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INTRODUCTION

Marketers are constantly interested in researching new ways to attract audiences in order to capture the consumer’s attention and increase sales in a cluttered market place. Also, they are constantly researching ways to make the most return on advertising dollars spent by doing a better job in targeting the right customers at the right place and time. Thus, the reason many researchers have tried to better understand human psychology and gender roles involved in purchasing decisions.

The purpose of this study is to explore consumption fears among male individuals and how they relate to masculine ideals. We introduce the concepts of fear, social identity and stigma management to explain the role they play in masculine consumption. We then explain and compare two masculinity models discussed by Holt and Thompson. We finally conclude our study by highlighting the fact that our respondents do not show evidence of the solutions proposed by the compensatory consumption thesis and theory of Man-of-Action Hero targeted at resolving the conflict resulting from the two competing masculinity models that males may experience.

FEAR

Fear is a topic that is commonly discussed by researchers and has a wide range of definitions. According to LaTour and Zahra (1989), fear is defined as “a primitive instinct, which can occasionally guide and activate human behavior”. They claim that individuals will experience feelings of tension and anxiety during a state of fear and will thus seek different ways to reduce this tension. The tension and anxiety experienced by the individual are the result of a specific threat which is an appeal to fear and a stimulus that attempts to induce a fear.
response by showing the individual some type of outcome that he wants or hopes to avoid (LaTour and Rotfeld 1997). Tanner, Hunt and Eppright (1991) depict fear in a similar fashion: they describe it as “an emotional response to a threat that expresses, or at least implies, some sort of danger.” They go on to say “for most people, fear has a significant effect on behavior, leading them to seek ways of removing or coping with the threat and therefore the danger”.

Based on the different studies that have been done regarding the use of fear as a marketing and advertising strategy, it is evident that marketers are aware of the consequences of anxiety related feelings, anxiety being described as an “unpleasant state of arousal which occurs in response to cognitively or environmentally produced stimuli (Craighead, Kazdin, and Mahoney, 1976). Thus, by creating the illusion of a threat, marketers are trying to influence a consumer’s behavior by triggering an emotional response of fear and anxiety. Per Paul Hill (1988), “regardless of the cause(s), the onset of state anxiety triggers an evaluation of potential threat and coping alternatives, and a reappraisal based upon the flow of events and reflection…. If the threat is considered significant, an individual will begin searching for a means to cope with the unpleasant situation.”

Altheide also talks about the use of fear in his book Creating Fear. However, Altheide sheds the light on a different perspective of fear and introduces the notion of risk. He clarifies to the reader that fear is “a different psychological experience than perceived risk”. While risk consists of a cognitive judgment, fear is tied to emotions and “activates a series of complex bodily changes altering the actor to the possibility of danger” (Ferraro 1995, 95). Altheide also provides examples of how fear and the definition of risk have traveled across topics over time by referencing quotes from Ewald (1993). He starts with defining fear in the Middle Ages as “an act of God, a force majeure, and a tempest of other peril of the sea that could not be imputed to wrongful conduct.” In the nineteenth century, the definition of risk changed and became a “mix between nature and will” and at the end of the nineteenth century, risk “designated the collective mode of being of human beings in society.” So while “fear begins with things we fear”, a continuous exposure to fear over a period of time may cause us to think of fear as part of daily life (Altheide and Best 2001).

Altheide believes that fear is learned and accuses the mass media and popular culture for being the most significant contributors to fear. He also emphasizes the fact that “fear is built on the foundation of social interaction and communication” (Altheide 2002, 55) and that it is a key component of “creating the risk society” (Erickson and Haggerty 1997; Staples 1997). He states that fear continues to expand in our social life thus playing a larger role in our daily communications (Altheide 2002, 7) and is leading to the emergence of shared social identities.

In addition, Altheide claims that fear is part of what he calls “social control” which he defines as “the process by which people behave in ways that meet expectations of others.” He references his childhood to describe how he defined his identity: “in terms of how people like us saw the world” (Altheide 2002, 7), and explains that “every society teaches its members many things, including what to worry about (e.g., money, status, sin/salvation, personal relationships, health, crime or cellulite)” (Altheide 2002, 54). He also pinpoint that “we are a secular society, so we are less concerned with the fear of God” (Altheide 2002, 22), spiritual development and justice but rather more
concerned with maintaining a good lifestyle, and achieving occupational success.

**SOCIAL IDENTITY**

Erickson defines identity as a process involving the interaction between the “interior development of the individual personality, understood in terms derived from the Freudian id-ego-superego model, and the growth of a sense of selfhood that arises from participating in society, internalizing its cultural norms, acquiring different statuses, and playing different roles.” He explains that identity is created and modified based on the individual’s interaction with his surrounding “social milieu”. Altheide defines identity in a similar fashion. He states that as individuals, “we exist as social beings in the midst of a process. We don’t ‘have’ or own an ‘identity,’ but rather, identity emerges and is acknowledged in situations.”

Erving Goffman has also done an extensive study regarding personal identity and the idea of stigma management, which consists of stereotyping individuals based on preconceived ideas, stereotypes being defined as creative elements, and categories that we project to the world to make sense of it (Altheide 2001). Stigmatized individuals are willing to do whatever it takes to be accepted by society including the alteration of their identity. Goffman suggests that individuals convey social information about themselves via the use of symbols and bodily expressions. On one hand, individuals will use symbols such as the use of lapel buttons to indicate membership to a specific social club. On the other hand, individuals may be interested in conveying a social status and will therefore use symbols to portray an image of prestige and honor about themselves. Goffman also emphasizes the importance of visibility when trying to convey information to others about one’s self and trying to fit in. As he describes it, “the issue is that in certain circumstances the social identity of those an individual is with can be used as a source of information concerning his own social identity, the assumption being that he is what the others are.”

**STIGMA MANAGEMENT**

Per Goffman, stigma management pertains mostly to “public life” and “contact between strangers or mere acquaintances.” As a result, depending on the stigma’s visibility and the role it will play in an individual’s life, people are willing to do whatever it takes to conceal their weaknesses and fit in society. That’s because failing to maintain the minor standards expected in face-to-face communication can impact the individual’s acceptance in a social setting. “Identity is increasingly sought by the consumer, even in its fragmented forms, and recognized by others, not on the basis of what one produces but on the basis of what one consumes” (Firat and Venkatesh 1993). Therefore, individuals will try to become the person they aspire to be by purchasing and displaying goods that create and maintain a sense of the identity they want to portray to others (Bocock 1993). According to Goffman (1959), unless the individual manages to play the identity role he is trying to project to others pretty well and does not leave room for others to question the validity of his act; this individual’s identity will be spoiled. Goffman suggests that a discrepancy may exist between an individual’s virtual and actual identity. “This discrepancy, when known about or apparent, spoils his social identity; it has the effect of cutting him off from society and from himself so that he stands a discredited person facing an unaccepting world.” Goffman talks about coping as it relates to individuals with
spoiled identities. He describes it as “passing”, a process in which individuals use coping mechanisms to conceal their weaknesses and get by during a specific situation. For example, “a hard of hearing person may intentionally style her conduct to give others the impression that she is a daydreamer, an absent-minded person, an indifferent, easily bored person – even someone who is feeling faint, or snores and therefore is unable to answer questions since she is obviously asleep. These character traits account for failure to hear without requiring the imputation of deafness.” What we also find is that individuals also consume products to help them through passing certain situations. For example, a guy may buy a fancy car to project an image of high status in a situation where he does not have it; someone with declining eyesight may want to hide his/her age and will therefore wear “inviso-blended lenses” as these do not have a visible dividing line on the lenses.

Conspicuous Consumption and Consumption fears

As Berger states, identities are “socially bestowed” and “must also be sustained and fairly steadily so. “As for the self, it is rather a process, continuously created and re-created in each social situation that one enters, held together by the slender threat of memory” (Gleason 1983). Altheide states that “popular culture is lived through participation…what we buy says more about who we are than other facts.” He cites Coca-Cola and Nike as an example of goods that represent more than just product labels, rather a lifestyle, social status and cultural preference thus product labels represent membership and communicate one’s identity.

Denzin (1995) portrays a similar image to that just described by Altheide and introduces the notion of conspicuous consumption “identified by Hollywood genres stressing money, sex, love and intimacy,” and defined as the tendency for individuals to enhance their image and social prestige by consuming products and acquiring possessions that signal and communicate their status to others (Kilsheimer 1993). Per Eastman et al. (1999), “the more a consumer seeks status, the more he/she will engage in behaviors, such as the consumption of status symbols, that increase their status.” Thus, it is through one’s possessions, which serve as key symbols that individual’s signal, their identity to others. Per Dittmar (1992), “an individual’s identity is influenced by the symbolic meanings of his or her own material possessions, and the way in which s/he relates to those possessions.

Clearly, individuals are constantly worried about not fitting in and will do whatever it takes to convey to others an identity that may allow them to become part of a particular social group. This notion of taking extraordinary measures to fit in is in line with Stuteville’s (1970) theory stating that social threats are the most effective types of fear appeals, which explains why marketers have relied heavily on the use of social threats to promote personal products such as perfumes and deodorants.

The act of fitting in becomes a zero sum game, as fitting in becomes a movable target. Altheide (2001) theorizes, “The major impact of the discourse of fear is to promote a sense of disorder and a belief that things are out of control.” Thus the main role of fear is to keep consumers in a constant state of flux reaching for a prize that will always elude them. Ferraro (1995) suggests that fear not only causes chaos and keeps consumers in a constant state of flux but it also repeats itself keeping those same consumers in a cyclical attempt to fit in. As such fear “becomes a
self-fulfilling prophecy”. Ferraro puts together the notions of fear, identity and social positioning when he comments on social life:

“Social life can become more hostile when social actors define their situations as fearful and engage in speech communities through the discourse of fear. And people come to share an identity as competent “fear realists” as family members, friends, neighbors, and colleagues socially construct their effective environments with fear.” (Ferraro 1995)

The pursuit of a “social life” in this cyclical environment creates a situation where the fear of not fitting in creates a domino effect. Each consumer constantly engages in consumption activities in an attempt to replicate the successes of their role models in a constant attempt to hit the moving target that constitutes fitting in (Altheide 2001).

According to Eastman et al. (1997) and Tse et al. (1989), males tend to be more materialistic than females and place great importance on portraying prestige and accomplishment via the use of visible symbols such as fashion clothing, apparel, cars and jewelry. The importance of prestige, status and accomplishment is directly related to the construction of a masculine ideal. Previous research alludes to the role of consumption in the negotiation between the two prevailing male models, the breadwinner and the rebel. Research has shown that this negotiation manifests itself in one of two ways: the compensatory consumption thesis and the man-of-action hero thesis.

MODELS OF MASCULINITY

Models of masculinity have come from divergent sources such as sociology, psychology, marketing, mass media and the arts. Sociologist Erving Goffman paints a portrait of the American construction of the perfect masculine model when he says:

“For example, in an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports. Every American male tends to look out upon the world from this perspective, this constituting one sense in which one can speak of common value systems in America. (Goffman 1963)

Crucial in Goffman’s description is the notions that not only are actions and accomplishments important in the perfect male but also physical characteristics. Goffman also states that any man who does not live up to this rather lofty standard will feel some sense of spoiled identity. In attempting to “pass” or to cover up for their perceived deficiencies, males may engage in consumption behaviors that will help create a façade of perfection. Singer and poet Gil Scott-Heron provide another view of American masculinity:

“And yesterday was the day of our cinema heroes riding to the rescue at the last possible
moment. The day of the man in the white hat or the man on the white horse - or the man who always came to save America at the last moment – someone always came to save America at the last moment … When the cavalry came straight away and all-American men were like Hemingway … Clichés like, “itchy trigger finger” and “tall in the saddle” and “riding off or on into the sunset.” … Clichés like, “he died with his boots on.” Marine tough the man is. Bogart tough the man is. Cagney tough the man is. Hollywood tough.” Gil Scott-Heron, “B-Movie”

Scott-Heron alludes to the mass media images that make up the construct of American masculinity: men’s men, the gunslinger in the saddle, and Hemingway the hard drinking author. For Scott-Heron these are clichés that are emblematic of the free spirit who always saves the day. Encoded in both Goffman and Scott-Heron’s descriptions are the two prevailing models of American masculinity, the breadwinner and the rebel. Holt and Thompson talk more specifically of the melding of the two prevailing models of masculinity, when they say:

“America’s most venerated approach to masculinity blends the rebel’s individual initiative, unwillingness to conform to the status quo, and risk-taking propensities with the responsible breadwinner’s care for the commonwealth and sense of responsibility.”

(Holt and Thompson 2004, 436)

These two models are at the center of the construct of American masculinity, regardless of how they are negotiated.

Breadwinner Model

This conceptualization of the masculine ideal conforms in part to what Holt and Thompson term “the Breadwinner” model of masculinity. This model is based on hard work, conforming to ideals, self-sacrifice and social climbing. Status is achieved in the attainment of both social position and wealth (Holt and Thompson 2004). This social construction of Masculinity finds its root in the notion of “the American Dream.” Achievement is possible for all regardless of social or ethnic background given the proper work ethic (Cawelti 1989). In this sense, the breadwinner is the classic working father. He is both responsible to provide economic support, achieve social standing at work, and to be the consummate family man. The breadwinner plays by the rules and achieves through a commitment to the negotiated structure. While the ideal is to be a good corporate citizen and a model father, it has been hypothesized that the status achieved in the 50s, 60s and 70s has eroded since the 80s (Ehrenreich 1983; Holt and Thompson 2004; Kimmel 1996). As the 20th century came to an end, the possibilities to create a masculine identity became fraught with obstacles. As Holt and Thompson describe these men of the establishment became characterized in terms of their failings:

“Mass culture is flooded with portraits of breadwinners as organization men who are alienated by the conformity and subservience in both
organizational and domestic settings...Men who are part of the establishment are readily coded as “failed fathers”, sellouts, petty bureaucrats, cowardly sycophants, or broken men.” (Holt and Thompson 2004, 427)

Rebel Model

Whether they are rebels against conformity, commercialism, or conventional wisdom, they are described by words like individualism, anti-authoritarianism and fearless independence. The major competing model of American masculinity is the Rebel model. We can find the rebel in iconic bad boy figures like author Hunter S. Thompson, the Hells Angels or currently American skier Bode Miller whose autobiography is aptly titled, “Bode: Go Fast, Be Good, Have Fun.” Described as eccentric, quirky, uncensored, a wild child, and untouchable, Miller is the latest in the line of American Rebels. From Daniel Shays, who organized farmers in a militia to fight against the Massachusetts supreme courts’ attempt to force farmers to repay bank loans which would have bankrupted the farmers, to Cesar Chavez who formed the National Farm Workers Association and captured the rebel spirit when he purportedly said, ‘You can’t change anything if you want to hold onto a good job, a good way of life and avoid sacrifice.” American rebels have taken the form of political dissidents like Walt Whitman and Noam Chomsky and musicians like Woody Guthrie and Miles Davis.

The rebel has been portrayed in film by characters such as Robert Redford’s “Jeremiah Johnson”, a solitary mountain man who lives by his wits in nature unencumbered by the trappings of society. This mythical rebel embodies the original conception of the rebel found in mass media described by Holt and Thompson (2004) and captures the outsider masculine identity.

While the rebel myth was embodied in the mountain men or the outlaws like Jesse James, the new rebels in mass culture such as Bode Miller or Steve Earle are men who steadfastly refuse to play by society’s rules and choose instead to live on the edge of society’s norms. They are seen as hard drinking, hard living risk-takers who embody the anti-establishment attitude that makes them both loved and revered.

For some the rebel is a hero, but at all times the rebel lives by his own code. While the rebel is lauded on one hand for living his life on his own terms with his only concern being his own personal goals and edification, society still feels pathos for this sometimes-tragic figure because he is seen as immature and unable to fit in the main stream. Holt and Thompson (2004) aptly describe this contradiction:

“Because rebels threaten the status quo and challenge societal institutions, they are often portrayed as dangerously antisocial outlaws who pose a moral threat to their communities...because (they) are both magnetic and threatening, they are often scripted as tragic figures whose fierce independence becomes their undoing ... (they) are also derided as immature boys who are not up to the task of mature
responsible manhood … mass culture manages the threat of the rebel by rendering him as a harmless adolescent prankster.” (Holt and Thompson 2004, 428)

Compensatory Consumption Thesis

One traditional way of resolving these two competing masculinity models has been a compensatory consumption model. Citing the works of Ehrenreich, Kimmel and Mitchell, Holt and Thompson synthesis the heart of this thesis as follows (Ehrenreich 1983; Kimmel 1996; Mitchell 1996):

“According to this thesis, major socioeconomic changes have threatened the masculine identities of many men. Jobs in certain industry sectors have become more (routine) and less secure, while, at the same time, women have gained more independence as they have entered the work force. Men who have suffered pangs of emasculation in this new environment have sought to symbolically reaffirm their status as real men through compensatory consumption.” (Holt and Thompson 2004, 425)

While adherence to the breadwinner model potentially secures respect in social hierarchies, there increasingly exists a dislocation between this form of masculinity and the masculinity provided by adherence to the rebel model. The compensatory consumption model hypothesizes that men will compensate for the stigmas attached to the breadwinner model, by engaging in various forms of consumption activities that allow them to access the masculinity provided by the rebel ideal. In exploring these various consumption activities, men are reaching back to the “Jeremiah Johnson” spirit of living life on one’s own terms, relying on guts, determination and physical prowess to succeed. While it is not possible to move to the mountains or join the Hells Angels because of the responsibilities of the breadwinner, it is possible to access the free-spirited, risk taking ideals through consumption activities such as weekend mountain man trips, river rafting, skydiving, mountain biking or being a weekend Harley biker (Belk and Costa 1998; Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993; Arnould and Price 1993; Dodson 1996; Schouten and McAlexander 1995).

The compensatory consumption model paints a picture of men who are trying to escape albeit only temporarily, the structure and constraints of the breadwinner model through a hedonic trip into the fantasy world of the rebel in an attempt to find the authentic masculinity hypothesized by Kimmel (Kimmel 1996). Holt and Thompson discount this view of the tension between the breadwinner and rebel models of masculinity and instead propose a third model, the “Man-of-Action Hero” which together with the breadwinner model and the rebel model form what they term, “the American ideology of heroic masculinity” (Holt and Thomson 2004).

Man-of-Action Hero

The man-of-action hero is a delicate synthesis of both the breadwinner and rebel models. Rather than trying to escape the bonds of the breadwinner model and social consternation of the rebel model, the man-of-action hero posits that the creation of a
masculine ideal is in fact a careful dance between the two models that serve to alleviate the stigmas attached to both. The man-of-action successfully melds the best qualities of both the breadwinner and the rebel to form a figure of masculinity that can be revered.

While these men still operate outside the normal rules and constantly push the envelope, in the end they use the rebel side of themselves to accomplish task of the common good that no one else could. Mass media figures of the man-of-action hero abound, a good example can be found in “Star Trek” confident hero James Kirk. He is a womanizing, sometimes arrogant leader who is famous for being the only person to pass the Kobiashi Maroo test, but he accomplished this by changing the rules. He is constantly being portrayed as a rebel but in the end he is the one man who can save the day in the face of incredible odds. Holt and Thompson list many men who fit this model: Presidents such as Lincoln, Roosevelt, Kennedy and Reagan; industrialists like; Turner, Gates, Jobs, Knight and Branson; and characters from movies such as Dirty Harry, James Bond, Indian Jones and Rambo. Like Captain Kirk these men always do things their own way, flaunting their distain for the social order yet still saving the day in the end, and preserving that same social order. The man-of-action hero is a charismatic iconic figure who embodies the best qualities of both the breadwinner and the rebel. Holt and Thompson describe the man-of-action with the following:

“(The man-of-action) must be adventurous, exciting, potent and untamed, while also contributing to the greater social good. He must be perpetually youthful, dynamic, and iconoclastic, while at the same time fulfill the duties of a mature patriarch.” (Holt and Thompson 2004, 429)

Crucial to this model is the idea that the man-of-action not only embodies the best qualities of both the breadwinner and the rebel but also avoids the stigmas of both models as well. They can be lauded for both their hard work and their status as providers, and also for their fierce independence and confidence in their abilities. They are not conformers yet they are able to take responsibility for their lives and the lives of others.

While each of the models of masculinity alludes to the notion of stigmas, they are not manifested in particular consumption fears of American males. In the next section we explore what consumption fears males have and how they relate to the masculine ideals.

**METHODS**

Projective techniques were used to explore the ideas of consumption fears. Each respondent was asked to make a collage using any images they deemed fit from any source. They were then asked to do a self-evaluation of their collages, explaining the images they chose and any other details such as positioning of pictures within the college. Each respondent was also asked to include a narrative detailing any images that they would have liked to include but could not find and explain why they would have liked to include them. A total of 43 collages were collected, 22 from males. The respondents were from a mid-sized midwestern city and ranged in ages from 20 to 45, one third of the sample was married and half of those had children.
The researchers analyzed all the information separately to begin the process. The collages were analyzed first before any supporting materials were considered, and again after looking at each respondent’s self-analysis and missing picture narratives. After individual analysis was completed, the researchers came together and discussed their individual findings. This iterative process allowed the interpretations to build upon themselves creating a new layer of analysis at each level thus creating deeper understanding of the images presented.

The collages provide rich information relating consumption fears to technology (being left behind), alienation, aging, commitment, rejection, responsibility, status, success and body image. For the purposes of this paper we have decided to concentrate on three specific ideas as they relate to the stigmatic effect they have on the formation of masculine identity; (1) Success, (2) social competitiveness and (3) the formation of family.

STIGMAS OF MASCULINITY

Goffman theorized that there is an “art of impression management” that individuals employ to hide the stigmas they have from public view. He asserts that people exert control over the symbols that cue an individual’s public identity. While Goffman alludes to the fact that sometimes this impression control is accomplished by the use of products such as no-line bifocals, he does not focus on consumption in itself as a tool to accomplish stigma management. The collages clearly showed as previous research has asserted that products are important symbols of identity and they also showed they are also important triggers of fear. As the consumption symbols in the collages are related to masculinity it is evident that absence of any of the qualities considered being integral to masculinity found in the breadwinner, rebel or hero model causes an individual to have a “spoiled identity.” The strongest themes relating to spoiled identity were consistent through the collages. These themes were strongly connected to the models of masculinity outlined above. After careful analysis of the collages, three main ideas dominated the consumption symbols depicted by our respondents: (1) The importance of success, (2) social competitiveness and (3) the formation of family, which interestingly enough manifested itself through pictures of body image.

Success

(See Figure I here). The idea of spoiled identity proved to be crucial in the respondents’ depictions of consumption fears. The collages, which mainly consisted of advertisement images, were filled with representations of status and in each case the respondents explained the inclusion of these elements as depictions of their fear that they would not attain the success they desired. Thus, Halls’ theory that advertising creates and contributes to culture holds true (Schroeder and Zwick 2004, 24). “The ways in which individuals habitually perceive and conceive their lives and the social world, the alternatives they see as open to them, and the standards they use to judge themselves and others are shaped by advertising, perhaps without their ever being consciously aware of it” (Lippke 1995, 108).

Success, as represented in the collages, manifests itself in many ways. One African American respondent (figure 1) indicated that being in style is very important in his culture as it reflects the idea of how true he is to his heritage. He explicitly stated that in order to be successful you must look the part. The
respondent’s perception of ‘the good life’ derives from lifestyle magazines and advertising that denote “wealth and spirituality, luxury and transcendent cultural value” achieved through attractive bright colors and appealing cultural associations (Marchand 1985). He ties being in style to the notion of success in “Corporate America” and uses the picture of Madsoul clothing line and a picture of GQ magazine with a title “How to be the Best-Dressed man in America...” This respondent used a picture of the Cartier watch to represent how he envisions he must be to become a successful businessman. He states that he must be seen successful and it is through consumption symbols such as designer clothes and expensive watches that he can “pass” even if he is not up to the task. He eludes this fact when he says, “often people view success in the watch and clothes that you wear to a meeting.” This shows a reflexive relationship between what the respondent sees as representing success and how advertising shapes the respondent’s notion of success, which “influences how we think…and what will be seen as desired and attractive by others (Schroeder and Borgerson 2003). Echoing Schroeder and Zwick (2003) assertion that “advertising imagery constitutes ubiquitous and influential bodily representations in public space, incorporating exercises of power, surveillance and normatively within the consumer spectacle” this respondent choice of GQ magazine and clearly gendered images to represent success show that consumption fears are linked to this ubiquitous notion of gendered space represented in advertising (Schroeder and Zwick 2004, 23).

It is clear in the collage’s description and the images he chose that being successful was essential to creating a masculine persona, which is in line with the breadwinner model of masculinity. This respondent’s depiction of success conforms to O’Cass and McEwen’s statement that “the acquisition of material goods is one of the strongest measures of social success and achievement” and is an example of Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption, which states that those who invest in wealth and display it are rewarded with “preferential treatment by social contacts.” It is also an example of Schroeder and Zwick’s theory that “advertising imagery helps provide consumer solutions to gender tensions and struggles over representing idealized masculine consumers, in particular the crisis of masculinity (2004, 23).

While success is an important factor in the attainment of breadwinner masculinity, the respondent and theory also indicate that consumers may use consumption behaviors to “pass” in their attempts to accomplish stigma management. Thus, “consumption plays a major role in the construction, maintenance, and representation of male bodies (Schroeder and Zwick 2004, 21). The respondent’s selection of a Grey Goose ad further emphasizes this notion. He comments that this “is another one of those status products that I as a consumer buy only because I want to be seen as something. Not necessarily because that’s I what or who I am.” Thus, consuming a particular product is another form of communicating one’s status and success since ordering and consuming the right product “expresses the man’s cultural capital” in his struggle to define himself in terms of his social standing and that of others. (Schroeder and Zwick 2004, 37).

According to Eastman et al. (1999), “status among other things, is a form of power that consists of respect, consideration and envy from others.” According to Holman (1981), products and brands send messages to others because product styles determine how
consumers owning these products are perceived by others. Eastman et al. also justifies the use of status products and selection of specific products as the reason to gain a desired success. This exemplified consumption behaviors of many respondents, each attempting to compensate through consumption, what they have not been able to achieve by other means. At some point these types of “passing” activities will no longer be sufficient to symbolically represent the success necessary to avoid a spoiled identity. Respondents saying that their greatest fear was not achieving the economic success that will allow them to permanently consume the trappings associated with success reflected this in a number of comments.

Schroeder and Zwick (2004) assert that “Gender remains a fundamental social, psychological and cultural category” and the respondent is clearly trying to affirm his gender and masculine identity and draws “references on what it means to be a man” through exposure to marketing imagery (Stern 2003). His concern regarding maintaining a particular lifestyle is the product of advertising, photography which establishes and maintains identity in visual representation (Schroeder and Zwick 2004, 30) and films that portray the good life (Mulvey 1989). (See Figures 2 and 3 here.)

Social Competition

In one sense, the respondents talked about their consumption fears with regard to status in terms of not being able to have nice things. However there was a deeper meaning that revealed itself in the collages, the fear of not being able to “keeping up with the Jones” or social competition, this manifests itself in not being approved and accepted by others in their surroundings. Images depicting this notion included the Mercedes Ben emblem, a Lexus car (figure 2) and a Plasma TV (figure 3). This is a perfect example of fashion and status brands that signal high-perceived quality, luxury, and / or high class attached to them (Shemach 1997). These are also examples of the good life that is based on the attainment of material influence in a consumer-driven capitalistic economy (Belk and Pollay 1985; Bocock 1993; Campbell 1987). The pictures depicted by our respondents are examples of status consumption, which Kilsheimer (1993) defines as “the motivational process by which individuals strive to improve their social standing through the conspicuous consumption of consumer products that confer and symbolize status both for the individual and surrounding significant others.” Conspicuous consumption is the key to the notion of fitting in as it focuses on putting wealth and position in evidence through the overt display of possessions (O’Cass and McEwen 1999).

While social competition was tied to the first theme “success” it was positioned in a very different way. While success was thought of as an individual construct, the respondents interpreted owning these luxurious items as not a symbol of success but as a necessary component of being considered part of certain groups. While one respondent had an image of the word success (figure 2) in his collage, he interpreted it to be a component of social competitiveness alluding to the fact that for him success was only achievable in relation to others with who you are in social competition with. More importantly, research has shown that the “world of high fashion provides an image of status that can be used to generate enjoyable moments of fantasy and dreams for the future” (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). According to O’Cass and McEwen, brands are an important element in creating an identity, a sense of achievement and identification for consumers. Brand
dimensions and associations on the other hand “lead to increased marketplace recognition and economic success as a result of the value consumers place on them.” Thus, products complete the self, help the user gain satisfaction or even ecstasy, and project a desired image (Schroeder and Borgerson 2004).

A crucial distinction developed between success and social competition. While success was related in terms of the breadwinner model, the fear of not being able to engage in social competition was tied closely to the rebel model of masculinity. Respondents alluded to the fact that engaging in social competition potentially had direct consequences, as the stigma associated with making risky consumption choices had the potential to put an individual in a bad light. Respondents feared the race to keep up and no matter how “successful” you were if you could not match the consumption choices of the competition you would be considered a second-class citizen.

These fears were tied directly to “settling down” and starting a family, in the sense that our respondents feared having to be responsible, on the one hand because they simply didn’t want to have to think about others and on the other hand because they felt they might not be able to accomplish the task. In terms of social competition “responsibility” was framed as an impediment to social completion. In other words being responsible meant not having the flexibility to engage in what to the breadwinner would be bad consumption decisions. In this sense the fear of failing to be socially competitive was tied to stigmas of both the breadwinner and rebel models of masculinity. (See Figure 4 and 5 here.)

The Formation of Family

The topic of having and providing for one’s family was a recurring topic across many of the collages. This is no surprise since children are also the most frequent target of fear in households (Warr 1992) which explains the ads marketers use to sell life insurance, security systems, alarms and various protective devices. The “perceived lack of control over our lives has led to a preoccupation with safety and risk” (Altheide, 2001). Per Altheide (2001), “risks over which people have no control, or no sense of control are scarier”. This is evident in our collages.

One respondent mentioned the “fear of the unknown when it comes to having a family and all the responsibilities that go along with that. Can I provide (financially) for my family in the manner that I want? Will I be a good father? Do I have the patience? Am I too selfish? What happens if I don’t have a healthy baby?” (See Figure 6 here.)

Another respondent displays a cartoon picture of a baby in his collage. He explains that this picture is a representation of the fear he has for long-term responsibility and of not adequately providing for his children. (figure 5). A third respondent provides the pictures of two happy children showering in the bathtub. This picture relates to his fear of having and especially raising children. He asks himself questions such as “will we have enough money, will they be healthy, am I mature enough, etc.” (figure 6).

A fourth respondent has four different pictures of kids and a picture of Money Magazine. He talks about insecurities that people base their decisions on. He asks himself “do I have enough money in my children’s college funds to pay for the
college of choice? Can I afford to send my children to our preferred daycare? Will I have enough money to retire comfortably? Do I have enough insurance that if something were to happen to either myself or my wife (or God forbid for both of us) that those remaining will be able to start again debt free?” (figure 2) Referring to pictures that they could not find one respondent wanted to find a picture of a “new born baby” which would symbolize his “worry of not being able to conceive, the baby’s health, raising the child, and maintaining a lifestyle that will allow us to provide properly.” (figure 6)

This echoed a theme that ran through most of the male collages, whether the respondent was married or not. The socially embedded notions of “good father”, “good provider” and “unselfish” were echoed in a majority of the collages. Clearly, the respondents’ desire to maintain a certain lifestyle is the product of visual consumption articulated in lifestyle marketing, marketing imagery and photography.

While some of the respondents were fearful of giving up the “rebel” persona, a theme emerged that was consistent with the idea that within the confines of the breadwinner model, these ideals are necessary in order to be a man in contemporary American society. From this point of view, the respondents were echoing the ideals of respectability, rationality, safety and community leader found in the breadwinner model. Unlike the images and explanations that informed the social competition theme, respondents here were fearful of not upholding these ideals. Even in the instance where a respondent feared having children, the fear occurred in the context of not being able to accomplish it not in the giving up of freedom. Concerning the fear of family formation the respondents seemed to worry more that they might have too much of the rebel spirit. Certainly there was a sense that a person who does not travel this path is one with a spoiled identity and that would be very hard to “pass” using consumption behaviors.

A confounding factor appeared in the symbolic portrayal of the formation of family. In almost all cases the images used to show family were of young virile good-looking men and women with their children. For this group of respondents, body image was seen as a crucial component of family formation whether it was related to an image of strength or virility. This finding illuminates Patterson and Elliot’s assertion that the “male gaze” has been inverted through contemporary images. The respondents present these images as part of the bellwether of success for men, they must not only be good father’s etc. but they must conform to an idealized image that is represented in contemporary lifestyle images. Masculinity then becomes a much more complex ideal to attain. As Elliot and Patterson say, “when the gaze is turned on itself, men are more likely to move through a range of responses such as rejection, identification and desire,” being a good father now means that males must reflect upon their physical appearance and may engage in consumption behaviors from walking at night to plastic surgery in order to “pass” in a society that demands the right look (Patterson and Elliot 2002).

Respondents indicated through their choices of imagery or their explanations that a youthful, powerful image was necessary to achieve the ultimate masculine fatherhood ideal. Images included a picture (figure 4) of a healthy, well-toned dad with his son to depict his fear regarding having children. The picture was meant to communicate worries regarding the ability to father and raise a child stating, “The man pictured appears to be healthy and able to take a strong role in
raising his child. The respondents indicated that not presenting this idealized image of the family was stigmatizing because it signaled weakness and projected an image of family that was unacceptable.

The images used were not what most would consider normal families, as the men in the pictures conformed more to the rebel image that has been described earlier in the research. These images were emblematic of strength and virility and seemed to have an emasculating quality to the respondents. The images presented an ideal that most felt they could not achieve, and there were no consumption behaviors that could help them “pass” in this case.

CONCLUSIONS

Increasingly, the things we do and the products we consume are dictated by fear, whether created by the media or simply socially constructed. While much work has been done on the efficacy and effectiveness of fear appeals, little work has addressed what our consumption fears actually are. Our study sought to understand what consumer’s consumption fears were and how they manifest themselves in consumption symbolism. We used projective techniques (collages) in order to try and access a deeper understanding of consumption fears.

A common theme emerged from the collages, conforming to Goffman’s idea of stigma management and spoiled identity (Goffman 1959). In most cases, respondents indicated they were fearful that they would lack a competency (status, success and/or ability to be a father) or a physical characteristic (in this case body image) that would in effect separate them from a society in which they desired to belong. In effect their shortcoming would cause them to have spoiled identities. While they might be able to engage in short term consumption behaviors in order to “pass” the collage interpretations indicated that a systemic change would have to occur to repair their identities.

Looking at the male collages exclusively it became apparent that most of the consumption fears dealt in some way with conformity to a socially constructed ideal of masculinity communicated via marketing imagery that often shows “men doing something, or with an identity defined outside that of a pin-up such as sports star or business man” (Schroeder and Borgerson 1998) and that portrays them as active subjects, business-like and self-assured decision makers (Schroeder and Zwick 2004, 34). One traditional view of the role of consumption in the construction of masculinity is found in the compensatory consumption model. This model posits the role of consumption as a mechanism to alleviate the emasculating consequences of the declining effectiveness of the breadwinner model. Marketers picked up on the masculinity crisis and conflict between the breadwinner and rebel roles resulting from the women’s movement and changes in labor participation and led to the shift from men as producers to men as consumers via the use of marketing imagery (Schroeder and Zwick 2004, 22). It seems that males “must compete with consumer goods for attention, facing the novel prospect of being replaced by a newer, more stylish (product) model (Schroeder and Zwick 2004, 42).

As the breadwinner model becomes less and less effective males look to consumption experiences that will allow them to access their masculine identity through the rebel model. The compensatory consumption thesis says that men will engage in behaviors which will allow them to achieve, at least symbolically, such qualities as: personal
freedom and autonomy (Schouten and McAlexander 1995); rugged, raucous individualism (Belk and Costa 1998); and/or an escape from serious responsibilities (Sherry et. al. 2001). In order to access these qualities males are required to engage in extraordinary consumption activities that are not part of their everyday life. As such the benefits of such activities may be short lived, and are not a permanent solution to the masculinity deficit attached to the breadwinner.

Holt and Thompson propose a different view of the relationship between the breadwinner and rebel models of masculinity. They state it quite succinctly with the following:

“In sum, the man-of-action resolves the stigmas of America’s two antithetic masculinity models. Successful responsible men, breadwinners, will always be haunted by the stigma of conformity, while the successful rebel is equally troubled by his inability to take responsibility and work on behalf of others.” (Holt and Thompson 2004, 429)

They propose the idea of the “Man-of-Action Hero” who is an idealized vision of American masculinity. The Man-of-Action successfully moves back and forth between being a breadwinner and a rebel, accomplishing this task through everyday consumption behaviors. The ability to move back and forth allows the American “Man-of-Action” to incorporate the best qualities of both of the prevailing masculinity models while avoiding in an ideal sense all of the stigmas. We found that in fact consumption fears are directly related to the ideals of masculinity. Specifically we found three main themes emerging related to consumption fears: (1) Success, (2) social competitiveness and (3) the formation of family.

Our research shows that males are torn between the breadwinner and the rebel model and try to achieve a balance of both. The data shows that with respect to consumption fears there is a melding of both masculine ideals. Images were used to depict both the breadwinner and rebel at the same time. Certain consumption choices such as fancy and or expensive cars, expensive wheel rims, diamond studded watches, and high fashion clothing were used to represent both status (associated with the breadwinner model) and independence (associated with the rebel model). This indicates that in some instances there is confluence of the two models as indicated by Holt and Thompson. The data indicates that this melding is even more seamless with respect to consumption fears, than indicated in their research. Even in the case of formation of family the images used to depict the father figure were; a young, muscular, tan, athletic, outdoorsy male, an image that traditionally aligned with a rebel figure. This may be partly due to standard advertising images described by Schroeder and Zwick as, “(the) standard motif in western advertising is the “hero” shot – an ad containing an image of a lone man, conquering some territory …” (Schroeder and Zwick 2004, 33). Even when depicting a “fear of family” some respondents chose images that clearly showed a dominate “rebel” male, rugged yet beautiful a product of the reflection of the male gaze. Ideals of masculinity certainly drive consumption fears for males. As Goffman suggests, advertising is part of the real world and affects our views and perceptions in life especially in terms of what we think is right and wrong, what constitutes a good life and how subjects lead a life in line with their
gender identity (Goffman 1979). However, the symbols used to communicate our three main themes also indicate a potentially unreal ideal of Masculinity. The self-analysis of the collages indicated that these consumption objects would serve to project an image of masculinity, but that the ideal was potentially unreachable. In this sense consumption was simply a way to hide the individual’s spoiled identity from the outside world.

REFERENCES


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FIGURE 1: AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE, SINGLE

FIGURE 2: WHITE MALE, MARRIED, CHILDREN
FIGURE 3: WHITE MALE, SINGLE

FIGURE 4: WHITE MALE, MARRIED
FIGURE 5: WHITE MALE, SINGLE

FIGURE 6: WHITE MALE, MARRIED