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Unrealistic Expectations

Toxic masculinity is a result of the cultural masculine norms which are deeply-rooted in society with lasting and undesirable outcomes. Men are expected to follow socially constructed rules and ideals in order to fulfill the standards expected of them. Such standards preserve the idea that males represent the utmost strength. For my creative project, I used satire to illustrate the unattainable standards expected of men in society, and while some may appear ridiculous or extreme, each of these examples are ideals perpetuated through various institutions. Toxic masculinity is a pervasive construct in our society, causing detrimental effects due to high pressure and assigned roles that individuals are expected to follow.

In order to preserve his masculinity, a man must seldom show signs of weakness through the expression of emotion. The display of emotions, specifically showing sadness through crying, allows others to see you as weak or unable to compete with other men. In Susan Bordo's "Hard and Soft," she describes "the cult of hardness" which is the idea that men must appear firm and indestructible. Bordo discusses how being soft is one of the worst ways to be seen by others as a man in our present society. This is because men who are seen as vulnerable are deemed unfit to

carry out positions of power and are less respected by others: “If a man is seen as soft at the core... he is permitted much less latitude, and constantly has to prove that he can ‘play hardball,’ ‘take a firm stand,’ and so on” (Bordo 55). Society’s expectations for males cause them to sacrifice their self-expression in exchange for others’ approval. Thus, men have a tendency to suppress their emotions.

A man’s diet is directly translated to how masculine others perceive him to be. He is expected to eat fatty and red meat such as steak and hamburgers, since such foods are considered tough and therefore masculine. On the contrary, due to the preparation it takes to consume fruits and vegetables, and that they must be kept fresh, they are considered to be a traditionally feminine food. Additionally, since men tend to strive for a physically strong physique, they tend to eat fatty foods and carbohydrates which they are later able to turn into muscles through intense workouts. Advertisements contribute to the stereotype that if a male does not avidly consume eat red meat, he is less masculine: “In the case of meat, advertisements for steak, for grills, for fast food, and for steakhouses contribute to the construct, perhaps implying that the ‘non-meaty’ male is not masculine” (Reeser, p. 95). Advertisements perpetuate such ideas through the use of the “ideal man” who is strong and often has girls who are interested in him, therefore targeting males by causing them to feel they should do what the man in the advertisement is doing. Such advertisements in the food industry tend to be for fast-food industry, since men are not expected to prepare their own meals, or for foods such as steak which can be grilled, a stereotypically masculine activity. Men feel that if they are not considered masculine, they also lose their consideration as strong and capable of duties such as being able to provide for a family.

Partaking in activities in which a man inflicts pain upon himself allows him to prove his strength and subsequent masculinity to others. Men often get tattoos all over their bodies to show

others they are tough and able to handle pain. In “Theorizing the Male Body,” Todd Reeser describes tattoos as a form of a man inflicting pain on himself since he is making a conscious decision to permanently alter his body and subsequently display his masculinity to others. “Culture teaches me to have control of my body, and tattooing is a logical extension of that control. I get a tattoo, endure the pain, and in permanently altering my body in that way I dictate (by selecting the type of tattoo and deciding where it goes), I reaffirm the cultural idea of masculinity as control over the body” (Reeser, p. 97). In addition to subjecting himself to suffering, a male is able to feel strong through showing others he has power over his body. Lastly, tattoos are a display of resistance against cultural norms and therefore a male with tattoos portrays a male who establishes his own rules and is not afraid to break boundaries.

Men purchase hygiene products specifically labeled as “for men” in an attempt to preserve their masculinity while shopping for hygiene products. Both actions, shopping and practicing good hygiene, are considered traditionally feminine in society. Thus, companies target men through products that directly target their fear of weakness. Such products cause men to feel as if they are preserving their strength and subsequent masculinity. In Kate Bornstein’s *Welcome to Your Gender Workbook*, she discusses the concept of how males and females tend to categorize certain actions based on how much of a “real man” or “real woman.” Moreover, often take this categorization into account when making decisions: “I’m going to continue to throw those terms around in this book: ‘real man’ and ‘real woman.’ They’re once vital concepts and meaningless, useless terms. They’re vital concepts because nearly everyone believes there is such a thing as a real man or a real woman” (Bornstein 22). While these concepts are not explicitly defined, they have become widely accepted by members of society and therefore put into practice. Therefore, males have developed habits in accordance with the standards set in place. In “Reading the Male

Body,” Bordo discusses an example of society’s response to a media portrayal of a man who is attentive to his appearance is in the movie *Saturday Night Fever* which was released in 1977: “Manero spends much of his time in front of the mirror, getting himself pretty, posing, anticipating the impression he’s going to make when he enters the disco or struts down the street” (Bordo, p. 198). When a male spends too much time caring about his appearance, his masculinity is threatened, and sexuality is often questioned. While society has become more progressive throughout the decades, such beliefs still exist in society, causing men to be reluctant to spend too much time on their appearance due to a fear of appearing less masculine.

As a male, appearing physically strong is necessary in order to gain respect from others. Having no muscles, therefore appearing weak, causes others to assume a male is incapable of his expected duties as a male. This coincides with Reeser’s ideas of male’s psyche and how males feel threatened by others who are more muscular, and they subsequently consider more masculine. “By idealizing the male body as muscular and perfectly proportioned in various historical contexts, cultures are attempting to construct a transhistorical male body that appears outside temporal and cultural change” (Reeser, p. 94). Due to the portrayal of males’ bodies in institutions such as the media, men feel the need to consistently maintain their strength. Additionally, since the male body, specifically the white male’s body, is considered indestructible throughout history, males fear any signs of change or degradation.