

Research: Men respond negatively to depictions of 'ideal masculinity' in ads

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The male response to depictions of ideal masculinity in advertising is typically a negative one, which has implications for advertisers and marketers targeting the increasingly fragmented male consumer demographic, according to research co-authored by Cele Otnes, a University of Illinois professor of advertising and of business administration. Credit: Photo courtesy Jerry Thompson of Thompson McClellan Photographers

The male response to depictions of ideal masculinity in advertising is typically negative, which has implications for advertisers and marketers targeting the increasingly fragmented consumer demographic, according to research from a University of Illinois marketing expert.

Cele Otnes, a professor of [advertising](#) and of [business administration](#) who studies how marketing and advertising shapes consumption, says that [men](#) who compare themselves to the hyper-masculine or over-exaggerated male stereotypes in advertising and popular culture experience a range of emotions, including [feelings of inadequacy](#) and [vulnerability](#).

"While partying and [promiscuity](#) are often depicted in advertising, some men find these images to be negative portrayals of their gender and are, in fact, turned off by them," said Otnes, the Investors in Business Education Professor of Marketing at Illinois. "So it's important to recognize that some men may react negatively or be adversely impacted by such images."

According to the research, which was co-written by Linda Tuncay Zayer, of Loyola University, Chicago, six themes emerge from the analysis that reveal how men respond to ad depictions of ideal masculinity. Half of the themes – skepticism, avoidance and indifference – are negative, while the others – enhancement, striving and chasing – skew positive, with men seeing advertising as more of a motivational tool to enhance a certain aspect of themselves.

Although much research has examined the negative impact of advertising depictions on women and children, very little is known about the impact on men, Otnes says.

"The research is a first step toward developing an in-depth understanding of the responses and meanings appropriated to [masculinity](#) by Generation X consumers," she said.

It also holds implications for advertisers and marketers, who can use the contributions from the research to "employ masculine themes in advertising more effectively and ethically," Otnes says.

"As much as academics and some practitioners have called for responsibility in media messages targeting women and girls, attention also should be paid to men and boys," she said.

According to Otnes, men's responses to ads, as well as their consumer behaviors in general, are issues that are especially relevant in today's marketplace. The main shopper in 32 percent of U.S. households is male, according to a study by Nielsen and the NPD Group, which is why it is more important than ever for advertisers and marketers to "find ways to appeal effectively to the male segment, and to do so in an ethical manner," she said.

"People build up certain offensive and defensive strategies when they look at ads," Otnes said. "If they feel threatened by an ad, it may actually bleed over into the way they feel about that product. So if a man is turned off by how males are portrayed in an advertisement, he'll say, 'I don't want to be that guy' " – and that's the end of his relationship with that brand. So teasing out what's offensive from a sociological or cultural perspective is important."

The male [market](#) demographic is "way, way more fragmented" than once believed, Otnes says.

"A lot of ads directed at males are still dominated by 'The Player,' 'The Beer Drinker' or 'The Buddy,' " she said. "But those stereotypes don't actually fit the vast majority of males. Advertisers and marketers need to broaden the spectrum, and create campaigns centered on more of the actual roles that men play – 'The Dad,' 'The Husband' and 'The Handyman.' Those types of ads weren't easy to find at the time we were doing our research."

More information: The study was published in the book "Gender, Culture, and Consumer Behavior," co-edited by Otnes and Zayer.

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