

Get Woke, Go Broke? A case study on the use of social issues in advertising

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

Emily Gralak

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Becky McDonald

**Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana**

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Abstract

In January 2019, Gillette encountered a storm of controversy when they launched their publicity campaign for “The Best Men Can Be” with an online short film tackling issues of toxic masculinity and #metoo. In a market where an increasing number of consumers buy based on their ethics or beliefs, value-based marketing is becoming the norm for brands across all industries. There are varying reasons why companies may or may not involve social issues in their advertising: It’s hard to deny the responsibility of brands to use their platforms to influence the world for the better. Still, some consumers beg brands to keep politics out of advertising. Gillette’s short film release was a highly-calculated, business-oriented decision that reaped mainly positive outcomes despite receiving visible public backlash and boycott.

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Table of Contents

Process Analysis Statement.....	1
History of Gillette.....	2
Situation Analysis.....	2
Public Response.....	3
Public Sentiment and Boycott.....	3
Media Response.....	6
Impact.....	7
Stock Impact and Writedown.....	7
Sales Impact.....	8
Company Response.....	8
Analysis.....	9
References.....	12

Process Analysis Statement

In the summer of 2019, I set out on my thesis journey with the goal to explore motives and consequences for socially/politically motivated advertising and PR campaigns. Months later, after significant toil, I can say with certainty that I met my goal, but it didn't come without obstacles.

At the inception of my thesis, I originally intended to research and compose two case studies on two separate campaigns with social/political messaging and compare their results. Eventually, I came to the decision that in order to achieve appropriate depth, I should only research and complete one case study, not two. I know that if I had done two, neither would have been completed to the best of my ability. Instead of writing a comparison on two, I poured my attention into one case, analyzed and drew lessons from it, and cited brief references to other cases and industry trends.

I selected to study the Gillette case for its prominence and relevance. The case was wide-spread and happened recently enough that it was still relevant to the advertising business and public interest, but not so recent that it was too early to study its long-term effects.

In the beginning of my writing process, I encountered quite a large learning curve. Before even beginning the research on my case, I had to first learn how to conduct a thorough public relations case study. I taught myself this skill with hours of reading and studying acclaimed case studies, and using them as examples and inspiration to my own project.

The research I conducted during my process was mostly secondary research. I initially intended to conduct primary research on reach and public sentiment, but with limited access to data and analytics programs, it proved more difficult than I anticipated. I didn't have the privilege of being inside the company I was researching, so the only data I could analyze was what was available externally to the public. After realizing my shortcomings and inability to conduct primary research, my goal became to reach meaningful conclusions with thorough secondary research.

In the analysis section of my case study, I took care to ensure my conclusions about the case were sound and backed by my findings, not just my opinions or conjectures without a researched basis. I certainly have my personal opinions about the ad I studied and the company's decision to run it, but I was intentional about leaving my biases at the door.

At the end of my process, I feel accomplished to have finished this task. I'm proud of my self-determination and my tenacity, and I'm proud to show the result of my hard work, even if it's not perfect.

History of Gillette

In 1901, Gillette company founder King C. Gillette transformed the practice of shaving with his invention of the first safety razor, a replaceable straight edge razor attached to a handle. He received a patent for the invention on November 15, 1904. Today, Gillette produces razors specifically for men's use on the face. Introduced in 2001, Venus is the division of Gillette that produces women's shaving products ("About Venus"). After more than 100 years of product development company expansion, The Gillette Company was acquired by Procter & Gamble (P&G) in 2005.

Going as far back as the early 1900's, the Gillette brand has been connected to athletics. Gillette cited the reason for the connection as "natural synergies with our reputation as a performance brand" ("History"). Marketing in male-oriented sports like football, baseball and boxing is ideal to reach Gillette's overwhelmingly male customer base. Gillette has continually sponsored major sporting events like the World Series and Rose Bowl. The home stadium of the New England Patriots football team in Foxborough, MA has been Gillette Stadium since 2002 ("Quick Hits"). Gillette has often used sports stars as ambassadors of the brand -- For example, in 2004, Gillette began a partnership with soccer star David Beckham, and he became a prominent face of the brand.

Gillette is known for innovation in the world of shaving. King C. Gillette founded the company on the credo, "There is a better way to shave and we will find it" ("History"). The company puts a heavy emphasis on research and development, with two dedicated R&D centers in Boston, MA, and Reading, UK. Their most recent innovation is the Gillette Treo, the first razor specifically designed to shave someone else.

Gillette's corporate mission statement emphasizes a "commitment to giving men the very best," and explains that Gillette products are made to help men "to look, feel and be their best every day" ("Mission"). Gillette's long-time marketing slogan, "The Best a Man Can Get," was first introduced in an advertisement during Super Bowl XXIII in 1989 (Coffee).

Situation Analysis

On January 13, 2019, Gillette introduced a new marketing campaign celebrating the 30-year anniversary of the company slogan, "The Best a Man Can Get." The campaign was called "The Best Men Can Be," a slight alteration of the words of the already well-known slogan.

The campaign was first introduced to the public with a 1 minute and 48 second short film uploaded to Youtube and Twitter with the title "[We Believe: The Best Men Can Be | Gillette \(Short Film\)](#)." The film was directed by a female director, Kim Gehrig. Short form 30- and

6-second versions of the film ran only on online ad spots, and never in traditional media like print, television or radio (Neff).

The content of the short film begins with a male narrator invoking the original slogan, asking in an ironic tone, “Is this the best a man can get?” It goes on to show scenes demonstrating instances of bullying, sexism, and toxic masculinity, as well as acknowledgment of the #MeToo movement. The ad closes with scenes of men breaking up fights, standing up for others, and being attentive fathers, and voiceover encouraging men to be the best they can be, because “the boys watching today will be the men of tomorrow” (Gehrig).

The introduction of the campaign was accompanied by the launch of a companion website, www.thebestamancanbe.org. The URL appears at the end of the short film, and viewers are encouraged to visit. Upon visiting the site, viewers see a written statement from Gillette in which they acknowledge the role and responsibility brands have in influencing culture. “As a company that encourages men to be their best,” they said, “we have a responsibility to make sure we are promoting positive, attainable, inclusive and healthy versions of what it means to be a man.” The statement ends with a commitment to donate at least \$1 million annually the next three years to non-profit organizations “designed to help men of all ages achieve their personal best” (“The Best Men Can Be”). Eligible organizations are encouraged to apply for a grant. The first donation recipient was Boys and Girls Club of America, announced upon campaign launch.

Quickly after the campaign launch, the short film went viral online, garnering millions of views and evoking both positive and negative reactions from media outlets, social media users and the general public.

After the initial launch, a new part of the campaign was introduced in late February. Gillette announced on Instagram they would be posting pictures and stories of “advocates, mentors, and leaders in their communities, actively demonstrating what it means to be a great man” (@gillette). These Instagram posts started February 27 and ended over a month later on April 5. The posts were also later added to the companion website.

Public Response

Reach

Shortly after the release of the short film on January 13, millions of people around the world viewed and interacted with it. In only the first 24 hours, the film garnered 5 million views, 100,000 likes and 400,000 dislikes on YouTube (Hale). On Twitter, #GilletteAd trended worldwide. In 24 hours Gillette garnered a combined 1.1 million mentions across social media, news sites, blogs and forums, a 214% increase in mentions compared to the previous 24-hour period (Sweeney).

As of October 2019, the original YouTube video has amassed over 32 million views, 802 thousand likes and 1.5 million dislikes. It ranks among the 50 most disliked Youtube videos of all time (“List of Most-Disliked YouTube Videos”). Gillette’s initial campaign tweet containing the full video has 227,000 retweets, 564,000 likes and 49,000 replies, and the embedded video has 30.9 million views. On Instagram, the initial campaign post containing a short clip of the film has 442,000 views and 31,000 comments.

Public Sentiment and Boycott

The divisive ad was well-received and even heralded by some audience members, and by others, seen as an overgeneralization, unnecessary scolding, or radically feminist, anti-male propaganda. Marketing intelligence firm BrandTotal found that social media response was overwhelmingly negative: They reported that 63% of consumer sentiment about the ad on social media was negative, 29% was neutral and just 8% was positive (Sweeney). Opponents of the ad and its messaging quickly began calling for a boycott of Gillette products, using the hashtags #BoycottGillette, as well as the misspelled #BoycottGilette. In popular tweets, boycotters showed themselves throwing away Gillette products in trash cans or toilets, and vowing to never purchase from the company again (see fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Tweet with picture of Gillette razor in toilet (@warroom)

Many conservative commentators and thought leaders, like Piers Morgan and Candace Owens, vocalized their negative opinions to millions of like-minded Twitter followers (see fig. 2-3).



Fig. 2. Candace Owens tweet (Owens)



Fig. 3. Piers Morgan tweet (Morgan)

Responses weren't all negative: Influencers like one CNN commentator supported the ad's messaging and condemned opponents (see fig. 4). Supporters commonly expressed that the influx of backlash against an ad encouraging men to be better was the exact reason why the ad was necessary.



Fig. 4. Keith Boykin tweet (Boykin)

According to sentiment analysis by Morning Consult, the ad was received better by Democrats than Republicans, and women responded more positively than men. Between the two factors, sentiment for the ad was more strongly divided along political party lines than gender lines (see fig. 5).

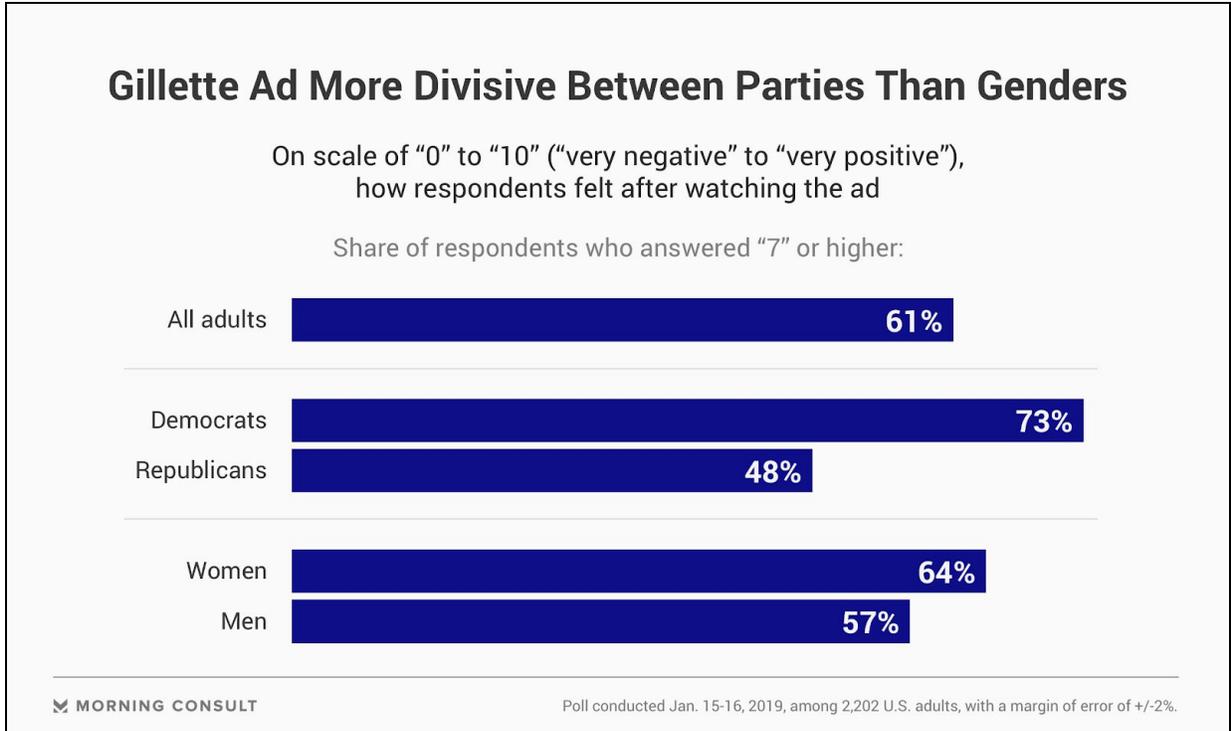


Fig. 5. Chart showing response to Gillette ad by gender and political party ("Survey")

Media Response

The news media reported not only on the ad itself, but also the negative reactions to the ad. Headlines about the ad commonly contained words like "outrage," "backlash," or "uproar" (see fig. 6-8).



Fig. 6. NPR Headline (Smith)

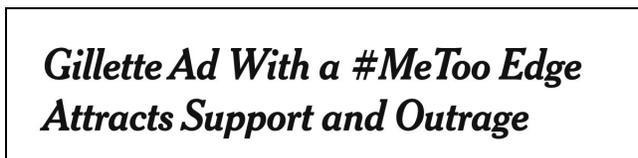


Fig. 7. New York Times Headline (Hsu)

Gillette faces backlash and boycott over '#MeToo advert'

Fig. 8. BBC News Headline (Baggs)

Kyle Smith, an essayist for the New York Post, argued that journalists and media coverage of the ad were responsible for creating “hacklash,” or fake backlash, against the brand. By isolating and amplifying negative comments -- often stand-alone comments that weren’t representative of a common sentiment -- media coverage exaggerated the volume and severity of negativity that was actually being expressed by the public. Even mild disagreement with the ad was conflated with fury, which contributed to manufacturing a sense of great outrage where there was little.

According to data analysis by Commetric, tweets with the hashtag #BoycottGillette were in the vast minority of tweets about the ad, greatly outnumbered by tweets with positive or neutral hashtags like #TheBestMenCanBe and #GilletteAd (Ganev). Even in the minority, tweets that express disagreement garner more media attention than tweets that express agreement because the media finds news value in conflict. Readers will click on a story to find out why someone is mad at something, but not to find out why someone agrees with something.

To adjust for exaggeration by “hacklash” and uncommon opinions, Commetric conducted a sentiment analysis of tweets from genuine active users followed by more than 500 people. This study found tweet sentiment to be approximately 48% positive, 19% neutral and 28% negative. Outside of the online sphere, an in-person survey of 2,201 American adults conducted by Morning Consult found that 61% of those surveyed had a positive opinion of the ad (“Survey”).

Impact

Stock Impact and Writedown

During the campaign launch, P&G stock prices went largely unaffected. Other than Gillette, P&G owns countless other personal hygiene and health brands, and by nature of the sheer size of the conglomerate, the success or failure of one brand among many would not be reflected by the rise or fall of P&G stock prices. A change (or lack of change) in stock price is not a valid measurement of the effects of the campaign.

However, months after the campaign launch, P&G reported an \$8 billion writedown, or reduction in value, of Gillette for the fiscal quarter ending June 30. According to Reuters, “P&G reported a net loss of about \$5.24 billion, or \$2.12 per share ... due to an \$8 billion non-cash writedown of Gillette. For the same period last year, P&G’s net income was \$1.89 billion, or 72 cents per share” (Naidu). P&G cited the cause of the writedown to be multiple factors including currency devaluation, increased competition in the industry, and a shrinking market for blades and razors. Net sales in the grooming industry declined in 11 of the previous 12 quarters, and the market for

men's razors shrunk 11% overall in previous 5 years. Experts attribute this decline to social trends shifting away from shaving, with men now choosing to shave less often.

In addition to the reasons cited above, it is possible the financial loss was caused in part by negative public sentiment towards Gillette and the boycott in the aftermath of the viral ad. Conservative media outlets and Gillette dissenters were quick to blame the writedown on the viral ad, claiming the boycott had been successful in hurting the company. These claims often disregarded other contributing market factors to Gillette's financials. Undoubtedly, a combination of factors contributed to the writedown, but it is unclear which factors were more impactful than others.

Sales Impact

After the launch of the campaign, Gillette's sales did not rise or fall significantly, despite threats of boycotting (Wahba). P&G Chief Financial Officer Jon Moeller told CNN, "Retail sales trends are in line with pre-campaign levels" (Meyersohn). While boycotters may have stopped patronizing Gillette, unprecedented levels of media coverage and consumer engagement may have caused supporters of the ad to start patronizing Gillette in equal numbers, causing sales numbers to plateau.

Research out of Northwestern University found that more often than not, product boycotts do not affect sales revenue of targeted companies ("Do Boycotts Work?"). Part of that reason is because boycotting is much harder in practice than it is in theory. Those who encourage a boycott and denounce a company online often continue purchasing from that very same company, either out of habit, convenience, or lack of caring. Additionally, boycotters usually represent only a small portion of a company's customer base, making the sales impact negligible. Rather than threatening sales, however, boycotts can do more damage by threatening a company's reputation. Said researcher Brayden King, "The no. 1 predictor of what makes a boycott effective is how much media attention it creates." Media coverage of a boycott created more of a threat to a company's stock, and creates more incentive for the company to change its behavior. The same research suggests that as boycotting becomes a more popular occurrence, companies should consider waiting out a boycott instead of acting on it. A boycott will be in the news one day and out the next, and eventually, consumers forget.

Company Response

Even after receiving severe backlash on social media, Gillette stood by their campaign. They never issued an apology or follow-up statement of any kind as a countermeasure against the negativity and/or boycott. A spokesperson for Gillette told CNBC the company did not regret the ad, regardless of negative reaction. They said, "We expected debate — discussion is necessary. For every negative reaction we've seen many positive reactions, people calling the effort courageous, timely, smart, and much-needed. At the end of the day, sparking conversation is what matters" (Taylor).

In August, associate brand director for Gillette Australia and New Zealand told media Gillette would be “shifting the spotlight from social issues to local heroes” (Chung). People against the ad took this to mean Gillette regretted the ad and considered it a mistake to learn from. However, these were the words of one executive, not an official statement from the company meant to represent the entire brand.

Analysis

It's no secret that value-based marketing and corporate social responsibility (CSR) have become popularly utilized by brands in recent years. Research conducted by Edelman found that nearly 2 in 3 consumers now buy based on beliefs, and that trend is only increasing as years pass (“Earned Brand 2018”). Because customers are attracted to companies that appear to be ethical, brands have great reason to attempt to prove that they care about more than just their bottom line. Instead of straddling the political fence, more companies are choosing to dive into social issues to appeal to socially-minded consumers, even when they are aware they risk facing opposition.

Many people support brands' involvement in social issues, arguing that anyone with a large platform who doesn't use their influence to enact positive change is squandering a moral responsibility to do so. Undoubtedly, brands and advertisers hold the power to influence vast numbers of people. On Gillette's campaign companion website, they acknowledged their responsibility to shape culture and promote the betterment of men. However, frequent boycotts against brands that participate in value-based marketing are indicative of the right-wing epithet “get woke and go broke” (Travis). The frequently touted message threatens brands to leave politics out of advertising or face boycotting.

If a brand does choose to get involved in social issues, how do they successfully convince consumers that they actually care about the issues they advocate for? The causes that a company chooses to support in their CSR efforts should be directly related to the core focus of the business -- otherwise, consumers would struggle to see the sincerity in it. Based on Gillette's mission statement and corporate character, it can be gleaned that the ad's messaging was sincere. Despite Gillette's focus on research and development and their reputation as a performance brand, their ultimate goal is not to just create the best razor. Rather, Gillette's stated mission is to help men look, feel, and most notably, be their best selves: a sentiment that was reflected in the ad's message encouraging men to step up, take responsibility and be better people. Because the cause Gillette chose to support is related to its long-standing mission, it is easier for consumers to believe in the company's sincerity.

The ad never would have been as convincing if its messaging wasn't defensible by Gillette's actions. Companies should not engage in CSR as simply a marketing tactic to make themselves look good -- Every word of support and every promise should be backed up by concrete actions.

Consumers will often see through flimsy support, causing CSR efforts to backfire. Gillette pledged to donate millions of dollars to charities for men, and claims that Gillette ran this ad only for the publicity and with no intention to enact real change are ignorant of those donations. Unfortunately for Gillette, lots of people *were* ignorant. Not everyone who saw the short film would know about the pledge because there was no mention of it in the actual video. To know about it, a viewer would have to follow the URL to the companion website shown at the end of the film. Gillette could have been more vocal about their monetary donations to curb claims that they were insincere. To convince audiences that CSR is more than just a marketing tactic, companies should show continued support of a cause, not just one-time support. By pledging to donate \$1 million for at least 3 years, Gillette showed that their support of men's betterment was for more than just a single occasion. Because of Gillette's actions, they were relatively successful in convincing consumers their advocacy was genuine and not just for public attention.

Even if the messaging was believably sincere, the intentions behind releasing the ad weren't as heartfelt as Gillette might want consumers to believe. Because CSR reflects well on a company and becomes profitable, there is always an ulterior motive to the showmanship of advocacy efforts. We heard from Gillette statements and executives that their intention behind the ad was to "start a conversation" about the involved social issue. How did they successfully start the conversation, and how did the conversation benefit the brand? Gillette actively encouraged discussion about their ad by posting it on shared channels. The campaign ran only online and never in traditional media, which facilitated the fastest possible spread of information. Traditional ads as a form of owned media are not meant to be commented on or responded to, so placing this Gillette ad in traditional channels would not have allowed for conversation. Instead, the online sphere and shared media platforms where the ad was posted allowed for maximum ease of response from viewers. By using only these channels, they certainly succeeded in sparking a discussion. However, the discussion was hardly about masculinity - it became mostly about Gillette. Facilitating a discussion with your brand name conveniently weaved in is a perfect way to keep hold of the public's attention even more effectively than a traditional advertisement. As a consumer, it's easy to ignore an advertisement — you can tune it out or turn off the TV — but it's much harder to ignore or escape a discussion happening in real life or on your Twitter feed. When a brand is the focus of a discussion, it is at the forefront of a consumer's mind, not in the back with most other traditional advertisements.

After facing backlash, was Gillette's crisis response strategy adequate for the situation? They very likely knew a campaign on the topic of a divisive social issue would inevitably spark negative reactions, which means they likely developed a response strategy. The negative reactions may have occurred on a larger scale than they predicted, but it was expected nonetheless. As reported by PR Daily, research recommends that companies under boycotts employ a "wait-it-out" strategy, which is exactly what Gillette did to their advantage (Comcowich). If Gillette had ever issued an apology for the ad, they may have quelled the anger of some boycotters, but also effectively reversed any progress they made in convincing the public of their social responsibility and ethics. They alienated some dissenters from their

audience, but an apology would have alienated supporters and brought even more attention to the issue and more damage to their reputation.

Gillette's case is comparable to their predecessor, Nike: In early 2018, Nike ran a controversial ad featuring NFL player Colin Kaepernick, a vocal supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement. Unsurprisingly, the ad sparked a boycott where opponents were seen burning Nike products and vowing to never buy Nike again. Given this example, if a boycott was expected, what incentive existed for Gillette to run the ad regardless? Simply, when managed appropriately, the negative effects of boycotts are negligible compared to the attention they can bring a company. Research shows that boycotts rarely ever hurt sales, especially for large companies like P&G. Nike hardly suffered from their boycott -- In fact, they increased sales and posted a huge earnings boom in December 2018 (Lucas). While boycotts rarely hurt sales, they have the power to hurt reputation. Even so, outrage doesn't last -- consumers quickly move on. Additionally, outrage as reported by the media is usually not as widespread as people believe it to be. Boycotts garner attention, which works favorably for companies regardless of the direction of the sentiment. As long as people were discussing Gillette, both negatively and positively, it was a positive outcome to the company.

Most boycotts are unsuccessful as it is, but boycotting becomes even less impactful in the world of massive and powerful corporate conglomerates. Someone who decides to actively boycott Gillette may continue to buy products from Tide, Charmin, Tampax, Dawn, Old Spice and Crest, not knowing that their money continues to benefit the owners of Gillette, P&G. Given an abundance of past examples, as well as P&G's status as a powerful conglomerate, Gillette had no reason to fear a possible product boycott. In many ways, the boycott counteracted itself and worked in Gillette's favor. By causing media coverage in massive numbers, it inadvertently caused Gillette to be able to position itself as a company that cares about social issues. The risk of a short-lasting boycott from a limited number of people is not a problem for Gillette if, in the meantime, they can permanently broaden their audience and gain more customers by appearing socially responsible.

Prior to running this ad, Gillette was struggling to gain ground in the industry for the previous few years. They lost significant market share to competitors like Unilever-owned razor delivery service Dollar Shave Club, and resorted to slashing prices to keep customers (Terlep). With their market share declining and social trends leaning away from shaving, Gillette needed a way to remind the public of their existence, and they found it in a socially-driven ad campaign. The ad was an attempt cause conversation around their brand and grip the public's attention by causing a little controversy, but not enough to be negatively affected. People who think Gillette made a mistake by running this ad would be wrong -- They benefited from it in many ways. People who say Gillette took a brave stand against toxic masculinity because of their upstanding morals would also be wrong -- Gillette conceived of the ad and ran it with profit in mind, knowing the benefits of CSR and without fear of a boycott.

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