Emilia Księżniak

Fusing Masculinity with ICT in American Advertising

Emilia Księżniak
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University
Lublin, Poland

Fusing Masculinity with ICT in American Advertising

Information and communication technology products and services belong to the "hi-tech" category, traditionally associated with men. Whether it results from the fact that men prevail among the ICT inventors or the belief that they are allegedly more skilful users of such devices (Terry, Calvert, 1997: 7), this unquestionably strong relationship between men and technology constitutes them as the primary consumer group targeted by multiple companies advertising their products in the 1999-2001 issues of *Wired,* the object of cultural reading in the present paper.

The analysed advertisements containing the images of men fall into three main categories: (1) the professional sphere, (2) the private sphere of sex and relationships, and (3) the technologically challenged men. On the grounds that wireless applications and the Internet enable one to work in any location, one can discern two separate subcategories within the first main category that reflect this fact: (A) conservative (casting men as workers in confined spaces, mainly offices), (B) new (presenting men at work in previously uncommon locations). The third subcategory within the first main category,

addressing career development, is (C) transition stage (presenting men between jobs).

1.1. The Conservative Work Style

Most of the advertisements in this category consist of a photo of a neatly clad man, either wearing a suit or a conservative dark blue shirt and dark trousers, expressing his opinion on a work-related problem, and a solution to this problem offered by the advertised product or service. These advertisements combine the product-oriented approach with the image of its user: they are highly informative and do not try to ostentatiously sell a lifestyle, as it is the case with most of other products, especially the ones that promise higher status or affiliation with prestigious consumer group by using a particular product. The focus on utility and problem-solving qualities of the ICT product matches the expectations of the implied male user, who is results oriented and who values immediate solutions.

Within the same category of advertisements one can also find less typical representatives, whose visual and textual components are richer in cultural meanings than those employing a product-oriented approach, thus giving the reader a better insight into contemporary American culture. One such ad is the one for an Internet e-commerce service *AddAShop.com.*, which appeared in the May 2000 issue, on page 129.

In the advertisement a perceptibly overweight man is sitting in his office chair, shoes off, a loosened tie and a bag of potato chips in his hand. The reader learns he is a successful entrepreneur selling the Buns of Steel videos. This work-out videotape, very popular since the mid '80s, targeted female consumers, to whom it promised "Now you can have the buns you've always wanted." It was a part of the cultural trend insisting that a woman has a duty to keep her body shapely and trim, since every sign of fat indicates that she is "...slothful and lacking moral fiber and self-respect, not to mention lazy, self-indulgent, insufficiently vigorous, lacking control, sedentary, and old" (Douglas, 1995: 261). There is a stark contrast between the feminine

physical ideal propagated by the merchandised videotapes and the sloppy looking man himself; the women who buy the product are interested in keeping fit, whereas he is keen on keeping fat. By making money on women who pursue certain unachievable or not readily achievable standards imposed on them by the oppressive system he becomes a part of it. The fact that he does it on a large scale and uses the Internet as a medium shows that information and communication technology can be easily used for the reinforcement of the gendered ideological order.

The message coming from the advertisement is that a well-groomed, attractive appearance is not a prerequisite for professional success any more – at least as long as you achieve it through the Net. The Internet frees the American man from the traditional codes of business life – the fact that he does not face his customers or business partners relieves him from the anxiety concerning his looks, be it excessive weight, visible deformity or just white socks. Another point this advertisement makes is that a woman is a "natural consumer" (McGovern, 2006: 40-41) and a man a provider, which in turn both upholds the traditional hegemonic order and adds a new twist due to the use of ICT, perfect for fulfilling this role.

As I have already pointed out, this advertisement is not a typical representative of the category to which it belongs. If we were to draw any conclusions on the basis of the remaining advertisements in this category, one would think that the American professional sphere is dominated by white males wearing shirts in different shades of blue, preoccupied with enhancing their companies' general performance by a careful choice of information and communication technology equipment.

1.2. The New Work Environment

Wireless technology enables people to work outside the traditional office walls; it redefines the notion of the workplace altogether, since one can do business from virtually every place. The development of wireless applications has redefined the spaces such as "workplace" and "home," traditionally gendered as 'the masculine' and 'the

feminine,' respectively. Although the stereotypical perception of these spheres persists, we can observe the progressive fusion of those domains enabled by modern information and communication technologies, especially wireless applications, which annihilate the notion of a workplace as a formal, enclosed public space, for example the office. This change is reflected in the advertisements for ICT products and services with regard to the American men's lifestyles. Also, this new work environment redefines the man as a worker. A relevant advertisement, which appeared on pages 114-115 in the October 2000 issue of *Wired,* advertises the Internet service for professionals *guru.com.*

The man in the advertisement, whom we see working at his laptop computer in the garden, is "the CEO, the CFO, the COO, and the dog-walker all in one," a powerful "guru". The acronyms stand for the Chief Executive Officer, the Chief Financial Officer, the Chief Operations Officer – all high-level managerial positions with the widest range of authority and power. Despite the fact that these positions entail vast responsibilities and traditionally require the manager's extended presence in the office in order to supervise the operations, this man takes delight in the outdoor solitude away from his subordinates. This implies that the technology he uses allows him to enjoy freedom from the conventional office and contributes to his superior performance which led him to the positions that he holds. His independence and expertise make him a "guru," an authority figure who can offer guidance and expertise to those who seek advice.

Another advertisement for guru.com features a man walking down the stairs with a caption "the commute," a woman in the kitchen feeding a toddler accompanied by a caption "lunch with co-workers," and a man talking on the phone while standing in the open door giving a view on the garden, captioned "2 pm conference call." The possibility of working from home opens up new vistas on the future roles of men with respect to family life. Staying within the limits of a household may force men to take on a larger share of duties and responsibilities that they have so far been excused from, i.e. housework or child rearing. However, the imagery used in the ad,

especially the female figure cast in the conventional role, undermines the implicit dissolution of traditional notions of 'the workplace' and 'home' as primarily 'masculine' or 'feminine'. Home is not the only alternative to the traditional workplace. A host of advertisements show men working form cafés or restaurants (April 1999, 28-29; June 1999, 92-93; December 2000, 118-119), while commuting (September 1999, 16-17; August 2001, 38-39), on the street (March 1999, 159; April 2000, 12-13; February 2001, 40-41), at sea (January 1999, 69; August 1999, 168; April 200, 163; May 2000, 80-81) and even on a desert (July 2000, 134-135). They are predominantly young and good-looking whites, many of whom wear informal clothes, thus defying the traditional dress code and emphasising the feeling of freedom. Although the extension of the workplace onto virtually every domain of life is a kind of entrapment the man has brought on himself, such products as mobile phones and notebook computers are presented as liberating, empowering tools rather than enslaving ones.

The message is clear – information and communication technology endows men with creative power and frees them from the traditional work conditions. The focus on freedom, a doubly important value for the American men, emphasises how the Internet services and portable devices foster their independence, autonomy and industriousness.

1.3. Looking For A Job

There is a group of advertisements presenting Internet sites offering jobs in the field of information technology. The one chosen for close analysis in this category appeared in January 2001, on p.131. It is an ad for a *dice.com* IT job web site.

The advertisement has a remarkably digital look. The backdrop consists of multiple screens, buttons, switches, controls, microchips forming a cylindrical shape around the central image of a young man, standing on a red disc behind a red crescent of a console. The man's pose implies that he has achieved the Nirvana promised by the advertisement. In the advertisement we can observe an interesting juxtaposition hidden in the phrase "serious tech toys" appearing in the ad. The word "serious" implies being serious about one's work – after

all it is a feature of a responsible adult. The word "toys", on the other hand, is associated with childhood; a time when you have the right to play and the responsibilities are minimal or nonexistent. The word "tech" inserted in between may suggest that this virtual "playground," is a "boys only" zone. "Boys will be boys," - only their toys become more sophisticated. Thus it may seem that the young man in the photo is yet another incarnation of J.M. Barrie's Peter Pan, for whom "work" is "play," and who yearns for the "waves of complete calm" undisturbed by other people, disregarding their gender, preferring to be left on his own in the sole company of his "toys." The fact that an image of a baby face appears on the aforementioned screens three times is significant as well; it can be seen as a symbol of the man's inner child. The connection is further supported by yet another image visible on the screens, one of a carefree youngster dressed in nothing but boxers, cavorting in the shower of digits.

This line of reading may be reinforced by the association of the poetics of the graphic part of the advertisement with the work of the science fiction writer William Gibson, especially with his famous novel *Neuromancer.* Gibson coined the term "cyberspace" that entered the everyday language and which he himself defined in the following way:

> 'Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding...'

> And in the bloodlit dark behind his eyes, silver phosphenes boiling in from the edge of space, hypnagogic images jerking past like film compiled from random frames. Symbols, figures, faces, a blurred, fragmented mandala of visual information.

> ... A grey disk, the color of Chiba sky.

> *Now* –

> Disk beginning to rotate, faster, becoming a sphere of paler gray. Expanding –

And flowed, flowered for him, fluid neon origami trick, the unfolding of his distanceless home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard extending to infinity. Inner eye opening to the stepped scarlet pyramid of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority burning beyond the green cubes of Mitsubishi Bank of America, and high and very far away he saw the spiral arms of military systems, forever beyond his reach.

And somewhere he was laughing, in a white-painted loft, distant fingers caressing the deck, tears of release streaking his face. (Gibson, 2000: 67-69)

The resemblance between the advertisement and Gibson's description is striking; it is a case of intertextuality at its best. Bearing in mind that cyberpunk literature is especially popular among young male readers (Nixon), it is difficult to resist associating Gibson's cyberspace with Barrie's Never-Never Land, both of which seem to appeal to either young males or males willing to maintain childlike traits or status.

It is important to emphasise that virtually all advertisements for the web sites offering high tech jobs feature very young men (perhaps college graduates or undergraduates), whereas the advertisements from the previous categories present mostly professionally established mature men in managerial positions. This kind of age-based division could be attributed to either greater popularity of the Internet as a job search engine among the younger generation of men, or different preferences they have with regard to the type of career, or both. It is also possible that it reflects a generational division, with greater numbers of American males aged 18-30 pursuing IT jobs in the analyzed period.

2. Men, Sex and ICT

A number of advertisements reveal the frequent use of sexually loaded metaphors to suggest analogies between the pleasures men derive from the use of ICT products and services, and sexual pleasures. A case in point is the advertisement for a domain name registration service *registrars.com*™ from June 2000, page 116.

In the advertisement a reader sees two pairs of bare hairy male legs standing on a gray tiled floor, typical of either a shower or a locker

room. The ad hinges on the pun which results from the equivalence between the length of the domain name and the size of the penis.

"I didn't know you could

get one that long."

"Yeah – it only cost me 60 bucks,

and it lasts for two years."

There is a limited number of situations when men stand completely nude in front of other men, but it is a common practice then that they - half inadvertently, half openly – tend to compare their own penises to those of other men. This situation may generate tension or anxiety not only because, as Susan Bordo notices, "... the superendowed [men] ... bre[e]d insecurity – *not* identification...." (32), but also because "[w]e live in a culture that encourages men to think of themselves as their penises, a culture that still conflates male sexuality with something we call 'potency'..." (36) In other words, the length of your domain name strengthens or weakens your masculine powers – if it is short, you are led to believe the owner is impotent.

The space where the two men in the ad are having their conversation is an "all-boys," or "boys-only" space, which excludes women and validates competition within the frames of the accepted, male dominated order. This implies that the rules of the shower/locker room are also applicable in the world of ICT products and services, where they become an extension of the penis, a representation of a man's 'potency,' and hence the proof of his masculinity. This evidently leads to rivalry and power struggle that aim to prove who has the qualities of a dominant alpha male.

This strategy perpetuates a serious problem for an American man - in the follow-up advertisement one of the men discusses it with his psychoanalyst (July 2000, 34). The image not only reveals men's obsession with competition and, *per analogiam*, improving performance, but also points to the cultural expectations of

masculinity which inform such fixation. "[American] national mythology teaches us that Americans are supposed to be independent, rugged individuals who are achievement-oriented, competitive, active, shrewd, and assertive go-getters...," (Douglas, 1995: 17), and with regard to their sexuality constructs the reality in which "masculinity demands constant performance from men," (Bordo, 2000: 34) thus leaving them with no other culturally accepted alternative.

In other advertisements sex and relationships with women are alluded to. It is essential to notice that in this class of advertisements sex and relationships are virtually inseparable; the latter hardly ever appears without the former. The manner of constructing male sexuality in terms of ICT advertisements is well seen in the advertisement for Kinko's conference equipment in July 1999, pages 8-9.

In this advertisement a man prepares himself for a conversation with his female life partner as if it was a business meeting in which the stakes are high and whose objective is to successfully impress the opponent.

<u>Tonight's Agenda: THE APOLOGY</u>

1. Introduction of Participants (you, me)

2. Why I Did What I Did

3. Current Physiological Status

　　a) Hair/Weight Loss

　　b) Sleepless Nights

4. Get Down on Hands & Knees

5. Beg for Forgiveness

6. Conclusions & Recommendations

The man calls her a "participant" and the blueprint of the conversation has an aura of a business operation. It seems that skilfully used ICT products become his effective allies in this scheme, allowing him to be totally in control of the situation. The woman, who will be taken by surprise, is not granted equal status inherent in the

word "partner"– she is a subordinate to be conquered, overwhelmed and defeated. The man grants himself an exclusive right to speak and act; to voice his concerns and elicit desired effects towards the end of the meeting. The woman's role here is that of a silent, passive spectator with little room for self-expression. The whole combination produces an immediate association with the notion of a conservative sexual encounter, in which one partner is active (masculine) and the other passive (feminine). The role of ICT equipment in this case is to help the man bedazzle, dominate and finally possess the female.

The way the ads in *Wired* present information and communication technology to men endorses a certain degree of hostility towards or depreciation of women and relationships. The only advertisement operating differently is the one which appeared in July 2000 on page 173. It presents a man using a mobile phone to book a table in a posh restaurant to have a celebratory dinner with his wife. Nevertheless, this exception simply corroborates the general principle. The excerpts from the copies of two other advertisements prove my point:

> Stan knew she was trouble, but he wasn't worried.

> "Melissa was a real bombshell. Without warning, she wreaked havoc on systems across the country. To make matters worse, the other viruses followed. ... [It] saved me a lot of heartache. I was safe from the likes of Melissa." (December 2001, 46)

> "You're not alone. Let me dial your phone for you. Read you your e-mail. Take you to a great Thai restaurant. I'll even check under the hood. Just talk to me."

> The love affair with your car continues. Now you can even carry on a conversation. ... (January 1999, 151)

The first advertisement is for a portable hard drive, the last one for an automotive system.

In the first one a computer virus of menacing force is metaphorically presented as a woman: "she was trouble," "a real bombshell," "wreaked havoc," "the other viruses followed," and as such needs to be avoided at all cost.

Juxtaposing 'the feminine' virus and 'the masculine' mainframe results in transferring, or transcribing the traditional gender divide

onto the plane of IC technology, thus changing it into yet another battlefield where men and women clash. Despite the cyberfeminists' optimism, "big daddy mainframe" is on the winning streak – "Stan" from the ad is "safe from the likes of Melissa."

In the second excerpt the product is gendered as a subservient female and as such becomes the man's partner: "[t]he love affair with your car continues." The copy consists of a series of offers made by the car/woman to the man, who is unquestionably in control of it (in the photo accompanying the copy the man is a driver). All the car/woman expects in return is to be talked to, and this is what the man can do: "you can even carry on a conversation." Yet the conversation does not give much opportunity for the car/woman to express itself/herself, since all it/she can utter are suggestions or propositions related to the man's welfare. Apparently, this is the way the ad projects a man's idea of a satisfying relationship.

To sum up, the American masculinity as constructed and perpetuated in the analysed advertisements is driven by sexual appetite and thus likely to respond to sexual metaphors. Therefore a combination of men, sex and ICT products is often used to convey the idea of a satisfying relationship in which the woman is redundant.

3. Technologically Challenged Men

Technology can be problematic for men just as it might be for women. It is as if their own creation was turning against them, but in a pretty harmless way. However, coping with problems tears the mask of a knowledgeable wizard off a man's face, revealing a human deserving assistance. This is the case in the advertisement for an Internet service *3Com.* In the April 2001 issue, page 145. The man in the close-up photo is visibly confused by the information that is being fed to him – the reader can't see the person who speaks to him, but the copy is in 'technobbable,' that is in a confusing technical language. The man's blank, unthinking look is characteristic of someone in need of help, guidance, and support, not of a masterful user of IC technologies.

Helplessness, particularly in facing advanced technologies, is stereotypically linked with women. The cultural expectations towards

men require them to offer help and guidance, as well as assist the
disadvantaged. The man's need of assistance, especially in the
conventionally masculine domain of technology, can be perceived as
unmanly. Nevertheless, the fact that men may need simplification or
clarification of the cryptic language of commands discharged by a
'geek' may only indicate his momentary helplessness without
necessarily making him effeminate. On the other hand, ineptness at
using new technologies may detract from the man's manliness as
proficiency with computers has become an important attribute of
modern masculinity. *Wired* reflected that change by promoting and
elevating the status of 'geekness.' The editors wanted to replace the
derogatory term 'geek,' which relates to a person who is socially
ostracised because of his or her extreme interest in computers, and
proposed a new term:

> ... "digerati:" the digital illuminati, or the elite of the digital economy with all the
> pretentiousness of the literati and none of their depth...but some cool machines.
> The digerati are an info-aristocracy lording over the technopeasants and
> technotards who cannot figure out how to boot up – the "tired" versus "wired."
> (Gray, 2001: 48)

The elevated info-maniac is not a wholly fictional creation, since in
today's world, where boundaries are virtually irrelevant as far as the
Internet is concerned, the Web has become an efficient tool for the
exercise of authority. As Gray points out, the way one uses the
Internet depends primarily on the knowledge one has in the real world,
although being proficient in the issues pertaining to information and
communication technology gives one an undisputed edge. (Gray,
2001: 134-135) The new term was meant to emphasize the elitist
character of the emerging technologically empowered 'superman.'

However, modern advanced technologies may still generate serious
problems for an average male consumer. The representations of
technologically challenged men in ICT-related advertisements could
aid to break the cultural stereotype casting that domain as masculine,
thus allowing American men to reveal their ineptness without losing
face. After all, the "digerati" are still less common than the

"technopeasants" and "technotards," and the ITC advertisers have to take it into consideration.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of the representations of men in the advertisements for ICT products and services targeted at male consumers indicate that they appeal to and make use of the traditional patterns of masculinity ingrained in American culture long before the advent of modern advanced technologies.

The primary domain where the American man finds fulfilment is his work. The advertised goods and services are the tools needed to improve his professional sperformance and successfully pursue an age-appropriate career path. Younger men are often depicted as actively involved in IT-related business, whereas their middle-aged colleagues are represented in more conventional managerial positions.

Freedom remains an essential value for the American man. Although he does not shun responsibilities his work involves, he can stay independent and autonomous with the help of laptop computers, wireless applications and the Internet. The new freedom gained with the help of ICT makes him even more creative and industrious.

Power, dominance and competition are the American man's element. The way he handles ICT products and services demonstrates a high level of confidence and a sense of entitlement. He will use them to ascertain his position in relation to other men and to women.

The American man is so engrossed in his work that he tends to transplant some of the business strategies onto the sphere of personal relationships. Making excessive use if ICT devices and demonstrating great skill using them, he disempowers and marginalizes the woman in the process.

Due to the strategies identified in the analysed advertisements, IC technology gets firmly established as a man's domain. The way men use it and relate to its various aspects perpetuates the existing gender hegemony of today's America.

Primary sources

Wired, January 1999–September 1999, January 2000, February 2000, April 2000–February 2001, April 2001–December 2001.

Works cited

Bordo, S. (2000), *The Male Body. A New Look at Men in Public and in Private*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York

Douglas, S. J. (1995), *Where the Girls Are. Growing Up Female with the Mass Media.*, Three Rivers Press, New York

Gibson, W. (2000), *Neuromancer*, Harper Collins Publishers, Glasgow

Gray, Ch. H. (2001), *Cyborg Citizen. Politics in the Posthuman Age* Routledge: New York and London

McGovern, J.F. (2006), *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945*, The University of Northern Carolina Press

Nixon, N., (2003), "Cyberpunk: preparing the ground for revolution or keeping the boys satisfied?", http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/57/nixon57art.html, the Internet 05.04.2003

Plant, S. (2000), "On the Matrix", *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, Routledge: London and New York. 325-336

Terry, J., Calvert, M. ed. (1997), *Processed Lives. Gender and Technology in Everyday Life*, Routledge: London and New York