.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND: MASCULINE ARCHETYPES EVOLUTION

Recently journalists like Mark Simpson or advertisers like Marian Salzman for Euro-RSCG (see Tuncay, 2006) launched many words supposed to label segments of men: Metrossexuals, Retrosexuals, Ubersexuals, Pomosexuals...Moreover, in the marketplace, companies are successful developing the skincare, the jewellery etc. But then how do we move from a commercial construct to an academic one?

Some attempts to an understanding of men and masculinity through a consumer research perspective exist but are still extremely limited. Kimmel & Tissier-Desbordes (1999) mentioned a threat to universal dominance of man that is becoming manifest in contemporary society that leads to a necessity of anticipation of changes in consumption behaviour. They noticed an increasing number of ads depicting male as sex objects. Then from a producer, the male consumer turned to also a consumer/consumed body with an “inversion of the male gaze” as a consequence (Patterson & Elliott, 2002; Schroeder & Zwick 2004). Also, Elliott & Elliott (2005) suggest that even though images of male bodies are on the increase in advertising, still consumer research in this area is limited. Yet, we argue with Schroeder & Zwick that masculine representations are part of the construction of masculine identity and should be more researched within the flow of historical images. More broadly, we think that the socio-historical framework helps capturing the evolution of masculine rep and understanding the construction of masculine archetypes by the marketplace. Holt & Thompson (2004) showed how North-American archetypes are imbedded in US socio-history. The European context especially in France and Italy suffers a lack of conceptualisation on masculinity as a cultural construct and is being of a renewed interest area in social sciences (Caru, Cova, Tissier- Desbordes, 2004, Welzer-Lang, 2004, La Cecla, 2002). We try in this paper to analyse the dominant discourse on masculine identity through French history and contribute to an understanding of evolving masculinity in brand narratives.

Traditional monolith masculinity

During the aristocratic regime, men were as concerned as women with make up, wigs, perfumes etc. It was not considered as effeminate or homosexual and even the Précieux of the 17th Century were not stigmatised. The aristocratic period had a unisex model of appearance. Also, the aesthetic ideal of beauty was a displacement for leisure and absence of work as these were signs of lower classes. Therefore, white skin, absence of muscles, very ornamented clothing were a social distinction issue.

“...The 19th century inaugurated the artefact of the virile man and the feminine woman.” (Bourdieu, 1998, p 29.). As historians of beauty, historians of arts and philosophers, Bourdieu considered the 19th century as a rupture in gender role and THE explicit period for “masculine domination”. After the French revolution, the bourgeoisie became the dominant class. It operated a strong division between men and women upon appearance (Lipovetsky, 1988). For the first time, men from upper, dominant class started to work. They adopted a “serious”, functional appearance by contrast with the ornamented aristocratic clothing made for idle men. Men were not to talk about clothing that had to be sober; uniform otherwise they would be considered as non-virile, effeminate. The traditional society divided gender by containing women in the private sphere, as mothers, housewives, but also as foils for their husbands: through their beauty, the social and professional success of their husbands was admired as mentioned by historian of beauty Georges Vigarello (2004). Thus, appearance still remained an issue of social distinction.

In this context, dandyism linked to romanticism took place in reaction to this recent norm of virility by adopting a different style, still using make up, being slender etc. Different intellectuals adopted dandyism as Baudelaire, Nerval, or Barbery d’Auréville, who claimed: “Appearance is for dandies as for women”. Thus, dandyism was seen as a way to “effeminate the masculine” during
the 19th century. It was associated with a perverse androgyne and the decadent and leisureed aristocratic man. Therefore, virility is a contextualized construct as before the 19th century, men were for example, encouraged to show emotions in public but this became in contradiction with the new masculine ideal. What is crucial in the traditional virility is that being a man was simply defined by contrast with being feminine through appearance and behaviours (Badinter, 1992, p79). Dandies and homosexuals were a threat to the traditional model of masculinity and were stigmatised. The word homosexual appeared in 1809 and was defined as pathological (e.g. “genital neurosis”). Thus, heterosexuality is the standard through an opposition between sexes, and sexual identity is linked to gender identity (ibid., p 155-156). Until the inter-war the virile monolith model is reinforced especially through nationalism. Fascism in Europe exalted “the new man”, persecuted homosexuals, stigmatised the beginning of women’s emancipation by agitating the birth rate decline.

Multiple contemporary masculinities

The erosion of the stereotype of virility went through the success of the two stigmatised figures during the traditional society: women and homosexuals. The success of women emancipation movements during the 60’s, their massive entry in the professional and public life, previously reserved only to men: in France, the right to vote (1944), the end of educational segregation, end of marital guardianship (1965), professional parity between male and female (1983)...and the control of their body (contraception, abortion in 1975). On the other hand, during the 70’s a positive gay culture emerged. Even the word “gay” is much more neutral than the pathological word “homosexual”. The gay culture and its aesthetic widespread especially in fashion: designers became of a big influence even among heterosexuals.

These changes in contemporary society had an impact on the masculine identity in private and public life. Work is not that a major element of the masculine identity as a vast majority of women works also. Moreover, the masculine identity is no more sufficiently defined by contrast with femininity as in the traditional model. Then, in postmodern societies gender is a “blurred” construct. As women did invest public life, men seem to invest new territories, as the private life, domestic life, intimacy or proximity with no exclusive reference to the traditional virile model (Welzer-Lang, 2004). For example, as noticed recently by a sociologist of fatherhood in her interviews with French men: “we see “new fathers” who try to develop “fatherhood models” claiming their part of femininity and pretending abandoning some of their virile values...” (Ferrand, 2001, p194-195). A kind of re-composition of men and women territories is operating, since exclusive male “enclaves” are somehow disappearing (Caru, Cova, Tissier Desbordes 2004).

This change does not mean that the universal masculine dominance has disappeared in postmodern societies or that men trucked their values to adopt feminine values. It means that there is a juxtaposition of the opposites, a balance/negotiation between feminine and masculine values according to de Singly (2001, P163).

Then from a monolith, traditional, reason driven masculinity, contemporary societies move now to multiple masculinities. Men seem more and more involved in traditional feminine territories characterised by emotion and appearance (Castelain-Meunier, 2005). This raises a question of a coming back to a masculine “work of appearance” prohibited in Europe since the 19th century. Renewed interest in masculine beauty is reflected by the media and the successful development of a range of products previously associated with the feminine (Jewellery, make up...). We analyse this as a manifestation of the emergence of postmodern values that emphasise appearance, the body and emotion as key cultural values that might apply equally to men and women (Baudrillard, 1970; Lipovetsky, 1988; Le Breton, 1992, Maffesoli, 1993).

Construction of gender archetypes

To understand the new masculine representations and their cultural codes, cultural anthropology is relevant. An inductive approach was adopted. When confronted to the data, we needed to structure the meaning coming from this large amount of images. A semiotic square (Greimas & Courtès 1979; Floch 1995) is used to organise and structure meanings in the western society. Jean-Marie Floch applies the semiotic square in a reduced form allowing to structure meanings of narratives (2001, P145). We use this tool, since our purpose is to underline the values and meanings that are linked to the entities or qualities found on the connotative level. Greimas’ schema is useful since it illustrates the full complexity of any given semantic term (seme). Greimas points out that any given seme entails its opposite or “contrary.” “Reason” for example is understood in relation to its contrary, “Emotion”. Rather than having a binary opposition, however, Greimas stated that the opposition, “Reason” vs “Emotion,” suggests a contradictory pair, i.e., “Un Reason” vs “Un Emotion”. The semiotic square is relevant to understand cultural representations, such as gender archetypes (2002, P32). Semantic axis opposing Reason/Emotion was chosen as it helps defining the masculine vs feminine values. (Badinter, Bourdieu, 1998; Kimmel and Tissier-Desbordes, 1999; La Cecla, 2002; Vigarello, 2004; Welzer-Lang, 2004)

Women’s Archetypes:

But, as we have seen earlier the masculine identity has evolved as regard to changes among the feminine identity. Also, as stated by Schroeder and Zwick “Masculinity is –semiotically- irreversibly connected with, opposed to and in relation to femininity” (2004, p23),Thus, we have several stereotypes of femininity that we can also emphasise through the same semiotic square Reason/Emotion (see Figure 1):

**Reason:** Refers to the executive woman, who deeply made of her traditional masculine values related to rationality, performance, work, power and sober aesthetic. She is career oriented and equal to traditional man seeking, success. She plays with some traditional codes of masculine aesthetic, like the wear of sober suits, very “corporate”. She is subject.

**Emotion:** Refers to a world of sensitivity, experience, aesthetic as of a very traditional woman, who is private life and family oriented. Also, she is very concerned by appearance, and stages beauty as a “social capital”. She is object.

**Un Emotion:** Refers to a “macha” or a woman who avoids any sign of emotion and work of appearance that characterise femininity by adopting a masculine language, appearance and behaviour, looking strong, tough vs. weak woman. She seeks to be only a subject referring to reason.

**Un reason:** Refers to an ultra-feminine woman, who denies reason, rationality, power or very sober aesthetic codes: she refuses any sign of traditional masculinity. Seduction and appearance are a must with a sexy attitude. She is an ultra-object.

**Reason+Emotion:** Refers to the androgyne figure or the postmodern woman juxtaposing reason and emotion, rational-
Men’s archetypes
Reason: Refers to logical, deductive, rational man. He is Subject, very active, in relationships (Gaze at the other). This characterises a very traditional man with also performance, power, work, success, as ethic and sober, functional appearance as aesthetic.
Emotion: Refers to the world of sensorial, experience and aesthetic. These are dominant characteristics of a melancholic man, very sensitive and romantic man. He is object, passive in relationships.
Un-Emotion: Refers to the “tough man” or ultra-masculine man that refuses any sign of femininity symbolised by emotion, beauty, sensitivity seen as a sign of weakness. He is exclusively a subject that dominates the Other.
Un-Reason: Refers to the effeminate man who refuses his masculinity symbolised by reason, power, and functional appearance preferring feminine gesture, appearance and sensitivity. He is exclusively an object, body focused.
Reason+Emotion: The androgynous or postmodern man, juxtaposes reason and emotion, rationality and sensitivity, power and negotiation, work and relationships, authority and seduction through appearance. He is alternatively subject and object in relationships.
Un-Reason, Un- Emotion: Characterises reification as theoretical position not evoked in the literature on masculinity.

Illustration of brands Masculine Representations

Un-Reason, Un Emotion: Characterises reification as theoretical position not evoked in the literature on masculinity.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY
The research objective is to describe masculine representations evolution in brands communications. The research question
is: “Is there a shift in brands communication from a traditional representation of men to multiple modern masculinities?”

A semiotic approach is performed to understand the meanings of brand narratives. An inductive approach was adopted. When confronted to the data, we needed to structure the meaning coming from this large amount of images. As the aim is to identify meanings of brand narratives, semiotics is far relevant (Greimas & Courtès, 1986, Courrèges, 1991, Floch, 1990). Qualitative and interpretative methodologies are legitimate especially when dealing with appearance (Heilbrunn and Hetzel, 2003; Dano, Roux et Nyeck, 2003).

A semiotic approach analyses visual signifiers (colours, forms, values) with some conceptual categories (Culture/Nature; Reason/Emotion…). Therefore, we structure our brands communications analysis around categories of visual signifiers vs. conceptual categories (signified). We analyse gestures, forms, colours/lighting, brands signature, product placement, verbal text that we confront to conceptual categories that we defined earlier: Reason/Emotion/Reason+Emotion/ Un Reason/ Un Emotion. These conceptual categories allowed us to exhibit masculine archetypes.

Past and present brands communication are analysed (ads, web sites, products and stores visuals) to describe masculine representations evolution. We collected as much data as possible and adopted a “holistic” approach to capture and understand if there is a shift in the dominant masculine discourse by each brand. Therefore, we did not select and analyse some past/present visuals but we analyzed All the data gathered to reflect brand’s discourse evolution on masculinity.

“Until late 80’s/ since early 90’s” is the historical rupture we retained as it is marking the emergence of postmodern or “hypermodern” signs (Firat, Sherry, Venkatesh, 1994; Maffesoli, 1990; Lipovetsky, 2002).

**PRELIMINARY FINDINGS**

Until the early 80’s, the vast majority of brands represented men as traditional, reason-driven, even within the beauty and lingerie sectors (Figure 2).

The next table reveals a shift of 25% of brands from a unique traditional representation to a more diverse masculine representation in the 90’s. Male representations include some emotional values, traditionally associated with the feminine, mainly for appearance/lingerie sector. Even a traditional masculine universe of Champaign (Moet) is using very feminine codes. The next section will discuss more deeply this change among men representations (Figure 3).

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semiotic square, (Floch, 1995)</th>
<th>Masculinities</th>
<th>Femininities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
<td>Traditional Man</td>
<td>Executive Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>Melancholic Man</td>
<td>Traditional Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Un Emotion</td>
<td>“Tough Man”</td>
<td>“Macha” (Ultra-Masculine Woman)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Un Reason</td>
<td>Effeminate Man</td>
<td>Ultra-feminine Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason+ Emotion</td>
<td>Postmodern Man</td>
<td>Postmodern Woman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DISCUSSION**

Our analysis portrays an evolution among masculine representations in brand discourses shifting from a unique representation of men to multiple masculinities.

*The postmodern man: a/ In the masculine sector,* High Tech sector shifts to design, creativity (Apple) or the relational (Nokia). b/ Hom as an underwear brandshifts from a discourse on masculine attributes to a juxtaposition of a sexy body attitude, with some traditional thematic as competition and performance. Hom is an underwear brand only for men. Until 2002, the brand emphasized a discourse on traditional masculinity, a brand that speaks to “real men”. One of the oldest ad by the brand in the 70’s shows two very dark hair, “Latin style” men wearing shirts and tie, sitting in a very confident attitude, legs opened, hands near the genitals, chest right, one of them is smoking a cigar. They seem to discuss typical male concerns ignoring the woman in the background, standing between them that looks bored and absent. The ad says “Homtom by Hom For men that are (real) men” (1970). During the 80’s and 90’s, the brand continued with a caricature of a traditional masculine discourse, using humour, staging the physical attributes of men, the specific masculine need for convenience and products performance. The last ad staging traditional discourse says “stay natural” (2001) which means not artificial. “Artificial” in Baudrillard’s terminology is specifically dedicated to the register of feminine seduction (1988).

But then, since the year 2003, Hom has shifted to a more rich and complex discourse juxtaposing very opposite values. Ads show very sexy male bodies, playing “100% seduction” (2003), wearing a new kind of underwear made of fishnet or lace (“To drive you crazy”, 2005). The brand termed this “lingerie for men”. The semantic switch from underwear to lingerie for men reveals and legitimises an appropriation by men of some elements of a very traditional feminine territory of seduction. Also, the brand encourages men to adopt these new practices (“dare the minimum!” 2004) responding to men’s fear being out the “safety zone” (Diego Rinallo, EACR conference 2007) or “acceptable” norm of masculine appearance or. The sexy male bodies are with no ambiguity about their masculine shape, very muscular, athletic, under control and dynamic. Still, many commentators classified the brand as addressing only gays. But, when digging deeper in the brand narratives especially through its website visuals, then the complex dialectic Man/Woman is displayed. The man by Hom is staged as alternatively subject or object in the relationship. The same character is staged playing a traditional role of seduction and at another
moment wearing very delicate underwear, in an usual suggestive posture, surrounded by a very romantic, feminine decor (cosy room, velour curtains, satin sheet, Champaign glasses...). This is consistent with recent sociological trends observed by Castelain-Meunier (2005). She noticed in her interviews with French men a “new intimist masculine culture”, p 72). Seduction, the need to adapt women’s demands in the private/domestic sphere are becoming of an important masculine matters as compared with men she interviewed in the 80’s. Also the brand displays a double narrative of fatherhood—a traditional, institutional father/son wearing the same product and sharing a moment of initiation to a “masculine sport” (Sailing...); a “relational fatherhood” (Ferrand, 2001): father and young daughter in the living room, man in underwear, relaxed, reading a magazine while smiling to his daughter who is also reading/ playing. The style of these images reminds of very usual inserts in female magazines. Again these visuals by the brand reflect recent trends observed by sociologist Ferrand (2001) as a claim by some men for a greater involvement in their children education not only with an institutional role but also being sensitive, playful regardless to a normative vision of fatherhood.

Moreover, the fragmentation is expressed when the same character staged also practising very virile sport (Boxing), being the best on the podium in a swimming competition (performance), or in a classic mise-en-scene of Man and mastery of nature.

Then, Hom as a brand shifted from a monolith discourse of virility to a more complex, multiple masculinity displaying a
fragmented postmodern man switching easily from a role to another, juxtaposing very opposite values. Social status is only suggested through the furniture of the domestic space but work is absent from narratives. Focus on the self; private life and leisure are also signs of the postmodern spirit.

The Melancholic man: Aubade is a feminine lingerie brand that extended very recently to men. Brand narratives show a shift from a traditional masculine representation to an emotional man. New man by Aubade becomes an object of desire competing with woman in this feminine territory. Old visuals by the brand show a woman in an exclusive role of seduction as passive object, offered to male gaze and pleasure (male dominance). Explicitly the brand addressed men while promoting feminine products: “Aubade for a Man” (70’s and 80’s). The brand also innovated to meet male expectations of realism, pragmatism, efficiency even in a context of seduction (very far from feminine matters): “Aubade eliminates seducers nightmare…a hook in the front and it is open”! (1974). Women where then conceived as peripheral by the brand while men where central, exclusive decision makers.

In the middle of the years 2000, the brand by launching men underwear clashed from the previous perspective displaying a new discourse, or “inverting the gaze” (Patterson and Elliott, 2002). Men that become also objects of seduction, compete now with women in this very feminine bastion: “rob her limelight” (2005). Male archetype by the brand moved from the very “Traditional man” to the “Melancholic man”, emotion and seduction oriented. He is object in all visuals valued through appearance and the body. But also, under the dominance of female gaze and desire, in a passive/submitted configuration (“Resist her in vain”, 2006).

The traditional man: a/ In the masculine sector: Rolex sticks to the theme of power. Omega’s role models (Schumacher) emphasize traditional rep of men. Label 5 focuses on the product in a very sober mise-en-scene. Champaign brands Dom Perignon stages a traditional gender role perspective. Lexus discourse is only focused on competition and performance, Mercedes sticks to status and power (“Masterpiece”), while BMW celebrates “the pleasure to drive” the ultimate powerful car. Sportswear brands communicate massively on performance, using athletes as heroes. b/ In the fashion and beauty sectors, more related to femininity and appearance, Boss (fashion and perfume) exhibits success and classic aesthetic codes of masculinity. Ralph Lauren follows the same trend (“fragrances that go beyond fashion”). Gio (Armani bestseller perfume) stages a classic Italian man-subject, seducer and concerned with appearance but with no ambiguity about his virility conceived as traditional. Also, skincare brands communicate on products performance while promoting beauty (Nivea) and wellbeing (Biotherm).

Also, we can briefly evoke how the transfer of masculine rep operates.

Different ranges of elements of discourse are displayed by brands to transfer masculine representations from traditional one to multiple ones. We have noticed very traditional themes as described earlier: reference to work space (Boss); the use of role models as heroes (fictional: James Bond through Pierce Brosnan (Omega)/ Real: exceptional athletes as Schumacher for Omega; some narratives concentrate also on explicit technical performance of products using expert terms and/or figures (car industry, skincare).

Masculine representations are now also transferred by referring to design as source of emotion (Apple). Private sphere and intimacy are displayed with quasi absence of reference to work or social status (Hom, Aubade); the presence of a feminine caution as a mean of “reassurance” for the very masculine fear to be considered as effeminate (explicitly by Nivea, implicitly by Aubade); humor, is also a mean by which masculine values are transferred suggesting less drama when investing some traditional feminine territories by men (Hom). Also, the representation of a man as peripheral and a woman as subject contributes to transfer new masculine representations: Moet addresses women in priority in a mise-en-scene where men are absent or objects.

CONCLUSION

The research objective was to describe evolution of male representations in brands communication. The findings show that a growing number of brands are in touch with the postmodern society, staging diverse masculinities. This is in line with the transfer of cultural values from the “culturally constituted world” (e.g. society) to products through fashion, media and opinion leaders (Mc Cracken 1986).

Still, the dominance of a traditional masculine representation is consistent with the literature since these values are still dominant while postmodern values are just emerging (Lipovetsky, 1988; Maffesoli, 1990; Firat, Sherry, Venkatesh, 1994).

This research revealed a different representations of masculinity in brands communication among masculine/feminine sectors. For the masculine sectors (wine, cars, spirits), there is still a strong emphasis on the traditional discourse even if we noticed a double narrative targeting men: -portraying an irruption of the postmodern values; -while sticking mainly to a traditional discourse. By contrast, appearance and beauty sectors (fashion, cosmetics, fragrance, lingerie) that stage new masculine representations mainly communicate on sensorial and hedonic values (Hom, Aubade). In the masculine sectors a lack of legitimacy to adopt this new masculine rep might be a significant reason, while beauty/appearance sectors seem much likely legitimate to follow this postmodern trend. Future research is needed to understand this difference.

Limits

While the study reveals the existence of new representations of men Vs monolithic traditional masculinity, further research is needed to explain: 1/ How does the transfer of these new representations to consumers operate? 2/ How do consumers integrate this emergent discourse in their own system of value

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APPENDICE
Some Representative Visuals By Brands

HUGO BOSS

1989
1996
2003
2006

1974

1980
1988

AUBADE (PRESENT)

2005
2006
2007


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