

REPRESENTATIONS OF MODERN MASCULINITY IN DOVE MENCARE USA ADVERTISEMENTS: A PEIRCEAN SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract: This research analyzes how Dove Men+Care USA advertisements represent modern masculinity and reframe male roles within cultural and commercial contexts. A qualitative approach based on Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework was employed to analyze 45 scenes selected from four Dove Men+Care USA advertisements released between 2022 and 2024. The analysis focused on iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs to interpret how visual and textual elements construct meanings associated with masculinity and care. The findings show that the advertisements challenge traditional masculine ideals by emphasizing empathy, inclusivity, and caregiving while simultaneously incorporating these values into commercial branding strategies. The study contributes to masculinity and media research by demonstrating how Peirce's semiotic framework can be systematically applied to interpret representations of contemporary masculinity in advertising. It further highlights the dual function of advertising as both a medium for negotiating changing gender norms and a mechanism for embedding those meanings within consumer culture.

Keywords: modern masculinity, Peircean semiotics, advertisement, male representation, Dove Men+Care

INTRODUCTION

The debate surrounding masculinity has increasingly moved beyond theoretical discussions into everyday social and cultural practices. Since the early 2020s, portrayals of men in popular media have evolved from traditional masculine ideals, often characterized by assertiveness, dominance, and physical strength, toward more plural, emotionally expressive, and caring forms of masculinity. This transformation has been influenced by several social factors, including the expansion of paid parental leave policies, the growing global attention to men's mental health, and widespread reactions to hyper-masculine figures in digital spaces. These changes reflect broader societal negotiations over gender norms and invite a reexamination of how masculinity is represented across different media platforms (Bamford, 2025; Brandth & Kvande, 2018; Wojnicka & de Boise, 2025). In this study, modern masculinity is understood as a form of masculine identity that moves beyond traditional ideals of dominance, emotional restraint, and authority by emphasizing emotional expressiveness, empathy, caregiving, equality, and self-definition (Kreichbergs, 2023; Roberts & Prattes, 2024). This operational definition serves as the analytical basis for identifying and interpreting visual and textual signs representing masculinity in Dove Men+Care advertisements.

Empirical research underscores the significance of these shifts. For instance, Bamford (2025) found that paternity leave policies within multinational corporations strengthen men's paternal agency, enabling them to redefine fatherhood both domestically and professionally. Pivetti et al. (2023) also demonstrated that paid parental leave is positively correlated with

flexible gender role attitudes, encouraging more egalitarian household divisions. Brandth & Kvande (2018) added that fathers' independent experiences of caregiving reshape masculine identities without undermining their social legitimacy as men. These findings align with the framework of *caring masculinities*, which emphasizes empathy and emotional connection as integral to male identity (Roberts & Prattes, 2024). However, this transformation is not entirely linear. As Bareket & Fiske (2025) argued, changes in traditional gender orders can trigger defensive or hostile responses among men, especially in contexts where patriarchal privilege feels threatened. Consequently, representations of masculinity in media occupy a dynamic space of both social acceptance and resistance.

Media and advertising play a pivotal role in this process by not only reflecting but also shaping the meanings attached to gender. Advertisements function as cultural texts that construct and normalize specific ideals of masculinity, thereby influencing public perceptions, policy debates, and personal identities. For example, Petts et al. (2020) and Yang et al. (2022) found that fathers' participation in caregiving, especially through paternity leave, enhances family well-being, while Rudman & Mescher (2013) highlighted the "flexibility stigma" men face when taking such leave, being perceived as less committed to work. These tensions between changing expectations and structural barriers make advertising a powerful arena for negotiating what it means to "be a man" in the 21st century.

Scholars have explored this issue from various angles. Hunter et al. (2017) examined the cultural tension between hegemonic and caring masculinities, while Byrne & Milestone (2023) highlighted the persistence of "invisible consumption," where men maintain traditional masculine images even in self-care practices. Kreicbergs (2023) identified emotional expressiveness, equality, and self-definition as key traits of modern masculinity, whereas Islentyeva & Zimmermann (2023) analyzed how visual cues such as body posture, gaze, and product positioning construct gendered identities in advertising. Farida et al. (2025) demonstrated the usefulness of Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic semiotic framework (comprising *representamen*, *object*, and *interpretant*) in decoding advertising messages, though their focus was on female-oriented personal care products.

Despite these valuable contributions, several research gaps remain. First, most studies employ discourse analysis, experimental psychology, or consumer perception methods, with limited application of Peirce's semiotic theory in the analysis of masculinity. Second, while research on gender representation often focuses on food, grooming, or lifestyle advertising (Byrne & Milestone, 2023; Islentyeva & Zimmermann, 2023), personal care advertisements, where the male body and emotions are central, remain underexplored. Third, although scholars such as Hunter et al. (2017), Kreicbergs (2023), and Valsecchi et al. (2023) have addressed modern masculinity, they rarely connect these insights to systematic Peircean semiotic interpretation. This study addresses these methodological and conceptual gaps by employing Peirce's model to analyze the processes of signification through which modern masculinity is constructed in advertising.

Building upon these gaps, this study systematically applies Peirce's semiotic framework to contemporary Dove Men+Care USA advertisements to examine how modern masculinity is constructed through visual and textual signs. Rather than emphasizing audience responses or advertising discourse, the study focuses on the process of signification, demonstrating how advertising simultaneously communicates cultural meanings of masculinity and incorporates those meanings into brand identity. In doing so, the study extends the application of Peircean semiotics within masculinity and media studies by examining how visual and textual signs construct representations of modern masculinity and communicate both cultural and commercial meanings in contemporary men's personal care advertising. Based on these considerations, the present study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the signs of modern masculinity found in Dove Men+Care USA's advertisements?
2. How do Dove Men+Care USA's advertisements represent modern masculinity?

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to masculinity and media studies by providing a semiotic perspective on how advertising constructs and communicates contemporary representations of masculinity. The study may also inform researchers, advertisers, and media practitioners interested in gender representation in commercial communication.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative semiotic approach to examine the representation of modern masculinity in Dove Men+Care advertisements. The data consisted of 45 selected scenes from four official Dove Men+Care video advertisements published between 2022 and 2024. Each scene was captured as a screenshot and analyzed for its visual elements and written on-screen texts. Audio elements, including narration, dialogue, music, and sound effects, were excluded to maintain the study's focus on visual-textual signs.

The analysis was grounded in Peirce's triadic model of the sign, consisting of *representamen*, *object*, and *interpretant*. Signs were further classified according to Peirce's typology: *qualisign*, *sinisign*, and *legisign* at the representamen level; *icon*, *index*, and *symbol* in relation to the object; and *rheme*, *dicisign*, and *argument* at the interpretant level (Chandler, 2007; Copley & Jansz, 1999). This framework enabled the study to identify how visual and textual signs generate meanings associated with masculinity.

The advertisements were purposively selected based on their thematic relevance to masculinity, richness of visual and textual signs, and engagement with issues such as fatherhood, racial diversity, and male affection. Data were collected through documentation and repeated non-participant observation of the advertisements. Relevant scenes were identified, captured as screenshots, and compiled into a visual-textual corpus, while written on-screen texts were transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis was conducted iteratively following qualitative data analysis procedures adapted from Creswell and Creswell (2022). First, relevant scenes were selected and irrelevant visual material was excluded. Second, visual and textual signs were coded and grouped according to recurring themes. Third, the identified signs were analyzed using Peirce's triadic structure and sign typology. Finally, the resulting interpretants were contextualized within discourses of modern masculinity, with Kreicbergs (2023) providing conceptual reference points such as emotional expressiveness, compassion, equality, open-mindedness, and self-definition.

Coding and data organization were conducted manually using Microsoft Word. To enhance analytical trustworthiness, the coding and interpretations were independently reviewed by a peer familiar with qualitative semiotic research, and differences were discussed until consensus was reached.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study analyzed four Dove Men+Care USA advertisements using Peirce's semiotic framework to examine how modern masculinity is constructed through visual and verbal signs. The findings reveal consistent ideological patterns across campaigns, although each advertisement emphasizes different narrative elements. Overall, masculinity is portrayed as caring, emotionally expressive, inclusive, and relational, while fatherhood is represented as both biological and non-biological. The following section outlines the four findings, followed

by an integrated discussion that examines cultural codes, ideological meanings, consumer ideology, and cross-advertisement comparison.

FINDINGS

Emotional and Caring Fatherhood

Dove Men+Care portrays masculinity primarily through emotionally engaged, hands-on fatherhood. *Indexical* signs such as hugging, carrying, smiling with, or leaning toward children depict fathers as present and nurturing. These scenes serve as *sinsigns* and *icons* of real caregiving moments (e.g., a father carrying children or pushing a stroller), generating *interpretants* of emotional closeness. As these representations recur across the dataset, they develop into *legisigns* that culturally anchor fatherhood in affection and attentiveness. Symbolic elements, including the use of fathers' social-media handles, extend this caring identity into public digital spaces. This positions caregiving not merely as a private practice but as a socially acknowledged marker of masculine identity.

Non-Biological and Inclusive Fatherhood

The advertisements also promote an inclusive view of fatherhood that legitimizes non-biological caregivers such as adoptive fathers, stepfathers, grandfathers, uncles, and teachers. *Indexical* signs such as warm hugs, closed-eye embraces, sustained eye contact depict deep emotional bonds that do not rely on blood ties. Textual cues such as “*Dad to Gabby*,” “*Father figure to Nathaniel*,” and “*You don’t have to be a father to be a Dad*” explicitly frame fatherhood as relational and choice-based. Through *semiosis*, these captions function as *sinsigns* and symbols that introduce alternative paternal identities, later solidifying into *legisigns* that culturally authorize non-biological fatherhood. Visual *icons*, such as an adoptive father hugging teenagers, produce *interpretants* of genuine intimacy, reinforcing that emotional involvement, not lineage, defines paternal identity.

Male Emotional Vulnerability and Bonding

A third theme is the normalization of male emotional vulnerability. The advertisements depict men hugging, crying, bowing their heads, or supporting one another through physical gestures. These *indexical* signs frame male emotional expression as legitimate and culturally accepted. *Symbolic signs* such as the caption “*NEED A HUG?*” encourage help-seeking and emotional openness among men. In the *semiosis* process, moments like two men hugging or groups embracing operate as *icons* of solidarity that produce *interpretants* of trust and emotional closeness. Their repetition across the dataset transforms vulnerability into a *legisign* of modern masculinity.

Symbolic Branding and Emotional Commodification

Dove Men+Care also constructs masculinity through branding that commodifies emotional values. Logos, slogans, and product visuals act as *symbolic signs* linking care and emotional responsibility to product use. Recurring brand markers, such as the Dove Men+Care logo and taglines like “*Care makes a Dad*” and “*GIVE YOU CONFIDENCE TO CARE*” associate caregiving with the consumption of personal-care products. Through *semiosis*, product images function as *legisigns* and symbols that signify comfort and protection. When repeatedly paired with emotional narratives, they generate *interpretants* that equate masculine care with brand identity. For example, “*Care makes a Dad*” symbolically asserts that fatherhood is defined by care; when linked to the brand logo, it constructs an argument that modern masculinity is both emotional and consumable.

To provide a concise overview of the findings, Table 1 summarizes the four major themes identified in the analysis, together with their representative signs, Peircean classifications, and resulting interpretants. This summary serves as a reference for the subsequent discussion of their broader cultural and ideological meanings.

Table 1. Summary of Semiotic Findings

Theme	Representative Signs	Peircean Classification	Interpretant
Emotional and Caring Fatherhood	Hugging, carrying children, smiling, pushing strollers	Index, Icon, Sinsign	Caring and emotionally engaged fatherhood
Non-Biological and Inclusive Fatherhood	"Dad to...", hugs, eye contact	Symbol, Index, Legisign	Fatherhood based on care rather than biological ties
Male Emotional Vulnerability and Bonding	Hugging, crying, "Need a Hug?"	Index, Symbol, Legisign	Emotional openness and solidarity
Symbolic Branding and Emotional Commodification	Dove logo, "Care Makes a Dad", "Give You Confidence to Care"	Symbol, Legisign	Emotional care associated with brand identity and product consumption

DISCUSSION

Cultural Codes and Social Context

The four themes reflect broader cultural codes of contemporary U.S. masculinity. These findings are consistent with Kreicbergs' (2023) concept of modern masculinity, which emphasizes emotional expressiveness, empathy, and caregiving as central masculine traits. Rather than reinforcing traditional ideals centered on stoicism and breadwinning, the advertisements reframe fatherhood as a relational and emotionally responsive practice. Emotional warmth and caregiving, represented through hugs, smiles, eye contact, and physical touch, function as culturally legible signs of intimate father-child bonds (Jean et al., 2009; Vogl et al., 2021). Non-biological fatherhood is legitimized through depictions of adoptive fathers, stepfathers, and community-based paternal roles, aligning with research demonstrating that quality of care, rather than genetic connection, defines effective parenting (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Golombok, 2015; Gold & Edin, 2023; Volling & Palkovitz, 2021). This finding supports the notion of modern masculinity as an inclusive identity that rejects rigid gender norms and broadens fatherhood beyond biological relationships (Kreicbergs, 2023). Male vulnerability, including tears, physical affection, and peer bonding, reflects changing attitudes toward masculinity, emotional well-being, and public displays of care (Connor et al., 2021; Duthie et al., 2024; MacArthur & Shields, 2015; Laestadius & Wahl, 2017). These signs indicate that Dove Men+Care embeds its campaigns within ongoing social shifts, including post-pandemic involvement in domestic labor (Carlson et al., 2022; Carlson & Petts, 2022) and gender equality debates (Hunter et al., 2017; Byrne & Milestone, 2023).

Ideological Meaning and Power Relations

Dove Men+Care conveys a progressive ideology of masculinity, associating care, empathy, and emotional engagement with male identity (Hall, 1997; Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). The normalization of emotional vulnerability further challenges traditional expectations that men should suppress emotion. Instead, the advertisements present compassion, emotional openness, and interpersonal connection as legitimate expressions of masculine identity, consistent with contemporary scholarship on male emotional expression. *Indexical* and *symbolic signs*, such as fathers hugging or using slogans like "Care Makes a Dad," encode

fatherhood as an active practice rather than a biological status. Nevertheless, patriarchal structures are subtly maintained: men remain central figures, and vulnerability is presented within socially acceptable contexts (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Goffman, 1979; Harrington, 2021; Anderson & McCormack, 2018; Kreicbergs, 2023). This ambivalence demonstrates that while the advertisements challenge hegemonic masculinity, they operate within dominant ideological systems.

Consumer Ideology

The campaigns transform progressive values into marketable assets. Slogans and product placement link emotional qualities, care, empathy, responsibility, to Dove Men+Care products (Williamson, 1978; Mccracken, 1986). Consumers may internalize these meanings, negotiating between authentic emotional identity and symbolic consumption (Hall, 1997; SINGH, 2011; Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holt, 2002). Thus, the brand commodifies masculinity, making emotional openness a purchasable lifestyle while reinforcing corporate authority over cultural ideals.

Accordingly, empathy and self-care are not only represented as characteristics of modern masculinity but are also incorporated into the brand's commercial identity, positioning emotional care as a symbolic value associated with product consumption.

Comparison Across Advertisements

A comparative reading reveals both coherence and variation. All campaigns position care as the core of masculine identity, yet each advertisement emphasizes a different narrative dimension:

- *Changing How the World Views Black Fatherhood* foregrounds intimate individual experiences of Black dads.
- *#CelebrateBlackDads* emphasizes community-centered and collective identity.
- *#HugLikeADoveMan* normalizes male vulnerability and public emotional expression.
- *Care Makes a Dad* reframes fatherhood through empathy rather than biology.

These variations allow Dove Men+Care to engage different social issues (racial visibility, mental health, family diversity) while maintaining a unified ideological foundation. The brand negotiates between modern and traditional codes: paternal authority becomes emotional guidance, vulnerability becomes authenticity, and fathers remain central figures. This hybrid form reflects the adaptive nature of hegemonic masculinity, aligning with Kreicbergs (2023) notion of modern masculinity as empathetic yet structurally male-centered.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to identify the signs of modern masculinity represented in Dove Men+Care USA advertisements and to analyze how these signs construct contemporary masculine identities using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework. Through the qualitative analysis of forty-five scenes from four advertisements released between 2022 and 2024, the research successfully met both objectives.

The study identified a wide range of visual and textual signs (*icons, indices, symbols, qualisigns, sinsigns, legisigns, rhemes, dicisigns, and arguments*) that illustrate how masculinity is portrayed through caregiving behaviors, emotional expression, intimate gestures, and relational interactions. These signs consistently mapped onto four thematic findings: (1) emotional and caring fatherhood, (2) non-biological and inclusive fatherhood, (3) male emotional vulnerability and bonding, and (4) symbolic branding and emotional commodification. Through Peirce's triadic model, the study demonstrated how *representamens* (visual gestures, captions, facial expressions), *objects* (paternal identity, emotional

connection), and *interpretants* (meanings of empathy, responsibility, vulnerability) interact to construct modern masculine identities.

The analysis also revealed that Dove Men+Care's representations align with broader cultural shifts in U.S. society, particularly discourses celebrating men's caregiving roles, emotional openness, and inclusive family structures. At the same time, the study found that these progressive values are embedded within brand strategy, where emotional traits become symbolic capital linked to product consumption. Thus, Dove Men+Care both challenges and reinforces dominant masculinity: it promotes empathy, vulnerability, and relationality while maintaining men as central figures and converting emotional values into marketable brand identities.

Through these findings, the study fulfills its methodological and conceptual aims. It extends the application of Peircean semiotics to masculinity studies, demonstrating how signs operate not only as communicative units but also as ideological tools shaping cultural narratives. It also contributes to gender and media scholarship by showing how advertisements function simultaneously as cultural artifacts and commercial instruments that redefine, negotiate, and commodify contemporary masculinity.

Overall, this research provides theoretical and practical insights for scholars, advertisers, and policymakers. It highlights how modern masculinity is constructed through visual-textual sign systems that humanize care, legitimize diverse paternal roles, and normalize male vulnerability. At the same time, it cautions that such representations remain entangled with consumer ideology, where emotional authenticity becomes a branded lifestyle. These conclusions underscore the complex interplay between culture, identity, and commerce in the evolving landscape of masculine representation.

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