

# **Time For a Change? Reinforcement of Hegemonic Masculinity in a Kleenex Ad**

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## **Introduction**

This article reports an ideological analysis of a single 30-second television/internet ad for Kleenex tissues. The ad, titled “Time for a Change,” is part of the “Someone Needs One” campaign created in the fall of 2014 for Kimberly-Clark, the manufacturer of Kleenex, by the ad agency VSA Partners Chicago. According to *AdAge*, the Kleenex campaign “features people coming to the rescue of others in emotional distress” (Neff, 2015). “Time For a Change” features a young boy comforting a distraught young girl on their school bus by offering her a tissue. The description accompanying the ad on the Kleenex YouTube page notes that “[t]he first day back at school can be tough, but sometimes all somebody needs to know is that someone else cares.” The hash tag “#ShareKleenexCare” follows the description. The agency executive who managed the Kleenex account said the impetus for the campaign was a finding in a survey that half of respondents “missed an opportunity to express their concern for someone” (Oster, 2015). Thus, the campaign positions Kleenex as “a brand designed to provide care and uplift,” the executive said (Neff, 2015). Company officials said they hoped the message would cause kindness to become “contagious” (Neff, 2015).

The young boy’s motivation for comforting the young girl was the catalyst for this article. While a cursory viewing of the ad could leave one with the impression that he is on his way to eclipsing society’s still favored definition of masculinity – of becoming a “sensitive new-age guy” (the title of a 1990 song by celebrated folk singer Christine Lavin), his treatment of the young girl in fact further affirms that definition, even though he seemingly acts in an enlightened fashion.

## **Hegemonic Masculinity**

Hegemonic masculinity provides the theoretical backdrop for this article. Numerous scholars (e.g. Bordo, 1999; Chesebro, 2001; Vavrus, 2002; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) have commented on how society’s preferred definition of masculinity has changed – evolved some would say – in recent decades. Connell (1987) asserted that society has actually produced a range of masculinities and of femininities. Reevaluation of the concept has not, however, interrupted “the social ascendancy of a particular version or model of masculinity that operates on the terrain of ‘common sense’ and conventional morality that defines ‘what it

means to be a man” (Hanke, 1992, p. 190). As Myers (2012) contends, “all boys and men are measured by hegemonic masculinity, even though most boys and men will never accomplish it” (p. 127). Beginning in elementary school (Messner, 1990; Renold, 2007), boys, purportedly aware that older boys and men are evaluating them, carefully manage their lives, eschewing non-hegemonic behaviors. They conceal their emotions, distance themselves from girls – “even as they pursue girls sexually” (Myers, p. 128) – and reject purportedly feminine behavior, often by making homophobic comments (pp. 128-129). As Fahey (2007) notes, hegemonic masculinity “is defined both by and against the concept of femininity” (p. 142). The alleged superiority of man is affirmed when men are characterized as having power and women as being subordinate, as Connell (1983) explains.

The fluidity in the concept supports Chesebro’s (2001) assertion that masculinity is a social construction. A model of masculinity attains dominance through “material and symbolic practices” (Vavrus, 2002, p. 357); it is “not inherited with the Y chromosome” (Connell, 1990, p. 83). Cultural traction is achieved “not only through coercion, but through consent, even though there is never a complete consensus” (Hanke, 1998, p. 190). Still, to rise to the level of common sense, a set of ideas often is “uncritically absorbed or spontaneously consented to” (p. 185). They develop “an imperative character in shaping consciousness, norms of conduct, affect, or desire” (p. 185). This process of naturalization unfolds through “dispersed articulation at multiple and even seemingly contradictory sites” (Hanke, 1998, p. 190). Among these “sites” are media texts like the Kleenex ad analyzed for this paper. In them, aspects of masculinity are defined, promoted and, at times, fall out of favor (Fahey, 2007). The sites provide fertile ground for naturalization, Vavrus (2002) argues, since for media companies “the commercial appeal of representations trumps other considerations” (p. 357). This is not to say that creating “lowest common denominator” content completely forestalls effective counterhegemonic messages; Sellnow (1999) contends the feminist message in singer Mary Chapin Carpenter’s popular song “He Thinks He’ll Keep Her” was made more palatable – but also more compelling – by the artist’s deft use of narrative to slowly roll out the main character’s move from a family dominated by her husband toward the chance for self-actualization.

While it is tempting to applaud challenges to the dominant model of masculinity, what often takes place is the reinscription of “significant aspects of patriarchal privilege within domestic space” (Vavrus, 2002, p. 353) – or, as in the case of Eminem’s popular 2000 album *The Marshall Mathers LP*, the artist’s failure to explore in his often sexist lyrics “alternative forms that do not reproduce and rearticulate dominating, patriarchal notions of the masculine” (Calhoun, 2005, p. 289). As Hanke (1990) asserted in his analysis of the 1980s television show *thirtysomething*, “Hegemonic masculinity changes in order to remain hegemonic; significant change in the direction of gender equality will require more than the ‘new view of manhood’” (p. 247) seen in some recent media content. The “leveling” of gender differences, seen in the characters of men “who are open to domestic concerns and interpersonal relationships, is in

actuality a distraction from in-depth discussion of power and gender inequity,” Hanke claims (pp. 244–245). In coverage of “stay at home dads,” broadcast journalists, inspired by the successful movie *Mr. Mom*, developed a “discourse of legitimation” (Vavrus, 2002) in which nurturing one’s children and maintaining the household were recast and promoted in texts as “properly masculine” (p. 353). But while indicating to readers that men “can be capable as stay-at-home parents and homemakers,” their stories did not challenge the myth of the nuclear family, “including the heteronormativity that undergirds it” (p. 353). Fathers still dominated their families; journalists lauded them “for learning parenting skills and adapting to stay-at-home paternity” (p. 354). Framing fathers in this way does not threaten the positive buying environment that advertisers demand media content creators establish for their products (Andersen, 1995).

In content aimed at or referencing children, the reinscription described earlier takes the form of deploying non-hegemonically masculine boys and young men to reinforce the dominant conception of masculinity (Myers, p. 128). In her textual analysis of Disney Channel programs aimed at pre-adolescents, Myers found that rather than chipping away at gender orthodoxy, the non-hegemonic behaviors of several male characters – studiousness, playfulness, lack of athletic ability, concern with grooming, wearing pink clothing, dressing in drag – valorized hegemonic masculinity; it “remained the standard” (p. 141) for the male characters. They welcomed the policing of their behavior by hegemonically masculine boys, and happily but unsuccessfully adapted their behaviors – “donned a ‘mask’ of masculinity” (p. 139) in Myers’ words – to exert control in social situations or to pursue the shows’ female characters. The characters’ actions suggest that hegemonic masculinity is a valuable “resource for all boys” (p. 140) – or what Connell (1995) calls the “patriarchal dividend.” While the worry expressed by scholars that portrayals like these present only “patriarchal constellations” (Butler, 2004) is not unfounded, the struggle with “the pressures of hegemonic masculinity and its unachievability” (Renold, 2004, p. 261) may not be fully joined until a boy reaches adolescence (Bartholomaeus, 2011). Or as Bartholomaeus puts it, “many of the resources necessary to ‘do’ hegemonic masculinity are not available to primary school students due to age” (p. 242).

### **Advertising: “A Philosophy of Life”**

In 1997, Leiss, Kline, and Jhally (1997) famously argued that advertising is “one of the great vehicles of social communication” and is “an integral part of modern culture” (p. 1). Much more than an example of “capitalist propaganda” (Tinic, 1997), an ad is a “significant site of cultural production” (p. 4) – indeed, of ideological struggle. Ads feature “a distinctive and central symbolic structure,” claims Schudson (1986, p. 210), through which products are promoted “not for their attributes, but for how they allow us to represent ourselves” (Tinic, p. 15). We reference and apply images and ideas seen in ads in our relationship with others – or, as Goldman (1992) explains, ads are the vehicle through which products are “translated into a world of social relations.” Twitchell (1996) goes further, arguing that we experience ads “in our shared myths, in our concepts of

self, in our marking of time” (p. 124). As seasoned consumers, we know full well that what we buy is reflected in the “ordering of life” (p. 122).

Where once advertisers were content to highlight a product’s attributes, their focus has shifted, claims Falk (1997), to achieving the “thematization of the product-user relationship.” *How* we experience a product is now front and center in ads, along with depictions of the “satisfaction that comes with using the product” (p. 72). They seek to instill what Ewen (1976) calls a “philosophy of life” (p. 69), built on the idea that commerce and consumption are our prime sources of truth – they furnish our “world of facts” (p. 69). But just because an advertiser “transforms culture into currency” does not mean a social issue invoked in an ad is “devalued” or “minimized” (Tinic, p. 5).

Of greater relevance to this article is the idea that an ad is a mechanism “through which masculinity is (re)defined, (re)constructed, challenged, and perpetuated,” as Fahey (2007) explains (p. 134). Writing nearly four decades ago, Goffman (1979) asserted that ads instruct viewers about how men and women are expected to act, and what roles they are to play in society. An ad’s effectiveness is determined by the ability of its creator to deftly “appropriate and transform a vast range of symbols and ideas” (Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, p. 5) into a message that causes the consumer to buy, switch brands, or change his or her perception of a company. Agencies must recycle “cultural models and references” (p. 5) into elements that invoke an audience member’s experiences. Fahey might reframe these tactics as “symbolic enactments” (p. 134) that pave the way toward revealing how textual elements reflect and reinforce a particular ideology. As Judith Williamson (1978) asserts, “the work of an advertisement is not to invent meaning...but to translate meaning for [a product] by means of a sign system we already know” (p. xx). An ad resonates with a viewer when he or she activates its elements, which have been taken from existing “referent systems” (p. 18).

In “Time for a Change,” VSA Partners Chicago invokes a number of the “experiences” referenced by Leiss, Kline, and Jhally. For many children, the first day of school is a trying experience, particularly if a child is new to the school. In addition, riding the school bus is not without its challenges. Young boys often find it difficult to talk to girls. Although the agency and Kimberly Clark insist the ad depicts a “first day,” at least one journalist (Neff, 2015) suggested the young girl had been bullied before the young boy happened by. Bullying – and the myriad efforts undertaken by school and law enforcement officials to combat it – occupies a prime spot on the national agenda. Media accounts of a laundry list of controversies and tragedies – the dubious value of standardized testing, a burgeoning movement to “opt out” of the tests, substandard conditions at many (primarily inner city) public schools, overzealous enforcement of zero tolerance policies, and horrific shootings like the one in 2012 at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut – coalesce in an impression that the act of trying to get an education is fraught with urgency and exposes students to nearly constant peril.

Deeper in the ad’s social backdrop, but still relevant to the analysis, are recent changes in how childhood is defined, how it is explained. Society has moved from not acknowledging childhood as a separate stage in life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to treating children less as “economic contributors” and more like

“priceless love object(s)” (Zelizer, 1985) to rigorous study of the new stage by newly minted child psychologists (Hirsh-Pasek & Michnick-Golinkoff (2003) in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century who persuaded parents that their role “required special knowledge and training (p. 6),” to explaining childhood as a period that must be jam-packed with fulfilling scheduled activities – and with acts of consumption (Schor, 2004). Society looks askance at parents who don’t plan every aspect of their child’s life with unstinting devotion (Skenazy, 2009). There is no room for “convenience” parenting when your child’s life is made to depend on your becoming an “expert” (Sears, 2016) in them.

The changing relationship between parents and children is mirrored in ads (Alexander, 1994) like the one analyzed here. Parents in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century tended to be strict with their children. Few ads from that period included children. By the time *Baby and Child Care*, in which Dr. Benjamin Spock famously advocated a more permissive parenting style, was published in the mid-1940s, children were seen more often in ads. They were more active, more precocious – more “precious” in the ads, Alexander observed (p. 757). As scholars debated whether parents reverted in the 1960s and 1970s to strictness, the frequency with which children appeared in ads declined. Nevertheless, they were linked in ads with products that would help consumers attain the “good life” (p. 757).

Alexander confirmed some of these assertions in one of the few detailed studies of ads featuring children. When the birth rate is high and society endorses more permissive parenting, more ads include children, though Alexander stressed this finding could have partially been explained by a spike in consumerism in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (p. 751). Further, children began appearing more often in ads for products created for adults (p. 751). They are more often deployed as “symbols of the good life that enhance the impact of an advertisement” (p. 753). Finally, with the exception of the late 1960s and early 1970s, children and adults are interacting more extensively in ads (p. 755).

## Method

The author in the summer of 2015 performed a detailed ideological analysis of the Kleenex ad, which was viewed at the iSpot.tv website and at the company’s YouTube page. Analysis of one (Sellnow, 1999) or two (Click & Kramer, 2007) is not without precedent and can provide a rich understanding of not only the artifact but also of the cultural conditions surrounding its creation. The article takes its cue from White (1992), who asserted that ideological analysis is “concerned with texts as social processes and as social products” (p. 196). The analysis revolved around a single research question: what does the ad ask the audience to believe about what it means to be masculine? Copious notes were taken during each viewing. Additional viewings and ongoing review of the notes enabled the author to identify, confirm, and refine themes that emerged as the analysis progressed. Individual readings focused on the ad’s key elements: plot, setting, dialogue, music, and graphics. Following guidelines for ideological analysis crafted by Foss (2004), the author identified the “presented” and

“suggested” (p. 214) elements in the Kleenex ad, then, as the number of readings increased, identified and refined the ad’s main themes produced by the interplay of the claims, evidence, images, and arguments. The author then invoked the themes to flesh out the ideology revealed and affirmed by the ad. The author also projected how the Kleenex ad’s preferred reading of masculinity might function for the audience (p. 214).

Writing in the mid-1970s, Stuart Hall (1975) defined “ideology” as “the mental frameworks—the languages, concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and systems of representation—that different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out, and render intelligible the way society works” (p. 15). An ideology becomes entrenched “not merely by producing a system of meanings which purport to represent the world but rather, by producing its own system of meanings as the real, natural (i.e. experienced) one” (Grossberg, 1991, p. 145). One perspective – one model of masculinity – dominates, pushing alternative perspectives to the margins. Those who adhere to a dominant ideology establish “the limits within which” opposing views are expressed, Cloud (1996, p. 304) argues.

But as Terry Eagleton (1991) warned, an ideology is more than “meaning in the service of power” (Thompson, 1990, p. 7). Dominance by one system of meanings in the cultural narrative about a subject does not mean that its audience is unified. An ideology propagated by a dominant social group does not always bring about cohesion. Dominated groups have “their own rich, resistant cultures” and do not give them up without a struggle (Eagleton, 1991, p. 36). What the audience experiences and internalizes, then, is a mix of the values affirmed by dominant groups and “notions which spring more directly” from its own experience (p. 36). “If there is nothing beyond power,” Eagleton writes, “then there is nothing that is being blocked, categorized and regimented” – and dominant social groups would not concern themselves with challenges to their authority. Those with power see their ideology in a state of constant negotiation with those held by less powerful groups – this interplay is a key source of their authority, Eagleton explains. Thus, it is more valuable for scholars to approach ideology as “an organizing social force which actively constitutes human subjects at the roots of their lived experience” (p. 222). There we will find “forms of value and belief relevant” to our “specific social tasks and to the general reproduction of the social order” (p. 222).

While Eagleton recognized that “the diffusion of dominant values and beliefs” by powerful groups “has some part to play” (1976, p. 36) in that reproduction, he nevertheless asserts that ideology “contributes to the constitution of social interests, rather than passively reflecting pre-given positions” (1991, p. 222). Probing an ideology reveals how likely it is a claim will influence people against the backdrop of “certain power struggles central to the reproduction...of a whole form of social life” (p. 222). Application of Eagleton’s ideas enabled the author to explore the historical conditions that informed creation of the ad as well as to highlight the “absences,” “silences” (p. 89), “ruptures” and “disorders” (p. 91) in the model of masculinity evident in it. As White (1992) instructs, ideological analysis centers on “delineating the range of

issues and questions” (p. 182) suggested by a text. We now turn to a brief description of the ad.

### **“Time for a Change”**

As the ad begins, the viewer sees a boy, perhaps 11 or 12, get up out of his seat to exit a largely empty school bus. Ahead of him, several children banter as they head down the stairs and out into the schoolyard. As the boy walks down the aisle, a whimper is heard, then a sniffle. The boy turns; the ad cuts to reveal a little girl, about the same age, huddled against the wall of the bus, rubbing her eye. She is crying. The boy stops; the girl turns slightly, as if she realizes someone is there. He takes a step or two backward, and leans in between the seats. “The thing is,” he begins, thumb hooked in his backpack strap, “people think boys are loud and immature and don’t care about feelings. But” – here he pauses and extends a packet of Kleenex toward the girl – “they’re wrong.” Plodding guitars and woodwinds give way to a brief crescendo. The girl takes a tissue, thanks the boy, and dabs at her eye. The ad cuts to a shot taken from the front of the bus; the boy stands back and lets the girl climb out of her seat. He follows her down the aisle and, presumably, off the bus. She smiles wanly. The viewer now hears a slow waltz, topped by what sounds like a xylophone playing a melody that suggests childlike innocence. Voice actor Tom Ciappa announces “Kleenex – someone needs one” as the product’s well known logo, the new slogan, and the Kleenex web address appear on screen. The ad concludes when an animated hand coming out of the second “e” in the logo gently gives a tissue to a hand coming out of the last “e.”

### **Discussion**

Is “Time for a Change” the site of a counterhegemonic message, as was the case in “He Thinks He’ll Keep Her” (Sellnow, 1999)? Does it begin to idealize a new masculinity that favors open displays by young boys of compassion and empathy? This analysis reveals the answer to both questions is no, for reasons that will now be explained in detail. As was the case with news media coverage of “stay-at-home dads” explored by Vavrus (2002), the Kleenex ad normalizes the boy’s emerging ability to be compassionate as “properly masculine” (p. 353). It does so by having him exhibit some of the traits we still associate with society’s dominant model of masculinity (Trujillo, 1991). Upon hearing the girl cry – and after a moment of hesitation – he took control of the situation; he became the ad’s primary actor. The boy dominated the dialogue – the girl says only one word to his 18 – and decisively offered a solution, or at least a salve, for the girl’s anguish. While the girl did not challenge the premise that boys do not care about feelings, the boy framed his act of kindness with an unsolicited defense of that premise (“The thing is...”)

The packet of tissues, not visible in the opening shot, was forcefully inserted into the conversation as if to punctuate the boy’s ability to come up with

a solution. It reinforced the idea he had mastered the tools necessary to solve the problem. Moreover, his calm, matter of fact manner suggested that he viewed the encounter as a task he had to complete in order to restore order. Once the girl collected herself, the school day could continue. This efficient, productive display of kindness is “man’s work” (Trujillo, p. 291). He imagined himself as the girl’s protector. On the way off the bus, his position behind her suggested his role changed to bodyguard. It could also be argued that he engaged in a behavior that the audience would have expected, again thanks to exposure to stereotypes, to see from another young girl.

The ad offers glimpses of the “leveling” of gender differences discussed by Hanke (1990). Trujillo might note that the boy was a bit “daring” (p. 291) for having the courage to help the girl. He took a chance by beginning a social relationship, albeit a temporary one (viewers are not informed if the children know each other), with a girl – something typically not on the radar of boys his age and that could have, if discovered, provoked ridicule from his peers, as Myers (2012) might note. Thus, the boy was not as brave as a cursory reading of the ad would suggest. Before talking to the girl, he checked to see if his school busmates – some older boys presumably among them – had departed. He made sure they could not hear him – and then checked again to see if he had been discovered, midway through saying “loud and immature.” Moreover, he talked to the girl in what can best be described as a declarative whisper – again, so the other kids, now outside talking, remained unaware that he was offering comfort. The slightly remorseful look on his face as he spoke indicated that he had bypassed previous opportunities to console classmates.

Repeated viewings revealed, however, that in fact the boy had not really comforted the girl. He showed little genuine concern for her. The girl’s sadness provided the boy with an opportunity to test drive his compassion. Before the boy spoke, he pursed his lips slightly as if he were mustering the courage to express himself. The soundtrack paused briefly to underscore and promote the significance of what was about to occur. And then, to use a current phrase, the ad became “all about him.” The boy could have sat down next to the girl – the seat next to her was unoccupied – and consoled her, but instead he chose not to enter the “private sphere” (Vavrus, p. 363) to ask her what was wrong. He did not give her a chance to talk, beyond thanking him for the tissue. He determined when they should leave the bus. The viewer was left to speculate about what caused her to cry – a single interaction or the by-product of a flawed institutional policy. Perhaps she was bullied, had an argument with a friend, or was nervous about the first day of school. The audience remains uninformed about what brought on her tears.

But the boy acted – he protected his reputation, but he acted. He rescued the girl, as so often happens in media texts. He was more concerned with how the expression of sympathy would play out – how it sounded – and how it would affect him. Meanwhile, one of the boys headed off the bus allowed a girl to move off her seat and exit ahead of him. He acted without soliloquy, although to be accurate, what he said, despite the author’s repeated viewings, was indecipherable. Preamble completed, the boy again steeled himself. He paused

briefly and again compressed his lips and tightened his jaw as if to say to himself, “here goes nothing.” The boy’s mannerisms and vocal tone suggested that he rehearsed the line. Relieved – or emboldened – by the fact he correctly delivered his line, he reached into his backpack for the Kleenex. The ad then cut to the girl, bracketed by the seats, a position that made her appear fragile and contained. As referenced earlier, the boy’s right hand holding the tissues emphatically entered the shot as he concluded “they’re wrong.”

It is more important to the boy that he performed this set of behaviors – that he defended the potential of boys to care about feelings – than it was to act compassionately. The girl looked up at him, grimaced, and weakly removed the tissue from the package. It opened like a parachute as she pulled it, giving the impression that it was heavy and hard for her to control. She dabbed at her eye just once, a bit confused and oblivious to his self-important posturing. This single forceful act had ended her sadness, although her grimace suggests she is unfamiliar with this kind of behavior in boys, or perhaps in any of her peers. The quick transition reinforces stereotypical depictions of women as hysterical and overly emotional.

The boy in the ad was unable or unwilling to consider context before acting. It could be that the girl had just started to cry, that she was nearly done, or that the snuffle and anguished moan conveyed the full depth of her sadness. She could have been remembering a lost loved one, been thinking about a sad movie, or have been immersed in a happy memory. None of these possibilities were relevant to the boy. He saw her crying, checked to make sure he would not be seen helping her, and leapt – sheepishly – into action, as men in so many media texts are wont to do. The function of her sadness is to enable the viewer to witness the boy’s enlightened behavior. Her sadness is pushed aside; it was less important than the chance for the boy to express kindness.

The boy was proud of his action. He practically strutted off the bus behind the girl, his duty performed, his mastery evident – to no one except the girl and perhaps the bus driver. How much pride he felt was contingent on the fact his feat was unseen by his peers; it took place in a safe “middle space” (Vavrus, p. 363). He was not ready to make his newfound sensitivity available for public consumption. What would he have said, for example, to the kids presumably milling around on the way into school if they deduced that he had helped the girl – that he gave her the Kleenex? He could have dissembled and said he was on the back of the bus and that her emotional outburst delayed his exit. But his face – his proud face – tells the real story. He *had* helped her. Yet he stayed stoic, measured – even “manly.” He showed little emotion during the act, and even less in the aftermath of it. His face, pace, and, bouncy gait affirmed that he was “just doing his job.”

Even if the other kids figured out he had shown kindness to girl, reverting to a typically male demeanor might have diffused the situation. While it is not clear how much time passed between their conversation and when they head off the bus, the girl held the tissue, barely used, in her hand as they walked toward the exit. Yet her mood was brighter; she smiled as they walked. At one point, she briefly looked down at the tissue. Her reaction – and her slight grimace earlier in

the ad – conveyed the impression that she might have been humoring the boy, or was surprised at what had just transpired; nevertheless, his mere presence and forceful action had saved the day. The combination of her facial expressions confirms the centrality of his experience and the secondary status assigned in the ad to hers.

## Conclusions

A viewer could be forgiven for concluding the Kleenex ad announces the arrival on the scene of an enlightened young male. It does present a simple act of kindness – a welcome antidote to the endless flow of negative and tragic news coming out of the nation’s schools. The viewer could also be forgiven for hoping that children who see the ad absorb and copy the boy’s compassionate behavior toward the girl. Armed with this knowledge, children might begin early to form richer friendships, to develop the capacity to feel empathy.

The Kleenex ad extends a “discourse of legitimation” (Vavrus, 2002, p. 353) begun in best-selling books (e.g. Pollack, 1999; Kindlon and Thompson, 2000) that encourage parents to treat their male children lovingly as they grow up in the hope they will become compassionate adults. In doing so, the ad redefines expressing one’s emotions – but only so freely and with a goal in mind – as “properly masculine” (p. 353). It is therefore “complicit” (Hanke, 1992) with society’s still dominant model of masculinity. The ad invites viewers to treat this simple act of minimal compassion as heroic, even though the boy hides from his classmates before delivering his short speech and offering the tissue to the girl. He exhibits an expanded form of masculinity that values compassion only if it is expressed tersely, decisively, and in secret. After asserting that boys indeed care about feelings, the boy ends his emotional connection to the girl; he was concerned with completing his task and getting off the bus. As they exit, the boy raised his eyebrows slightly, as if to indicate “well – that was easy!”

Whatever the boy has learned is mitigated by the suggestion that he is to be lauded for this and other minor signs of emotional growth. As referenced in the previous section, the girl walked off the bus having used the tissue only once; the boy’s rehearsed statement eased her pain, but it also caused her to be impressed by his limited display of emotion. She looked at the tissue as if it had magical properties – perhaps she planned to save it as a memento of their interaction. The suggestion of adulation is perhaps a nod by the ad’s creators to the at times overheated concern from some observers (e.g. Twenge, 2006) that children today receive praise and accolades just for being courteous and for the most trivial of accomplishments. The ad’s creators resisted the impulse to have the boy “drop the mike,” although the pride on his face and the eyebrow raise seen as they leave the bus could be seen as conveying that message. Thus, this version of masculinity privileges self-referential behavior. “Classify your antagonists as haters,” Colson Whitehead (2015) wrote recently in the *New York Times*, “and your flaws are absolved by their greater sin of envy.” The boy’s whispered but emphatic delivery indicate he may be refuting unseen “haters” –

teachers, parents, other kids – who envy his ability to take charge and show compassion at the same time.

Finally, the mere fact the ad made it on air and on to the Internet indicates the model of masculinity personified by the boy is palatable to Kimberly-Clark. This “new view of manhood” (Hanke, 1990, p. 247) is just progressive enough for company executives. It will not damage the buying environment set up by the ad’s main message – to buy Kleenex. The largely positive responses to the ad on the company’s YouTube page (VSA Partners Chicago, 2015) indicate that the ad has not dampened the public’s “buying mood (Bagdikian, 2000, p. 133). If during the creative process an earlier version of the ad showed the boy sitting down and engaging the girl in a deep discussion of what caused her to cry, or crying with the girl because he too was nervous about the first day of school, or coming to the aid of another boy, Kimberly-Clark might have asked for revisions, out of fear airing the ad would provoke a negative reaction from segments of the public still made uncomfortable by a truly expanded, enlightened take on masculinity. Instead, parents will learn that their young sons can exhibit a minimum amount of self-involved kindness – outside the gaze of peers – and still be considered masculine by society. Meanwhile, young boys who truly are compassionate, who are developing empathy and the ability to listen, who help others without self-reflexive preamble, and whose behavior truly challenges the dominant model of masculinity, remain largely absent, to use Eagleton’s (1991) word, in media content. Having a young boy acting in a truly compassionate fashion remains on the list of non-hegemonic behaviors that can be used by content producers to valorize hegemonic masculinity.

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