Reframing masculinity

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Fourth-wave feminism has given rise to populist female empowerment, seeping into every brand sector from tampons to sportswear to fintech. The #MeToo movement, the gender pay gap and intersectional feminism are on cultural agendas across the world. Brands, marketers, and newsmakers have intensively zeroed in on the female experience of late—and rightly so. And now, insights agencies, research groups and think tanks are starting to ask: what about men? In the ideological corner, they are addressing the challenges of defining manhood against narratives of toxic masculinity—not least, connecting to the men who feel alienated by these tropes. In the commercial sense, how do we market and sell to today’s man? What does he look like?

One of the higher-profile examples was released by London-based futures consultancy The Future Laboratory. In the “New Masculinity” report released in spring 2018, The Future Laboratory team takes a deep dive into the shifting definition of manhood. “One of the main things that came out of this project was firstly that we didn’t want to go from having one monolithic version of masculinity—which, from the perspective of this report, we define as being toxic or having toxic elements—to creating another monolithic version of masculinity that people have to subscribe to,” Peter Maxwell, senior journalist and author of the report, tells JWT Intelligence.

Faith Popcorn’s BrainReserve also released a study at the summer 2018 Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity. Initiatives launched by marketers such as Carl Martin (formerly of Burberry and UsTwo) include Menmade, a collective for men who do not recognize themselves in negative, one-sided pop-culture narratives. Trailblazing brands from Axe to Nike have also started to present a more multifaceted view of masculinity.

What does it mean to be a man in 2018? Traditionally, the acceptable expression of masculinity in mainstream Western culture has been very rigid, with little room for emotional expression or vulnerability. But these constricting parameters have reached a breaking point. According to a 2016
survey by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, males accounted for 70% of suicides that year, and suicide rates for men are more than 3.5 times higher than for women. And movements like #MeToo make it abundantly clear that the destructive effects of toxic masculinity are not limited to men. As the damage it causes becomes impossible to ignore, the need for change is more apparent than ever. In response, brands and marketers are taking steps to consciously adapt the portrayal of masculinity to allow for more nuance, flexibility and compassion.

“I think what this entire conversation has been about and what it’s brought up is the need to allow men to exist in a plurality of different versions of their manhood, rather than defining specific boundaries in which they should exist if they want to perform masculinity ‘correctly’ in 2018,” explains Maxwell.

The Future Laboratory’s report also serves as a call to action for brands to destigmatize this diversified evolution of manhood. “There’s a need for brands to become involved in providing better role models for men and to undo some of the damage that they’ve been complicit in subjecting society to over the last 50 to 100 years,” says Maxwell. He stresses the importance of “creating signposts and role models that allow kids from a young age to see a bigger, more successful ‘manhood’ that isn’t based around rescuing princesses—or any kind of domination or control—but that actually can be around kinship and care.”

Harry’s, a direct-to-consumer men’s grooming label disrupting the stodgy shaving category, is one such brand working to reappropriate masculinity. In February 2018 Harry’s launched “A Man Like You,” an ad that questions what it means to be a modern man. In the spot, a boy attempts to explain the meaning of manhood to an alien unfamiliar with human culture. The boy lists all of the stereotypical things a man “should” be; “a man has to be strong… a man shouldn’t be afraid of anything.” But by the end, the boy admits that “the truth is, there’s no one way to be a man.”
“Harry’s believes the outdated rules of masculinity are too narrow for today’s world,” says Dale Austin, creative director at GSD&M, the agency that developed the ad. “Modern men embrace the ‘ands.’ They know they can be strong and nurturing, powerful and sensitive, self-assured and accepting of others. The problem comes not when we embrace the things that make us men, but when we shut ourselves off to an entire half of our humanity. In short, it’s time we stopped asking ourselves what makes a real man and instead ask what makes a good man. The answer, we believe, is the same things that make a good human.”

Men’s clothing brand Bonobos is actively continuing the conversation about what it means to be a man with its new #EvolveTheDefinition campaign. The central spot debuted during the ESPY Awards on July 18, 2018, amid a powerful moment in the #MeToo movement: the presentation of the Arthur Ashe Courage Award to the sexual abuse victims of former USA Gymnastics coach Larry Nassar. “We talked about moving beyond the evolution of men’s pants to the evolution of men,” says Bonobos co-president Micky Onvural. “Our bigger purpose became starting a conversation about masculinity.” The ad, which interviews a host of men about what masculinity means to them, intends to do just that by presenting varied definitions of manhood. “I think that’s what gets us in trouble,” one interviewee says, “when we say that there’s only one way to be a man.”
Axe ‘Is It Ok For Guys?’

Grooming brand Axe was one of the first brands to question what it means to be a man in 2016 with its “Find Your Magic” campaign. The original spot featured different types of men, encouraging viewers to embrace what makes them unique with the tagline “Find your thing and work on it.” The brand took this one step further with the “Is It OK For Guys?” spot. Released in May 2017, the spot asks real Google search questions about what is “acceptable” for men, including “Is it OK to not like sports?” and “Is it OK to experiment with other guys?”—and whether it’s OK for men to be nervous, depressed, scared …

The spot is only one part of Axe’s larger effort to break this culturally perpetuated cycle of toxic masculinity. The brand has partnered with three nonprofits—Promundo, The Representation Project and Ditch the Label—to better understand and help correct the factors contributing to this harmful cycle. “Axe asked guys to ‘find their magic’ and express what truly makes them an individual,” says Rik Strubel, global vice president at Axe. “But we can’t just tell guys to be themselves without addressing the underlying cultural issues and restrictive definitions of manhood holding them back in the first place. It not only hurts guys, it hurts everyone.”
72% of guys have been told how a real man should behave.

The Man Box Study, Promundo, 2017; US

Axe 'Is It Ok For Guys?'
The bigger picture alongside this is a proliferation of new direct-to-consumer brands and media platforms that are presenting a more nuanced version of masculinity. Fatherly, the millennial men’s platform, addresses conscious but culturally engaged and irreverent male parents. Hims is switching up the dialogue around men’s nutrition and hair loss. New men’s makeup and personal care brands, with sleek neutral packaging, appear regularly. This sits against a backdrop where millennial men are becoming more engaged parents (if not stay-at-home dads); are influencing grocery spends; and are generally defying traditional marketing wisdom about gender constructs.

Maxwell notes that, undeniably, brands were “culpable in reinforcing or creating some of the stereotypes” that have contributed to the problem of toxic masculinity. Now, as he points out, it’s time to make amends. “That has been a massive negative, but also it shows the power that they have potentially to reverse some of those perceptions or attributions.”

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