



Media Apollos: Representation of Masculinity through the Concept of Gaze

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Abstract

The contemporary media landscape is increasingly characterized by the pervasive phenomena of corporeal commodification and objectification. Drawing upon Anthony Giddens' assertion that mediated power dynamics between objectified men and women reflect broader societal structures, this study investigates the representational tropes of masculinity within international television advertisements for fragrances, deodorants, and apparel. The primary objective is to elucidate how the mechanism of the 'gaze' facilitates the objectification of the male physique. Through a narrative analysis of eight purposively selected commercials produced between 2010 and 2021, the research demonstrates that the strategic emphasis on muscularity – specifically the torso, biceps, and chest – effectively transmutes the male subject into an object of desire. Critically, however, the findings suggest a semiotic divergence: while visually objectified, male subjects maintain a position of structural agency and dominance relative to their female counterparts, thereby complicating the traditional paradigms of gendered objectification.

Keywords: masculinity, objectification, gaze, commodification, TV commercials, narrative analysis

Introduction

Objectified, Commodified, Commercialized

While the media representation of the human body has historically witnessed numerous instances where female nudity provoked intense public reactions, equivalent representations of the male body remain significantly scarcer and historically more suppressed. For instance, the highly publicized covers of naked pregnant Demi Moore on the cover of 'Vanity Fair' in 1991 (Collins, 2018) and Kim Kardashian balancing a champagne glass on her buttocks in 'Paper' magazine in 2014 (Fortini, 2014) effectively fulfilled their commercial and editorial objectives by generating widespread audience engagement. These two covers, as expected, sparked countless controversies, discussions and debates about nudity, body image and the use of sexuality in the media. In contrast, the depiction of naked male celebrities on magazine covers represents an anomaly, exemplified by Indian actor Ranveer Singh's 2022 nude photographic spread in 'Paper' magazine (Subramanyam, 2022). Historically, public exposure of the male nude has encountered severe systemic backlash and institutional censorship. A prominent regional case occurred in SFR Yugoslavia, where the student newspaper 'Polet' (issue no. 127) was judicially sanctioned and its distribution prohibited under the pretext of violating public morality. The state intervention was directly triggered by the publication of full-frontal photographs featuring Milan Šarović, the prominent goalkeeper of the Zagreb football club (Krušelj, 2024).

Still, the contemporary media environment is exposed to the unstoppable trend of body commodification. According to Scheper-Hughes and Wacquant (2002), the body is being seen as an object and consumer item that may be bought and sold. The tenet might be applicable to women and men, as well as the commercialization concept since the body is "crafted in accordance with industry standards for -

commercial applications.” (Adamović & Maskalan, 2011: 54) As an example, the front pages of ‘Men’s Health’ magazine only feature men with well-defined muscles so “not only is the male body instrumentalized but is also objectified and exposed to the reader’s gaze.” (Rubio-Hernández, 2010: 66) The phenomena extend far beyond the confines of lifestyle magazines, pervading diverse facets of societal discourse and cultural representation. The widespread use of social media and accompanying culture of visual portrayal contribute to the dehumanization of individuals by sustaining social standards that prioritize physical attractiveness. Over the past decade, numerous conducted studies have confirmed that social media exerts a substantial influence on individuals’ self-perception, reinforcing gender-based stereotypes (e.g. Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2019; Davis, 2018; Daniels, 2018; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Moreover, the research carried out by LaForme-Csordas (2021) provides support for the notion that the media idealizes the flawless physique and constructs a standard for how one’s body is supposed to look.

Traditional media platforms are not exempt from the influence of objectifying the physical appearances of both men and women, especially in attention-seeking advertisements (Vidia & Retnaningdyah, 2021; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Vance et al., 2015). Desirability is not an innate character trait, but a characteristic that person can embody. It has been defined as the quality of being sexually attractive, but also worth having (Gajger & Car, 2020: 106). Back in the 1950s, Sartre defined desire as the tendency to possess the essence of ‘the other’ (Sartre, 1956: 394, cf. Gorton, 2008: 10). It is therefore not unusual that the commodification of desire, or rather desirability, is one of the fundamental sources of profit in the marketing industry. The sale of desirability as a marketable commodity, and then the advertising of certain products as an important factor that will contribute to the individual level of desirability, is not only aimed at women, but also at men, and in the twenty-first century increasingly often. The important difference is that “men are taught to want, and women to be desired.” (Gorton, 2008: 13)

In the 20th century advertising, according to Goffman (1979) men were frequently portrayed as powerful and dominant, while women were represented as submissive and caring. Men have often been portrayed on television as incompetent husbands and fathers (Kaufman, 1999). At the turn of the century commercial enterprises have increasingly prioritized the portrayal of the masculine physique (Beynon, 2002). Rohlinger’s (2002) study illustrated that the erotic man is increasingly becoming the depiction that dominates mainstream conceptions of masculinity. This trend is further exemplified by the growing tendency to depict men as objects of sexual desire, even in contexts that are not overtly sexual (MacKinnon, 2003: 88). In addition, MacKinnon (2003) points out that man’s authority and strength can be determined through his physique, but also through the suggestion of his wealth and business success. It is crucial to highlight, in this case, that MacKinnon (2003) describes men from television commercials as men “to-be-looked-at” (Mulvey, 1975), which means that male’s dominance is suspended for a short period (MacKinnon, 2003).

The primary objective of this study is to demonstrate how the mechanics of the gaze contribute to the objectification of the male body.

(Im)Balanced Power

In his influential publication on the evolution of personal relationships 'The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies', Giddens' (1992) theoretical assumptions are based on the disintegration of uneven social divisions and gender equality. Discussing how the traditional divisions between men and women in intimate relationships are evolving, through the prism of sexuality, Giddens (1992) argues that the sexual control of women by men is much more than an incidental feature of modern social life. Furthermore, historical division on "virtuous" and the "loose" women is now replaced by the modern paradigm on free choice "according to which women reject male sexual dominance." (Giddens, 1992: 8) Lilian Rubin's (1990) research, according to which Giddens' premise is supported, has shown that today's married women possess a considerably greater amount of sexual experience due to the breakdown of old conventions, which traditionally required women to abstain from sexual activity until marriage. In this manner, Giddens (1992) concludes that intimacy unveils the principles of democracy and equality, as well as the right of individuals to be self-determined.

Giddens' (1992) theories, particularly his emphasis on individual agency and the negotiation of relationships in the context of modernity, share common ground with certain aspects of postfeminist thought which "brings a shift in understanding the construction of identity and gender categories." (Genz & Brabon, 2018: 23) Postmodern theory highlights its pluralistic and anti-foundationalist tendencies whereby it rejects the notion of a universal and singular conception of a woman and instead foregrounds the individual differences between women (Genz & Brabon, 2018). As Toro (1999) argues, it articulates the deconstruction of current hegemonic systems and entails a convergence of theories emanating from diverse fields and disciplines. Genz & Brabon (2018) claim that Madonna represents the archetypal postmodern (post)feminist woman since postfeminism emphasizes individual agency and the idea that individuals, particularly women, have the power to shape and redefine their own identities. To add, in her performances, Madonna shows how the gaze can be realigned using the hyper-feminine but also encourages the viewer to reread her body as the intersection of converging differences. Madonna influenced the development of the so-called "porno chic" – culture of open expression of female sexuality and became a kind of originator of the concept of emancipated self-objectification (McNair, 2002; 2013).

Lady Gaga, an American singer-songwriter, producer, and actress whose professions inherently support the notion of redefining identity, serves as an additional illustrative instance. Her public persona and artistic expression have been characterized by a deliberate and bold departure from conventional gender norms and expectations (Deflem, 2019). Lady Gaga challenges traditional notions of femininity and masculinity through her performances, fashion choices, and advocacy for self-expression.

Postfeminism, though, is not only about women. Men attempt to redefine masculinity and comprehend their role within feminism in reaction to the questioning of the term 'woman' by feminism and the interest in gender relations. At the same time, men are bombarded with pressures to live a desirable and "correct lifestyle" (Zeman & Geiger Zeman, 2012). The notions that contributed to this state should not be neglected. According to Beynon (2002) and Gill (2003), there are several norms and characteristics that have influenced such a state, and they are widely connected with the concept of masculinity in Western societies. Those characteristics include feminism, world wars that required bravery, endurance, and emotional restraint as well as the emergence and popularity of men's style magazines and gay movement. The result of all those processes is the challenge of male power while the male body is sexualized and visualized for profit (Beynon, 2002). Zeman and Geiger Zeman (2012) argue that the rise of consumerist society is a key factor in the alteration of masculinity.

Genz and Brabon (2018) provide a description of the "postfeminist man" as a new category of masculinity for the twenty-first century. According to Rosin (2012), middle class, where the disparities between men and women are the greatest, is slowly turning into a matriarchy, with men increasingly absent from the workforce and from home, and women making all the decisions. MacKinnon (2003), accordingly, provides a description of a "new man" who embodies "the sort of anti-sexism which is characterized by his attempts to form non-oppressive relationships with women, children and other men." (MacKinnon, 2003: 13) It is important to point out that in this context the "new man", in his relations with women, tends to disavow the traditional link between sexual desire and female objectification. "Soft masculinities," characterized by a departure from traditional, stereotypically aggressive, or dominant forms of masculinity, can be observed in various films such as 'Call Me by Your Name' (2017, dir. Luca Guadagnino), '500 Days of Summer' (2009, dir. Marc Webb) or 'Lost in Translation' (2003, dir. Sofia Coppola). All of them challenge the conventional notions of masculinity.

Regarding the redefinition of the postfeminist man's identity, Connell and Connell (2005) assert that contemporary man with a history of violence and a criminal record feels no unease about staying home to do the childcare if his wife or partner can get a better-paying job than he can. By the mid-1990s he was easily recognizable as a "new" icon of masculinity in range of cultural forms (Gill, 2013). Moreover, as Nixon (2001) claims, in the early 1990s, magazines shifted their focus from portraying the "equalitarian" new man to a more assertive representation of the post-permissive masculine heterosexual script with growing numbers of sexualized images. Those "softer" portraits of men could thus represent a renegotiation of masculine ideals, the meaning of which must be carefully examined (Goedecke, 2021).

Gender portrayals in advertisements do not only sell products but they also perpetuate and propagate gender stereotypes and behavioral norms (Akesse-Brempong & Cudjoe, 2023). As Dow (2004) argues, the postfeminist men that are respectful, sensitive, and nurturing, start appearing in 1980s film and television. Since then, postfeminist portrayals of men are increasingly visible in

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popular culture. For instance, characters like Don Draper in 'Mad Men' (2007, dir. Matthew Weiner) and Tony Soprano in 'The Sopranos' (1999, dir. David Chase) show complex and multidimensional portrayals of men that go beyond traditional stereotypes. Movies like 'The 40-Year-Old Virgin' (2005, dir. Judd Apatow) and 'Moonlight' (2016, dir. Barry Jenkins) depict male protagonists struggling with identity and societal expectations while advertisements often portray men as involved fathers challenging traditional gender roles. This represents the results of multiple analyses conducted thus far on the depiction of males in most of the media.

Goedecke (2021) found out that the depiction of both men and gambling as soft is concomitant with developments in international consumerist culture, "where the acceptance of traditional, or 'hard' masculine positions is lessening." (Goedecke, 2021: 816) Moreover, research conducted by Matthes et al. (2016) has shown that male television commercials characters in the United States were not stereotypically associated with car, electronic products and that approximately the same number of men and women were shown both at home and at work, and men and women were portrayed in work roles about evenly. Dwivedy et al. (2009) carried out the research on role portrayals of men and women in Indian magazine ads which addressed the "new man" who is sensitive, egalitarian in outlook and highly conscious about his physical appearance. All those portrayals should be seen as arenas where negotiations around masculine ideals and power take place.

While some of the brands try to persuade their customers through linguistic expressions, others do it by the objectification of gender (Khan et al., 2021). Advertisements often depict men in a manner that highlights their physical attractiveness, reinforcing societal norms and expectations surrounding masculinity, contributing to the objectification of men. A content analysis of magazines targeting men found that these media outlets depicted greater muscular male images than those intended for general audiences (Lanzieri & Cook, 2013). Moreover, researchers suggested that advertisements targeting men have become more objectifying over time (Ricciardelli et al., 2010). To add, the men in advertising increasingly display the signals of objectification as it relates to gaze and touch behaviour. The problem with such images is that it attaches themes of liberation to sexuality, which may eventually dilute equality issues in favor of commodification (Rohlinger, 2002). Another danger of such images lies in self-objectification. The persistent portrayal of men and women in commercials according to restricted physical ideals fosters unrealistic body standards, which might result in self-objectification and dissatisfaction. According to objectification theory, the primary psychological consequence of sexual objectification is the development of unnatural perspectives on oneself, which is called self-objectification (Calogero, 2004: 16). Women who self-objectify themselves have internalized the observer's perspective on their bodies and chronically control themselves in anticipation of how others will evaluate their appearance and treat them accordingly (ibid.). The act of self-objectification, driven by the aspiration to adhere to society standards propagated by advertisements, can lead to mental health problems, unhappiness with appearance and a false perception of one's own value (Kumar, 2023).

The Concept Of 'Gaze'

A foundational tenet within feminist theory and cultural studies is the 'gaze' – a construct denoting the subjective realization of being observed and interpreted by an external 'Other,' which subsequently necessitates a recalibration of individual conduct (Moe, 2015). More precisely, the gaze encapsulates the intrapsychic phenomena that occur when an individual internalizes the awareness of being a spectacle. This consciousness triggers a modification of performative identity, wherein the subject strategically alters their physical presentation, linguistic choices, and behavioral demeanor to align with or respond to perceived external expectations.

Laura Mulvey (1975) describes the tendency of men to “project their fantasy onto a female figure who, in her traditional exhibitionist role, is shown with a coded look for strong visual and erotic effect” (Mulvey, 1975: 15) during which the men “own” the woman on the screen. Since then, Mulvey’s essay ‘Visual pleasure and narrative cinema’ (1975) has become “the most widely cited, heavily anthologized and endlessly summarized essay in Film Studies.” (Buckland, 2025: 1) ‘Male gaze’ is a concept of depicting a woman in film or any other visual media, from a masculine, heterosexual point of view, presenting a woman as a passive object of male desire and pleasure. This concept asserts that the audience is aligned to adopt a male perspective, thereby reinforcing patriarchal power structures through the objectification of a female character.

Whereas the ‘male gaze’ traditionally reduces the female physique to a passive object of visual consumption, French (2021) argues that the ‘female gaze’ is inherently nonhomogeneous, resisting any singular or monolithic definition in favor of diverse, multifaceted expressions. This perspective prioritizes the interiority of the character, emphasizing subjective cognitive and emotional states over external aestheticization. Furthermore, Fan (2023) posits that the female gaze facilitates a deeper empathetic engagement, allowing audiences to discern complex emotional nuances through subtle physical cues; consequently, this framework serves as a potent emancipatory tool for advancing gender equality and feminist discourse by subverting the heteronormative eroticization of women.

The ‘queer gaze’ extends this theoretical critique by fundamentally challenging the binary ontological assumptions inherent in both the ‘male’ and ‘female’ gaze. McNealy (2021) posits that ‘queer gaze’ functions as a form of resistance against hegemonic epistemologies, simultaneously disrupting heteronormative paradigms and destabilizing the notion of fixed, essentialist identities. In redefining queer spectatorship, McNealy argues that representation through this lens transcends simple identification; desire is provoked regardless of whether the imagery aligns with the spectator’s own identity (McNealy: 2021: 447). Furthermore, as Erickson (2014) suggests, the ‘queer gaze’ subverts the unidirectional power dynamics of traditional observation by introducing intersubjective reciprocity. Within this framework, the object of the gaze becomes a self-aware agent with the capacity to ‘look back,’ thereby confronting the observer with their own ontological incompleteness (McNealy, 2021).

(R)Evolution of Apollos

Throughout history, societal norms have consistently idealized conventional notions of male attractiveness, accentuating attributes associated with physical strength, muscularity, and athletic builds. This prevailing cultural inclination, deeply ingrained in societal expectations and media representations, perpetuates a narrow and standardized perception of the aesthetically desirable male physique. The ideal image of male beauty can be discerned from the physical features depicted in, for example, ancient Greek sculptures. This artistic tradition is commonly referred to as “Apollo,” named after the Greek deity associated with male beauty.

Ideals of male beauty have evolved significantly over time. Moreover, beauty was never absolute or unchanging; rather, it varies depending on historical periods and cultural contexts, taking on diverse characteristics (Eco, 2004). For instance, while in ancient Greece and Rome athletic and muscular physiques symbolized strength and prowess, during the Renaissance artist celebrated more rounded and proportionate male form (Martinec, 2013).

On the other hand, during the Middle Ages, thinness was valued as it symbolized a devout rejection of physicality, a sentiment particularly prominent during Christianity’s peak ascendancy (Kunitz, 2017). Moreover, Middle Ages favored a lean and slender look, influenced by the focus on intellect over physicality. By the late 19th century, muscularity regained favor with the rise of physical culture movements and the promotion of athleticism.

According to Martinec (2013) the thinness imperative was introduced again at the start of the 20th century, but in the next few decades, as Beynon (2002) claims, the World Wars emphasized the ideal of robust, courageous men prepared for combat. The wars might have spurred a surge in male enlistment, contributing to an increased tendency for men to join gym clubs seeking physical fitness and readiness. Accordingly, Andreasson and Johansson (2014) find a significant increase in the sexualization and visual representation of men, related particularly with the fitness business. While the fitness industry was at its peak of expansion, number of subscriptions in fitness clubs and gyms was constantly increasing, and as Andreasson and Johansson (2014) claim, gym walls often displayed photos of youthful attractive bodies idealizing a youthful and healthy physique that emphasizes dynamism and vitality. This trend is accompanied by a global shift and substantial growth in the advertising industry. In this context, Osgerby (2003) points out that advertising becomes particularly important because marketing and media shape societal perceptions of attractiveness and reinforce gender stereotypes, which can significantly influence individuals’ thoughts and behaviors (Sever Globan et al., 2018).

Advertisements integrate narratives of empowerment, implying that masculinity may be achieved through well-defined facial features and unwavering physical might. However, beneath the outward appearance of impressive physical beauty, there is a danger of self-objectification, as men absorb these idealized pictures and shape not only their bodies but also their sense of self based on society norms. The

commercialization of muscular ideals in television advertisements reflects a continuous narrative that requires men to shape their identities based on a standard of perfect physical form. This visual story resonates across our culture, with the prominence of well-defined biceps serving as a recurring theme.

Research Framework

The primary intention of this study is to examine how masculinity is depicted in television perfume, deodorant, and underwear commercials of international brands. Considering theoretic premises related to male objectification, the goal is to demonstrate how the concept of 'gaze' acts in male body objectification. Eight brands have been selected into the research sample: 'Axe', 'Old spice', 'Paco Rabanne', 'Christiano Ronaldo 7', 'Jean Paul Gaultier', 'K by Dolce & Gabbana', 'David Beckham' and 'Gregg Homme'.

Criteria for brands selection were more than a million viewer on YouTube, and visual representation of a man character in TV ad as an object. The search was conducted in two rounds. First was done through YouTube search using key words 'men's fragrance commercial', 'male luxury fragrance', 'male cologne ad', 'men's deodorant commercial', 'male boxer brief ad', and 'men's underwear commercial'. Second was done by researcher. The selection process incorporated diverse narrative patterns as fundamental eligibility criteria.

On a selected sample of eight video commercials created from 2010 to 2021, narrative analysis has been conducted. Narratives in media texts are essential for understanding current political, financial, and social priorities and power positions (Gillespie & Toynbee, 2006: 83). Narratives in media texts can announce or lay the foundations for certain changes, and can also deepen the status quo (Gillespie & Toynbee, 2006: 83). Ultimately, the importance of narratives is also reflected in how much they occupy and influence the audience intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. The audience connects with narratives while the characters within the narrative invite the audience to engage, and generally they provide pleasure or some kind of relief (Gillespie & Toynbee, 2006: 85).

Analysis

(i) 'Axe – Chocolate man, Dark Temptations'

In the first shot of the commercial 'Axe – Chocolate Man, Dark Temptations'¹, the central character is depicted in the bathroom, wearing only trousers, as he applies deodorant to his chest. In the subsequent frame, the male individual undergoes a transformation into chocolate – a delectable comestible that holds an appealing allure for numerous individuals. Moreover, the identical individual in the shape of a chocolate bar is presently strolling along the road with a smile on his face. As he walks past a woman engrossed in a book, she sighs, and her facial expression reflects profound contentment. The man forcefully removes a portion of his chocolate nose and delicately scatters it across the ice-cream of two women who gaze at him with desire as they savor the ice-cream, exemplifying how the man gratified their desires. While the man reclines on the grass, as seen in the figure 1, the woman proceeds to take a strawberry and vigorously rub it against his groin

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area, insinuating sexual activity, as he smiles with satisfaction. The chocolate guy exerts control over the women in the movie theatre, who express their desire and nibble on the man's chocolate ears. The advertisement reaches its pinnacle of male objectification when the chocolate guy is depicted in a public transportation setting, and the lady symbolically 'bites off' a piece of his chocolate buttocks. The man is depicted as an object of desire when he walks past the gym, causing all the women to gather at the window and express their admiration for him. Specifically, they are captivated by the chocolate sculpture in the form of a man. The protagonist's objectification is further demonstrated in the final scene, where the woman forcefully tears off his arm from the car.



Figure 1: 'Axe Chocolate Man - Dark Temptations', source: MullenLowe Global, YouTube (2010)

(ii) 'Old Spice – The Man Your Man Could Smell Like'

'Hello, ladies! Look at your man. Now back to me'² is one of the most recognizable phrases used in television commercials. Namely, the protagonist of the advertisement, a muscular man naked to the waist (covered only with a towel), as seen in the figure 2, looks directly into the camera, addresses the women in a semi-stern voice, and with carefully chosen words achieves a kind of dominance over them. In this context it is important to note that "male models in advertisements rarely look at the camera, but when they do it represents power." (Schroeder & Zwick, 2004: 32) While the focus is on his sculpted abs, as well as his broad shoulders, he tells women that their husbands, or partners, could be like him. As the commercial continues, the man becomes increasingly dominant. While still addressing the women directly and giving them orders of sorts, the man appears on the boat, dressed in luxurious clothing, but again with a large part of his chest exposed, which continues to emphasize his muscles. Apart from the ship, the man's wealth is connotatively expressed by the diamonds he scatters from his hand while at the same time gaining power over women and keeping it. At the same time as

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the diamonds fall out of his hands, Old Spice deodorant comes out of his hand. The last shot shows the same man sitting on a big white horse, which gives the impression that the main character of the commercial can do anything he sets his mind to, and at the same time, as if by magic, he can control the women who have 'lost their power' in this commercial as well.



Figure 2. 'Old Spice - The Man Your Man Could Smell Like', source: Old Spice, YouTube (2010)

(iii) 'Paco Rabanne – Pure XS'

From the very first frame of the 'Paco Rabanne – Pure XS'³ perfume advertisement, it becomes evident that the product exudes opulence and grandeur, as seen by the setting of the shop adorned with golden decorations. The man removes his deep crimson jacket, revealing his well-defined back muscles reminiscent of the chiseled physique of the Greek deity 'Apollo'. The same individual becomes objectified and desired purely for his physical appearance. The background music amplifies, heightening the tension as the man systematically removes each article of clothes, revealing his impeccably chiseled physique. Simultaneously, unbeknownst to him, women clandestinely observe him via the mirror and walls. They audibly express desire whenever he undresses, symbolizing their submission to him and the perpetuation of his control. The culmination of the events and the absolute authority of the man over women is reached when the protagonist removes his final garment – trousers and simultaneously applies the fragrance on his genital area, as seen in the figure 3. The women are seen falling to the ground, seemingly under the man's influence, but he maintains a mysterious smile. This scene serves as a reminder of his ability to exert control and domination over women, despite being objectified and reduced to a mere object of desire.



Figure 3. 'Paco Rabanne - Pure XS', source: Central Models, YouTube (2017)

(iv) 'Cristiano Ronaldo – CR7'

It is difficult to fathom that Cristiano Ronaldo, a renowned soccer player of exceptional skill, is encountering multiple challenges and setbacks. Nevertheless, this aligns precisely with the storyline depicted in the television advertisement for perfume⁴. Ronaldo awakens in a highly irritable state and is additionally incensed by the fact that the photograph he shared on social media has received no 'likes'. Subsequently, Ronaldo emerges from his bed, drawing attention to his impeccably shaped abdominal muscles, as well as his remarkably slender physique. Furthermore, the use of visuals showcasing the opulent residence in which Ronaldo resides amplifies the perception of him as a formidable and affluent individual. Ronaldo, who is treated like an object, moves about his residence and encounters difficulties in performing mundane tasks: he is unable to prepare toast, exhibits subpar skills in handling a ball, and then sustains an injury from scalding coffee. The climax of the challenges he encounters occurs when Ronaldo loses his footing and plunges into the pool situated in front of his residence. However, as seen in the figure 4, the storyline takes a twist when the protagonist applies fragrance on his well-developed pectoral muscles and neck. Specifically, at the conclusion, Ronaldo skillfully maneuvers the ball, successfully scores a soccer goal near the pool, and furthermore, a woman emerges in the advertisement presenting him with a cup of coffee, which he enjoys. To conclude, the woman places her head across his robust chest, deriving solace and a sense of safety from his presence. Ronaldo, while being objectified and reduced to a desired object like the main characters in the previously examined advertisements, managed to exert authority and control over the woman, who ultimately submits to him.



Figure 4. 'Cristiano Ronaldo - CR7', source: Cristiano Ronaldo Fragrances, YouTube (2021)

(v) 'Jean Paul Gaultier – Le Male'

The commercial is set at a seaport, a location that is commonly linked to notions of harshness, dominance and masculinity⁵. In the advertisement, the main character showcases his physical power and impeccably honed abdominal muscles and biceps by forcefully toppling the arm of another muscular individual, as seen in the figure 5. The issue becomes intricate when a svelte, fair-haired woman beckons to a man through melodic singing, reminiscent of sirens. The protagonist, completely unclothed from the waist up, navigates through the harbor, triumphantly surmounting every hindrance encountered. Furthermore, the man is depicted as an object of attraction, since the emphasis is placed on his well-defined abdominal muscles, as well as his radiant white smile. The portrayal of an idealized yet dehumanized man is further emphasized during the instances when he effortlessly leaps over the ropes and ascends the lighthouse where a young woman eagerly awaits his arrival. Ultimately, the man successfully entices the girl, causing her to adopt a subservient role, so granting him authority not just over her, but also over the other ladies and men in the seaport.



Figure 5. 'Jean Paul Gaultier - Le Male', source: Jean Paul Gaultier, YouTube (2017)

(vi) 'K by Dolce & Gabbana'

The ad's protagonist, Mariano di Vaio, a renowned fashion designer and actor, is immediately objectified as the camera zooms in on his well-defined abdominal muscles while he strolls around an Italian vineyard and greets acquaintances⁶. While his companions are harvesting luscious grapes, Mariano frequently strolls across the vineyard and admiringly gazes at the neighboring town where he resides, riding his formidable and swift motorcycle. The culmination of the action occurs when Mariano comes into a quaint town, strolling through its charming streets with great allure, while the scenes of enjoyment in the town square are alternated with images highlighting his well-defined stomach muscles and captivating stare. Mariano achieves the epitome of masculinity by embodying the ideal father figure, diligently tending to his children, while simultaneously captivating a woman who willingly submits to him and seeks refuge in his embrace, as seen in the figure 6. In the final scene of the video, Mariano is positioned by himself on a hill, with a captivating close-up shot that emphasizes his symmetrical facial features and impeccably white teeth.



Figure 6. 'K by Dolce & Gabbana', source: Perfumerias Unidas, YouTube (2021)

(vii) 'David Beckham's Underwear'

Retired English soccer player and one of the world's most famous athletes, David Beckham, is the main actor in the underwear commercial⁷. The musical background of the advertisement is the song 'Don't Stop' by the group 'Foster the People', and this music enhances the dynamism of the advertisement in which Beckham successfully overcomes all obstacles. Namely, in the introduction of the commercial, a dressing gown is attached to the car door, and Beckham is left in his underwear, undershirt and panties. Realizing that he can't get back into his opulent house that exudes wealth, Beckham starts running parallel to the car and encounters and jumps numerous obstacles: first he runs down the street, then he jumps over walls and bushes in his neighborhood, and on that occasion, he is left without slippers and an undershirt. Then Beckham is reduced to a pure object of lust, considering that the focus is on his abdominal muscles, but also on his properly rounded buttocks, as seen in the figure 7. However, although he is objectified, Beckham catches the eye of a woman when running and jumping into his neighbors' pool, and in this way, Beckham exercises power and dominance over the same woman. Also, the objects of desire are his muscular legs, whose strength he shows when, while running, he plays soccer with the children in the neighborhood. Arriving at a big bend in the road, Beckham stops briefly and attracts the attention of tourists. Beckham's power over all the other characters in the ad reaches its peak when passengers on the bus take out their smartphones and cameras to take pictures of his body. In this way, Beckham became a pure object of lust, but at the same time kept power and dominance in his hands.



Figure 7. 'David Beckham's Underwear', source: Fashion SGM, YouTube (2013)

(viii) 'Gregg Homme – One Night Stand'

Underwear is often an object of desire and passion. An additional erotic charge in this underwear commercial⁸ was achieved by using transparent underwear, through which both the buttocks and the male genital organ can be seen. The main character of the advertisement is in a luxurious apartment, naked to the waist and covered only with a towel over his genitals, while the focus is on his well-sculpted abdominal muscles, as well as his overall athletic physique. He pulls Gregg Homme underwear out of a drawer, while at the same time close-up shots of his backside quickly alternate. However, the protagonist is portrayed as an object of desire as the man turns towards the camera and shows his dominance. Not long after that, he took out a pair of transparent blue panties from the drawer and put them on, during which his backside came to the fore again, as seen in the figure 8. The climax of the video commercial occurs when the police ring his doorbell and warn him that his neighbors have complained about his posing, given that the outside of his apartment consists only of transparent glass walls. The denouement is constructed by a time jump – after the police warning, the shot shows the main actor completely naked in bed. His genital area is covered with a quilt while he wears a police cap on his head, which connotatively shows that he had sex for one night with the policewoman who was knocking on the door. So, although this man is objectified to the extreme and reduced to an object of lust during almost the entire advertisement, he achieves power and dominance over the woman who came to warn him that he is breaking the law, and in this way, he kept the power in his hands. In addition, his direct gaze into the camera further enhances the impression of dominance.



Figure 8. 'Gregg Homme - One Night Stand', source: CityBoyz USA, YouTube (2013)

Discussion & Conclusion

The primary objective of this research was to investigate the representational tropes of masculinity within international television advertisements for deodorants, fragrances, and apparel. Specifically, the study sought to elucidate the operational role of the 'gaze' in the corporeal objectification of the male character in TV commercials. Methodologically, a narrative analysis was performed on a purposive sample of eight commercials produced between 2010 and 2021. The selection was characterized by protagonists exhibiting hyper-muscularity and idealized physical conditioning. The analysis reveals that these advertisements strategically foreground the male physique – with particular emphasis on the abdominal and brachial muscle groups – utilizing cinematic techniques such as extreme close-ups to accentuate these features as primary sites of visual consumption.

As an instance, the protagonist of the Jean Paul Gaultier perfume commercial is portrayed as a highly commodified strong man who knocks another man's hand, jumps over all obstacles with a light step and climbs the ropes. The underwear commercial in which David Beckham, thanks to the underpants he wears, has a similar narrative – he jumps all over the obstacles while being objectified with close-up shots of his legs and backside. Cristiano Ronaldo is the one who manages to turn a bad day into a series of perfect events with the help of perfume while the 'Axe's Chocolate Man', by applying deodorant, manages to gain the attention of all the women who come across him. By applying perfume to his crotch, the main protagonist of the Paco Rabanne commercial manages to throw a dozen women into ecstasy as they sigh lustfully watching him like a voyeur. The main character of the Old Spice deodorant commercial also dominates women: looking directly into

the camera and inviting women to compare him to their men in a slightly cheeky way. A woman is conquered and seduced by the protagonist of the K by Dolce & Gabbana commercial, who is also objectified given that his abdominal muscles are in focus. The main focus is on the erogenous zone of the main character of the Gregg Homme advertisement, which pushes objectification to its limits by focusing on the genitals and buttocks. Of course, that man also 'conquers' the woman who previously came to warn him.

An examination of TV commercials for male deodorants, fragrances, and apparel through the lens of the 'gaze' provides nuanced insights into the simultaneous reinforcement and contestation of traditional gender norms. The findings indicate that the sample is uniformly characterized by protagonists exhibiting hyper-muscularity and idealized physical conditioning. Through strategic cinematic framing, low-angle perspectives, and minimal costuming, the narrative focus is centered on the tonicity of abdominal and brachial muscle groups. Consequently, these subjects undergo a process of corporeal objectification, wherein masculinity is fragmented and reduced to a commodified aesthetic to serve commercial interests. In this framework, physical attributes function as a 'marketing catalyst,' engineered to elicit a visceral response from the audience and optimize brand engagement. These results corroborate extant literature (e.g., Rubio-Hernández, 2010; Lanzieri & Cook, 2013), which suggests that the male physique is not merely instrumentalized but is actively subjected to an objectifying scopophilic regime.

On the other hand, research has shown that even when men are objectified and reduced to objects of desire, they still retain power in their hands over women. The men in the analysed advertisements address both women and men in a dominant tone (Old Spice, Gregg Homme), utilize fragrance to exert influence over women (K by Dolce & Gabbana, Cristiano Ronaldo), easily pass through all obstacles (Jean Paul Gaultier), while women are subject to them, depicted as voluptuous bodies yearning to be satisfied by a man (Paco Rabanne, Axe, David Beckham). Those women are treated as an object 'to-be-looked-at', and pleasure men's needs (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Finally, although objectified, men still retain power in relation to women, which is contrary to the objectified portrayal of women in advertisements (Lubina & Brkić Klimpak, 2014; Gajger & Car, 2020). Men maintain a position of authority in relation to women, no matter they are presented to be primarily seen as objects of desire.

However, it is clear that the observers, those on the other side of the screen, are not only women, regardless of the fact that the content of the commercials places a man in a heteronormative position. Still, the interpretation of 'queer gaze' that challenges heteronormative paradigms, goes beyond the methodological framework of this research and therefore represents a limitation of this study.

Notes

1. 'Axe Chocolate Man – Dark Temptations'. Source: YouTube, MullenLowe Global. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I4G3_jovoTc (14th July 2024).

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2. 'Old Spice – The Man Your Man Could Smell Like'. Source YouTube, Old Spice. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owGyKVbfgUE> (14th July 2024).
3. 'Paco Rabanne – Pure XS'. Source: YouTube, Central Models. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9Y7CLmHhJc> (14th July 2024).
4. 'Cristiano Ronaldo – CR7'. Source: YouTube, Cristiano Ronaldo Fragrances. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItR2zbqwnNQk> (14th July 2024).
5. 'Jean Paul Gaultier – Le Male'. Source: YouTube, Sephora Romania. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajfUBzyp9IY> (14th July 2024).
6. 'K by Dolce & Gabbana'. Source: YouTube, Parfumerias Unidas. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tX2dcUxXKo> (14th July 2024).
7. 'David Beckham's Underwear'. Source: YouTube, Fashion SGM. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPcjTefW_Ao (14th July 2024).
8. 'Gregg Homme – One Night Stand'. Source: YouTube, CityBoyz USA. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fc4bZrAJUU> (14th July 2024).

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