

# “The best men can be”

## New configurations of masculinity in the Gillette ad “We believe”

by Michael Nebeling Petersen & Karen Hvidtfeldt

### Abstract

In January 2019, the company Gillette released a short movie “We believe” as advertisement for the brand. In the ad, Gillette reframes their slogan from “the best a man can get” to “the best a man can be.” Connecting the video to the #MeToo movement and critiquing ‘toxic masculinity’, Gillette portrays a new, more responsible, gentle, empathetic masculinity for “the men of tomorrow.” In this article, we present and discuss theories and strands of masculinity studies, and we analyze how the short movie portrays contemporary masculinity vis-à-vis these theories. Our argument is that while Gillette’s short movie and similar branding movies appeal to social responsibility and might open for new and more inclusive masculinities, it does, however, at the same time reproduce the patriarchal organization of masculinity in which power and privilege run from man to man and leave women and children as objects. Furthermore, the recoding of masculinity from toxicity to empathy is framed as an individual choice within neoliberal logics.

**KEYWORDS:** critical studies of men and masculinities, masculinity, patriarchy, Gillette, #metoo

**MICHAEL NEBELING PETERSEN** Associate Professor at the Center for Gender, Sexuality and Difference at the University of Copenhagen. He is affiliated *Medicine Man: Media Assemblages of Medicalized Masculinity*. His research centres gender, race, nation and sexuality, among other, within new technologies of reproduction and kinship and digital media and mediated cultures of intimacy.

**KAREN HVIDTFELDT** Professor at the University of Southern Denmark. She heads the Research project *Medicine Man: Media Assemblages of Medicalized Masculinity* funded by the Danish Research Council on the Humanities. She works within critical cultural studies, media and gender studies and centres issues related to health, illness, reproduction, family, gender and the body.

*“Our tagline needs to continue to inspire us all to be better every day, and to help create a new standard for boys to admire and for men to achieve... Because the boys of today are the men of tomorrow.”*  
(Gillette.com 2019)

In the short film titled “We believe,” launched by the American safety razor and personal care company Gillette on January 13<sup>th</sup> 2019, Gillette develops and replaces the company brand’s slogan since 1989 “The best a man can get” with a new tagline, “The best men can be” (Gillette 2019b). The opening sequence presents a flashback to Gillette’s own ad history as a group of young boys tear through an older (retro) Gillette ad at the exact spot in which a young girl kisses a man on his clean-shaven cheek. The voice-over of the sounds of different news clip speaks situates the commercial: “Bullying... The #MeToo movement against sexual harassment... Masculinity.” As the male speak asks: “Is this the best a man can get?” it is followed by a small sequence of the historically well-known jingle/theme song “The best a man can get” after which the speak rhetorically challenges Gillette’s own statement by repeating “Is it?” The commercial shows a series of episodes of men and culture patronizing, laughing at or sexually objectifying women as well as boy cultures of fighting, bullying and no crying encouraged by fathers as “boys will boys.” The commercial then states that “something finally changed,” and makes a stand for a better masculinity and boy culture based in care, inclusivity, responsibility and empathy.

Gillette’s *We believe* campaign gave immediate cause to heated media attention, however also stirred fierce debates on social media platforms. Comments show that viewers experienced the commercial as a backlash towards traditional masculine values and that many men felt that the ad unjustly held all men accountable for performing toxic masculinity. The ad also gave cause to critiques towards Gillette for trying to capitalize on the #MeToo movement and at the same time performing double standards as products for women typically cost more than products catering to men (so-called “pink tax”). Following this both men and women voiced negative critique and the video

soon reached the top 10 list of most disliked videos on YouTube.

The aim of this article is to critically present and discuss theories of masculinities in the context of recent mainstream critiques of what is termed “toxic” masculinities (e.g. the #MeToo movement). We firstly draw up recent developments within masculinity theory to understand how masculinity can be and has been conceptualized. In particular, we are interested in how masculinity is transformed and how these transformations are theoretically understood in conceptualizations as ‘hegemonic masculinity’, ‘inclusive masculinity’ and ‘involved fatherhood’. Secondly, we analyze to what extent the short film places itself in relation to new/old notions of masculinity in order to assess and critically discuss the theories of masculinities. Following this, and finally, we include another Gillette commercial portraying new forms of masculinity, the so-called ‘trans commercial’, *First Shave, the story of Samson*, published in May 2019. This latter commercial was perceived as a – to some extent – more inclusive representation of masculinity. We discuss the range of this inclusivity as we operationalize the Gillette commercials as obvious examples of such popular and broadly accessible critiques of traditional – if not toxic – masculinity.

## Critical studies of men and masculinities

While women and minoritized men have long been the object of research, the focused studying of (heterosexual) men and masculinities is a relatively new phenomenon. Within the gender studies subfield of Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM), men and masculinity are considered to be social, and socially and societally constructed, and the focus on criticism relates to not that the studies are critical towards men per se,

but rather that men constitute a social category of power (Hearn 2019) in ways that should be addressed and analyzed. In this section, we will present modern theories and conceptualizations of masculinities, before moving to presenting a more poststructuralistically grounded, queer and feminist theorization of same. Our aim is to present and critically discuss different theories prevalent in the field of studies of masculinities in order to later discuss these theories in relation to the case.

According to Hearn et al., reflecting on the Swedish context and history, CSMM can roughly be structured within three waves: In the 1960s and 1970s, the focus was on "sex role approaches and structural gender power" (Hearn et al. 2012: 34), while CSMM in the 1980s and 1990s was increasingly and vastly influenced by Raewyn Connell's concept of and theory on hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), which widened CSMM to analyze and focus on different kinds of masculinities, their relations and positions to other men, as well as masculinity's structural and hierarchical relation to women and femininity. Hegemonic masculinity is understood as the at any time dominant one; thus, constantly changing in relation to the given context:

*It is the masculinity that is most dominant and culturally exalted at any given time, though its ascendancy is not fixed. Rather, hegemonic masculinity responds to societal changes and challenges and mutates accordingly. It subordinates men who embody devalued forms of masculinity, such as gay men (subordinated masculinities) and marginalizes men based on axes such as race, ethnicity, class, and ability (marginalized masculinities). (Elliott 2016: 46).*

Hegemonic masculinity is the organization of power and dominance which works both internally within the form of social hierarchies of masculinities and externally in relation to women (Demetriou 2001; Christensen and Jensen 2014: 63). This means that different masculinities are socially organized in terms of dominance, privilege and access to power in accordance with their proximity

to the (contextually depending) hegemonic masculinity. This organization is internal, as it relates to the organization of masculinities, whereas the masculinities also are organized in a hierarchical dichotomy to femininity and women. This is the external relation of power, which is a patriarchal organization. Critical approaches have addressed hegemonic masculinity as harmful to both men and women: The latter because of the violence directed towards women, subordination, unequal opportunities and the responsibility of care work. For men the cost of hegemonic masculinity is the accompanying stress to meet the ideals of hegemonic masculinity and that men's needs for intimacy and emotional engagement are denied (Hanlon 2012; Elliott 2016: 247).

The 2000s mark the third wave of CSMM (Hearn et al. 2012: 37-38), as CSMM to some extent became influenced by different strands of post-structuralist feminist theories, resulting in more theoretical contributions on the constructions of masculinity encompassing feminist third-wave theories, e.g. like intersectionality (Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman 2002) and queer theories (Halberstam 1998). As Lucas Gottzén & Wibke Straube put it, Jack Halberstam's concept 'female masculinity' "attempts to destabilize the relationship between men and masculinity that characterizes masculinity studies in its tendency to ascribe masculinity as something primarily (or solely) cis-male bodies accomplish" (Gottzén et al. 2016: 220). Thus, Halberstam expands the understanding of 'trans' by examining popular cultural expressions as for instance butches and drag kings and stresses the need to analytically separate the concept of masculinity from cis-manliness.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) explores the intersectional premise of queer theory, that gender is inherently sexualized and vice versa. In her work Sedgwick has especially shown how heterosexual masculinity is defined and structured around the violent exclusion of *homosexual* male desire: Within contemporary Western patriarchy, she argues, when men help men to maintain economic, social and cultural privileges, it is not seen as *gay* (Sedgwick 1985, 1990). Though these homosocial systems of support could be seen as

interactions of homosocial desire, however, gayness is understood, within patriarchy, as inherently feminine and anti-masculine. This leaves the Western culture as structured "by a chronic, now endemic crisis of the homo/heterosexual definition" (Sedgwick 1990: 1) in which heterosexual masculinities and patriarchal homosocial patterns of male-to-male desire are not easily (if even possibly) demarcated from homosexual homosocial desire. While on the one hand, male homosociality enables the reproduction of patriarchy from male to male, homosociality also runs the chronic risk of being labeled as gay. Thus, masculinity needs to constantly distance itself from homosexual desire and draw the line between what is 'male' and what is 'gay'. But it is impossible to fixate the line between homosocial forms of desire (which should be understood as a continuum of male-to-male interactions of desire and affects), and thus, Sedgwick argues, homophobia appears as the violent and omnipresent demarcation of homosexuality from the realm of masculinity. A demarcation which is essentially anti-feminist as it depends on women as currency in which homosocial male-to-male interactions can continue without being regarded, framed or understood as homosexual. In the classical literary plot, for example, two men fight over the honor, power and dominance. The affective energies and desires are directed from one man to another, and the placing of a woman in the middle (the two men fighting over who should have the woman) conceptualizes this intensified male-to-male desire interaction as not-homosexual. In this way, homophobia and sexism are intimately linked. Kimmel echoes Sedgwick (while strangely enough not referencing her) when he argues that masculinity should be conceptualized as hierarchal power relations to the feminine and to other forms of masculinity and, thus, masculinity is constructed and enabled by homophobia and the escape from the feminine (Kimmel 1997).

During recent decades, especially the concept of inclusive masculinity has set the agenda for new configurations of masculinity. Inclusive masculinity, a term coined by Eric Anderson (2009), points to the fact that contemporary masculinity has become radically more diverse and

non-exclusive. Anderson's research focuses on the identification of shifting cultural attitudes towards former stereotypical gender roles among university-attending men within specific sports environments in North American and Western European cultures. Building on empirical studies within these surroundings, he argues that "things are now finally beginning to change" (Anderson 2009: 4). Anderson argues that homophobia and "homohysteria" were central to the production of orthodox masculinity, making "hyper-masculinity compulsory for boys, and its expression of femininity among boys taboo" (Anderson 2009: 7). Homohysteria is defined as the fear of being socially perceived as gay (Anderson and McCormack 2018). As this fear gradually diminishes more inclusive forms of masculinity emerge, "multiple masculinities will proliferate without hierarchy and hegemony," as homophobic discourse will no longer be socially acceptable. "In such a setting, the esteemed attributes of men will no longer rely on control and domination of other men; there is no predominance of masculine bullying or harassment and homophobic stigmatization will cease, even if individual men remain personally homophobic" (Anderson 2009: 97). As the borders of acceptable heteromale behaviors thus expand, the formerly mentioned concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' devalues as there is no longer a dominating form of masculinity present. As cultural homohysteria diminishes, the remaining level of a conservative, 'orthodox masculinity' continues to exist as a dominant but no longer dominating ('hegemonic') form.

This leads Anderson to conclusions that place homophobia and gender inequality in the past and announce a new reality in which 'inclusive masculinity' is the new normal and in which boys and men are free to express emotional intimacy and to openly display physical expressions of relationship with one another.

*Accordingly, this culture permits an even greater expansion of acceptable heteromale behaviors, which results in yet a further blurring of feminine and masculine behaviors and terrains. The differences between*

*masculinity and femininity, men and women, gay and straight, will be harder to distinguish, and masculinity will no longer serve as the primary method of stratifying men. Whereas gender expressions coded as feminine were edged to extinction among men in the 1980s; today they flourish. (Anderson 2009: 97).*

These rather optimistic and hopeful assessments of the current state of gender and sexual equality have given cause to extended discussion and criticism. Rachel O’Neill convincingly points out that the theory of inclusive masculinity lacks a theoretical framework of sexual politics and feminism in order to recognize how new/old masculinities emerge (e.g. “neo-orthodox masculinities” (Rodino-Colocino, DeCarvalho, and Heresco 2018)) and operate as power relations, and to analytically address how these achieve new forms and expressions. Thus, inclusive masculinity theory both reflects and reproduces logics of ‘postfeminism’ specifically through the erasure of sexual politics:

*With sexual politics – that is, an understanding of gender relations as structured by power – consigned to the past, postfeminism represents an especially pernicious form of antifeminism wherein the “taken into accountness” of feminism allows for a more thorough dismantling of feminist politics, at the same time that gender inequalities are renewed and patriarchal norms reinstated. (O’Neill 2015: 102).*

Feminist gender theories tend to theorize the ways in which gender is constituted in language, power and social relations, offering theoretical concepts to understand and even deconstruct the production of gendered meaning and identity (Butler 1990) as well as matter and bodies (Butler 1993). Though aligned with these scholarly insights, CSMM seems mainly to have been developing descriptive theories of masculinity; departing from the concept of hegemonic masculinities, CSMM has been keen on naming new forms of masculinity, each conceptualizing a new way of doing masculinity within larger social contexts. Apart from

inclusive masculinity Anderson and McCormack list also “personalized masculinities (Swain, 2006); soft-boiled masculinities (Heath, 2003); cool masculinities (Jackson & Dempster, 2009); caring masculinities (Elliott, 2016); flexible masculinities (Batnitzky, McDowell, & Dyer, 2009); chameleon masculinities (Ward, 2015); and saturated masculinities (Mercer, forthcoming)” (Anderson and McCormack 2018: 556). These studies have in different ways tried to widen the scope of CSMM by offering new/old concepts of masculinity, questioning both the theoretical premise of Connell’s hegemonic masculinity “of patriarchy on which the concept of hegemonic masculinity is based,” arguing that it “simply does not allow for an explanation of how alternative equality oriented masculinities might emerge” (Christensen and Jensen 2014: 66), and at the same time critically discussing the theoretical premises of the notion of inclusive masculinity headed by Anderson himself.

### Toxic masculinity – “Boys will be boys”

In the following part we explore how the narration and composition of the 1.40-minute short film titled “We believe. The best men can be” taps into both contemporary political agendas of gender equality and the ongoing development of masculinity theory. Though the commercial is short and fictional, it represents the contemporary discussions about masculinities. We have chosen the commercial as a case of popular representation and negotiation of what masculinity can and should be in the context of feminist critiques of male privilege and violence. The aim of this article, however, is not to lay claim about how men and masculinities are represented in commercial popular culture in general. Rather, we use our analysis of the Gillette ads as a projection to discuss and evaluate theories and conceptualizations of masculinity within. We situate the analysis within cultural studies and gender studies, in which commercials and commercial popular culture have been analyzed in order to understand how gender,



meaning, identity, power and culture are (re)configured and understood and where both the levels of semiotic, aesthetics and production are granted analytical significance (Bordo 2000; Hall 1997).

If understood as an ad, it is remarkable that the short film does at no point display razors or refer directly to the products supposedly being marketed. Though branding and marketing are not the primary focus of this article, the commercial is as such an obvious example of value-based marketing or "emotional branding", to which advertising and brand managers according to Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser have increasingly turned in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, developing strategies that appeal to "affect, emotion and social responsibility" (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012: 20). Sarah Banet-Weiser highlights the Dove Real Beauty campaign from 2006 as "a contemporary example of commodity activism, one of the new ways that advertisers and marketers have used brands as a platform for social activism" (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012: 40), and accordingly on their website, Gillette states that "[i]t's time we acknowledge that brands, like ours, play a role in influencing culture. And as a company that encourages men to be their best, we have a responsibility to make sure we are promoting positive, attainable, inclusive and healthy versions of what it means to be a man" (Gillette.com 2019). As the ad's audio quotes short media headlines like "bullying," "the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment" and "masculinity," the short film marks itself as being a comment on the contemporary #MeToo movement understood as a crisis of masculinity. Underlining this is also the fact that *We believe: The best a Man can be* is part of a campaign including both the video launched on TV and on social media and a pledge made by Gillette on the company website "to donate \$1 million per year for the next three years to non-profit organizations executing programs in the United States designed to inspire, educate and help men of all ages achieve their personal 'best' and become role models for the next generation."

The first half of the short film displays the influence and challenges of contemporary social media culture as the one word "FREAK" covers

the screen, followed by a focus on a woman who embraces and tries to comfort a young boy while further demeaning text messages continuously appear on the screen. This points both towards bullying and hateful behavior as being a dominant part of digital communication in everyday youth culture in general and specifically towards gender-related hate speech (e.g. "sissy"). Through sequences of fast cuts, a number of references to 20<sup>th</sup>-century American popular culture are presented: cartoons, sitcoms, music videos, displaying a historical reality of mediated misogyny. Thus, the problem is localized as ubiquitous, and despite the examples being from comical and humorous popular culture, the speak announces the question of masculinity to be too serious to just ignore or "laugh (...) off." Male power, dominance and oppressive behavior are legitimized among both children and adults as gendered inequalities are shaped and shared through popular culture.

The ad problematizes what has been termed toxic masculinity, understood as the ways in which hegemonic masculinities rely on the symbolic and literal violence of other men and women. Throughout the ad's different settings, we see the effects of this violence: The patronizing of and sexual violence towards women, the violence and mockery of other men and the taboo on men's and boys' need to show feelings, insecurities and empathy. In the opening scene, the film cuts between different men gazing in the mirror and the reflection of themselves in moments of thinking, while the voice-over frames the ad: "...bullying, the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment, masculinity. Is this the best a man can get?" Through the introduction of the first part of the ad, this mosaic shows how toxic masculinity works: The bullying of other ('weak') boys, the shaming of empathy, the objectification, sexualization and patronization of women, the violence and no-tears logic. Symbolically (and in a self-reflective mode of Gillette), the "boys of tomorrow" jump out through the screen of a Gillette ad from the 80s, showing how the advertisement and cultural representations of masculinity have framed and added to this toxic masculinity, within a sexist culture saturating television shows, cartoons, music industry, cinema,

etc. Thus, toxic masculinity is reproduced through cultural representations and excused as “boys will be boys” by other men.

However, the short film turns down traditional evolutionary arguments like “boys will be boys” as being “the same old excuses” and as a self-confirming group dynamic. A sequence shows how chubby middle-aged men stand shoulder to shoulder behind their identical barbecues as a visualization of the feminist argument that masculine culture not only offers male privilege but also provides men with a shield of protection against accusations (0.35). The announcement of the #MeToo movement is highlighted as a turning point after which men, formerly protected from any consequences of their actions, are now being held responsible. The media statements “something finally changed” (0.40) and “allegations regarding sexual assault and sexual harassment” are visualized as a mosaic of news channels, and as a narrative point of no return the statement “there will be no going back” is declared exactly halfway through the film (0.47). Following this, the last part of the short film emphasizes which types of social interaction will no longer be acceptable, including fighting, men rivaling among themselves or cat-calling women. At the same time the soundtrack rhythm shifts to arpeggios, creating a tension between the rhythm that accompanies themes of conflict and the half pace that supplements the suggestions for solutions. The audio resembles the tradition of folk music typically played as open chords on string instruments and as such holds references to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century tradition of American film music, e.g. sceneries of the wide-open spaces of the prairie suggesting a new world of open possibilities. Thus, the soundtrack of the film provides a hopeful and symbolic atmosphere throughout the ad.

The Gillette short film is in many ways in line with the definition of inclusive masculinity claimed by Eric Anderson as for instance the film visualizes social conventions and behaviors wherein the differences between masculinity and femininity are less obvious and harder to distinguish than before. This analogy is supported by scenes where men associate respectfully with women without

sexual harassment and explicitly reject unacceptable male behavior. In the first scene of the second half of the short film, we see a man at a pool party patronizing a woman by saying, “smile, sweetie.” While the woman being humiliated turns her head and looks at the man with a face of anger, another man interferes in the scene and stops the patronizing by getting between the man and the woman and saying, “come on.” Secondly, we see a man about to catcall a woman on a busy street who is interrupted by yet another man saying, “not cool, not cool.” The next couple of scenes are cut together in a collage-like mix in which different ways of young boys violently harassing other boys are disciplined by grown-up men with the words “this is not how we treat each other.” Also, we see an adult man standing in front of a mirror with an infant girl, encouraging her to repeat the empowering statement “I am strong!” All this before the ad ends with a series of clips of young boys looking directly into the camera with the voice-over “the boys of today will be the men of tomorrow.” Terry Crews, actor, former football star, sexual assault survivor and the author of the autobiography *Manhood: How to Be a Better Man or Just Live with One*, is displayed during his congress testimony as he states that “men need to hold other men accountable.” The film displays other examples of ‘good behavior’, e.g. groups of young men gathered in the street shaking hands instead of rivaling, and a man who steps out of the line of men behind the barbecues and intervenes in a conflict between two young boys. In this way, Gillette is calling on men to take responsibility for changing culture and blames also the ignoring of other men’s misbehavior.

“Because the boys of today will be the men of tomorrow”

A major argument in the short film lies in the declaration of intergenerational influence and paternal responsibility. Gillette’s “We believe” shows how men today do no longer refuse or abstain from taking part in the upbringing of children. The second part of the short film portrays men spending

free time with their family rather than being with friends or at work and shows how men step forward also when it comes to getting involved in emotional labor. Within traditional masculinity and a gendered division of labor, child care and everyday upbringing are understood as a feminized activity and responsibility. In the family structure of the (post)industrialized societies the role of the father is generally speaking defined as an economic provider (breadwinner) whereas domestic tasks are stereotypically thought of as being female. The biological line of argumentation would see women as the 'natural' providers of child care (having been pregnant and given birth), whereas sociological arguments would point to the extent that taking over responsibilities of care "means giving up the privileges and power of hegemonic masculinity" (Elliott 2016: 254; Hanlon 2012).

It is, however, remarkable to what extent "We believe" portrays relations between fathers and sons. "The best a man can be" shows examples of how inclusive masculinity allows (and demands) of boys and men to express feelings towards each other and engage in physical contact (other than the traditional act of males fighting). Thomas Johansson and Jesper Andreasson argue that a gradually changing kind of everyday fatherhood "toward involved fatherhood and equitable caregiving can be seen in many Western countries, as well as in other parts of the world. This process, although not uncontested, should undoubtedly be understood as calling into question old ideologies, structures and identity formations" (Johansson and Andreasson 2017: 2). A new metanarrative of involved fatherhood is emerging wherein the distant provider-dad model is no longer an option (Farstad and Stefansen 2015). Abigail Gregory and Susan Milner point towards a new normative discourse of fatherhood in popular media in which both parents take parental leave or reduce working hours and state that "'new fatherhood' has problematized the tension between fathers' caring and breadwinner roles, around two key themes: the need for father-sensitive legislation and the need to reduce long working hours" (Gregory and Milner 2011: 593; O'Brien 2005). These new standards of parenthood include an emotionally present

and nurturing father who also (or especially) after a possible divorce shows involvement and responsibility. This research, however, also points out that reality might lag behind the public image of change, e.g. supported by Johansson and Andreasson who argue that everyday life also in the Nordic countries holds a distinction between child-oriented masculinity and gender-equal men (Johansson and Andreasson 2017).

## The double bind of masculinity

Throughout the accounts of the changing of masculinity in the Gillette ad, we see men correcting and stopping other men in specific ways. This means that women are portrayed as objects which some men can harass, while other men can intervene and stop. Likewise, it is the father figure, the older man, who calls the children into behaving properly. While we do not want to question the importance of men holding other men and themselves accountable for sexism and misogyny, we suggest that it is worth reflecting on what kind of social organization of masculinity the ad represents as being "the best." In the new social organization, the misogyny and catcalling are replaced with well-behaved and balanced masculinity. What is interesting is, however, to what extent this new organization of masculinity resembles the former tradition.

In the (according to Gillette) 'new' organization, men save women and fatherly figures teach the boys how to behave in relation to other men and to the gendered other (the woman). In this way, the Gillette organization of masculinity targets toxic masculinity in a patriarchal framework in which masculinity is recoded from toxicity to empathy without questioning the patriarchal organization in which women still are left outside the organization as mere objects for male-to-male action and intervention. Thus the ad draws attention to what Susan Bordo termed the double bind of masculinity: How men in order to "do the right thing" and "be cool" need to on the one hand act civilized and non-sexist, however on the other must take leadership and show the way (described by Bordo as the



balance between “beast” and “gentleman”) (Bordo 2000). On the one hand, men are expected to act and to become socialized through gentle and non-dominant forms of masculinity and *not* take advantage of male privileges and dominance. On the other hand, men are expected to become full gendered subjects through exactly embodying the norms of masculinity: Being the best on the soccer field, taking charge, speaking up and saving women and children.

Following Sedgwick’s and Kimmel’s arguments about masculinity as constructed through the expulsion of male homosexuality, we can understand why there is no representation of male homosexuality in the ad: The recoding of masculinity, suggested in the ad, challenges hegemonic notions of what defines masculinity and which social privileges masculinity gives access to. Thus, we argue that the seemingly non-toxic organization of masculinity in the Gillette ad is highly homosocial in the narrative and visual quality of the ad (and also in the reception of the ad in online debates following the release on social media, YouTube in particular). The recoding of masculinity from being characterized by inter-male violence, bullying and competition to one of inter-male care, support and empathy runs the risk of being framed as *too* homosocial, as *gay*, and this might explain why the ad neither mentions or represents male homosexuality nor challenges the boundaries of male-to-male desire. And in this way, women are still needed as the object through which male-to-male desire can run and as objects of heterosexual alibis. Read along this Sedgwick vein, the ad does present a more sensitive and family-oriented masculinity, however does not challenge the ways in which masculinity is based on patriarchal structures of dominance and privilege. Rather, it recodes the same structures in a modern and gentle way, while, however, reserving the symbolic and literal power to men.

### Race or color blindness?

Whereas homosexuality is nonvisible in Gillette’s ad, questions of both class and race seem to ap-

pear in different ways. Mostly the ad portrays middle-class masculinity in the suburbs. However, also black masculinity in the city is represented in small sequences. Within Connell’s account of hegemonic masculinity, she argues that racialized masculinities (notably black masculinity in the US) function as subordinated masculinities within a white supremacist society. It has long been part of racist discourse and logic that racialized men are scapegoated as more patriarchal and sexist than white men. In different local versions, the patriarchal-racist logic characterized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak runs the notion that white men save brown women from brown men (Spivak 1994: 93).

In the ad, it is (what appears to be) white men who catcall and treat women poorly in public spaces, which for one challenges the racist imagery in which racialized men are the men who most often and most brutally catcall women or behave directly sexist in streets and public places. And additionally, when it is stopped, it is in the Gillette ad in several cases done by racialized men. Likewise, black men are portrayed as caring and fatherly and a part of the change away from toxic masculinity. The question is how we are to understand or conceptualize these changes in relation to race in the ad? On the one hand the changes seem to be new ways of portraying racialized masculinity compared to the racist representations that typically dominate public discourse (colored men as brutal, dangerous and sexist). On the other hand, “We believe” brings to mind current debates of race in relation to postracial color blindness as described by David L. Eng (Eng 2010). Following Eng’s line of thought, we may ask if the ad portrays race within what Eng would call a color-blind or postracial imagery in which race is seen as something not important and not structuring in contemporary society. Eng critiques that this postracial discourse itself is racist, as it makes it difficult to address racism and potentially makes us blind to the fundamental ways in which race and racism structure social and cultural worlds. We wish to point to the fact that these positive post-race portrayals of masculinity run the risk of rendering invisible how race continues to impact the very foundation of

masculinity as a hierarchized social order of violence and privilege.

### Happy shaving #mybestself – Masculinity as ritualized doings passed on by fathers

In continuation of the “The best a man can be” ad, Gillette launched a new short film in May 2019, this time featuring Canadian artist Samson Bonkeabantu Brown as he learns to shave (Gillette 2019a). The 1.05-minute ad “First Shave, the story of Samson” features him with his father who passes on his knowledge about shaving. The short film refers directly to the contemporary discussions of masculinity, and Samson’s statement “growing up I was always trying to figure out what kind of man I wanted to become, and I am *still* trying to figure out what man to become” underlines the notion of masculinity as an embodiment and construction rather than a biological or congenital condition. The use of the word “transitioning” (0.15) marks that Samson is transitioning from female to male and that the act of shaving is part of this process.

In “First Shave, the story of Samson” shaving is presented as a universal and common human condition. This is underlined by the way shaving techniques are described first in geographical terms (“north, north, east, west, never in a hurry”) and afterwards as an emotional process connected to confidence as a fundamental human value (“don’t be scared, shaving is about being confident”). Interestingly, masculinity is not represented as something only deriving from the body or genitalia, rather, masculinity is portrayed as ritualized doing. To shave comes to represent the masculine doings which constitute and make a man. Furthermore, masculinity as ritualized doings is passed on from fathers to sons, and by letting trans sons be part of this generational pattern of masculinity and maleness without questioning their masculinity or body, the ad about Samson represents a (in mainstream) new and more inclusive and contemporary understanding of what masculinity is and can be. An understanding which aligns to

queer- and trans-theoretical conceptualizations of masculinity and gendered embodiment.

The ad’s empathetic storyline about inclusiveness, about fatherly and generational love and about coming of age and coming to one’s ‘true’ gender is moving and affective. This happy story is aligned with the narrative Samson: His primary motivation for transitioning was not merely gendered, but also affective: “I went into my transition just wanting to be happy” (not “just wanting to be a man”). Thus, the film rhetorically subordinates gender differences to happiness and involves not only men in the need to change: “I am at the point of my manhood where I am actually happy. It is not just myself transitioning. It is everybody around me transitioning” (as he hugs his father). Whereas cis masculinity normally is understood in mainstream as a condition rather than a choice, the storyline uses trans masculinity to reflect all gendered embodiment as, if not a choice, then a dynamic, changing and reflexive condition. In this way, the change of masculinities represented in “The best a man can be” is mirrored in a trans-masculine experience of gendered reflexivity and embodiment. Thus, very interestingly, the ad portrays a masculine experience *constituting* manliness which relates to both cis and trans masculinity and thereby diminishes the difference between those forms of masculinity and gendered embodiment.

In Gillette’s ad, transitioning becomes less about the bodily change and the ability to grow a beard and more about the process of shaving away a beard. Or rather, masculinity is constituted by the reflexivity and ritualized doings. These doings are represented by the technology of shaving (and the products developed and sold by Gillette). And in contrast to “The best a man can be”, the film “First Shave, the story of Samson” does display razors. However, like the Dove Real Beauty campaign, the quality and price of the products are not the subject of the ads. Apart from this commercial logic, Dove and Gillette also share the thematic focus on youth and self-esteem.

Samson states that he is “just wanting to be happy” and “glad I am at the point where I am able to shave.” As such he appears as what Sara Ahmed has termed a ‘happy queer’, which is according to

Ahmed not the typical image of queer fiction archives (Ahmed 2010). Traditionally, in queer fiction, the theme of trans masculinity (if portrayed at all) is about how trans men are negated a male identity, and their unhappy battles to gain access to recognition as male from other men, family and friends. In the Gillette ad, the shaving equipment becomes a ‘happy object’ which rather seamlessly connects Samson to (embodied) masculinity as well as a male generational line through the intimate masculine connection to his father. The shaving gear as what connects Samson to masculinity and as a happy object invokes the feeling of sympathy towards Samson and his situation and further towards Gillette and their products. The feeling of kinship in “First Shave, the story of Samson” is constituted through the transfer of knowledge and experience from father to son, and openness towards and acceptance of trans-genderness connect to recognizable family values. The ad closes with an image of the original Gillette tagline “the best a man can get” printed across Samson’s face as a visual reminder of the traditional company brand.

## Conclusion

The Gillette ads obviously belong to the tradition of value-based marketing and lifestyle commercials; ads doing marketing for products by paying attention to feelings and questions of identity and appealing to the customers’ values and sense of ethics as the speak for instance encourages to

consider how “to say the right thing. To act the right way” or “Whenever, wherever, however it happens. Your first shave is special.” “First Shave, the story of Samson” can be said to take masculinity to a new level of inclusion of masculinities traditionally not included (racialized trans-genderness), however, does at the same time silence these exact issues. Gillette’s ads target race and gender concerning both minoritized masculinities (trans-gendered, black masculinity) and hegemonic masculinity (men offended by #MeToo). The narrative of “First Shave, the story of Samson” follows the same logic as in “The best a man can be”: The older man (father figure) teaches the young man how to behave (and how to shave) within a patriarchal framework. Thus, masculinity is recoded from toxicity to empathy without questioning the patriarchal organization: The father figure takes leadership. He shows the way and through gentle authority saves the young (trans) man. Though the representation of a happy trans-masculine story of inclusion and acceptance is as important as it is rare, one must keep in mind that the Gillette ad still portrays a patriarchal organization of masculinity in which men have the final authority to protect women and children and in which masculine privileges are passed on from fathers to sons. The masculinities offered in the Gillette ads open towards other and more empathetic masculinities, however, the organization of masculinity remains patriarchal, and the ‘ethics of doing the right thing’ envisioned by Gillette does at the same time connect non-toxic masculinity to postfeminist and neoliberal ideals of individualism.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to a list on Wikipedia counting the dislike and like buttons on YouTube (Wikipedia 2019).

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