THE COMMODIFICATION OF MASCULINITY WITHIN MEN’S MAGAZINE
ADVERTISEMENTS: WITH WHAT AND HOW DO WE MAKE THE MAN?

A thesis presented to
the faculty of
the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts

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August 2003
This thesis entitled
THE COMMODIFICATION OF MASCULINITY WITHIN MEN’S MAGAZINE ADVERTISEMENTS: WITH WHAT AND HOW DO WE MAKE THE MAN?

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A large body of research on men and masculinity has emerged in the past decade, paralleling the already vast writings on, and explorations of, women and feminism. Just as feminism has critiqued and examined the ways in which women and femininity are shaped and constructed by society, so too has recent research discussed social constructions of manhood. While such masculine examinations may seem contradictory to the aims of feminism on a superficial level, they actually support and further feminist work by deconstructing and analyzing the social and cultural expectations for men. In essence, such research uncovers what it means to be a man in contemporary US society (i.e., masculinity), which cannot occur without also understanding societal expectations for women. The category of masculine is itself a nebulous one, and is characterized by a range of behaviors, appearances, words, and presentations, that serve to organize social life by ascribing meaning to the sex category of man. Previous writings have discussed each of these gendered phenomena at some level and in various contexts, such as those focusing on sexuality (Kimmel, 1990; Dines, Jensen, & Russo, 1998; Stoltenberg, 1999), violence (Katz, 1999; Hatty, 2000) identity (Connell, 1995), embodiment (Edwards, 1997; Bordo, 1999), historical development (Kimmel, 1996), and social change (Kimmel, 1987; Stoltenberg, 1999; Connell, 2000; Pease, 2001), among others. Although these researchers have examined the methods through which various aspects of masculinity are shaped and reinforced socially, few have looked to these active constructions in relation to, and within a, consumer culture. In this work, masculinity is examined as it is constructed through
advertisements; specifically, the ways in which masculinity is related to certain products, and the form and content of masculine identity that is conveyed through such goods. From the sampled advertisements, eight dominant themes emerged as central components of hegemonic masculinity, particularly in relation to consumer goods.

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Acknowledgements

Herein I acknowledge the patience, persistence, and participation of many others that have allowed me to follow this work to its conclusion, however temporary. Most immediately, I must thank Dr. Christine Mattley for her continued guidance and availability throughout this project. Her insight, commentary, and sense of humor have helped alleviate any problems that arose through this work. I would also like to thank Dr. Ronald Hunt and Dr. Mary Beth Krouse for both their helpful comments and suggestions with this project, and their broader educational roles as informers of, and inspirations for this project.

Similarly, I wish to thank Ohio University Men Against Sexism, Positive Action, and Feminist Coalition for continually providing me with an outlet and resource in and from which to draw ideas and perspectives related to this subject matter. Combined with the wonderful encouragement of my family, distraction by my friends, and support and sanity of Andrea Steele, all of those mentioned here are in some way responsible for this work, and I thank them all deeply.
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INTRODUCTION

The importance of feminist critiques in understanding women’s oppression is undeniable as evidenced by the many gains such examinations have wrought in the economic, political, and social realm. Women’s methods of resistance to male societal dominance, as well as their objectives, have evolved dramatically so long as injustice and inequality have existed within this society. Yet many of the successes of various women’s movements have been limited to very specific, concrete alterations in social structures or legal mandates. The political goals of earlier feminist actions have involved legally sanctioned increases in power, such as voting or reproductive control, with the expressed goal of sexual equality. However, many social norms and gender expectations remain unchanged, particularly with regard to men, serving to perpetuate inequality between men and women by preserving notions of masculinity rooted in sexism and patriarchy.

One area in which feminist critiques have shifted, or at least have seen an increased awareness, is in the area of gender as a social construct. An emerging discussion of gender as an identity separate from biological sex, and one that is socially constructed, is a more recent shift within feminist examinations. That is, “man” and “woman” refers to physical characteristics, while masculine and feminine are categories of characteristics culturally assigned to men and women through socialization, whereby gender is socially constructed (Kimmel, 2000).

The actual term social construction is rooted in the symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective of George Herbert Mead (Farganis, 1998) who postulated that we assign meaning to our words and actions through subjective interpretation, then react in accordance with these interpretations. More recent configurations of social constructionism have examined language and its relational meaning to understand the ways in which we shape our experience through
language (Grodin & Lindlof, 1996). In relation to gender, then, we construct our gender identities through social interaction guided by norms and expectations. This contradicts the idea that masculinity and femininity are related in some way to the biological makeup of men and women. Rather, a range of characteristics are socially ascribed to men and women and are reinforced by social expectations and cultural norms, maintaining a culturally defined dichotomy between men and women, and therefore masculinity and femininity.

Recognizing this social constructionist perspective runs contrary to the deterministic, essentialist view that is generally held outside of social scientific or feminist circles, whereby men and women are thought to embody some true sense of masculinity and femininity rooted in biology. However, it is crucial to recognize the degree of variability among men and women in terms of gender characteristics and definitions in order to redefine potentially harmful cultural ideals. The degree of both interpersonal and intrapersonal gender variation illustrates the reflexivity of gender identity throughout the lifespan and across contexts. Further, the prevailing ideals of femininity have already been deconstructed and rejected as a result of earlier feminist struggles that have deemed predominant notions of what it means to be a woman as oppressive. The discrepancy between the remaining patriarchal social structure and gradually shifting social norms may be the result of earlier feminist separatist ideas that served to essentialize all men as oppressors. In so doing, men may not have recognized and addressed their individual role in perpetuating, and possibly addressing, sexism and its direct relationship to masculinity as a social, cultural (not biological) phenomenon.

Although this in no way negates the validity of the struggles of feminism, it is extremely important to recognize the necessary role of men in ending sexism. Because men and women coexist in society, both sexes must accept some basic tenets of feminism for a shift toward a
more egalitarian society to occur. However, just as race and class are invisible to those who benefit from these categories, most men largely ignore patriarchal domination, for they benefit regularly from their position within this society (Kimmel, 2001). Further, following the idea of refusing to fix something that is not viewed as broken, men have generally not seen gender as the most pressing issue in need of address. However, in a male-dominated society, the powerful and privileged members of society (i.e., men) must seek and enact change for fundamental power structures to be altered, for it is around and by men and masculinity that contemporary society is structured.

In this sense, then, feminism must also be accepted and recognized by men for fundamental societal changes to occur. That is, the powerful and privileged members of society must necessarily view their oppression of others as immediately important to their own lives. Many believe that for men to desire change in terms of their relationships with both women and men, they must be directly affected by oppression to desire such change. While this may not be a necessary goal of feminist movements, it is certainly an area in which men can focus to create a more urgent recognition of the impact of sexism and patriarchal domination on all lives. This has been one of the key points raised by sociological researcher of masculinity Michael Kimmel, and one that is often received with mixed response.

While Kimmel’s intentions are very much in line with feminist thinking, in that he desires to end all forms of oppression, he understands the difficult task of motivating men to recognize and understand their own privilege. Therefore, Kimmel’s primary focus involves highlighting areas in which masculinity, as it has been socially constructed within our society, actually harms men (1987). Kimmel, in addition to other masculinity theorists (Messner, 1992; Stoltenberg, 1999; Sabo, 2001), uses this method with the intention of raising consciousness of
the problems related to the rigid forms of masculinity that define male existence, much like the consciousness raising groups of feminist women. Rather than narrowly addressing feminism and anti-sexism in terms of men oppressing and exploiting women, Kimmel, and others, focus on social constructions of gender that harm both men and women.
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This objective reaches beyond simply focusing on men’s issues, or men’s harmful behavior, and compliments discussing areas in which gender restricts and guides women’s and men’s social relationships and identities. It is important to understand this distinction, for although feminist social theorists view masculinity as the root cause of a host of problems for men and women, it is also believed to be at the root of many larger social problems. Some of society’s most pressing dilemmas, such as violence, sexual assault, inequality, crime, and education, have all been tied to problematic masculine roots in various ways (Haddy, 2000; Kimmel & Messner, 2001; Messner, 1997).

In referring to the concept of masculinity, it is important to distinguish the gender category of masculine from the biological/social category of man, and to clarify precisely which form of masculinity is being examined. The term hegemony has been reconceptualized from Antonio Gramsci’s concept of legitimizing social and political order along dominant class lines, to understand contemporary masculinity (Connell, 1995). In this sense, hegemonic masculinity is a form of gender performance and identity that is both structurally and culturally supported, and as such, serves to legitimize the status quo of patriarchy. In short, such masculinity appears natural and normal, much like the hegemony Gramsci spoke of with regard to class. Herein lies the relevance of feminism in deconstructing hegemonic masculinity, piercing its legitimacy and exposing its socially constructed, and potentially exploitative, roots.

Reframing feminist aims in this manner to address a variety of issues has resulted in a surge of scholarship and academic research to further understand the ways in which social constructions of masculinity relate to a myriad of social problems. Perhaps foremost among these researchers, Kimmel asserts his work as a logical extension of the contributions from
women’s studies to understanding gender (1987). Therefore, much of his writing and research focuses on making gender visible to men, and society in general, in order to highlight the problems associated with dominant masculine gender identities. This has also been the goal of many feminist social theorists, such as bell hooks, who have called for a “feminist masculinity” in response to the “sexist masculine identity” that permeates contemporary society (2000, p. 68). Additionally, Manning Marable has called for a unification of Black men and women to fight oppressive stereotypes of Black manhood (1993; as cited in Kimmel, 2001); which are essentially harmful constructions of black masculinity, and often more narrow than representations of white men.

Understanding that men and women can both benefit from reconceptualizing the dominant masculine gender identity, women are increasingly recognizing the degree of fluidity involved in enacting not only female, but also male gender characteristics. Therefore, critical examinations of masculinity must recognize the extent to which patriarchal dominance affects all members of society, while not ignoring the inverse impact of such dominance on minority groups. Similarly, gender must be understood as a flexible description of characteristics that are never truly fixed or associated with one sex, and potentially transgressed at every turn.

This perspective of gender, shared by Judith Butler (1993) and Bob Pease (2000) among others, reaches beyond simple deconstruction and criticism by allowing room for re-creation and redefinition. Thus, masculinity is not only something to be critically examined, but an identity to be altered, shaped, and performed with a historical and social knowledge of its potentially exploitative and harmful consequences. Implicated in this notion of gender is the continual possibility for change, and in terms of masculinity such change implies a more egalitarian and humane identity not rooted in power and dominance. As Butler notes, gender is more of a
symbol representing some culturally shared idea of self. Specifically, gender is a “sign” that, although separate from the body, cannot be understood without the physical body with which it is associated (1993).

In order to truly link these signs to their contextual knowledges, researchers have examined the modes and processes associated with assigning meaning to masculine gender identities, as well as their outcomes within society. To do this, many have focused their work on uncovering the host of media through which masculinity is ascribed meaning and presented as social fact. This goal is reached by examining dominant social institutions such as education, family, and mass media. In “Masculinities at Schools,” Lesko (2000) has collected a variety of perspectives illustrating the aspects of education utilized for indoctrinating boys into a narrowly configured form of masculine identity. Similarly, Michael Messner (1990; as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2001), Don Sabo (2001), and Jackson Katz (1999; 2002), have all examined sports as agents of masculine socialization in terms of reinforcing competition, dominance, and heteronormativity.

Further, because of the near-universal boyhood pressure to engage and excel in sports, this becomes a key area in which masculinity is created, defined, and disciplined. As Messner’s ethnographic work points out, teenage boys and men alike describe experiences of fitting in through sport (1990; as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2001). Additionally, the elevated status one achieves through such participation serves to socialize competition and dominance into the masculine gender role, signaling to boys very early on that such behavior is a necessary component of manhood (Messner, 1990; as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2001). Similarly, Connell discusses the ritual of high school football in many communities, illustrating the degree of gender coding and hegemonic masculinity rampant in contact sports such as football (Connell,
While many aspects of sports reinforce a variety of masculine characteristics, perhaps the most destructive result of masculine socialization is its violent and abusive manifestations.

Arguably the most researched subject in feminist men’s studies, violent behavior and attitudes, while certainly damaging to many women, are largely male phenomena, both in terms of victimization and aggression (Kimmel, 2001). In fact, violence educator Jackson Katz has discussed studying masculinity as a very male-affirmative action for this very reason (1999). That is, discussing violence as an extension of hegemonic social constructions of masculinity is not at all anti-male, but rather, pro-male in terms of the positive impact such discussion may have on men. Not only will men benefit from reducing or eliminating the violence of which they are overwhelmingly the victims, but a male-dominated society on the whole would necessarily improve as a result. This form of proactive education is critical in averting violence by reaching some of its fundamental origins, ultimately aiming to prevent future instances.

In the film “Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity,” Katz presents what he views as links between cultural notions of what it means “to be a man,” and the violent outcomes of these definitions of manhood (1999). One of the most troubling examples of males engaging in violent behavior can be seen by looking to the recent trend of school shootings by teenage boys. As Katz (1999) and others (Kimmel, 2001; Hatty, 2000), have discussed, the assailants have been overwhelmingly male; specifically, males who have felt disenfranchised by the greater society, and their male peers in particular. In her chapter, “Engendering Violence,” Suzanne Hatty discusses various cases of school aggression and assault, illustrating the degree to which rigid, traditional masculine gender identities are implicated in the enactment of violence (2000). In the most immediate sense, masculinity, as it has been socially constructed within US society, must be redefined in order to end concrete forms of violence and control.
To reach this objective, the roots of masculinity must also be examined to understand how such negative characteristics are reproduced and why their problematic conclusions have yet to be averted. Looking to less extreme, but no less harmful, implications of hegemonic masculine identities, we see what bell hooks describes as a “murdered soul,” in terms of the emotional death reinforced through a callous form of manhood (p. 71, 2000). Similarly, Michael Messner describes the results of conforming to narrow definitions of masculinity, as men “pay heavy costs…in shallow relationships, poor health, and early death,” while following notions of power and privilege through such identities (p. 6, 1997). That is, although men have benefited, and continue to benefit, from certain aspects of the hegemonic masculine identity, such as dominance and control, it has undoubtedly resulted in restrictive interactions, ultimately hindering men’s and women’s human experience. Further, masculinity impacts society on the whole, as many negative aspects of the greater society have been linked to men and masculinity, either directly through violent male perpetrators, or indirectly through the reinforcement of control, dominance, and extreme individualism.

This relationship between harmful constructions of masculinity and larger societal problems extends from what many have described as a patriarchal society; a society controlled by, and highly valuing of, men and masculinity. Within such a male-dominated society, problems of men and masculinity can actually be reconceptualized as problems of the larger society due to the structural dominance of men and masculinity. Further, the economic structure of capitalism cannot be separated from the patriarchal organization of society, as that which is profitable within such a male-dominated society often maintains and reinforces patriarchy. The interlocking systems of a capitalist economy and male-dominated cultural, political, and economic sectors have been termed capitalist patriarchy to illustrate the each
maintains the other (Eisenstein, 1979; hooks, 2000). Thus, in a capitalist patriarchy sexism is supported both systemically and culturally, as that which profits is linked directly to economic and cultural male dominance.

Sexist commodification has been studied by many feminist scholars, ranging from concrete explorations of advertising and femininity, such as Jean Kilbourne’s discussions of the harmful ways women are represented in ads (1999; 2000), to more theoretically informed critiques of advertising and the general culture’s devaluation and objectification of women and femininity found in Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight* (1993) and Carol Adams’ *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (2000) and *The Pornography of Meat* (2003), among others. Such works have served to reveal the ways in which sexual and gender inequality have been supported and maintained through an elaborate system of woman objectification and largely unattainable cultural beauty standards. The economics of such profitable exploitation manifest in the products that are specifically marketed to women as a solution to largely fictitious problem constructed through the medium of advertising and the broader culture. That is, women’s subordinate status within this society is established and perpetuated by formulating a feminine ideal, then marketing a variety of woman-specific products whereby women can reduce their culturally defined inadequacies.

This general trend within modern capitalism has shifted the consumption of goods from purchasing specific products with concrete uses, to a more abstract relationship of these goods to constructed identities (Jagger, 2000). To maintain this continual relationship of identity to products, consumers must remain in a similarly continual state of insecurity about some aspect of their lives. Therefore, the advertising industry itself has become a public relations arm of capitalism, whereby goods are no longer advertised to merely sell a product (Jagger, 2000;
Jhally, 1990). Rather, goods and services are immediately associated with a much more nebulous social identity, and one that is steadily changing to perpetually fuel an endless crusade of consumption. In this sense, the supply drives the demand, as goods are manufactured and marketed along similarly manufactured needs and insecurities. In relation to gender, then, a host of products are advertised as necessary components of a particular gender identity. Much of this marketing has targeted the body as a primary source of such identity, particularly with regard to women.

Thus, the body is viewed not so much as a gendered object, as it is a single medium through which gender is communicated (Jagger, 2000). Susan Bordo examined this phenomenon in-depth in her comprehensive book, “Unbearable Weight” (1993). In a philosophically informed analysis, Bordo discusses the elaborate and deeply rooted sexist structures of Western Culture in relation to profit and female subordination. Within the capitalist framework of US society, male control of women’s bodies is essential not only for profitability, but also for legitimizing the patriarchal social order. While Bordo’s work may be one of the most insightful examinations of the commodification of women’s bodies, a host of other feminist scholars have researched similar use of the female body to sell products or services, such as Jean Kilbourne (1999), who noted that women are increasingly encouraged to take up less space and appear less threatening. Despite these scientific, theoretical explorations, masculinity and the commodification of male bodies has only recently come under scrutiny by social scientists.

Just as Bordo has discussed women’s bodies in relation to their functional profitability, she has also more recently examined the narrow displays of male bodies in her book of the same name (1999). In “The Male Body,” Bordo describes the very strict displays of the male body, both in public and private, relating this restriction to equally narrow constructions of masculinity
throughout United States culture (1999). Bordo does note the increase in male bodily display, attributing this shift to an increasingly gay, mainstream consumer market (1999). Edisol Dotson observes a similar trend, linking what he sees as the increasing spectacle and self-reflexivity of men in relation to their bodies, to the increasing representations of ideal male body types throughout Western culture (1999). The bulk of Dotson’s discussion, however, remains at the individual level by examining the increasing “hype and selling” of male beauty as it impacts boy’s and young men’s self-esteem (1999).

While such work is indeed very necessary and all too infrequent, it falls short of a structural analysis to examine the intersections of capitalism and patriarchy within the broader consumer culture. A more direct analysis of masculine identity within the larger capitalist structure has been offered by Tim Edwards’ thorough discussion of the role of men’s fashion in constructing masculine identity (1997). Attributing the recent shift in cultural concern not necessarily to the changes in social norms brought by feminist struggle, but to the rise of consumer capitalism, Edwards’ observations help to place the beauty Dotson discusses within the broader structural intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality for a more comprehensive understanding of shifts in masculine representation (1997; 1999).

The interesting change, then, is not only that it is more socially and culturally acceptable for men to be displayed as fashion and image conscious, but also the role of such displays in shaping how we see men and masculinity increasingly as signified through consumer goods. Much like postmodern sociologist Jean Baudrillard describes in his concept of the “consumer society” (Ritzer, 1997), men are increasingly consuming signifiers of masculine identity by purchasing products and services linked to such signs. As Baudrillard notes, “If we consume the product as product, we consume its meaning through advertising” (1990, in Rivkin & Ryan,
Given this ascription of meaning to consumer goods through advertising, it is important to understand the various mechanisms for reaching this objective in relation to the growing male consumer base.

This is not to say that men’s consumption of products and services are a recent phenomenon; only that linking these purchasing decisions to definitions of masculinity is novel. Although women’s insecurities have always been used to sell products, men’s self-images have recently become profitable vehicles through which products can be marketed, given the combination of cultural and economic forces that have abetted various changes in gender and identity. Despite shifts toward understanding male beauty and aesthetic presentation in relation to its profitability, research on this shift has been minimal, and primarily focused on actual male bodies as opposed to their more abstract, gendered meaning. While the most common instances of such male commodification involve body image, such as that described by Dotson (1999), a more abstract commodification of masculinity has also taken shape.

Although the body can be considered a direct site of gender performance, both in terms of physicality and presentation (e.g., clothing, language, body movement, etc.), certain goods are commonly linked to an ideal notion of masculinity. The definitions of such gender signifiers, though, shift historically, economically, culturally, and contextually, operating through an interlocking combination to give meaning to masculinity. Thus, as Butler (1993) recognizes, gender is anything but fixed, stable, or natural, and must be continuously presented and defined contextually. For consumer goods and services to be gendered, then, it is crucial to examine how this objective is reached.

One of the most powerful ways in which consumer goods become meaningful is through the informational medium of advertising, which is also the primary financial supporter of various
modes of communication in the United States. To understand gender and its contextual meaning at any given time, it is crucial to not only understand the media through which gender is displayed, but also the larger economic and cultural forces that guide its presentation. As Baudrillard suggests (1996), a story of some form must be told within a given advertising display to link the abstract (i.e., the meaning of the ad) to the concrete good for which it is presented. Similarly, the ways in which such products are advertised to men, whether implicitly or explicitly, often point to and describe hegemonic notions of masculinity. Such advertisements cannot be examined without also understanding their context. Thus, it is perhaps equally important to analyze the parallel content of advertisements and the medium through which such advertisements are conveyed.

Whether in terms of television, magazines, or internet websites, any superficial knowledge of marketing reveals that advertising placement is strategically targeted toward a particular audience. In other words, the audience of a certain television show, website, or magazine, is simply a market for the goods advertised within these media, and in the most direct sense, a market for the advertisements themselves. Considering that most, if not all mainstream media outlets are primarily funded through advertising, it is crucial to examine advertisements in relation to media content, even if only for their potential conflation of information with marketing messages. In terms of men’s magazines, then, the advertisements contained within their pages need to be understood in direct relation to the messages being conveyed with the articles themselves. As Jean Kilbourne has discussed in books and a recent video, many women’s magazines include articles directly related to a product advertised within close proximity to the article (2000). Perhaps even more powerful is advertising’s influence on the
entire mediated communication process, to the extent that some have begun to refuse advertising, such as Gloria Steinam’s *Ms.* magazine (1990).

Therefore, it is crucial to understand the linkage between advertising and the messages they promote for its sheer power as a cultural force. To examine and understand advertising critically, the subjectivity of each ad must necessarily be tied to its contextual meaning. Thus, the meaning of each magazine advertisement is constructed through the language and imagery contained both within the ad itself, and the magazine as a whole. Such relational meanings, while largely interpretive, are at the very least, concrete in their aims. As Diane Barthel has described, advertising, while not the only or most important medium conveying masculine identities, remains major part of the cultural landscape, both as a source and reflection of such masculinity (1992). Further, Barthel discusses and reaps the Baudrillardian notion of consuming signs of gender, stating that we use consumer goods to define and reinforce that which is masculine (1992).

In this sense, masculinity is marketed and sold along dominant cultural lines, as consumption is generally not linked to achieving and constructing marginalized identities. Within a capitalist, patriarchal society, then, the form of masculinity that is likely to be most linked to profit is one that equates notions of manhood with dominance, control, violence, emotional callousness, and exploitation. Further, because products per se are not inherently sexist or hegemonically masculine, they must be advertised as such to forge their cultural and contextual meaning. Consumer goods themselves are value-neutral; they receive their valuative properties, however, from the images, language, and identities associated with the product, which is often done through advertising. Such advertisements are equally subjective, and vary in meaning depending upon the context in which they exist. Thus, within a men’s magazine that
reinforces and perpetuates a masculine identity supportive of the status quo, such products are linked to the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity; characteristics also linked to a range of social problems, including women’s oppression. Although the ways in which certain men’s products are advertised vary in form and meaning, within the specific context of a men’s magazine, television show, or movie, the subjectivity is much more telling in its intent.

A host of studies have focused on advertising and its effects, yet within feminist explorations, they have primarily examined constructions of femininity to illustrate and critique commodifications of the body in terms of ideal body image. Similarly, the majority of research that has included men and masculinity in relation to advertising has paralleled that on women by focusing on men’s bodies and beauty (Craig, 1992; Edwards, 1997; Dotson, 1999). This is not to say that such explorations of masculine portrayals within advertising are without merit or fail to provide useful critical examinations. Such endeavors are indeed important and necessary to provide a useful discourse for analyzing contemporary representations of masculinity. Yet, few have looked to the more ambiguous ways in which men forge their masculine identities within the realm of consumption, and advertising of consumer goods, in particular.

Understanding different cultural modes of masculine expression and representation requires examining both the structural transformation of the centrality of consumption over production in men’s lives, and the cultural changes in definitions of masculinity that have equally transformed. Therefore, culture can be thought of as something that helps to legitimize the larger economic order, while also extending and expanding it. Therefore, men’s magazines and their advertising content are important sites for producing culture and supporting the broader white supremacist, capitalist patriarchal structure within which such magazines exist. As both
Breazeale (1994) and Pendergast (2000) have discussed *Esquire* magazine was created not for its journalistic value, but for its potential as a marketing force.

The success of this attempt, however, required substantial structural and cultural support; support that has been examined extensively in relation to consumer culture (Ewen, 2001; Cohen, 2003) with magazines playing a central role in shaping this culture for men, in particular (Pendergast, 2000). Just as the emergence of *Esquire* magazine reflected an early attempt to define men as consumers and thus, de-gender shopping from the cultural grips of femininity, the contemporary rise of men’s general interest magazines must also be looked at as suspect. As Sean Nixon has discussed, advertisers and marketers were seeking new ways to “address” the male market during the mid-1980’s (1996).

The surge in men’s general interest magazines during the mid-1990’s may be understood in part as an attempt to do just this. As Peter Jackson, Nick Stevenson, and Kate Brooks describe in their attempt to “make sense” of the recent flux of men’s magazines, the unforeseen popularity of the general interest men’s magazine must be explained through a combination of social changes (2001). Yet, despite the variation of editorial content and magazine style found in today’s men’s magazines, and their highly masculine substantive style, it is crucial to revisit the original intent of the medium itself. Within what is currently an exponentially greater consumer-based culture than was the case when men’s magazines were originally developed, magazine advertisements must necessarily be examined as key sites of masculine identity construction. Further, the themes conveyed through magazine advertisements must be equally analyzed and explored for their power as socializing agents of gender, and inextricable links to capitalism as ideologies which are constructed primarily to sell products and services.
METHODOLOGY

With the objective of examining the ways in which masculinity is constructed to sell products, the current study aims to reveal the abstract and concrete aspects of masculine gender identities within contemporary US culture, particularly in relation to product consumption. Therefore, in the current study, social constructions of masculinity were examined within men’s magazines, specifically in terms of the advertisement of consumer goods and services. The advertisements within these periodicals were sampled and categorized based on dominant themes depicting masculine characteristics.

A qualitative content analysis was conducted to best answer research questions regarding representations of masculinity within men’s magazine advertisements. Namely, in what ways are men represented, and is masculinity constructed within magazine advertisements, and what general themes emerge from these representations? This method was selected for its value in understanding advertising texts beyond their manifest meaning, for gender, and masculinity in particular, is more latently constructed through more abstract means. Additionally, content analysis in general is useful for gathering contemporary information because of its accessibility, and is generally unobtrusive (Berger, 1998).

SAMPLE

To examine the ways in which masculinity is constructed within magazine advertisements, I selected three magazines based on their largely male readership. Because advertising is the major source of revenue for magazines (Davis, 1997), what constitutes a men’s magazine is also determined by its advertising, as that which is being sold is not so much the magazine itself, but the audience to advertisers. In short, the readership determines the type and form of the advertising as much as it informs the content itself. Therefore, the three magazines
chosen for this sample were conceptualized as “men’s magazines” based primarily on their advertising content, and thus, their targeted audience.

I examined two of the three magazines, *Esquire* and *Maxim*, based upon a combination of factors that I deemed relevant to the research questions of study. First, *Esquire* was included in the sample because it is the oldest men’s general interest magazine, and was actually founded as a marketing tool rather than as a journalistic endeavor (Breazeale, 1994). As Breazeale has noted, *Esquire* was created by men whose formal training was in marketing rather than journalism, and actually played a crucial role in shaping men as consumers (1994; Pendergast, 2000). Additionally, *Esquire* aimed to replicate what was already the aim of women’s magazines such as *Vogue*, by selling its readers on a broader consumer lifestyle (Pendergast, 2000). Although other magazines have since replaced *Esquire* in importance and popularity, it remains the original and longest-running men’s general interest magazine, and an important site of masculine construction.

Similarly, *Maxim* was selected for the sample primarily because it is the most popular and widely circulated men’s general interest magazine as of 2002 ([http://www.maximonline.com](http://www.maximonline.com)). With a guaranteed base circulation rate of 2.5 million per issue ([http://www.maximonline.com](http://www.maximonline.com)), Maxim is currently the most successful men’s magazine ever, and as such, plays a crucial role in the construction of masculinity, particularly within its advertisements. Given that Maxim was founded in 1997, it is important to understand Maxim’s rapid ascent to become a significant and popular cultural resource for men. Maxim was included in the current study, then, for both its inductive theoretical potential for its position as the most popular magazine (and what this says about the larger culture), and deductive for its position as a major producer of culture itself.
The third magazine included in the sample was *The Source*, a self-described magazine of “hip-hop music, culture, and politics.” On the surface, the inclusion of *The Source* may seem outside the realm of the general category of “men’s magazine.” Given its advertising content and readership, however, *The Source* can be conceptualized as a men’s magazine geared toward the African-American male, in particular. For this reason, *The Source* was included as a major site for the construction of Black masculinity, and as such, a medium of comparison to the other two magazines that are primarily created for white men.

Issues of each magazine from the same three months were selected (November, 2002, March, 2003, and August 2003) with the goal of adequately representing each magazine’s advertising for this time period. Although the actual months were arbitrary, it was important to select magazines from certain seasons because monthly general interest magazines are highly season-oriented, and sampling should reflect this seasonality (Stempel, Weaver, & Wilhoit, 2003). According to Stempel et. Al (2003), selecting a magazine from each season sufficiently represents the magazine content from the entire season (2003). In this study, only 3 seasons were sampled from; namely, spring, summer, and autumn, due to time and resource restraints. Despite the seasonal bent Stempel et. al discussed, he was mainly discussing the content of the magazine itself rather than the advertising. Therefore, it may be said that advertising is less time-specific, as illustrated by the overlap/duplication of some advertising campaigns across issues of the same magazine.

Using a stratified random sample, every tenth ad was selected from each magazine, for a total sample size of 64 advertisements (*Maxim*=25; *The Source*=24; *Esquire*=15). Although each magazine issue contained more advertisements in absolute terms than were included in the sample, only full-page ads were considered because of their salience and economic power.
Further, multi-page advertisements were treated as single ads because of their relatively unified themes, though due to their higher expense, each case of such an ad was deemed part of a separate advertising category.

ANALYSIS

The qualitative content analysis used in this work involved systematically examining men’s magazine advertisements to reveal dominant themes of masculinity constructed within. That is, thematic categories of masculinity emerged from the data, rather than from a predetermined coding sheet, grounding all conclusions in the advertisements themselves. Some basic variables were considered, however, to allow for an internal consistency in terms of what was actually examined and compiled from each advertisement. The thematic categories, however, were formulated after several passes through, and comparisons between, the data set to allow for a broader understanding of these dominant themes and their prevalence. Further, some initial categories were actually collapsed into larger, more overarching themes of masculinity after the combinations of product/brand, language, and image become clearer in their meaning. Each variable is described below:

Product/Brand: each advertisement was coded for the product being advertised (e.g., athletic shoe), and the name brand of each product

Language: any text included in the advertisement beyond the brand name and/or store locations (i.e., any words giving meaning to the product itself)

Image: the actual image that is generally displayed in each advertisement

Thematic Category: the broader notions of masculinity conveyed through the combination of the product, brand, language, and image
THEMATIC CATEGORIES

In conducting the content analysis, eight dominant themes of masculinity emerged from the data to reveal thematic categories representing social and cultural notions of manhood. To be considered an actual category, each theme recurred in multiple advertisements and was conveyed through both image and language contained within the ads. Multiple page advertisements were considered to be more powerful in their thematic salience, primarily because they cost more to take out than those that are a single or portion of a magazine page. Therefore, the companies that are able to place lengthier advertisements have a more powerful voice than those not able to do so. Given that the categories emerged from the data set, rather than from a predetermined list of masculine criteria, some overlap was evident as many ads contain multiple themes of masculinity. This was particularly true of the more powerful ads, for the simple fact that there was more content for such overlap to occur.

The discussion of each theme that follows is arranged in order of prevalence, so as to illustrate the most frequent themes used in men’s magazine advertising, and therefore, the most important in constructing masculinity in relation to consumer goods. It may be difficult, if not inaccurate to conclude that the most frequently occurring theme within the sampled advertisements is also most symbolic of ideal cultural notions of masculinity. Yet, it can be said that the most dominant themes are those considered capable of being addressed through the marketplace, as that is precisely the function of the ads themselves: to channel all avenues of masculine expression into profitable mediums.

The emergence of each theme, then, does not so much speak to overarching cultural ideals of masculinity primarily. Rather, the existence and prevalence of each theme illustrates the degree to which certain aspects of masculinity have been commodified through the medium
of advertising. That is, notions of gender have become ideals to be purchased as they give
meaning to a given product or service via advertisements. The broader implications of these
categories will be discussed later in this paper after each theme has been identified and
exemplified. The percentages that accompany each theme are relative to the overall sample in
terms of occurrence.

*Aesthetic/Presentation/The Body* (31%)

This category includes representations of the ideal man in contemporary United States
society on an immediate, bodily level. This ideal is reached through presentation, such as
clothing and shoes, and other similar signifiers of what “makes a man.” Advertising that utilizes
this theme commonly demonstrates the ideal man through imagery, with language as a secondary
method of ascribing meaning to the image. Although less frequent than appeals to clothing and
other accessories as gender signifiers, the physical body itself, and particularly muscular
development, is a common medium for displaying the ideal masculine aesthetic within
advertisements.

This emergence of this category is largely supported by previous examinations of the
body as not only a site of gender display, but as also a site of power contestation, for the two are
so intertwined (Connel, 1995). It would follow, then, that the most dominant theme of
masculinity constructed through magazine advertising is that of an aesthetic presentation, as this
is the most immediate and easily accessible mode of gender and power display. As some
theorists have discussed, the increasing popularity of men’s fashion can be linked to decreases in
economic, structural power for men (Edwards, 1997), and changes in definitions of masculinity
within, and as a result of, these structural shifts (Emig, 2000; Pendergast, 2000).
Thus, while the need to construct a certain ideal masculine aesthetic can be understood as socially constructed, it is no less real in its influence over gendered social life and its power implications. Given that the aesthetic/body theme emerged as the most popular within the sampled advertisements, it is also important to note the overrepresentation of this theme within *The Source*. This finding suggests that physical presentation is a central component of Black masculinity, and perhaps more so than hegemonic masculine identity.

A key difference between the sampled magazine advertisements, then, is the more frequent use of the body as a source of power for Black men. Answering the question of why style and presentation are so important to Black men, Richard Majors and Janet Billstone conclude that, “the African-American man…has been nobody for generations. The purpose of styling, then, is to paint a self-portrait…that makes the black male ‘somebody’” (1991, p.84). In other words, the presentation of self is actually a presentation of power for men of color at an immediate, bodily, and most accessible level. Such a reliance on aesthetic power can be understood as resulting from structural denials and restrictions of power for minority groups in general. Therefore, the power that flows from self-image and presentation can be conceptualized as a negotiated power when it is structurally unattainable, much like that discussed by Michel Foucault (Gauntlett, 2002).

The advertisement that follows (See **FIGURE 1**) depicts the ideal male aesthetic on an immediate, bodily level by suggesting that a supplement can cancel out weight gain from a common lifestyle for the target audience. This muscular presentation and its characteristic “six-pack” stomach muscles have only recently become sites for cultural gaze. Such an ad makes the ideal physique very clear through a powerful image made sense of by equally powerful wording that many young men can to relate to.
Introducing the breakthrough non-Ephedra way to lose weight fast.

It's time to get down to business. Thermo DynamX™ is the new fat-burning formula that works without ephedra. It has been shown to increase your resting metabolic rate (RMR) on average of 5-17%, and as much as 20% when used in conjunction with exercise and a healthy diet. RMR is how many calories you burn while resting, and it accounts for most of the calories you burn each day. Your results will astound you. Thermo DynamX is guaranteed to raise your RMR - just get tested at locations around the country with the BodyGem™ metabolic measuring device by HealthTech™. We'll even send you a $10 coupon!*

- New scientific breakthrough formula
- New Non-Ephedra fat loss agent
- Increases metabolism
- Provides energy

Thermo DynamX uses only laboratory tested fat-burning agents such as ECGG (epigallocatechin gallate) in green tea, shown to increase thermogenesis and overall fat burning. Yerba Mate, Octopamine, and Citrus Aurantium. So start shrinking your waist with the real world-proven, pound-burning dynamo - Thermo DynamX.

Available at GNC and other specialty retailers. *For more info on EAS products, our money back guarantee or our coupon offer, call 1-800-287-3776. Expir. 05/31/01. See offer for details.
Sexual Activity (20%)

The category of sex/sexual activity describes advertisements that contain blatant appeals to sexual behavior through the use of images and/or language. This is different from the category of agency, as there is not necessarily the direct implication of power over the sexual action; only the implication of sexual activity, and most commonly with men as the subject and women as object of sexual advance or attention. The advertisements containing this theme depict sexual activity resulting from the use of the advertised product or service, and do so through language and/or imagery.

This is consistent with dominant cultural ideals of masculinity in which sexual activity is central. As Robert Connell has discussed, many men do not feel wholly masculine without sexual activity, often describing their initial sexual experiences as markers of having entered into manhood (1995). Linking sexual activity and desirability to consumer goods and services, then, is a central function of advertising, particularly in constructing masculinity. As Connell (1995) and Butler (1993) both discuss, the activity of the body can also inform gender identity, such that how one feels about their body can also impact their notions of gender. Advertisements hinting at or directly connecting the use of a given product to sexual activity, then, often aim to devalue some aspect of a man’s body or lifestyle as less-than (hetero)sexually appealing, while also emasculating him by denying a key component of masculine identity: sexual activity.

Within the marketplace, and advertising specifically, this problem of sexual undesirability is immediately solved by purchasing the advertised product or service. The typical ways this objective is reached is through either tying the product directly to, or resulting in, sexual activity, or by making it a key component within a sexualized environment. An interesting, though not at all surprising, component of this theme is its ubiquity in terms of
product/service advertisement. In short, given the sampled magazine advertisements, the type of product or service itself does not matter as much as the myriad of ways that sexual activity can be associated with its use.

However, within this thematic category, one commodity remains disproportionately linked to sexual activity: alcohol. Perhaps more than any other product, alcoholic beverages are commonly tied to sexual activity, and often in more concrete ways than other products. An advertisement typical for this category involving alcohol often depicts either women alone in sexually suggestive positions and/or with similarly suggestive wording, or women and men together in an apparently post-alcohol embrace.

The meanings in these ads, while commonly masked in double-speak, are very clear in their sexual intent. Such overt appeals to sexual behavior and attitudes could be the result of previous critiques of advertising for sexual suggestion, as well ironic responses to the more psychoanalytically informed analyses of advertisements for their supposed subliminal messages. Either way, (hetero)sexual activity remains central to conceptions of masculinity with US culture, which on the surface may not be surprising, but the advertising methods by which this goal is reached continue to push boundaries of sexual commodification.

An example of the sexual activity theme is seen below (see FIGURE 2) in the highly suggestive language and positioning. Note the wording on the cellular phone’s LCD screen: “I’m easy. Take me home. Turn me on.” This message, in combination with the women’s facial expression and body position relative to the near-invisible man, give sexual meaning to the advertised good.
Tasty. Flirty. Fun.

If these aren’t words you use to describe your cellular service, Sam Goody would like to introduce you to Virgin Mobile. No year-long contracts, no surprise charges, no headaches. Just pay as you go and dial into all kinds of funky features you can’t get anywhere else.

It may be the most fun you can have with an electronic device. Well, a close second anyway.

Check out Virgin Mobile today. Available in the mall at Sam Goody.

For the location nearest you, call 1.888.666.9342 or visit us online.

Selection, prices and special offers may vary by store and online.
Rugged Individual (14%)

The rugged individual category consists of appeals to engage in solo behavior, and to define oneself as separate from the larger society, either through one’s presentation, interests, or accomplishments. When constructed through language, the “rugged individual” theme encourages walking your own path, determining your own destiny, and having a stable and independent sense of self. Images reflecting the “rugged individual” frequently depict a man without any obvious social ties, alone in the wilderness, and/or standing separate from other men and/or women as an individual. Another aspect of this theme involves self-expression through a unique sense of style and identity.

While this theme may not be new within advertising, it is noteworthy as one of significance that has emerged from the data set. The individualist themes found in the sampled magazine advertisements can be linked to the economic structure of capitalism, as competition and individual striving are fundamental features of a capitalist economy. Further, this is a classic model of masculinity, and one that has been in existence so long as capitalism itself has flourished. The image that best epitomizes this notion of extreme individualism may be the Marlboro Man of classic advertising. As Jackson Katz has examined in the film, Tough Guise (1999), the rugged individual is central to Western society’s idealized masculine standard.

Such self-made notions are not only rooted in actual individualism with regard to social interaction, but also in terms of the entrepreneurship and innovation that is also key to capitalist economies. Therefore, advertisements appealing to themes of individualism also depict men as having their own unique style and self-definition, refusing to follow the dominant social trends. A common method for reaching this objective within advertisements is to associate an icon of individualism and innovation (whether contemporary or historical), with an advertised product or
service. This technique is not new, as evidenced by Erving Goffman’s discussion of “characters…stereotypically identified with a particular kind of activity” to appeal to a broad audience (1976, p. 26), as illustrated in the example ad below. The appeal to individuality and uniqueness is obvious with the image (see FIGURE 3) below of Hugh Hefner, founding editor of Playboy magazine. Thus, by equating the product with individuality, innovation, and sexual appeal, the alcohol’s meaning is clearly forged.
Agency/Power (14%)

The category of agency/power suggests that a man is wholly responsible for his social position, in control of any given situation, and capable of affecting his environment, either socially or physically. Though separate from that of sex and sexual activity, this category is related to sex primarily in terms of power and who is most capable of wielding it in a given situation. Advertisements that fall within this category that are remotely sexual, then, suggest that men are in control of sexual activity and pleasure, both in terms of themselves, and their (largely female) partners. This theme is constructed through both language and image, and is less overt than that which signifies actual sexual activity.

Advertisements representing this theme that are not sexual, appeal to ideas of economic power and social grace. Namely, knowing what is expected and valued in society, and using one’s resources, knowledge, and position to attain whatever is deemed important. As is the case with advertisements dealing with sexual agency, appeals to power and “privilege” are most often constructed using language in combination with images of the “good life.” Further, such ideals are highly class-based, as that which marks control over one’s own life situation suggests a certain economic freedom and ownership of social status.

Therefore, it is noteworthy that no advertisement sampled from The Source magazine used this theme, as agency and power are not necessarily key components to African-American masculinity due to structural economic and political denial of power relative to white men. That is, appeals to “the good life” may not be as realistic to men of color as they are to white men, and are therefore, less commonly used as such. In essence, advertisements that include themes of agency and power play on ideals of decisiveness, competence, and well-roundedness, to create a “renaissance man” of sorts who is knowledgeable and capable of many tasks. The advertisement
that perhaps captures all of these sub-themes at once is depicted below (see FIGURE 4), as the man depicted here is the quintessential renaissance man in control of a variety of situations.
I have a strong opinion.
I have learned from my mistakes.
I have been published.
I have ridden a motorcycle across Route 66.
I have always kept my word.

ARE YOU PRIVILEGED?
*Gender Neutral/No Relation*  (16%)

Advertisements representing this theme bear no obvious relation to constructions of either masculinity, or femininity. Typically, magazine ads that were coded as gender neutral advertise goods or services that are useful for both women and men, and are advertised as such with no appeal to gender identity other than their placement within a gendered magazine. The emergence of this theme is not necessarily of major cultural or theoretical consequence. Rather, the notion that some goods and services remain “gender neutral” in their subjectivity simply illustrates that not all advertisements appeal to ideals of masculinity or femininity, or are at least components of both sides of the socially constructed gender binary. What follows (see FIGURE 5) is an advertisement coded as “gender neutral,” given its ambiguity and lack of a specifically gendered theme.
Holiday pleasure!

SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: Quitting Smoking Now Greatly Reduces Serious Risks to Your Health.


**Gadgetry (14%)**

The gadgetry theme emerged from advertisements that link possession and/or mastery of various technological machines, computers, and other electronic equipment to a masculine ideal of some form. This theme suggests the accumulation of goods as a necessary component of masculinity, and therefore, an extension and expression of societal power. That is, just as Baudrillard discusses the consumption of “signs” that forge their meanings through advertisements (1996), possession and mastery of various gadgets have come to signify a coherent masculine self. Yet most of the advertisements from which this theme emerged do not simply end at mere possession of “gadgetry.” Rather, they equate mastery and use of such signifiers as virile, masculine attainment.

Herein lies the overlap found between the agency/power and gadgetry themes, as possession in and of itself does not convey the ideal masculine self, so much as its demonstrated utility. This is perhaps no more clear than in advertisements for various automobiles, wherein many direct references to masculinity and mastery of environment are made, but typically in terms of the machine itself. That is, a key distinction between (though noted overlap of) the agency/power and gadgetry themes is mastery over the broader society typical of the agency category (with regard to social mobility), versus mastery over a specific electronic or automotive device, and usually one gendered masculine.

As is the case with the agency/power category, this theme was not as common within *The Source* as it was in *Esquire* and *Maxim*, suggesting once again the class differences this theme defines and perpetuates. Such differences suggest that the accumulation of things, particularly those technological in nature, is more an extension of economic power for white men, than for men of color. Just as the body and appearance are more prominent masculine themes for men of
color, gadgetry as a commodified theme of masculinity seems to be a largely white phenomenon given the current sample. The advertisement below (see FIGURE 6) illustrates mastery of the road and machine, equating such mastery to masculinity. Automobile advertising commonly uses this technique, as it is the most readily available “machine” for men to demonstrate power over and through, and has historically been limited to men’s use.
EARTHSKING POWER. GROUND-SHREDDING TRACTION. BE CAREFUL WHERE YOU POINT IT.

If you get that a true performance car needs more than just go fast, you get the Subaru WRX. It seamlessly blends the turbocharged power of 227 horses with the traction and control of Subaru's All-Wheel Drive. The result is 0 to 60 in 5.4 seconds, along with the ability to turn a twisted mountain road into your own personal roller coaster. And when you get behind the wheel, remember, this thing's loaded. The beauty of Subaru All-Wheel Drive. When you get it, you get it™.
Active (13%)

The “active” theme that emerged from the data set refers to representations of masculinity involving physical activity as central to definitions of manhood. This theme commonly depicts an active lifestyle, including sports participation and various forms of outdoor leisure, and encourages exploring one’s environment via physical activity. Although some characteristics of this theme are similar to the category of “agency/power,” the key difference is the level of abstraction involved in the “agency/power” category, and the less class-specific physical activities used within the “active” advertising themes, such as sport.

Further, the appeals to activity are mostly just that; whereas the advertisements that include notions of agency and power symbolize more than the simple actions the subject is engaged in. This theme is supported by the common idea of men defining themselves in terms of activity (what they “do”), particularly sports, rather than the more abstract lifestyles suggested within the “agency/power” coded ads. This category is also related to the “gadgetry” theme, as many of the physical activities associated with masculinity and various goods or services also encourages using the most advanced and innovative equipment while engaging in physical activity. The example advertisement below (see FIGURE 7), while simple, illustrates concisely the degree to which physical activity plays a central role in the construction and affirmation of masculinity, particularly within men’s relationships with each other.
LOVE IS
HANGING WITH YOUR FRIEND ON SATURDAY
AND EMBARRASSING
HIM IN FRONT OF MILLIONS ON SUNDAY.

WOODSON WEARS THE 6-RING TANK, JUMPMAN CLASSIC TRICOT PANT, AND THE JUMPMAN TRIFECTA.

JUMPMAN23.COM/LOVE
Negation of the Feminine (5%)

This category includes representations of masculinity in relation, and in opposition to, femininity. This theme is conveyed within male-directed advertisements that aim to devalue that which is deemed feminine. While this may occur with imagery, it is more likely done through language, as illustrated in the example below. The emergence of this thematic category illustrates the subjective nature of masculinity, for it cannot exist without clear constructions of femininity. Therefore, goods advertised in this manner gain their masculine properties only by a negation of anything feminine; the important meaning conveyed in such ads, then, is what these goods are not, rather than what they are.

This theme is consistent with what both Breazeale (1994) and Pendergast (2000) discuss as key themes in constructing men as consumers, in general, and within men’s magazines, in particular. To forge a distinctly masculine meaning in a genre primarily reserved for women, *Esquire* magazine from its inception used editorial content intended to devalue women and femininity (Pendergast, 2000; Breazeale, 1994). This technique was employed to negotiate the gendering of shopping and consumption as feminine, much like the swimsuit issue has been described as a diffuser of the homoerotic tension from the male-to-male contact common within men’s sports (and therefore, magazines) by Laurel Davis (1997). What Davis describes as “masculine preserves,” or cultural and social realms thought to be reserved for men only, helps to understand the emergence of this category within men’s magazine advertisements (1997). The example ad below incorporates this technique by mocking a common concern for women (wearing the same clothing and/or makeup of someone else) and making it a masculine appropriate mode of social life.
NOT ONLY DO YOU GUYS WEAR THE SAME OUTFITS,

BUT OCCASIONALLY EVEN THE SAME MAKEUP.

Real friends. Real bourbon.
DISCUSSION

The eight themes that emerged from the sampled men’s magazine advertisements tell us something about not only the ways in which advertisers construct masculinity in ads, but about masculinity in the broader culture, as well. Considering that market research incorporates many social scientific methods, it may be said that the themes found in the sampled ads reflect the culture as much as they help to create and shape it. For this reason, it is important to understand what each theme says not only about the ways in which masculinity is commodified, but also why and how such themes have been incorporated into advertising that is directed at men.

Considering that the “gender neutral/no relation” category was representative of only 16% of the overall advertisements included in the sample, the inverse suggests that 84% of the advertisements conveyed a masculine gendered theme of some form. This alone speaks to the power of advertising in constructing masculinity, for a great portion of the ads sampled appeal to ideal cultural definitions of manhood, illustrating the impact of gender on virtually all aspects of social and private life. That gender remains an important way to sell goods and services may not be very surprising, but the various ways in which masculine gender identity is used within advertisements reveal some powerful things about our culture and society.

Further, the fact that gender is used to sell products illustrates very clearly that it is a social construct, tenuously negotiated through a range of appearances, signifiers, and performances. If this were not the case, products and services would not be advertised appealingly as necessary, defining components of men’s and women’s lives. Therefore, even the least frequent theme, negation of the feminine, is important to understand as a crucial component of the dominant, hegemonic conception of masculinity within Western culture, and primarily as a marker against what masculinity is not. Just as insults used against men often
suggest feminine characteristics, advertisements that devalue women and/or things deemed feminine derive meaning at the expense of women.

Thus, not only does a good or service advertised in this manner gain its masculine meaning at the expense of women and femininity, but such ads reinforce the subordination of femininity in the process. This may seem like a relatively recent phenomenon, particularly within the cutting-edge context of contemporary advertising, and its contribution to the rise of men’s magazines. However, such techniques of mocking women’s interests and characteristics have played a pivotal role in defining Esquire, the first men’s general interest magazine, as Breazeale (1994) and Pendergast (2000) have detailed. Similarly, Playboy was packaged as a magazine determined to reclaim masculinity at the expense of women and femininity (Ehrenreich, 1983), and thus, deriving its meaning from femininity.

While the negation of the feminine was crucial to the budding men’s general interest magazine market on the whole, the presence of this theme within contemporary advertisements simply reiterates the instability of masculinity. Further, the actual advertisements in which negation was used as a thematic technique are commonly for what Davis refers to as masculine preserves (1997), if such a thing can be applied to products, in the sense that they are thought of as sacred signifiers of what it means to be a man in Western culture. For example, the ad shown to represent this category is for bourbon whiskey, a highly “preserved” masculine beverage in the sense that women are not encouraged, if even discouraged from drinking it. This correlates with Davis’s conceptualization of the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue, particularly in its early development, as serving the similar function of reclaiming sports from an ever-changing culture in which men were losing power (1997).
Similarly, the role of the swimsuit issue in reinforcing not only masculinity, but heterosexuality, and equating it with sport is very much like the second most common theme found in the current sample of magazine advertisements, that of sex/sexual activity. This thematic category commonly overlaps with the “negation” theme for its frequent assertions of heterosexual masculinity at the expense of women and their bodies. Much like the swimsuit issue Davis describes, women in advertisements with blatant sexual themes exist as objects of desire or attraction, rather than active subjects, constructing masculinity and the relationally advertised product or service as so intertwined.

The emergence of this category may make intuitive sense, as the saying “sex sells” suggests. However, what this lay phrase fails to address is that a very narrow, specific type of sex sells; within the men’s magazine advertisements sampled, heterosexual, male-dominated, and woman-passive sex is what sells a range of products and services. Whether it is a stereo, cellular phone, athletic shoe or chewing gum, sexualized women, and sexually suggestive situations with women as objects, are fundamental to hegemonic ideals of masculinity. Given the centrality of sexual activity to definitions of manhood, this is not necessarily a significant finding overall.

However, what may be important to consider is the contemporary existence, if not omnipresence, of sexualized women within men’s magazine advertisements, to the extent that it is a given. While many theorists and researchers, perhaps the most blunt of which has been R.W. Connell (1995), have documented the crucial roles of sex and sexuality in defining masculinity, it is still important to question the association of sex with virtually anything. Further, it is important to understand the message conveyed by incorporating sexualized images of women with various products, ultimately turning women into commodities to be consumed
and disposed of like the products with which they are advertised. Despite changes in gender relations, and the broader social and cultural landscape within which we exist, the emergence of this category and what it actually contains seems regressive, if not strategic.

Though some have discussed the rise of men’s magazines partially as a backlash to such gains (Jackson, Stevenson, & Brooks, 2001), the same may be said of the advertisements supporting men’s magazines. Because the magazines and advertising are so entangled, then, the emergence of traditional notions of sexuality can necessarily be tied to the emergence of hyper-masculine magazines on the whole. Comparing contemporary men’s magazines to those I have previously subscribed to during the mid-1990’s, such as Details, both the advertising and content have changed quite noticeably. Though one may consider this a sign of magazines and advertising as an oasis from the larger society in which real changes in power are continually occurring, a more structural analysis allows for the themes found in this study to be placed in terms of the larger society.

Just as these affirmations of masculinity have come at the expense of women, and often in response to shifts in power, the rise of the male consumer in general can be understood in similar terms. The decline of manufacturing jobs in the United States, combined with changes in gender and racial relations brought from the civil, women’s, and gay rights movements from the 1950’s up to the present, have dramatically impacted white, straight, masculine identity (Faludi, 1991; Emig, 2000; Ewen, 2001; Cohen, 2003). As a result of the power redistribution that followed these changes, masculinity is considered to be in crisis, and as such, must be reconstituted via whatever means are most readily available.

Given the most important theme that emerged from the data, a major site on and through which power may be reclaimed is the body itself. Occurring in 31% of the advertisements
sampled, the aesthetic/presentation/body thematic category demonstrates a change in not only masculinity, as clothing and fashion have historically been relegated to the feminine, but in the broader opportunity structures. Further, the disproportionate emergence of this category from advertisements within *The Source* magazine support the notion that aesthetic presentation, while not only a display of power for those denied structurally, is an accessible and important site of local power in the Foucauldian sense that it exists contextually (Gauntlett, 2001). As Majors and Billson have referred to as the “cool pose,” African-American men use their bodies to enact power in a given situation (1991).

This immediate, bodily power display includes accessories, such as clothing and jewelry, as well as the physical body itself, most notably in muscularity and physical intimidation. Majors and Billson interpret this “pose” as a response to the dominant society denying Black men of political and economic opportunities through institutional discrimination and exploitation (1991). A similar explanation can be offered to understand the ways in which women’s bodies have been commodified and used as sources of power, much like the type discussed by Susan Bordo (1993). It is interesting to note, then, that this theme significantly emerged not only from *The Source*, but from the other two magazines sampled, as well.

Thus, as white men’s bodies and aesthetic presentation have become more central to their definitions of masculinity, evidenced by the sampled advertisements from both *Maxim* and *Esquire*, this shift may be attributed to the broader changes in the economic structure of capitalism, and the culture that reflects such changes. Increasingly, men have become sights and objects of visual attention throughout contemporary US culture, creating a greater reflexivity and self-awareness of appearance and aestheticism for men. Edisol Dotson describes his realization of this fact in the introduction to his book, “Behold the Man: The hype and selling of male
beauty in media and culture,” through a personal account of his own growing insecurity once he himself felt under scrutiny (1999). Although this may leave many women feeling somewhat vindicated, for they have always known this pressure, I believe it is more than a sign of “equality.”

Rather, in an almost ironic sense, the more men’s bodies are being used to negotiate the power they are increasingly losing to a variety of social and economic forces, the more insecure and on display they feel about their own presentation. Therefore, the emergence of aesthetic presentation as the dominant theme within men’s magazine advertisements makes both theoretical and logical sense. Whereas men have historically been judged based on what they “do,” as in wage labor and other similar productive activities, they are increasingly being judged by how they “do” themselves. Similarly, the emergence of the “active” theme was significantly lower than the “gadgetry” and “rugged individual” themes, illustrating the ways in which masculinity is increasingly constructed within the realm of consumption.

In other words, the “gadgetry” and “rugged individual” themes involve notions of separating oneself from others through presentation, whether in terms of individual style and entrepreneurship, or possession and mastery of technological goods. Either way, both themes of masculinity involve not action, but secondary construction of self through the possession of commodities. Additionally, the “gadgetry” theme, much like that of “agency/power,” emerged almost exclusively from advertisements in both *Maxim* and *Esquire*, further illustrating the differences in class and opportunity between the target audience for these magazines, and that of *The Source*. Judging by these cross-magazine comparisons and the differences in masculine advertising themes between them, it is still apparent that white men are afforded a greater range of avenues through which to construct their masculinity.
This may be no more evident than in the exclusively white “agency/power” category that emerged from advertisements within *Maxim* and *Esquire*. The degree to which white men are able to choose their own career, and ultimately life path, though diminished within the structural shifts mentioned earlier, remains greater than men of color (Majors & Billson, 1991; Emig, 2000). Therefore, it may be concluded that despite the increasing use of white men’s bodies as commodities, white middle and upper class men remain in positions to affect their environments and reach socially and culturally desired ends, more so than any other social group. After all, a given theme would not be evident if it were not even remotely attainable, save for humor.

Yet we do know that many images used in advertising actually are unattainable, particularly with regard to body image. As Bordo (1993) and Jean Killbourne (1999) both discuss, the images used in many advertisements are altered and enhanced at least partially to keep them as unattainable standards. Therefore, the notion that the body and its presentation have become central components of masculine identity remains of great consequence, both for its future implication and historical relevance. Additionally, the fact that men’s magazines have become so popular in general hint at similarly significant shifts in masculinity and the broader society.

Much like United States citizens looked to signs and sources of unity following recent real or perceived threats, whether in the form of flag waving or an affirmation of all things “American,” men and masculinity can be similarly interpreted. Given the dominant themes that emerged from men’s magazine advertising, and the larger emergence of the men’s general interest magazine as a major cultural force, we can see the shifts in masculinity and capitalism intersecting at consumer culture to produce a similar scramble for meaning and reclamation of identity. Ultimately, structural shifts in power and changes in masculine expectations have
combined to produce this, the newest incarnation of the male consumer, facilitated in part by men’s magazines over the course of the past seventy years.

It is only recently, however, that men’s actual, physical bodies have become a part of the commodity system, and as a result, a site of powerful display. Using the metaphor of patriotism noted above, then, the attack on structural and cultural power must be severe and real enough to warrant fierce displays of masculinity and extensions of power from a variety of sources without historical precedence. How else to explain the development of such recent phenomena as Nair hair removal products for men or the television show “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy,” to name a few of the interesting changes that have presented themselves in recent months? Yet, although Emig discusses such crises as cyclical (2000), given the varied waves of such crises, from the 1930’s and Esquire’s role in “creating the modern man” (Pendergast, 2000) to Levi’s successful exploitation of men’s insecurities in the mid-1980’s (Nixon, 1996), an optimistic view suggests a similar fate of the current crisis.

Given the sample of this study, however, perhaps the current findings are unique to the sampled magazines, and are therefore, not generalizable to understanding broader notions of masculinity. Additionally, considering The Source as a music magazine first, other sites of masculinity for men of color must also be further explored. Regardless, it is certain that more research needs to be conducted to examine other ways in which masculinity is constructed through advertising, whether in magazines or other forms of media, to provide a more comprehensive look at masculinity within consumer culture. Yet the findings of this study do reveal some telling things about masculinity, most notably that many core aspects of hegemonic, traditional masculinity remain central to definitions of manhood, such as control, competition, individualism, and heterosexual desire.
Still, the puzzling paradox exists between the traditionally feminine realm of consumption, and all of the presentation and superficiality it entails, and the increasingly consumption-driven man seeking to affirm his masculinity through market-based avenues. Thus, the bind exists between the sickness of major structural shifts in production within the United States and changing expectations for men and masculinity, and the consumptive cure that is partially a result of the sickness itself. In essence, masculine identity has been turned into a commodity governed increasingly by market-conditions, much like women’s identities have historically been. Before concluding that the chickens have finally come home to roost, however, we must work to recognize the ways in which societal male dominance has been threatened, and rather than allowing marketers to play on this (and therefore, continue the legitimacy of patriarchy) seize it as an opportunity for dialogue into the overarching dominance of consumer capitalism.

By analyzing its multiple venues for the proliferation of consumer goods and services, we as a society are better able to recognize and understand the power and purpose of consumer capitalism as a major driving force in contemporary society. Men’s magazines are one of those venues, and have been so since their inception. Similarly, advertising and marketing, although not to the current level of saturation, have existed so long as capitalism has. Comparing the trends and shifts of these forces, however, provide a firmer grasp on not only historical changes and developments of capitalism and gender relations, but on the contemporary manifestation of the broader society and its implications for the future. So long as people and their relationships to one another are commodified, whether in terms of sexuality, friendship, or social worth and identity, the marketplace will find solutions, and consumer driven media outlets will continue to flourish at the expense of all of us.
Further examinations of both gender and consumer culture must necessarily take each into account, for they are interlocked with other organizing features of society, such as race, class, sexuality, and ability, among others. Additionally, the level at which consumer culture now operates requires the discussion of power and hegemony, whether in relation to gender and hegemonic ideals of masculinity (and their social effects), or larger social trends that have substantially shifted the location and enactment of power to the realm of consumption and presentation. These trends must be charted and critiqued just as readily as their more obvious manifestations, for without a combined analysis of both the structure of white, supremacist, capitalist patriarchy, and its everyday impact as conveyed through cultural systems, all of the problems each entails will continue to fester and spread. To revisit the metaphor briefly mentioned earlier in relation to patriotism and militarism, if we only discuss and critique the “flag-waving” and jingoism that follows from national threats to power, rather than the power imbalance from which larger challenges emerge, we as a society are guaranteeing further exploitation and commodification of our lives and bodies at the already too-powerful hands of consumer capitalism.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


