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Hunkvertising: The Objectification of Men in Advertising

Some wish they'd just keep
their assets covered

By [David Gianatasio](#)

[\(http://www.adweek.com/contributor/david-gianatasio/\)](http://www.adweek.com/contributor/david-gianatasio/)

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Call it hunkvertising.

The objectification of men in advertising (as with women) is not new. Consider icons like the Marlboro Man and Old Spice's sexy pitchman [Isaiah Mustafa \(internal:node/136933\)](#). And yet, a disproportionate number of buff, often-shirtless studs are lately popping up in ads for everything from salad dressing to air freshener—in other words, consumer products not normally associated with sexual imagery.

As ever, sex sells—even the hirsute sex, apparently.

Many ad experts and social critics see the whole thing as a harmless turning of the tables following decades of bikini-clad babes in beer commercials. Double entendres abound when

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dissecting the trend, the overriding feeling being that it can't be taken all that seriously because, after all, we are just talking about *guys* here. "We're all in on the gender-reversal joke," explains Lisa Wade, associate professor of sociology at Occidental College. "It's funny to us to think of women being lustful."

Adds
Steve

O'Connell, ecd and partner at Red Tettemer O'Connell + Partners: "Objectifying men doesn't really upset anybody. You really can't offend the white male." O'Connell's agency helped pioneer the manvertising trend last year with print ads for Renuzit featuring small product shots alongside a parade of beefcake. ("Now that is gorgeous. And the man is not so bad either," reads the copy in one ad.) O'Connell says, "It's tongue-in-cheek and calls itself out. The hot guy clearly had no business being there. Because it's guys, you get the extra safety net of it not being too offensive."

Renuzit refreshed the campaign last month with a whole new batch of dudes. The new push from Pereira & O'Dell, themed "Choose Them All (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqv8n9w4HRI>)," introduces eight handsome

new "Scent Gents" who personify the brand's aroma palette and promise "a good-looking man in every room." Each a master of the come-hither stare. The Gents also star in a branded reality show

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/27/business/media/a-soft-sell-for-air-fresheners-with-joan-rivers-in-reality-show-spoofs.html>) featuring Joan

Rivers called Romancing the Joan

(<http://www.sheknows.com/sheknowstv/romancing-the-joan/season-1>), presented by the site SheKnows TV.

And, they're a hit. "Our digital banner CTRs are 25 percent above CPG averages and are driving users to our Facebook page where our likes have increased significantly," reports Jeanne Howard, home care brand manager at Renuzit's corporate parent, Dial Corp., a unit of Henkel AG.

But while largely seen as good-natured fun, others argue that this trend bears as much scrutiny as advertisers using women as sex objects. One detractor is marketing and media critic Åsk Dabitch Wäppling

(<http://dabitch.net/>), who maintains, "Studly Steve is as bad of a stereotype as Doofus Dad. They're stereotypes, and that's by definition not

original. When can we return to product-as-hero advertising? When will we stop insulting people?”

On her Adland blog, Wäppling savages the poster boy of the pecsvertising trend, the hunky model Anderson Davis, best known for his shirtless (sometimes pantless) pitch for Kraft Zesty Italian salad dressing. That campaign, created by TBWA’s Being, bowed this past April with an eye-popping spot casting Davis as a chef who adds Kraft Zesty Italian to a hot skillet. As flames shoot progressively higher, he asks the viewer, smolderingly, “How zesty do you want it? A little? A little more? How about a *lot* more?” Ultimately, his shirt catches fire and is singed right off his body, revealing a chiseled torso in all its glory.

Once again, man candy proved a winning strategy. The clip garnered [2.5 million YouTube views \(internal:node/150412\)](#) and shot Davis and the brand into the chat-o-sphere, with fans able to share his image on social media via Zestygrams.

“I would be lying to say I knew it would be that successful,” says Patrick O’Neill, ecd at TBWAChiatDay, Los Angeles, who oversaw the campaign. O’Neill strove to create “the ultimate chef” to engage the brand’s female demographic—fans of Sex in the City, Bridesmaids and 50 Shades of Grey who are tired of purely “functional” ads and hungry for spicier fare. “It’s nonthreatening and playful,” O’Neill says of the campaign, leaving “viewers

in control” to concoct whatever fantasies they choose. And, he argues, “It was never meant to be taken seriously.”

Just Say No to Nud*ty

But some took it quite seriously, most notably the group One Million Moms (<http://onemillionmoms.com>), which raised all kinds of heck about a Zesty Italian print ad that ran this spring in national magazines such as People, Cosmopolitan and Glamour and that featured Davis sprawled with a picnic blanket covering his croutons.

“Last week’s issue of People magazine had the most disgusting ad on the inside front cover that we have ever seen Kraft produce,” howled OMM, an offshoot of the conservative group the American Family Association. “Christians will not be able to buy Kraft dressings or any of their products until they clean up their advertising.” OMM was widely ridiculed for its uptight use of asterisks to censor terms like “g*nitals” and even “n*ked”—all of which served to give the campaign fresh legs, with Davis’ Zesty Guy doing a late-summer encore in a fresh flight of ads.

As Wäppling sees it, OMM might have a point, as she, too, finds the ads shallow. And as a mother herself and part of the target audience, she doesn’t feel they speak to her. Moreover, she contends that by objectifying men, Zesty Italian actually does female consumers a

disservice by reducing them to voyeurs on par with guys ogling models in ads that sexualize women.

The critic draws an analogy with the controversy over Titstare (<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/elements/2013/09/the-worst-joke-in-technology.html>), an app (that turned out to be a joke) exposing men gawking at women's cleavage. "We might as well make an app called Ab-Stare, where Bethenny Frankel and the Good Morning America ladies fawn over Anderson Davis' abs and share those images over social networks," Wäppling says. "This is, in fact, exactly what these women did when Anderson Davis visited their shows—they posed with their heads next to his abs."

And yet, the Zesty Italian campaign isn't even Davis' hottest gig. This year, he also went

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shirtless for Beam Inc.'s Sauza Tequila
([internal:node/148386](#)) in a marketing push by Havas Worldwide Chicago that appeared around the same time as his first Kraft ad.

Sauza's "Make It With a Lifeguard" spot finds Davis at the beach on a sweltering summer day, suggestively squirting suntan lotion into his palm and rubbing it in, at times in slow motion. He prepares a Sauza-Rita, with time-outs for rescues and peering through binoculars to see his own hunky image staring back. The commercial was a sequel to 2012's "Make It With a Fireman ([internal:node/139729](#))," which starred Thomas Beaudoin. "The brand wanted to target women, which was pretty revolutionary for the tequila category," says Havas cd Ecole Weinstein. "So we figured, what better way ... than with a hot, impossibly perfect man?"


"Don't overthink it," says Rebecca Cullers, a copywriter and AdFreak blogger. "It means that heterosexual women like to look at fit, attractive men. It shouldn't be a shocking revelation. I've heard that heterosexual men like to look at attractive women, too. And in general, people like to look at attractive people." (Obviously, there are men who like to look at the hot dudes, too.)

Still, Cullers sees obvious pitfalls. "What should worry men about these portrayals is that there's really only one kind of guy being held up as 'hot,'" she says. "It's dangerous to limit the notion of attractiveness to a single model and,

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in the case of Kraft Zesty and Sauza, the same exact model.” (While the debate rages, indications are that the ads may be helping cash registers ring. Beam reported an 8 percent gain in global sales to \$1.2 billion in the first half of this year, with Sauza a key performer, up 5 percent worldwide.)

Getting Cheeky

Injecting the studly ads with humor may help to offset any controversy—and Zesty Italian, Sauza and Renuzit all do to some extent. The Scent Gents have a light touch but don’t exactly bring the funny. Other hunkvertising campaigns make more of an effort.

“There’s a difference between the Liquid-Plumr daydreaming girl (internal:node/138451), who swoons over the hardware store man as he drills a piece of wood, and the Zesty Guy who keeps losing his top,” says Wäppling. She views Kraft’s effort as “pure objectification,” but praises Liquid-Plumr as “situational comedy, recognizing that even suburban housewives have an active imagination.” The everywoman heroine of the Liquid-Plumr spot, called “Urgent Clear (internal:node/151441),” fantasizes about Peter, a handyman who promises to satisfy her with a seven-minute cleaning of her pipes. That effort followed the brand’s similar “Double Impact” commercial from 2012, featuring a pair of hunks.

Some critics find Liquid-Plumr’s push safer and more appealing than the Zesty Italian or Sauza

campaigns because it includes women in the silly narrative, clearly establishing that they are the ones indulging in fantasy. “We were able to put a twist on a key insight into our consumer—her take-charge, get-it-done attitude,” says Stacey Grier, chief strategic officer at DDB California. “We weren’t trying to make a statement or lead an advertising trend. We were just trying to use humor to communicate the benefits of Clorox products.”

Elsewhere, a Diet Dr Pepper ad from Deutsch LA pushes the self-awareness envelope and pokes fun at studvertising itself. Josh Button, who rivals Davis for pure pulchritude, frolics shirtless in the sand and surf.

“Millions of guys are born good-looking,” his voiceover begins. “But not many are really good-looking. Even fewer are really, really, really, really, really good -looking. At least,

that's what I'm told. I'm Josh Button, and I'm one of a kind." A countdown appears on-screen during his spiel, running from 70,611,600 to 1.

"We're poking fun at ourselves and the trend of hot guys in advertising," said Dr Pepper svp, marketing Jaxie Alt when the spot launched in May. Deutsch creatives Xavier Teo and Erick Mangali say the spot caught on at least partly because the setup is played as a goof from the get-go.

Davis, appearing more sexually aggressive and subversive (he is one hot dude, to be sure), invites criticism from groups such as OMM; meanwhile, Button's broader, over-the-top approach is more accessible and likely helped mitigate any complaints, say experts.

Some marketers are digging through the vault to take advantage of this whole sexed-up-man boom. Take Diet Coke, which chose to revisit its famous construction worker spot from the early '90s that (very) briefly made a star of the hunky model Lucky Vanous (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HI3Ft363PZ8>).

For the reboot, BETC London cast Brit Andrew Cooper (internal:node/146881) as a hardworking, overheated landscaper who catches the attention of some female onlookers, one of whom rolls a can of Diet Coke his way. Cooper promptly pops the top, salaciously

spraying himself with product. And like Lucky Vanous before him, Cooper became overnight watercooler fodder.

“The sexual imagery is obvious to the point of being silly,” notes Occidental’s Wade, pointing out “the sweating Diet Coke can rolling in the grass, the phallic tower in the background, the ejaculation imagery with both the spewing grass cuttings and, of course, the exploding soda.”

Sweet Six-Pack

Some hunkvertising has moved past comedy into the realm of the absurd.

A 12-foot-tall fiberglass statue of Colin Firth promoting the BBC’s adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* was erected in the middle of a lake in London’s Hyde Park this summer. (In the miniseries, the actor, who portrays the aloof Mr. Darcy, takes a swim in his shirt and emerges sopping wet.) Even more curious, Dove Chocolate whipped up a sculpture of TV personality Mario Lopez ([internal:node/151886](#)) (just his torso, actually) to introduce its Mint & Dark Chocolate Swirl variety. The huge hunk of chocolate was served at an August event in Los Angeles to drive home the message that Dove’s latest confection “tastes as good as it looks.”

Perhaps what’s good for the goose is good for the gander, and does hunkvertising, in fact, amount to equality of the sexes?

“As women gain in education and the workplace and men take on more household and childcare responsibilities, there’s more gender parity” versus a generation ago when Lucky Vanous strutted his stuff, offers Ann Mack, who follows popular culture as JWT’s director of trendspotting. “This trend is symbolic” of a more even playing field, she says.

Then again, maybe it’s all much baser than that. “This has nothing to do with equality—though equality is a good excuse for looking at hot men if you’re the sort of woman who needs an excuse,” argues blogger Cullers. “It had to do with equality back when Cosmo picked Burt Reynolds as the first nude male centerfold. At this point, looking at some abs while drinking Diet Coke is hardly a feminist revolution, particularly when it’s a remake of a popular spot from decades ago.”

Occidental’s Wade concurs. “I wouldn’t call it equality—I’d call it marketing, and maybe capitalism,” she says. “Market forces under capitalism exploit whatever fertile ground is available. Justice and sexual equality aren’t

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