

The Beer Commercial and the Paradox of Masculinity

Abstract

In our hyper-capitalistic society, advertisements have an unconscious affect on our perception of identity. They have proliferated in forms unimaginable by previous distribution systems and create a powerful form of presence hard to escape. The specificity of advertisement towards the male demographic has contributed to the perception of what defines Masculinity. One in particular has been the influence of the beer commercial. As Judith Butler has suggested, identity is now acted out as a performance. It is through the performance of masculinity that beer commercials have contributed to what constitutes ideal male behavior.

This paper will investigate how forms of 'social design' have emerged and proliferated in commercialism directed towards men, and how they have defined (or redefined) Masculinity and perpetuated stereotypes of gender identity and sexual orientation. This conundrum has further been complicated by imagery that becomes an ideal perception of the male identity and behavior that does not truly reflect reality. Despite the complication that this new sphere engenders in regards to masculinity, Gilles Deleuze offers us a counter-position that can help resolve this paradox by challenging these ideals.

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In all these advertisements the use of humor is intentional but always referencing the transgressions of ideal masculinity as a manual of how to perform. Judith Butler described that gender is a performance and a performance that was not prescribed by individuals' acting alone but rather in accordance to certain measurements of acceptance.¹ Through selected Beer advertisement campaigns in the post-millennium era, Butler's notion of the performance can be visibly seen and critiqued on what perspective the term masculine really means through the direction of behaviors. If gender is a performance, it bares repeating itself in order to define our gender roles. However, through Gilles Deleuze's interpretation of using humor and irony, men can free themselves from repeating conformity, thus changing the perspectives of what constitutes accepted masculine behavior.

Lance Strate's 1992 essay *Beer Commercials: A Manual on Masculinity*, he addressed how through the beer commercial myths of masculinity are depicted by defining male existential relationship between their environment, themselves, boys, and women.² The commercials that Strate analyzed were steeped in the theme that stereotypical men overcome challenges they face through discipline, control, and support of your fellow man. It is through these commercials, the performative act of

¹ Butler, Judith. *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in phenomenology and feminist theory*.

² Strate, Lance. 1992. *Beer Commercials: A Manual on Masculinity*. In Steve Craig (Ed.) *Men, Masculinity, and the Media*. Sage Publications. Pp 78-92.

mastering masculinity can be observed through various strategies that display the ability of males to control any situation or circumstance.

However, there seems to have been a paradigm shift on what certain Beer advertisers thought constitutes ideal masculine behavior. Milwaukee's *Bests' Men should act like Men* campaign is an extreme form of this shift in which performing outside the parameters of acceptability results in repetitive punishment. The most ironic thing about the campaign is that retribution comes in a form of a Light Beer can. Nevertheless, it informs us that misrepresenting masculinity comes with some form of retribution that parodies violent acts in order to correct one's behavior. Through the campaign questions are posed on whether the performance of a male can be clearly defined as well as, whether masculinity is monopolized by heterosexual men.

In a slightly different approach, the Guinness campaign, asserts its own definition of what constitutes masculinity through rules and guidelines in bonding behavior. Directions on how to perform are given but to the extent of awkward and unnatural human interaction via the A-frame man hug. Using measurements of space to assert acceptable performance between two men complicates the motion of performing gender. Even the simplest act of posing becomes confusing as the expression of casual and too casual are questioned. By framing the commercial in the form of a lesson, men are asked to perform this behavior so as not to be confused by the over-laying fear of being judged as homosexual as seen in the Fernet Cinzano commercial. What could be seen as individual forms of expression, could easily be seen as transgressions of masculinity as each man in the

commercials begins to hide perceived misrepresentation of machismo. Moreover, minute details become the mere measurements of acceptance that begin to suppress individuality that is interpreted as having overtones of homosexuality.

Michael Kimmel describes in his interactions between adolescent students in classes and workshops, how they would point out who is homosexual. The answers varied as descriptions were about how a homosexual person walked, talked, acted in a certain way, and even conveyed emotions. Yet when pressed to describe what a heterosexual masculine man would be like, it was always referred as opposition through the same stereotypes such as never walking, talking, acting, or showing emotions.³ It is peculiar that young adolescents would point out the transgressions of masculinity before even pointing out clear definitive descriptions. Furthermore, it confirms to us that masculinity through the viewpoint of the selected beer commercials, the relativity of what constitutes as “effeminate” and homosexual behavior.

Through these beer campaigns, masculinity is defined as repetitive performance of vague rules that are determined by its transgressions to differentiate from the un-masculine. The paradox of masculinity in these commercials is that it cannot define itself beyond associating transgression with sexual orientation and individuality. It is through Gilles Deleuze's *Repetition and Difference* that our humanity gives us an innate quality that allows us to break out of this cyclical paradox by saying: “Repetition belongs to humour and irony; it is by nature transgression or exception, always revealing a singularity opposed to the

³ Kimmel, Michael. *Masculinity as Homophobia*. 1994.

particulars subsumed under laws, a universal opposed to the generalities which give rise to laws.”⁴ Deleuze would agree that stringent definitions of gender are generalities of moral codes that have been constructed for humans thus repeating these habits are against the nature of humanity. It is the construction of these moral laws that created generalities of perfection and integration, which leaves various forms of conformity. Through Deleuze’s idea of using humor and irony, the history of beer advertisement has in its ways in which the performance of masculinity can break out of its monotony.

In the history of beer advertisement, it is relatively new that campaigns have been trying to define masculinity through heterosexual idealization. In 1906 Budweiser had used the figure of Ganymede in Greek mythology on posters and mugs. Ganymede was a handsome young man, who garnered the attention of Zeus. Zeus abducts Ganymede, in the form of an eagle, and brings him to the realm of the Gods, keeping him as his cup-bearer. The use of homoerotic iconography has its history without controversy and becomes its own form of irony.

Also in 1997, Guinness had a commercial that was never aired. In the commercial, traditional tropes of heterosexual relationships and the applicability of it to homosexuality are questioned. The use of Tammy Wynette and the Diana Dors statement provided represents the traditional heterosexual context of relationships. The irony in the commercial is that the meaning of the song and statement break down when the gender roles fail to become applicable. It even allows us to question whether these notions are applicable to heterosexual relationships at all. In this

⁴ Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton. Columbia University Press. New York. 1994

commercial, the performance of the masculine is broken down in which gender roles are blurred and transgressions are not mentioned at all. At the end, it becomes ironic that masculinity has to be regulated to sets of strict performative acts at all.

Finally, the use of humor can also allow repetition to be broken as well. *Schmidt's Gay*, a 1992 Saturday Night Live skit featuring Adam Sandler and Chris Farley, pokes fun of the stereotypes of beer commercials. By using the format of the beer commercial and using the oppositions disassociated with the traditional portrayal of young males, this satirical skit up ends the concept of objectification of women that serves to define masculinity by objectifying males. It is a commentary of how narrow definitions in gender identity misinforms us of what constitutes the performance of being a "guy." Strategies like these can be very effective in getting advertisements to move away from using transgressions to determine the performance of masculinity. The use of humor and irony can also do the same by getting advertisers to rethink their campaign messages in understanding what masculinity really is.