

Advertising, in a commodity-driven consumer culture, is an omnipresent and rich source of gender ideology. Contemporary ads are filled with images of "dangerous"-looking men. Men's magazines and mainstream newweeklies are rife with ads featuring violent male icons, such as uniformed football players, big-fisted boxers, and leather-clad bikers. Sports magazines aimed at men, and televised sporting events, carry millions of dollars' worth of military ads. In the past decade, there have been hundreds of ads for products designed to help men develop muscular physiques, such as weight training machines and nutritional supplements.

Historically, use of gender in advertising has stressed difference, implicitly and even explicitly reaffirming the "natural" dissimilarity of males and females. In late-twentieth-century U.S. culture, advertising that targets young White males (with the exception of fashion advertising, which often features more of an androgynous male look) has the difficult task of stressing gender difference in an era characterized by a loosening of rigid gender distinctions. Stressing gender difference in this context means defining masculinity in opposition to femininity. This requires constantly reasserting what is masculine and what is feminine. One of the ways this is accomplished, in the image system, is to equate masculinity with violence (and femininity with passivity).

The need to differentiate from the feminine by asserting masculinity in the form of power and aggression might at least partially account for the high degree of male violence in contemporary advertising, as well as in video games, children's toys, cartoons, Hollywood film, and the sports culture.

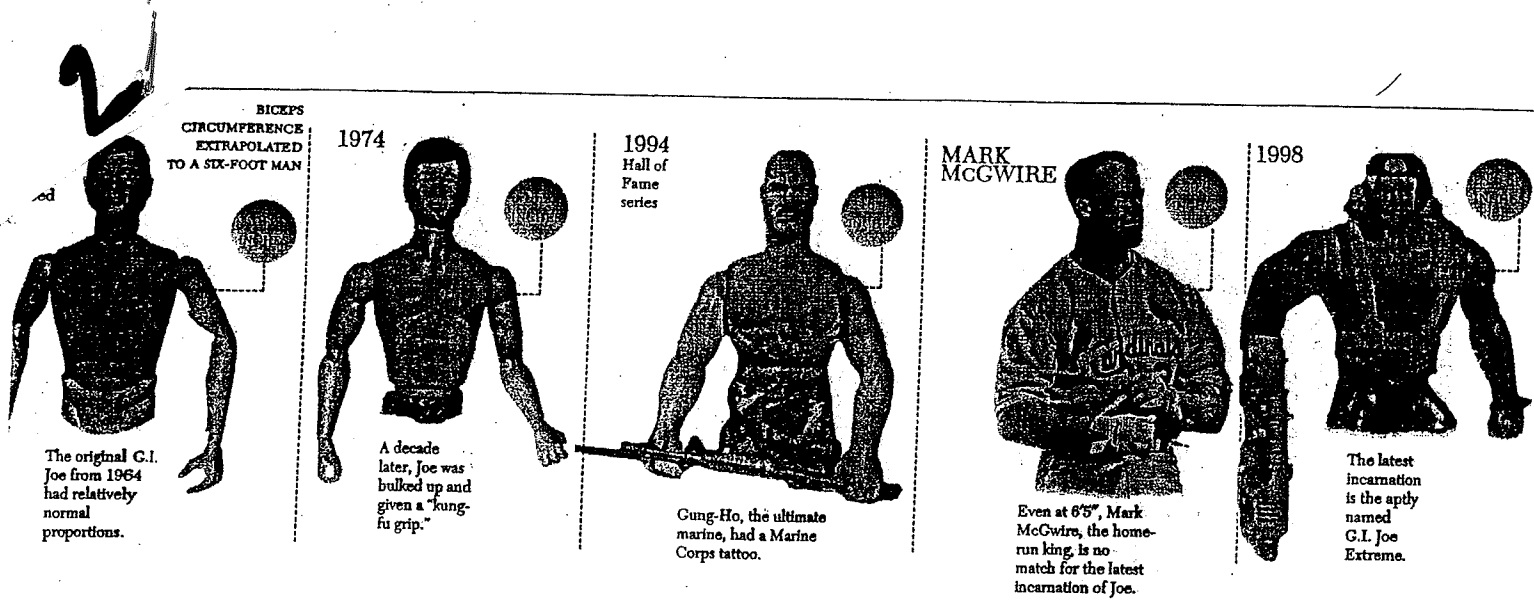
By helping to differentiate masculinity from femininity, images of masculine aggression and violence—including violence against women—afford young males across class a degree of self-respect and security (however illusory) within the more socially valued masculine role.

### Violent White Masculinity in Advertising

The appeal of violent behavior for men, including its rewards, is coded into mainstream advertising in numerous ways: from violent male icons (such as particularly aggressive athletes or superheroes) overtly threatening consumers to buy products, to ads that exploit men's feelings of not being big, strong, or violent enough by promising to provide them with products that will enhance those qualities. These codes are present in television and radio commercials as well, but this chapter focuses on mainstream American magazine ads (*Newsweek*, *People*, *Sports Illustrated*, etc.), from the early 1990s.

Several recurring themes in magazine advertising targeting men help support the equation of White masculinity and violence. Among them are violence as genetically programmed male behavior, the use of military and sports symbolism to enhance the masculine appeal and identification of

ources: *The G.I. Joe Encyclopedia* by Vincent Santelmo; photographs by Vincent Santelmo (G.I. Joes, except far right) and Associated Press (Mark McGwire).



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products, the association of muscularity with ideal masculinity, and the equation of heroic masculinity with violent masculinity. Let us now consider, briefly, each of these themes.

### *Violence as Genetically Programmed Male Behavior*

One way that advertisers demonstrate the "masculinity" of a product or service is through the use of violent male icons or types from popular history. This helps to associate the product with manly needs and pursuits that presumably have existed from time immemorial. It also furthers the ideological premise, disguised as common sense, that men have always been aggressive and brutal, and that their dominance over women is biologically based. "Historical" proof for this is shown in a multitude of ways.

An ad for the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, an elite financial institution, depicts a medieval battlefield where muscle-bound toy figurines, accompanied by paradoxically muscular skeleton men, prepare to engage in a sword fight. They might wear formal suits and sit behind desks, the ad implies, but the men in high finance (and those whose money they manage) are actually rugged warriors. Beneath the veneer of wealth and class privilege, all men are really brutes. The text reads: "How the Masters of the Universe Overcame the Attack of the Deutschmarks."

An ad for Trojan condoms features a giant-sized Roman centurion, in full uniform, muscles rippling, holding a package of condoms as he towers over the buildings of a modern city. Condom manufacturers know that the purchase and use of condoms by men can be stressful, partially because penis size, in popular Western folklore, is supposedly linked to virility. One way to assuage the anxieties of male consumers is to link the product with a recognizably violent (read: masculine) male archetype. It is no coincidence that the two leading brands of condoms in the United States are named for ancient warriors and kings (Trojan and Ramses).

Sometimes products with no immediately apparent connection to gender or violence nonetheless make the leap. An ad for Dell computers, for example, shows a painting of a group of White cowboys on horseback shooting at mounted Indians who are chasing them. The copy reads: "Being Able to Run Faster Could Come in Real Handy." The cowboys are foregrounded and the viewers are positioned to identify with them against the Indian "other." The cowboys' violence is depicted as defensive, a construction that was historically used to justify genocide. The ad explains that "you never know when somebody (read: Indians, Japanese business competitors) is going to come around the corner and surprise you." It thus masculinizes the White middle-class world of the computer business by using the violent historical metaphor of cowboys versus Indians.

An even more sinister use of historical representations involves portraying violence that would not be acceptable if shown in contemporary settings. Norwegian Cruise Line, for example, in an ad that ran in major newsweekly magazines, depicted a colorful painting of a scene on a ship's

deck, set sometime in the pirate era, where men, swords drawn, appear simultaneously to be fighting each other while a couple of them are carrying off women. The headline informs us that Norwegian is the "first cruise line whose entertainment doesn't revolve around the bar."

It is highly doubtful that the cruise line could have set what is clearly a rape or gang rape scenario on a modern ship. It would no doubt have prompted feminist protests about the company's glorification of the rape of women. Controversy is avoided by depicting the scene as historical.<sup>3</sup> But Norwegian Cruise Line, which calls itself "The Pleasure Ships," in this ad reinforces the idea that rape is a desirable male pastime. Whether intentional or not, the underlying message is that real men (pirates, swashbucklers) have always enjoyed it.

### *The Use of Military and Sports Symbolism to Enhance the Masculine Identification and Appeal of Products*

Advertisers who want to demonstrate the unquestioned manliness of their products can do so by using one of the two key subsets in the symbolic image system of violent masculinity: the military and sports. Uniformed soldiers and players, as well as their weapons and gear, appear frequently in ads of all sorts. Many of the Camel Smooth Character cartoon ads, for example, display submarines surfacing or fighter jets streaking by as Joe Camel stands confidently in the foreground. One ad features Joe Camel himself wearing an air force bomber pilot's jacket. The message to the young boys and adolescent males targeted by the campaign is obvious: Violence (as signified by the military vehicles) is cool and suave. The sexy blond woman gazing provocatively at the James Bond-like camel provides female ratification of Joe's masculinity.

Ads for the military itself also show the linkage between masculinity and force. The U.S. military spends more than \$100 million annually on advertising. Not surprisingly, armed services advertisements appear disproportionately on televised sporting events and in sports and so-called men's magazines. Military ads are characterized by exciting outdoor action scenes with accompanying text replete with references to "leadership," "respect," and "pride." Although these ads sometimes promote the educational and financial benefits of military service, what they're really selling to young working-class males is a vision of masculinity—adventurous, aggressive, and violent—that provides men of all classes with a standard of "real manhood" against which to judge themselves.

Boxers and football players appear in ads regularly, promoting products from underwear to deodorants. Sometimes the players are positioned simply to sanction the masculinity of a product. For example, an ad for Bugle

<sup>3</sup>Some feminist groups did protest the ad, such as the Cambridge, Massachusetts-based group Challenging Media Images of Women. But the protests never reached a wide audience and had no discernible effect.

Boy clothing depicts a clean-cut young White man, dressed in Bugle Boy jeans and posed in a crouching position, kneeling on a football. Standing behind him, inexplicably, is a large, uniformed football player flexing his muscles. The only copy says, in bold letters, "Bugle Boy Men." It seems reasonable to infer that the goal of this ad was to shore up the masculine image of a product whose name (Bugle Boy) subverts its macho image. The uniformed football player, a signifier of violent masculinity, achieves this task by visually transmitting the message: Real men wear Bugle Boy.

Advertisers know that using high-profile violent male athletes can help to sell products, such as yogurt and light beer, that have historically been gendered female. Because violence establishes masculinity, if these guys (athletes) use traditionally "female" products, they don't lose their masculinity. Rather, the masculinity of the product—and hence the size of the potential market—increases. Miller Brewing Company proved the efficacy of this approach in their long-running television ad campaign for Lite beer. The Miller Lite campaign, which first appeared in the early 1970s, helped bring Miller to the top of the burgeoning light beer market and is often referred to as the most successful TV ad campaign in history.

#### *The Association of Muscularity with Ideal Masculinity*

Men across socioeconomic class and race might feel insecure in their masculinity, relatively powerless or vulnerable in the economic sphere, and uncertain about how to respond to the challenges of women in many areas of social relations. But, in general, males continue to have an advantage over females in the area of physical size and strength. Because one function of the image system is to legitimate and reinforce existing power relations, representations that equate masculinity with the qualities of size, strength, and violence thus become more prevalent.

The anthropologist Alan Klein<sup>4</sup> has looked at how the rise in popularity of bodybuilding is linked to male insecurity. "Muscles," he argues, "are about more than just the functional ability of men to defend home and hearth or perform heavy labor. Muscles are markers that separate men from each other and, most important perhaps, from women. And while he may not realize it, every man—every accountant, science nerd, clergyman, or cop—is engaged in a dialogue with muscles" (16).

Advertising is one area of the popular culture that helps feed this "dialogue." Sports and other magazines with a large male readership are filled with ads offering men products and services to enhance their muscles. Often these ads explicitly equate muscles with violent power, as in an ad for a Marcy weight machine that tells men to "Arm Yourself" under a black and white photograph of a toned, muscular White man, biceps and forearms straining, in the middle of a weight-lifting workout. The military, too, offers

<sup>4</sup>The article cited here was excerpted from Klein's book *Little Big Men: Bodybuilding, Subculture and Gender Construction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

to help men enhance their bodily prowess. An ad for the Army National Guard shows three slender young men, Black and White, working out, over copy that reads "Get a Part-Time Job in Our Body Shop."

The discourse around muscles as signifiers of masculine power involves not only working-class men but also middle- and upper-class males. This is apparent in the male sports subculture, where size and strength are valued by men across class and racial boundaries. But muscularity as masculinity is also a theme in advertisements aimed at upper-income males. Many advertisers use images of physically rugged or muscular male bodies to masculinize products and services geared to elite male consumers. An ad for the business insurance firm Brewer and Lord uses a powerful male body as a metaphor for the more abstract form of (financial) power. The ad shows the torso of a muscular man curling a barbell, accompanied by a headline that reads "the benefits of muscle defined." The text states that "the slow building of strength and definition is no small feat. In fact, that training has shaped the authority that others see in you, as well."

Saab, targeting an upscale, educated market, bills itself as "the most intelligent car ever built." But in one ad, they call their APC Turbo "the muscle car with a social conscience"—which signals to wealthy men that by driving a Saab they can appropriate the working-class tough guy image associated with the concept of a "muscle car" while making clear their more privileged class position.

#### *The Equation of Heroic Masculinity with Violent Masculinity*

The cultural power of Hollywood film in the construction of violent masculinity is not limited to the movies themselves. In fact, many more people see the advertising for a given film than see the film itself.

Advertising budgets for major Hollywood releases typically run in the millions of dollars. Larger-than-life billboards enhance the heroic stature of the icons. Movie ads appear frequently on prime time TV and daily in newspapers and magazines. Not surprisingly, these ads highlight the movies' most violent and sexually titillating scenes.

Violence on-screen, like that in real life, is perpetrated overwhelmingly by males. Males constitute the majority of the audience for violent films, as well as violent sports such as football and hockey. It is important to note, then, that what is being sold is not just "violence," but rather a glamorized form of violent masculinity.

Guns are an important signifier of virility and power and hence are an important part of the way violent masculinity is constructed and then sold to audiences. In fact, the presence of guns in magazine and newspaper ads is crucial in communicating the extent of a movie's violent content. Because so many films contain explicit violence, images of gun-toting macho males (police detectives, old-west gunslingers, futuristic killing machines) pervade the visual landscape.



**In an effort to reduce injuries, the Clodpell Valley Football Conference devised the two-hand tickle tackling rule.**

### Conclusion

Recent research in sociology, media, and cultural studies strongly suggests that we need to develop a much more sophisticated approach to understanding cultural constructions of masculinity. Feminists, who have been at the forefront in studying the social construction of gender, have, historically, focused on images and representations of women. Clearly we need a similarly intensive examination of the representation of men—particularly in light of the crisis of men's violence in our society.

This chapter focuses attention on constructions of violent White masculinity in mainstream magazine advertising. But we need also to examine critically a number of other areas where violent masculinities are produced and legitimated: comic books, toys, the sports culture, comedy, interactive video, music video, pornography. This will help us to understand more fully the links between the construction of gender and the prevalence of violence, which might then lead to effective antiviolence interventions.

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### ENGAGING THE TEXT

1. What does Katz mean when he says that "violent behavior is typically gendered male" (para. 6) in American culture? What evidence do you see to support or challenge this assertion?
2. What role does Katz suggest that the media play in "producing, reproducing, and legitimating... violence" (para. 1)? Why does he believe that the issue of gender is typically ignored in discussions of media and violence?
3. How do images of male aggression, strength, and power appeal differently to working-class men and professional men, according to Katz? How does he explain the increasing popularity of such images—for example, in action-adventure movies—since the 1970s?
4. Katz describes and interprets several specific ads (for example, the rampaging pirates in the ad for Norwegian Cruise Lines in para. 21). Sketch out an alternate interpretation for one or more of these ads based on the details Katz provides. To what extent are the images and texts of the ads ambiguous?

### EXPLORING CONNECTIONS

5. Play the role of Holly Devor (p. 414) and write a journal entry explaining how the advertising images described by Katz contribute to the "social hegemony" of the "patriarchal gender schema."
6. While Katz implies that our popular images of masculinity are overwhelmingly sexist and damaging, Judith Ortiz Cofer's (p. 423) account of her Wonder Woman fantasies suggests that images from popular media can influence us in complex and sometimes unexpected ways. Do you see superheroes, comic book characters, and action figures as sexist or liberating for children? Can they be both?
7. Both Katz and Jean Kilbourne (p. 444) suggest that violent media images at once reflect and help to perpetuate a culture of violence; however, they offer few suggestions about how this cycle of violence might be broken. Why do you think both writers focus more on analyzing the problem than on offering solutions? How would you begin to address the issue?
8. In the cartoon on page 474, how does the artist play with our assumptions about football players, football, and fans of the sport? Is he making fun of