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Abstract

The purpose of this study was *to examine cultural representations of masculinity in advertising in two cultures, Finland and the United States*. It was anticipated that due to the effect of global advertising, Finland and the US would share similar gender representations of masculinity. The purpose was divided into the following research questions:

1. What cross-cultural and culture-specific gender codes can be found, and how have these codings possibly changed during the last three decades?
2. What is the relevance of using human models in advertising?
3. What is the role of advertising in modeling gender stereotypes?

In order to get a deeper understanding of the socializing role of advertising within culture, and in order to find out how people respond to the visual images of men in these two countries, the method used was focus group interviewing, i.e. letting Finnish and American people talk. The group arrangement was supposed to bring a deeper perspective to the adverts and the discussion of the representations of masculinity. The study was retrospective in the sense that it looked back at potential changes in the representations of masculinity in advertising during the last 30 years, as viewed by the participants in the focus group discussions. The idea was to incorporate consumer interpretation into the cross-cultural advertising studies, and by doing so, enrich the meanings of masculinity. The focus group discussions were extended in the sense that before the actual discussions, six magazine ads – representing a 30-year time span – were used as projective stimuli for the upcoming discussion. Besides, the information from the questionnaires assisted the actual discussions; by using the questionnaires, it was possible to diminish group effect and draw out minority opinions as well.

In spite of the a-priori proposition that Finland and the United States would share similar representations of masculinity, there were actually more similarities within the countries than across them. In this sense, the statement that gender is culturally defined proved out to be tenable. However, all the groups elicited a shift from traditional 'breadwinner' masculinity to more diversified roles; the definition of masculinity appears to be in transition in both countries. Whether there is a human model in an ad or not, seemed not to be of interest to any of the discussants in either country. On the basis of the discussions, advertising has a role in moulding gender roles; however, the absorption happens little by little and often subconsciously.

As distinct from the earlier, mostly quantitative gender research in advertising, this research used a qualitative research method in order to enrich the meanings of masculinity in advertising in two different cultures, Finland and the United States. The need for cross-cultural research that focuses on target audience's interpretations and conceptions of gender in advertising has been abundantly acknowledged in a number of recent studies. The study at hand has, consequently, added to the scarce area of cross-cultural gender research concerning masculinity in advertising.

Key words	Gender, masculinity, advertising, culture, focus group discussions
Further information	