Generation Z's and Millennials' Perception of Masculinity in Advertising: a Challenge for Advertisers

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Abstract

Purpose of the article: To explore Genneration Z's and millennials' perceptions of masculinity in advertising and determine which type of masculinity and which masculinity characteristics consumers favour in a masculine character or the advertising message centred around masculinity. This can help advertisers to understand what type of masculine character to focus on and whether advertisers' offered version of masculinity is in alignment with consumer preferences.

Methodology/methods: Methods included qualitative video content analysis of advertisements centred around masculinity and quantitative research methods such as survey research and A/B testing of younger consumer segments such as Generation Z and millennials. The empirical results were analysed using the SPSS 23 statistical software.

Scientific aim: To see whether social construction and social identity theory can help advertisers and researchers understand consumers' ever-changing perceptions of masculinity. In addition, the research aims to test the essence of congruity theory suggesting that consumers prefer content (advertisement) that aligns with individuals' preconceived notions.

Findings: The survey results showed that Latvian Generation Z and millennial men and women are evenly split on whether they like or dislike how masculinity is depicted in advertising. From people who say that they do not like the way masculinity is depicted in advertising, 49.7% of them say that depictions of masculinity in advertising affect their buying decisions. A/B test results showed that consumers give preference to competitiveness as a traditionally masculine characteristic, while heavily preferring the display of affection and love and depicting masculinity less stereotypically in modern masculinity advertisements.

Conclusions: Advertisers mainly focus on traditional masculinity as it is the most common masculinity type used in popular advertising in the last decade. On the other hand, consumers tend to approve of modern masculinity in advertising, with women approving of modern masculinity in far more convincing numbers than men. There is a statistically significant difference in men's and women's preferences when it comes to depictions of masculinity in advertising.

Keywords: advertising, marketing, masculinity, consumers, perception

JEL Classification: M37, M31

Introduction

In the last two decades, researchers have begun to analyse the significant effect masculinity has on advertising. Research suggests that masculinity is now branded (Scheibling, Lafrance, 2019), and men are increasingly marketed to and offered visions of masculinity for consumption. There is a term for this phenomenon called "branded masculinity", a term defined by 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 (2003) argues that masculinity is constructed as a product available for consumption if one merely chooses the appropriate brand names. Other researchers concur; for instance, Cortese, Ling (2011) suggest that companies and advertisers use masculinity as a product of consumption. 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. It is found that 49% of US beer ads during sports events focus on masculinity as the central theme of the ad (Noel *et al.*, 2017). One of the reasons why masculinity in advertising is so prominent is because it evokes a lot of emotions in consumers, and it has been found that emotional content strongly influences how advertisements are perceived and remembered (De Pelsmacker *et al.*, 1998; Friedman *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, emphasis on masculinity in advertising can impact purchasing intentions, thus indicating the vital relevance of this topic.

The problem is that consumer perception of masculinity is changing (Scheibling, Lafrance, 2019; Zayer *et al.*, 2020), which

means that advertisers can be confused about how to speak to consumers changing perceptions. 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 favourable 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. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how marketers should depict masculinity in their advertising so that it speaks effectively to today's consumer. This study is focused on masculinity in advertising and the changing consumer perceptions in answering these **research questions:**

RQ1: What is masculinity and what is the theoretical explanation of consumers' ever-changing perceptions of masculinity?

RQ2: What are the types of masculinity used in advertising and what are their characteristics?

RQ3: Which masculinity types are the most common in advertisements that are focussed on masculinity?

RQ4: What is the consumer (Generation Z and millennials) approval of contemporary depictions of masculinity in advertising, and does that affect their buying behaviour?

RQ5: Which types of masculinity and which specific characteristics get more approval from the consumers (Generation Z and millennials)?

RQ6: Are there statistically significant differences in men's and women's preferences for masculinity in advertising?

The first chapter of this paper explains the literature review process and the theoretical framework of this entire research. The second chapter details the methodology behind the research explaining the use of these methods as well as the process of how they

were conducted. The third chapter presents the findings from the research, and the fourth discusses these findings as well as their relation with prior studies conducted on the topic of masculinity in advertising.

1. Literature review and the theoretical framework of this research

The authors 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 organising the notes and creating the literature review itself, incorporating it into the research. The authors used the Scopus database to search for relevant latest research (years 2018 and 2019, the years 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 2,558 articles. By going through the search results, the authors chose articles that extensively focused on masculinity, defining masculinity, and concentrating on various types of masculinity. There were 32 articles that were selected at first based on the criteria, but by reading through the articles, 26 more articles were chosen for additional analysis. Later, there were several more articles added by analysing other sources. These articles helped the authors to first understand and then analyse traditional, hybrid, and modern masculinity and various other important elements for this research. Moreover, to analyse masculinity in the context of branding and advertising, there was a new literature review conducted. For that, the authors 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 authors checked social sciences and business management. The data-

base provided 46 articles, out of which 18 were selected as relevant. By reading these articles, additional 39 articles were added that seemed relevant to the research. Later on, more articles from the year 2021 were added by reading relevant theories and other sources.

1.1 Social construction, social identity and congruity theory

After conducting a literature review and analysis of masculinity definitions, the authors were able to answer RQ1 and agreed that the definition that best capitulates what masculinity means is by Srivastava (2015, 334), because it captures all the most common words used by other definitions such as "socially", "male", "behaviour", and "social interaction". The definition is: "*masculinity refers to the socially produced but embodied ways of being male. Its manifestations include manners of speech, behaviour, gestures, social interaction, a division of tasks appropriate to men*". The analysis of the definitions gathered through the literature review process showed that the keywords that appear the most in masculinity definitions are society, culture, behaviour, construction, and social. The emphasis on social construction as the key concept of masculinity prompted the authors to consider social construction theory as the fundamental theory of consumers' ever-changing perception of masculinity. The theory argues that reality is constructed by social interaction and not by the thoughts of individuals. The idea of social construction theory is that many aspects of our world are considered objective facts of life when in fact, these aspects derive from patterns of social interaction that have become institutionalised (Gergen, 2009). It means that the idea of masculinity is not created individually but rather collectively by society as a culturally and socially constructed phenomenon. The theory argues that what people experience in this world is often just constructs, and people experience the world

through that lens of constructs. The theory also states that during the process of social interaction, practices also become legitimate; it means that not only are practices taken as a fact but also as correct, valid, and desirable (Kessler, 2013). The idea that human practices become desirable through social interaction points out that social construction theory largely resembles social identity theory. Social identity theory, which offers insights into identity formation and change (RQ1), suggests that individuals seek a positive sense of self (Bertucci, 2018). Social identity theory, just like social construction theory, argue that individuals desire to perform their practices in a way that will please their social group, where such practice performance is appropriate.

Similarly, as to the idea of the social construction theory and social identity theory, other theoreticians argue the idea that consumers appreciate when something external, such as an advertisement, fits the self-constructed identity and version of an individual's masculinity. This hypothesis is backed up by the congruity theory which presents the case that individuals appreciate when the content is in alignment with individuals preconceived notions. For instance, consumers appreciate advertisements that depict masculinity in a form that fits the consumer's view of masculinity. The congruity theory proposes that people value illustrations that are in alignment with their existing social model (De Meulenaer *et al.*, 2019). In other words, congruity theory suggests that consumers seek to buy brands that they perceive to be compatible with their own self-concept. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to understand what type of masculinity consumers appreciate in advertising and what types of masculinity are even offered by the advertisers.

1.2 Types of masculinity

When masculinity is involved in interdisciplinary research, for instance, in research about advertising and psychology, the researchers mainly distinguish between two types of masculinity, such as traditional and mo-

Table 1. Types of masculinity and their characteristics, attributes, behaviours, and rhetoric.

Type 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 *et al.*, 2019; Birch *et al.*, 2017; Smith, 2012; Månsdotter *et al.*, 2009; Kimmel, 1996; Jaffe, 1990; Zayer *et al.*, 2020; Rogers, 2019; Connell, 2014; Montemurro *et al.*, 2019; Pollack, 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 *et al.*, 2019; Connell 2014; Ging, 2019; Eisen *et al.*, 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

Source: Authors' original work.

dern masculinity. These two types are common for distinguishing how a man is portrayed in the advertisement. However, there are also a few authors 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 authors of this research have 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 (Table 1.). It is important to understand each of these masculinity types so that they can be accurately identified in advertisements for further research (RQ2).

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 one end and modern on the other (Figure 1.).

In the scientific literature, there is a discussion of how traditional, hybrid and modern masculinity are portrayed in advertising and how consumers perceive it. For starters, the results of these efforts have a wide range of success of approval; for instance,

Orth, 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 are likely to respond more positively to communication that is 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
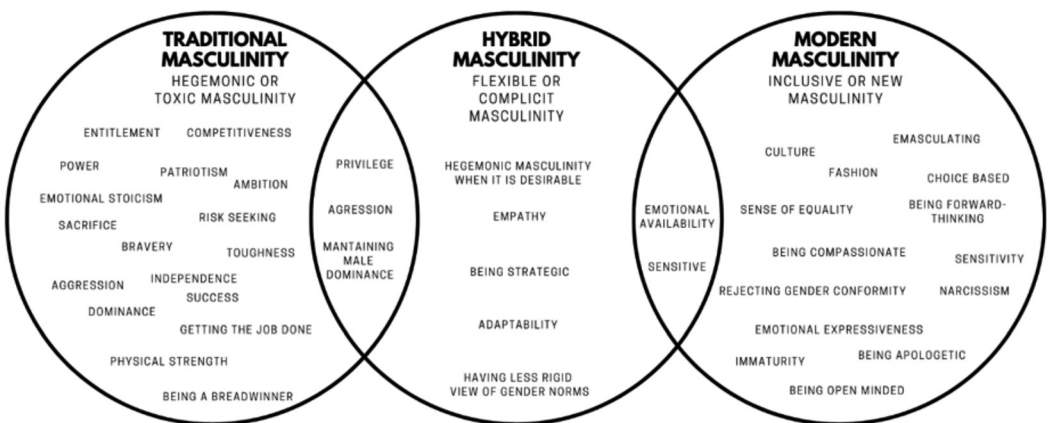

Figure 1. Types of masculinity and their key characteristics, behaviours and rhetoric.
Source: Authors' original work.

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

This chapter explains the methodology behind the research by first providing the methodological justification for the qualitative video content analysis and then for the survey and A/B testing. Chapter 2.2 provides greater detail about the sampling process, sampling size, and the process of determining the statistical significance.

2.1 Qualitative Video Content Analysis

As a part of this research, the authors conducted a qualitative video content analysis, a method used to describe, interpret and understand video content. This method was used to analyse the visual representations of masculinity in the advertisements. During the period of autumn of 2020 to spring of 2021, the authors were extensively looking for advertisements on YouTube depicting masculinity in order to find material to analyse the types of masculinity that advertisers use to communicate their versions of masculinity to consumers. Most of the advertisements

used were Super Bowl commercials from the previous decade (from 2010 to 2020). However, to increase the size of the sample, several other advertisements from well-known brands in Europe and the United States were added. These advertisements appeared on YouTube and Google when using the search words "Masculinity" paired with "advertising," "commercial," or "ad." A qualitative video content analysis was conducted by viewing a total of 288 advertisements.

2.2 Methodological justification and the structure of the survey

For analysing consumer perceptions and preferences of masculinity in advertising, the authors created a survey and an A/B test. The process of creating the survey and the A/B test involved several steps based on the theory (Marczyk *et al.*, 2005), such as defining the purpose and objectives of the survey, selecting relevant questions using the knowledge gathered from the literature review process, finding fitting advertisements to select as objects in the A/B test (from video content analysis). The survey was done in two sections (Table 2).

In the first section, the respondents answered eight survey-type questions (multiple choice). The respondents selected a few aspects of their demographics and then answered general questions about their preferences, opinions, and attitudes concerning masculinity in advertising. The second

Table 2. The reasoning for the survey questions.

Question sections	Description of the questions	The reasoning for the questions/ sources
The first section (eight survey questions)	Questions about consumer opinions on masculinity in advertising, equality, man's role as a breadwinner, etc.	Zayer, Otnes, 2012; Scheibling, Lafrance, 2019; Zayer *et al.*, 2020; Cortese, Ling, 2011; Gopaldas, Molander, 2020; Branchick, 2012; De Meulenaer *et al.*, 2019; Orth, Holancova, 2003; Putrevu, 2004; Brownbill *et al.*, 2018
The second section (eight A/B test questions)	Questions about consumer preferences between traditional and modern masculinity, and the reasons for the choices.	Pollack, 2017; Ging, 2019; Kimmel, 1996; Zayer *et al.*, 2020; Smith, 2012; Lalancette, Cormack, 2018; Oswald, 2007; Salzman *et al.*, 2005; Jaffe, 1990; Ging, 2013; Bellizzi, Milner, 1991; Hupfer, 2002; De Meulenaer *et al.*, 2019

Source: Authors' original work.

section was the A/B test, where respondents watched sixteen advertisements in eight rounds of questions and selected one out of two options (traditional or modern masculinity). It took around 20–30 minutes to fill out the survey, mainly due to the 16 advertisements that had to be watched in order to answer the questions.

2.2.1 The sampling process

The authors decided to focus on Generation Z and millennials as the core demographic of the research because these two groups are the future of consumerism due to these demographic groups entering their financial prime in the near future. Millennials are born between 1977 and 2000 (Palmatier, Sridhar, 2017), and Generation Zers are born after 2000, although many analysts include people born after 1995 in this group (Kotler, Armstrong, 2018). This group of consumers is also important to analyse for this particular research, as younger audiences in Latvia have been influenced by their conservative parents who grew up during Soviet Union times, but they also have been influenced by modern-day American and Western Europe pop culture (movies, music, TV shows), which depicts different values and gender norms. The younger audience is also interesting to analyse 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, 2019). Thus, the authors wanted to determine whether younger generations in Latvia overwhelmingly select ads where inclusiveness, equality, and rejecting masculine stereotypes are key aspects of the advertisement, therefore, confirming congruity theory.

2.2.2 The sample size

The Latvian population between the ages of 18 and 30 is approximately 207,000 (Central Bureau of Statistics in Latvia, 2022). The necessary sample size was calculated using a sample size formula (Ryan, 2013). According to the formula, the required sample size that would accurately reflect the views and opinions of the selected population was 384 respondents. The authors gave the survey and the A/B test to students of The Latvian Academy of Culture and Riga Technical University, since both authors give lectures for these two higher education institutions. The time period of respondents filling out surveys and the A/B testing was May 2021 to February 2022. The total eligible number of respondents was 420. Since the authors wanted to focus on analysing the differences between men and women and their preferences towards masculinity in advertising, the three surveys where respondents selected "other" as their gender (people who do not identify as either male or female) were excluded. That was done because three respondents were too few to reasonably be able to make conclusions about the entire subgroup in Latvia. Therefore, the final count of eligible surveys (Latvian youth, age 18–30, men and women) for the analysis resulted in 417 (n=417), with 142 being men and 275 being women.

2.2.3 Statistical significance

Regarding the differences between men's and women's responses, the authors wanted to analyse whether there is statistical significance in the data collected from the respondents. For that, there was a need to make a hypothesis.

H0: There is no difference between men's and women's response.

H1: There is a difference between men's and women's response.

To accept or reject the hypothesis, there is a need to calculate the p-value. A p-value less than 0.05 (typically ≤ 0.05) is statistically significant. It indicates strong evidence against the null hypothesis, as there is less than a 5% probability the null is correct.

In order to calculate the p-values of the empirical data, the authors followed the necessary steps:

1st step: Take the empirical values of the surveys that were summarised using the SPSS 23 software and put them in easy--to-read table.

The second step consisted in determining the calculated values by taking the empirical values and following the formula (sum of the row * sum of the column/ the total). This is done for every value of the empirical values table.

The third step comprised calculating the X2 empirical values following the formula: (Empirical value-calculated value)2/ Calculated value

This is done for every value in the table.

The fourth step consisted in calculating the sum of X2 values, thus getting Empirical X2 value, which does not have any meaning on its own, but is necessary for the next step.

The fifth step consisted in calculating the degree of freedom based on the formula: Degree of freedom= (amount of rows--1)*(amount of columns-1)

The sixth step comprised using the "CHIDIST" function on Excel and adding the two necessary values for this function (first adding the X2 empirical value and then adding the degree of freedom value).

And the seventh step consisted in comparing the value with 0,05 to confirm or reject the hypothesis (McClave, Sincich, 2018).

3. Results

This chapter introduces the findings of the research, while also explaining them in greater detail. First, there is an explanation of the findings from the qualitative video content analysis, followed by the explanation of the results from the surveys and the A/B testing.

3.1 Results of the qualitative video content analysis

A qualitative video content analysis was conducted by viewing 288 advertisements, of which 92 were categorised as "masculinity ads", meaning that these advertisements had a strong emphasis on masculinity as a concept to help the brand resonate with the audience. Of the 92 advertisements, 58 of them were labelled as traditional masculinity ads, and only 27 were labelled as modern masculinity ads (RQ3), while the remaining seven were hybrid masculinity ads. Hybrid masculinity ads were not selected due to the difficulty of accurately identifying them and due to the fact that hybrid masculinity is depicted in rare cases. Of the 92 "masculinity ads", the authors selected 16 (eight traditional masculinity and eight modern masculinity) of them for the A/B test. The authors wanted to select an equal number of advertisements representing the two major types of masculinity.

An important criterion for choosing these 16 advertisements was the amount of material that the ad can provide for content analysis because while the advertisement is usually only 30 to 60 seconds long, it had to display the main character long enough to provide him with personality and behavioural characteristics or perhaps statements about men or masculinity. In other words, in order for the advertisement to be selected for the A/B test, it had to be revealing of the masculinity narrative or message that the marketers and brand strategists behind the advertisement were trying to convey to the audience.

There was a stark contrast between how men were depicted in the traditional masculinity ads versus the modern masculinity ads. As the literature review process suggested, the men in traditional masculinity ads were depicted as strong, successful, decisive, and aggressive. Modern masculinity ads, on the other hand, showed men caring for others, loving, and even emotional. All this proves that brand strategists who focus on traditional masculinity in their advertising and brand strategists who focus on modern masculinity in their advertising focus on almost entirely opposite characteristics that align with the

traditional and modern masculinity characteristics concluded from the literature review process.

3.2 Survey results

The analysis of the survey results was done using SPSS 23 statistical software. One of the main questions of the survey was: "Do you generally like the way masculinity is depicted in advertising?" Of the respondents, 41% (35% men and 45% women) do not like how advertisers show masculinity in their advertisements, which means that only 59% (overall) like masculinity's depiction in advertising (RQ4). Furthermore, only 2% (overall) say that they very much like how advertisers depict masculinity. The authors argue that it is a very low number, considering that it is the goal of advertisers (and as congruity theory suggests) to connect with the audiences, to be liked by it, and for the character of the advertisement to resonate with the consumers.

Interesting results can be drawn when this question is paired (SPSS's Cross tabulation feature) with another critical question of the survey: "Can depictions of masculinity in advertising affect your buying decisions?" Of the people who say that they do not like the way, masculinity is depicted in advertising, 49.7% say that depictions of masculinity in advertising affect their buying decisions. In addition, of the respondents who strongly dislike the way masculinity is depicted in advertising, 72.3% say that depictions of masculinity in advertising affect their buying decisions (RQ4). This points to a problem or, instead, a lost opportunity, meaning that if companies manage to depict masculinity in a more appealing way in their advertisements to the consumers, the consumers might respond favourably to these companies with their purchases. Regarding the statistical significance of the difference between men's and women's responses, considering that the calculated p-value is 0.155457, the H0 hypothesis cannot be rejected (RQ6). Therefore, the result does not show statistical significance between men's and women's responses in how different they are from each other.

One of the survey questions showed a rather significant preference for modern masculinity; the question was: "Which display of masculinity in advertising would resonate more with you?" The results (Figure 2) show an overwhelming preference for key modern masculinity characteristics over traditional ones, with the natural assumption that what
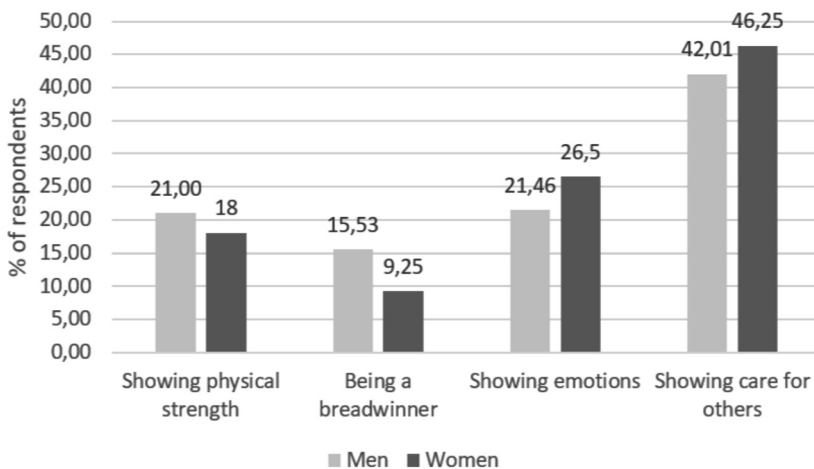

Figure 2. Characteristics mostly resonating with consumers. Source: Authors' original work.
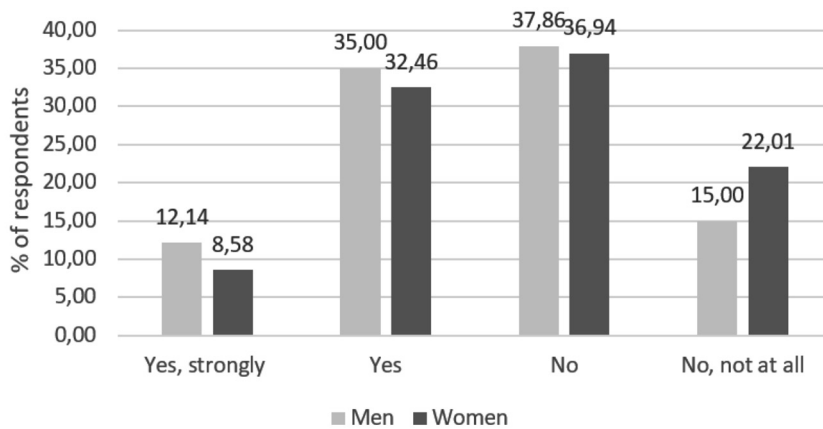
Figure 3. Approval rating for men's role as the breadwinner. Source: Authors' original work.

resonates with consumers is what they consequently prefer.

Respondents said that "Showing care for others" would resonate most with them (42% men and 46% women), with "Showing emotion" being the second element most likely to resonate with them (21% men and 27% women). Compared with the results for the key traditional masculinity elements, one could see a rather significant preference for modern masculinity characteristics, especially among women. Furthermore, while the differences between men's and women's responses are not enormous, it still shows that men favour traditional masculinity traits such as "Showing physical strength" and "Being a breadwinner" more than women (RQ5). With respect to the statistical significance of men's and women's responses, considering that the calculated p-value is 0.056263 which is slightly higher than 0,05, the H0 hypothesis cannot be rejected (RQ6). Therefore, the result does not show statistical significance between men's and women's responses in how different they are from each other.

As shown in Figure 3, the respondents reported rather surprising results (considering the previous question) in their responses to the question, "Do you agree with the statement: A man should be the main provider for the family (be the breadwinner)?" While

a slight majority of respondents rejected the statement that a man has to be the main provider for the family, a key traditional masculinity characteristic, the rejection of this idea was not an overwhelming one (37% versus 33% overall). A slightly more convincing result shows in responses "No, not at all" versus "Yes, strongly" with 20% versus 10% overall (RQ4 and RQ5). The results are similar and consistent with previous results in another way. That is, women again show less support for the breadwinner role for men than men themselves. However, it has to be noted that the difference between men's and women's responses to this question is rather insignificant.

As for the statistical significance of men's and women's responses, considering that the calculated p-value is 0.296269, which is considerably higher than 0.05, the H0 hypothesis cannot be rejected (RQ6). Therefore, the result does not show statistical significance between men's and women's responses in how different they are from each other.

3.3 Results from the A/B test
The results of the A/B test showed a much more significant difference in how Generation Z and millennial men and women in Latvia prefer masculine depictions in advertising. In some cases, the differences

Table 3. Men's choices in A/B test (%).

Masculinity	Dove	Axe	NFL	Gillette	Dos Eq./ Bonob.	Old Sp./ Tide	Nesp./ Dorit.	Barb./ Lego	Average
Traditional	18.37	28.9	62.68	36.62	43.66	61.27	67.61	39.44	**44.81**
Modern	81.69	71.1	37.32	63.38	56.34	38.73	32.39	60.56	**55.19**

Source: Authors' original work.

between men's and women's responses were stark. After watching the two advertisements in each round of questioning, the respondents were asked a simple question: "Which display of masculinity do you prefer?" They did not know which of the two versions in each question is classified as modern masculinity and which is traditional masculinity.

There were eight questions, each containing two advertisements (from 30 seconds to approximately 2 minutes long), that respondents had to watch and then decide their favourite masculinity depiction and provide reasons for their choice (choosing a specific characteristic, for example). In some questions, respondents had to choose between two advertisements from the same brand (for example, Dove, Axe, NFL, Gillette), one being traditional and the other modern masculinity depiction, and in other questions, between two different brands. Table 3 illustrates men's responses in percentage, meaning how many men chose the traditional masculinity advertisement and how many chose modern (RQ4).

As evidenced by Table 3, men chose, on average, advertisements depicting modern masculinity 55% of the time, compared to 45% of traditional masculinity. It seems a reasonably balanced result, especially compared to women's responses in the A/B test. On three of the occasions, men chose traditional masculinity ad over modern, and in five of the questions, modern masculinity was chosen as the favourite one. Interestingly, every question (except the Dos Equis/ Bonobos question) had a significant disparity (over 20%) between the results. Especially Dove and Axe, which had margins of more than 40% (Axe) and even 50% (Dove). This indicates that there could be stark differences between consumers' attitudes to masculinity depictions.

In contrast to men, women chose modern masculinity over traditional masculinity advertisements in far more convincing numbers (Table 4). In some of the questions, the young Latvian women showed their preference for modern masculinity ads over traditional ones with an 80 to 90% margin (Dove, Axe, and Barbasol/ Lego questions), with other modern masculinity ads being chosen with 50% to 60% margins (Gillette and Dos Equis/ Bonobos questions). Looking at the average score, it is clear that Generation Z and millennial Latvian women prefer to see modern depictions of men in advertising over traditional and stereotypical ones (RQ4). While men, as mentioned, chose modern masculinity ads on average 55% of the time in the A/B test, women did that 74% of the time. Women chose modern masculinity over traditional in every single question except Doritos/ Nespresso one. However, the

Table 4. Women's choices in A/B test (%).

Masculinity	Dove	Axe	NFL	Gillette	Dos Eq./ Bonob.	Old Sp./ Tide	Nesp./ Dorit.	Barb./ Lego	Average
Traditional	10.55	16.4	40.73	17.82	21.45	32.36	51.27	14.55	**25.64**
Modern	89.45	83.6	59.27	82.18	78.55	67.64	48.73	85.45	**74.36**

Source: Authors' original work.

Table 5. Statistical significance between men's and women's responses in A/B test questions.

A/B test choice	p-value
Dove	0.118397
Axe	0.034469
NFL	0.001896
Gillette	0.00282
Dos Equis/ Bonobos	0.000804
Old Spice/ Tide	0.0000419
Nespresso/ Doritos	0.018615
Barbasol/ Lego	0.0000735

Source: Authors' original work.

margin in the responses to this question was minimal (51% versus 49%).

The margins are pretty significant between men's and women's responses showing that women and men view masculinity in advertising quite differently, with women preferring modern masculinity over traditional in much greater numbers than men do. For instance, in five of the eight A/B test questions, the margin between women's and men's responses exceeds 20%. Regarding statistical significance, the p-value was calculated in the same process as it was for the survey questions. The p-value of the empirical data determining the statistical significance of men's and women's responses in how different they were was 0.0000000000000009987. This means that there are statistically very significant differences between men's and

women's responses in their preferences for traditional or modern masculinity in advertising. The differences were statistically significant (p-value being lower than 0,05) in every round of the A/B test, except in the Dove question (RQ6). Only Dove ads showed that men's and women's responses do not have significant differences (Table 5).

3.4 Preferences of masculinity characteristics

An essential part of the A/B test was not only to understand which masculinity type is more preferred by men and women and how much but also to understand specific traditional and modern masculinity characteristics that consumers find appealing in advertising as the reasons for their choices in the A/B test. Table 6. shows the most popular an-

Table 6. Most popular reasons for choosing traditional masculinity advertisements (%).

Reasons	Men	Women
Competitiveness	41.5	23.6
It exaggerates masculinity in a humorous way	37.0	18.2
The ability to "do it all"	33.8	14.2
It shows men being in control	25.6	16.1
Showing patriotism and bravery	19.7	11.6
It exemplifies confident masculinity	19.2	10.9
It accurately addresses men's insecurities	18.3	10.9
Showing toughness	16.9	5.1
Aggression and dominance	13.4	8.4
Emotional reservation	12.3	7.6
Display of physical strength	11.3	12.7
The role of a breadwinner	6.3	6.2
I can relate to this advertisement personally	4.9	3.6

Source: Authors' original work.

Table 7. Most popular reasons for choosing modern masculinity advertisements (%).

Reasons	Men	Women
It tackles a serious problem about masculinity	43.0	66.5
It is less stereotypical of men	38.7	49.1
Display of affection and love	35.6	50.9
It shows carefreeness of singing and dancing	31.0	41.8
Showing care	28.4	33.3
Carefreeness of what other people think	25.4	28.7
I can relate to this ad personally	20.4	11.3
Opposing gender conformity	17.6	26.1
It promotes equality	16.2	19.8
It shows sensitivity and emotionality	15.5	14.5
It is more inclusive	14.6	20.4
Showing reliability	11.3	11.3

Source: Authors' original work.

swers for choosing traditional masculinity ads among the men and women surveyed (RQ5). The numbers show the average value in percentage that men and women chose these characteristics when selecting their preferences in the A/B test. Based on the results, the benchmark for significant approval or preference for the masculinity characteristic was set at 20%. When analysing the specific traditional masculinity characteristics of men's and women's answers, it became clear that men value competitiveness as the most desirable traditional masculine characteristic (42%). It is followed by humorous exaggeration of masculinity as a close second (37%), "the ability to do it all" (34%) as the third most popular characteristic, and showing men being in control (26%) as fourth. While men had four traditional masculinity characteristics popular enough to exceed the 20% benchmark, the women surveyed only had one characteristic that received a significant preference. That characteristic was competitiveness, which received 24% (compared to men's 41%) approval among young Latvian women. This result also points to a noteworthy difference between men and women in terms of their preference for masculinity in advertising.

When looking at the preferences of modern masculinity characteristics (Table 7) as the reasons for choosing modern masculinity ads, it becomes clear once again that

modern masculinity is preferred because the values for modern masculinity characteristics are significantly higher than those of traditional masculinity characteristics. For instance, while there was only four (for men) and one (for women) traditional masculinity characteristic that exceeded the 20% benchmark, there were 7 (for men) and 8 (for women) that exceeded this benchmark for modern masculinity ads (RQ5). Among the men surveyed, the most popular reason for choosing modern masculinity advertisement was "It tackles a serious problem about masculinity" (43%). In addition, the men also appreciated advertisements that are less stereotypical of men (39%), display love and affection (36%), and depict men being carefree (31%). Women also selected similar reasons for choosing modern masculinity advertisements in the A/B test. For instance, "tackling a serious problem about masculinity" was also appreciated by women as the most popular reason (67%). Similarly to men, "display of affection and love" (51%) and depicting masculinity in a less stereotypical way (49%) were also the second and third most popular reasons for preferring modern masculinity in advertising for women as it was for men (RQ5).

Therefore, on the one hand, women and men prefer similar or, in some cases, the exact characteristics of masculinity and the same depictions of masculinity in advertising. On

the other hand, the level of how much they prefer these characteristics sometimes differs with margins that exceed 20%, which is a noteworthy difference.

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). However, previous studies evaluating masculinity in advertising observed inconsistent results on whether consumers appreciate more modern or traditional depictions of masculinity. In other words, is it the masculine stereotypes or inclusiveness in advertising that is getting positive feedback from the consumers indicating advertising effectiveness? There are many individual differences (*e.g.* attitudes, personality, values, or 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, while also being 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 both quantitative and qualitative methods, such as conducting a thorough literature review, the qualitative video content analysis, surveys, and an A/B test to understand consumer preferences on the matter of masculinity in the context of advertising.

At the beginning of the research, it was hypothesised that some of the theories that help understand the ever-changing consumer perceptions of masculinity can be rooted in social construction theory. As discovered in the analysis of masculinity definitions, masculinity is a socially constructed phenomenon, where reality and perception of it are constructed by social interaction with others and society at large and not by the thoughts of individuals. Furthermore, the social identity theory confirmed some of the key aspects of the social construction theory. Finally, the authors argue that the congruity theory is perhaps the most applicable in this research, since it suggests that consumers not only want to fit in with the socially constructed concepts in society, but they also choose and prefer content (advertisements) that fit that identity which is constructed by the society that they have adopted for themselves as argued in the prior research on masculinity in advertising (De Meulenaer *et al.*, 2019). Thus, this theoretical framework helped shape the relevance of the research topic and provide insights into why advertisers must pay close attention to consumers changing perceptions of masculinity.

Regarding the theoretical implications of this study, the authors were 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 one end and modern on the other. However, the differences between traditional and modern are stark both in scientific literature and in advertisements, as qualitative video content analysis proved. The results from the qualitative video content analysis also showed that advertisers put emphasis on traditional masculinity far more than modern masculinity. From the sample of 288 advertisements, of which 92 were categorized as "masculinity ads", meaning that these advertisements had a strong emphasis on masculinity, 58 advertisements were labelled as traditional masculinity ads, and only 27 were labelled as modern masculinity ads (the remaining seven advertisements were hybrid masculinity ads). On the one hand, that 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, consumer responses from the A/B test clearly showed preference toward modern masculinity depiction in advertising (with an average of 55% of men and 74% of women) instead of the traditional one. The results of men and women were statistically significantly different, which showed far more convincing support for modern masculinity advertisements from women than it was from men.

The results of this study indicate that advertisers are not effective in depicting a favourable masculine version to consumers in advertising. The survey results showed that Latvian Generation Z and millennial men and women are rather evenly split on whether they like or dislike how masculinity is depicted in advertising. Of the people who say that they do not like the way masculinity is depicted in advertising, 49.7% say that depictions of masculinity in advertising affect their buying decisions. In addition, of the respondents who strongly dislike the way masculinity is depicted in advertising, 72.3% say that depictions of masculinity in advertising affect their buying decisions. The survey results also show that while being a breadwinner is a less important characteristic of modern masculinity characteristics, nearly half of the consumers surveyed still consider a man's role as the breadwinner (provider for the family).

The results of the A/B test are somewhat counterintuitive because during the survey part, the respondents, both men and women, showed only a slightly higher preference for modern depictions of masculinity in advertising rather than traditional ones, while the A/B test results point to a rather significant preference. That shows that the consumers perhaps do not exactly know what they want until they see specific examples. Furthermore, these results show a problem in advertising because the qualitative video content analysis showed that traditional masculinity depictions are used more frequently by

advertisers, while the A/B test results clearly indicate a strong preference for modern masculinity in advertising. Perhaps a deeper problem is that advertisers and brand strategists do not understand the audience (at least the younger audience) but keep focusing on ancient stereotypes about masculinity.

The characteristics that were the most preferable for men and women were quite similar. In traditional masculinity ads, consumers preferred confidence, humorous exaggeration of masculinity, and men's ability "to do it all". In modern masculinity ads, however, the consumers gave preference to tackling a serious issue about masculinity, display of affection and love, and depicting masculinity in a less stereotypical way. It is necessary to point out that modern masculinity characteristics received far more convincing support than traditional characteristics, but that is related to modern masculinity ads being chosen more often than traditional ones. These results corroborate the findings of a great deal of the previous studies (Magaraggia, Cherubini, 2017; De Meulenaer *et al.*, 2019; Zayer, 2020) that found that it is the more inclusive and sensitive version of men who are preferred in advertising rather than the stereotypical depictions of gender roles.

The results of analysing men's and women's responses to survey and A/B test questions in relation to how different they are from each other are inconclusive. On the one hand, women and men prefer similar or, in some cases, the same characteristics of masculinity and the same depictions of masculinity in advertising. On the other hand, the level of how much they prefer these characteristics sometimes differs with margins that exceed 20%, which is a noteworthy difference. Similarly with statistical significance, while survey results presented a finding that men's and women's answers do not differ in a statistically significant way, the A/B test results pointed to the contrary with more convincing results.

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 preferences as well as which masculine characteristics consumers perceive more favourably, thus helping brand strategists and advertisers to create a more meaningful, effective and resonating male brand persona or to choose a male brand ambassador. Furthermore, consumer behaviour researchers and consultants can use this study as an example of researching consumer perceptions of masculinity in their markets and using masculinity-type classification to execute similar research to help them better understand the consumer and come up with marketing strategies.

Conclusion

This research aimed at understanding the current consumer perceptions of masculinity in advertising and how advertisers should depict masculinity in order to get consumer approval. The research concluded that since masculinity is a socially constructed phenomenon with a socially encoded set of attributes, characteristics, behaviours and ''tasks'', the social construction theory, social identity theory and congruity theory can help advertisers and other researchers understand the complexity of this phenomenon, as well as the relevance of it. Furthermore, it

was concluded that advertisers and researchers mainly distinguish traditional and modern masculinity, with traditional entailing strength, success, power, and aggression and modern entailing sensitivity, compashion, caring, and emotionality.

Advertisers mainly focus on traditional masculinity, as it is the most common masculinity type used in popular advertising in the last decade. Consumers are nearly evenly split on whether they like or dislike how men are being portrayed in advertising, furthermore suggesting that depictions of masculinity in half of the cases has an affect on their buying decisions.

Consumers tend to approve modern masculinity in advertising more than traditional one, with women approving of modern in far more convincing numbers than men. Consumers give preference to competitiveness as a traditional masculine characteristic while heavily preferring the display of affection and love and depicting masculinity less stereotypically in modern masculinity advertisements. There is a statistically significant difference in men's and women's preferences when it comes to depictions of masculinity in advertising.

Further research will expand the research methods for assessing consumer perceptions of masculinity in advertising by conducting focus groups with consumers and interviews with advertising industry experts.

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