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The Best Men Can Be

“Boys will be boys” is a phrase we hear very often in today’s society to justify the actions of young males when they’re play fighting or acting mischievous. Gillette attempts to tackle issues such as sexual harassment and toxic masculinity all in the span of a minute and forty-eight seconds. The images shown in the commercial are what most of society deem as “normal” male behavior. Meanwhile others (including Gillette) believe that the actions shown should not be acceptable and we should hold men to a higher standard than what we currently do. The commercial goes away from advertising men as alpha-males like so many products for men do like Axe, Old Spice and a lot of truck companies. It shows a softer side by the actual content and techniques it uses. They represent their intentions with this commercial through their specific shots, reworked language, sound and current events. Gillette has been in business since 1901 - over one hundred years of business, specifically tailored towards men (“Proctor and Gamble”). They know how to turn a profit when it comes to shaving products. Shaving is even thought of as a macho-man activity. Only real men can grow beards. Gillette wanted to use their platform as the macho-man’s product to target a more sensitive side of men. It changes the issues discussed a men’s issue instead of a women’s issue, which is how a lot of men perceive it. Ultimately, they are taking a product and make it the face of a new era of men that are more responsible for their actions as well as others.

Gillette has been advertising its well-known slogan, “The best a man can get,” since 1989 during Super Bowl 23 (Coffee 2019). However, in January of 2019, they started a new ad campaign with the slogan “The best a man can be.” They know how to advertise towards men, and it’s been working relatively well so why would they change anything? To understand this, it’s important to look at what was happening around the time of this ad campaign. A few months before this ad campaign started, in October, the confirmation hearings of Brett Kavanaugh took place. Kavanaugh’s hearings were very high profile and a hot button issue for many people. This is because Kavanaugh was accused of sexually assaulting a woman named Christine Blasey Ford in high school. This caused an uproar and made people think of how society is so quick to disregard women’s accusations towards men. And this is just one instance around the same time of Gillette’s ad campaigns. In 1991, only two years after Gillette’s first ad campaign, Associate Justice Clarence Thomas was accused of sexual assault by Anita Hill, who worked underneath him. In 2017 the #MeToo movement started gaining steam. This was destined to be an issue for a popular men’s brand to look at and condemn. Gillette caught major pushback for taking a stance that was deemed political and out of the realm that a business should be in. Some consumers thought the ad campaign was necessary and positive and the issues shown in the commercial need to be talked about and changed.

Of course, Gillette has tried to take advantage of the events that have happened near their ads. Gillette uses many camera shots of different situations to show the true feelings and thoughts of not only men but the company itself. The commercial begins with an eyeline match technique that shows men staring into the mirror with words and phrases like “bullying, the Me-Too movement, and toxic masculinity,” playing in the background (0:02). This establishes that men are thinking about these subjects but it’s just a matter of if they will do anything about it.

The commercial then shows a flashback of an old Gillette commercial, where a woman is kissing a freshly shaven man, then a shot of kids busting through it (0:08). I think this is Gillette showing that they are moving on from the past and embracing the new standards that should be set for men. This is an effective way of establishing their position in just a few seconds of footage without even explicitly stating it, although they do later in the commercial. This could also potentially be a way of Gillette saying that they are breaking barriers because very few companies are willing to tackle such a highly politicized topic publicly. The commercial continues to show scenes of toxic, typical “boys will be boys” situations like bullying, workplace harassment, and rough housing (0:10-0:38). All of these scenes have a cool tone over them. Most of the colors involved in the scenes are of a blue hue. Blue is used to represent the sadness of these situations. Harassment, bullying and sexual assault aren’t situations that should be shown in a bright, warm light. No one wants to admit that it is disappointing that we just let certain events happen and do nothing about it. Most people are scared to admit that we have an issue, so we mask it like the way the colors of the ad do. However, the ad moves away from its blue hue and changes its visuals. The commercial continues and shows men and young men holding other men accountable for their actions (0:54-1:25). During these scenes the colors become warmer and seem to be happier. The world would be brighter and more welcoming if we hold men accountable for their actions. It shows close-ups of men of all ages (1:27-1:33). Toxic behavior starts young and continues into adulthood. It doesn’t just subside as you become older if you are never shown that what you are doing is wrong. There are no formal inter-titles on the images of the commercial until the last thirteen seconds of the ad. The inter-title is placed over the image of a young boy and it has Gillette’s original slogan on it (1:35). This shows the connection between

boyhood and being a man almost as if the boy is saying he's a man because he knows he is going to be someday.

Just like visual components, Gillette also uses language to promote their new outlook and want for a new type of man. Gillette changes the word "man" to "men" in the slogan. This conveys that there is no set definition of what a man is. Men come in all shapes and sizes so why does one have to be the ideal man? They also change the word "get" to "be" in the slogan. People are constantly changing, and this includes how a man is always forming who he is. As a society we are evolving to be our best selves by looking for improvements in technology and in the medical field. This helps form Gillette's rhetorical situation to establish their evolution. Gillette is telling us that our current standards are not good enough and not the best a man could get. They actually beg the question in the beginning of the commercial asking "is this the best a man can get? Is it?" Boys are mentioned more in the commercial far more than men. Boys grow into men so the current generation should be leading by example of what a "real man would do." They repeat the phrase "boys can be boys" several times and it gets its own dedicated scene. They specifically point this out because this is one of the most toxic phrases that people hear. It is the ammunition that allows boys to think that what they do is okay and will be tolerated. They are sure to include that they say that some men are already saying and doing the right things whether it be considered big or small. Even the smallest acts can have a major impact on someone. You never know if the way you affect one person could mean affecting millions of other people.

Another technique Gillette is able to use to resonate this feeling of blueness is sound. The commercial is very gloomy, and Gillette uses this to their advantage to tell you how you should feel. The tone of the narrator is almost melancholy. You can sense the disappointment in his

voice with what is happening. His volume rarely changes and is always low. It's almost as if he is ashamed that he even has to discuss this topic. Although words like toxic masculinity and sexual harassment are spoken in the background the narrator never actually says them. They're also mainly spoken by women instead of other men. We tend to keep accusations in the background, and they are rarely acknowledged by men in our society. These issues are hidden until they boil over, and we are forced to talk about them.

Entering to the rhetorical situation you can see how the audience responded. This commercial caused mass controversy among men. Even though this was unintentional it's a good way for Gillette to prove their point that something needs to be changed among men's actions. Many men thought that the ad was trying to strip them of their masculinity and make people think that masculinity is a bad thing. Some people even went as far as boycotting Gillette razors and throwing them away. Gillette spoke out against those that were angry over the ad but didn't show any sign of pulling it or regretting their actions. Gillette is a company though and their end goal is to make the most money. In September when Nike had released their ad campaign with Colin Kaepernick surrounded by controversy their sales had actually increased. Gillette saw this as an opportunity to seem more socially responsible and increase their earnings. It's still to be determined how well this worked. The same "we're socially responsible" act won't work in the same way for Gillette that it did for Nike. It seems that it had lots of backlash from men on this commercial but maybe Gillette was trying to reach into a different audience, women. According to an Adweek article, "The shaving conversation online is 62 percent female," (Zupan 2019). So, looking at this maybe Gillette wasn't trying to please their male consumers but instead get a larger market to purchase their products. According to the same article fifty-one percent of women reacted with joy to the ad, which isn't overwhelming, but it's not terrible (Zupan). If

Gillette is able to gain more customers than they lost from the commercial then they came out on top for this. Brand loyalty is super important in the world of marketing and business so consumers who were willing to stop using the product over one simple advert are not the consumers that Gillette would have wanted anyways.

Gillette is able to piece together precise language, a particular look for the company that fits with its main color (blue), sound and a hot button issue to sell its product without even displaying the product. They take several risks in hopes to not only bring awareness to issues that need to be discussed but to gain a new audience that they might not have had before. Their carefully planned social commentary ad campaign gets them all the news coverage a company could dream of.

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