

Entertainment Media as a Source of Consumer Mythology: The Gendered Case of Lieutenant Columbo

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Abstract:

In contrast with marketing research that indicates consumer decisions are made through cognitive methods such as expected utility maximization, researchers in the Consumer Culture Theory tradition have emphasized the non-cognitive drivers of consumer decisions, including the role of symbolism and consumer myth (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Levy 1981; Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010). While symbolism is important in many consumption domains, an important domain is gender (Levy 1959), the subject of this paper. Specifically, our mythic understanding of what it means to be a woman/man influences our actions and interactions with others on a basic level.

The process through which children learn to become consumers is termed consumer socialization (Moschis and Moore 1979; Roedder John 1999), and typically is understood as a series of age-based stages (based on Piaget 1963) through which children pass as they gain understanding and independence in their consumer choices. For example, Roedder John (1999) suggests that three stages of consumer socialization exist: the perceptual stage (3 to 7 years), the analytic stage, (7 to 11 years), and the reflective stage (11 to 16 years). A contrasting perspective suggests a more socially-influenced explanation for consumer socialization, focusing instead on the influence of adult mentors and other external sources of socialization such as entertainment media (Ekström 2006). A benefit of seeing socialization from this external perspective is that it provides a more complete picture of both the influences on children (primary socialization) and influences on adults (secondary socialization) adjusting their consumption behavior based on joining new consumption communities in the process of “transformation of self” (Schouten and McAlexander 1995).

Early writing argued that gender was linked to symbolism (Levy 1959), and masculinity in particular has benefitted from the discussion of mythic influence. In the early to middle part of the 20th Century, the idea of maleness was simply biologically understood. More recent conceptualizations involve less focus on the gender binary (men/women) and more on the range of masculinities that might exist (Tuncay Zayer et al., in press). As research on masculinity has moved into the consumer research domain (e.g., Belk and Costa 1998; Holt and Thompson 2004), the conceptualization of what it means to be a man is often influenced by marketing-generated myth.

Myths provide a cultural framework for societies (Campbell 1988), and have the potential to serve as drivers for consumption (Levy 1981). The myth of the hero is an example of a socially universal “monomyth” (Campbell 1949) which has the potential to guide masculine behavior and represents a common cultural archetype (Jung 1980). Consumer research has addressed the role of the hero myth in the enactment of gendered activity. For instance, Holt and Thompson (2004) suggest that modern masculinity functions to balance the needs of the family as breadwinner with the desire to rebel, forming the “man of action hero,” who accomplishes a culturally valued identity as the hero. This paper addresses the following research question: How does entertainment media influence the changing of cultural norms? Specifically, it examines the role of entertainment media in providing external socialization of masculinity by using the 1970s television show *Columbo*.

The role of entertainment media to influence behavior has also been described in previous research. For example, men’s roles in television commercials have continued to be stereotyped despite changes in women’s roles (Allan and Coltrane 1996). Some television advertisers have used the symbolism of meat consumption to address environmental and feminist threats to hegemonic masculinity (Rogers 2008), supporting the idea that certain product categories may be coded as masculine (Hirschman 2003), while Hirschman and Belk (2014) suggest that masculinity itself is branded.

Various historical trends capturing masculinity ideals have been examined by previous research. Kimmel (1996), for example, traces 200 years of the changing nature of masculinity in the history of the United States. Of particular

note in his historical approach is the role of *Playboy* in countering the darker post-WWII era of what Ehrenreich (1983) termed “breadwinning” masculinity. The founder of the publication, Hugh Hefner, “characterized himself as a pioneer rebel against the gray miasma of conformity that gripped other men” (Ehrenreich 1983, p 44). In so doing, *Playboy* created a place for men to rebel against the conformity of the breadwinner, often creating male spaces where masculinity was celebrated (see also Moisio and Beruchashvili 2016) in an act Benyon (2002) termed “buddydom.” Faludi (1999) has suggested that the burden placed on men to uphold the breadwinner status indicates the loss of “utilitarian masculinity” to a culture that characterizes men in more ornamental fashion, creating a crisis of masculinity (Bederman 1995).

In order to examine the role of masculinity portrayed in *Columbo*, this research uses discourse analysis of episode guides collected from <http://www.columbo-site.freeuk.com/> and television scripts from http://www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk/episode_scripts.php?tv-show=columbo-1971. Script data and episode guides were collected and were coded using QSR nVivo qualitative analysis software. After a deep read of the first season’s script data, conceptual categories were developed and iteratively tested against later scripts, resulting in categories that persisted through the remainder of the study. This methodology is consistent with other qualitative consumer research (e.g., Spiggle 1994, Thompson 1997).

This study finds that the role played by Lieutenant Columbo contests the Playboy masculinity (Ehrenreich 1983, Kimmel 1996) expressed by the villains portrayed in *Columbo*. Three specific characteristics of the Lieutenant Columbo character support this finding. First, the Columbo character is examined as a mythical figure intended to be seen as an everyman opposing the wealthy and elitist perpetrators of the crimes he investigates. Second, the scripts offer a temporal dynamic in which he emerges as a non-threatening traditionalist breadwinner male who diligently follows leads to solve the crimes. And finally, we see in the revelation of the culprit the acquiescence to the social norms representing the breadwinner. Here, Lieutenant Columbo’s actions first annoy and then then signal defensiveness in the culprit, usually tricking him/her into making a fatal revealing mistake.

This project examines the role of entertainment media in the formation and contestation of cultural gender norms, and finds that entertainment media have the potential to influence and contest norms of masculinity. The implications of these findings may result in further analysis of influences in these changing gender norms, including the role of marketing communications and entertainment media in the transformation of gender.

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Keywords: *Masculinity, Entertainment media, consumer mythology*

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: This research examines the role of entertainment media to influence social and cultural norms with respect to gender and masculinity.

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TRACK: Music, Arts, and Entertainment