Exploring Masculine Ideologies

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"Grooming Masculinities: A Poststructuralist Analysis of Masculinity Discourses in Films" by Gokcen Coskuner, University of Wisconsin-Madison

In this paper, I take a poststructuralist approach to explore the masculinity discourses circulated in films. I focus on men’s grooming practices as a venue that has become situated in a gender ideology. Through analyzing media representations of different type of masculinities, I first aim to understand the symbolic boundaries between masculinities that are expressed through distinctive grooming. Second, I propose that men’s grooming practices not only carry gender instructions but also reflect/ create/ reestablish boundaries around social class and ethnicity. Finally, I highlight two key ideological dimensions – rebellion versus conformity and femininity versus masculinity as imperative tensions in men’s consumption and identity projects.

"Men’s Responses to Depictions of Ideal Masculinity in Advertising" by Linda Tuncay, Loyola University Chicago

While past research has investigated the ideals of masculinity, little research has examined how mediated messages of masculinity in advertising are experienced by consumers. To investigate this issue, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted, using advertisements as projective aids. Men’s reactions to images of masculinity in ads were investigated in order to uncover what their responses revealed about their own notions of masculinity. A typology of response styles was developed. Moreover, based on these response styles, five themes emerged in consumers’ experiences of masculinity. These included: (1) authenticity (2) vulnerability (3) individuality (4) achievement and (5) elusiveness.

"The Challenge of the New Masculinity: Conservative Reactions to a New Consumption Ethos " by Jacob Ostberg, Stockholm University School of Business

This study presents theoretical and empirical arguments regarding traditionally style conscious consumers’ responses to the influx of the new hegemonic masculinity. The research is based on online and real life participant observational studies and looks at a how an enclave of young, well-off consumers respond to the increased aesthetization of mainstream consumption. I propose that the traditional elite is experiencing a crisis in masculinity, as the aspiring new elite is mimicking their consumption style. To handle this crisis they engage in conspicuous non-consumption. They also use women to manifest their masculinity in light of the new, allegedly feminized, consumption ethos.

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LONG ABSTRACTS

“Grooming Masculinities: A Poststructuralist Analysis of Masculinity Discourses in Films”

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In this paper, I take a poststructuralist approach to present the masculinity discourses circulated in films. This approach allows me to analyze how masculinity is socially constructed in media images, to locate central tensions operating within masculine ideologies and to present the interconnectedness of gender, social class positions and ethnicity. In this analysis, I focus on the cinematic representations of men’s grooming practices. Traditionally grooming like fashion is viewed as a feminine activity. It has been argued that men’s increasing involvement in consumption especially fashion and grooming and the increased depiction of men in advertising inverted the male gaze onto itself (Mulvey 1975). Looking at the masculinity discourses in a consumption context that is traditionally viewed as incompatible with masculinity thus, provides potential to understand how masculinity is constructed through conventional feminine cultural practices. An analysis of men’s grooming practices extends prior consumer research, which has primarily focused on the consumption of products/brands/activities that reinforce traditional masculinities (i.e. Belk and Costa 1998, Schouten and McAlexander 1995) and on research that presents how products are chosen/avoided because they are perceived as fit/unfit with masculinity (i.e. Barthes 1975, Bourdieu 1984).

The popular media offer a variety of characters and masculine ideologies. These ideologies function as how to be (or not to be) a man and they also represent the dominant tensions that exist with contemporary models of masculinity. Kimmel (1992) for example, asserts that if masculinity is socially constructed, one of the primary elements in that construction is the representations of manhood that we see daily in the mass media. Along similar lines in her book The Male Body, Bordo (1999) analyzes images of male bodies as represented in advertisements and films to understand the contemporaneous masculinity discourses. She asserts that advertising serves as the primary lexicon of gender images, responsible for the wide dissemination of currently relevant masculine and feminine imagery. I explore grooming of the male protagonists in films About a Boy (2002), American Psycho (2000), Casino (1995), Saturday Night Fever (1977), Zoot Suit (1981) and Malcolm X (1992) to understand the masculine ideologies that are represented through grooming practices. I map various masculinities in comparison to one another to understand the symbolic boundaries between masculinities that are expressed through distinctive grooming (see Holt 1997).

The analysis suggests that men’s grooming not only carry gender instructions, but also represents/creates/reestablishes boundaries around social class and ethnicity. Men in upper class positions tend to gain power and status among his milieu through his extensive self care practices. A very good example of this phenomenon is depicted in American Psycho (2000), where the main character has a set of grooming rituals before he starts his day and spends extensive amount of time and energy on how he looks partly because this is a part of his competition in the business world. On the other hand, among working class the physical capital that is valued is associated with a more down to earth look where involve-ment in extensive grooming would not be seen appropriate and men who do so are called “sissy” and/or even “gay”. In addition men from diverse ethnicities employ different grooming practices to construct their masculinities. Analysis of the masculine ideologies in films and comparison of characters in films such as Casino (1995), Zoot Suit (1981), Malcolm X (1992) and About a Boy (2002) provide an important tool to understand these differences.

Based on the analysis, I identify two dominant tensions (femininity versus masculinity and rebellion versus conformity) that are influential in the representation and/or construction of masculinities. I propose that men constantly borrow from and negotiate between these tensions to construct their masculinity and that exploring these tensions is imperative to understand men’s identity projects. The first tension I present is between femininity and masculinity. The masculinities are constructed against other masculinities and sometimes femininities. In different forms of masculinities we see the balance between these tensions vary. Hugh Grant’s character in About a Boy (2002) depicts a masculinity that borrows largely from feminine traits. The character and the story of the film transgress the modernist dichotomies connected with female and male that emerged from the modern era some of the eminent ones being home versus workplace, passive versus active, emotional versus rational, submissive versus assertive (Firat 1994). Grant’s character (Will) is unemployed; he is submissive and passive; and depicted as developing an emotional relationship with a preadolescent. Another dominant tension I identify is rebellion versus conformity. Holt and Thompson (2004) point out how rebellion and conformity play an important role in formation of certain masculinities. Again by focusing on masculinities in films I discuss how men strategically employ grooming to rebel against the traditional masculinity roles (i.e. Hugh Grant in About a Boy) and to construct their identities against other masculinities. I also note that conformity and rebellion tensions are not always binary and that rebellious actions should be interpreted within new hegemonic power relations (Foucault 1984).

I present the implications of the poststructuralist analysis of masculinities in films to marketing. As Holt (1997) notes, under the conditions of postmodernity it becomes ever more difficult to capture the subtle differences among collectivities. The plethora of masculinities thus poses challenges especially for those who aim to segment the male consumer. The marketer that claims to be targeting to male consumers in a specific demographic, such as 18-25 year olds, will likely overlook important differences in product usage habits, advertising readership, consumption experiences, identity projects that exist within the statistical category (see Holt 1997). The poststructuralist analysis of masculinity discourses in the media, on the other hand, has the potential to map various masculinities that are represented across a variety of situational settings in comparison to one another, to locate main tensions around masculine ideologies and to understand the dominant masculinity ideologies and its relation to other constructs such as social class positions and ethnicity. Analyzing how masculinities are represented in other mainstream media and how these discourses are perceived/negotiated/reconstructed by men in different social positions and from diverse ethnicities will be important steps to undertake in the future studies.
“Men’s Responses to Depictions of Ideal Masculinity in Advertising”

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Past researchers have noted the importance of examining the connections between advertising representation and identity construction (Schoeder and Zwick 2004; Bordo 1993). However, despite the increasing importance of male consumers in the marketplace, little consumer behavior research has investigated masculine gender identities, with few exceptions (Holt and Thompson 2004; Hirschman 2003; Belk and Costa 1998). While research outside of consumer behavior has investigated the ideals of masculinity, and created typologies to capture these ideals (Brannon 1976, Lindsey 1997), this research is outdated and offers insights only from the researcher’s perspective.

Moreover, men are bombarded with mediated messages of masculinity in advertisements, but little is known as to how these depictions influence their experiences of masculinity. Several researchers have discussed the confusing and often contradictory nature of depictions of masculinity in advertising and in society as a whole (Mangan 2003; Lindsey 1997; Firt 1994; Pleck 1981). Thus, it is clear that the meanings appropriated to masculinity are not only complex, but also dynamic in nature. It is important to examine these meanings to gain a better theoretical understanding, as well as to discover emergent themes in the experiences of masculinity.

The principal research questions for this study are (1) How do men respond to images of ideal masculinity in advertising? (2) What do men’s interpretations of ideal masculinity in advertising reveal about their own sense of masculinity? To investigate these issues, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted, using advertisements containing masculine images as projective aids (White 1984; McGrath, Sherry, and Levy 1993). The informants were asked “grand tour” questions (McCracken 1988) at the onset of the interviews, while subsequently moving toward a more semi-structured approach in order to compare responses to a set of 15 ads. Thus, the ads were used as projective techniques to gain a better understanding of how these men experienced ideal masculinity. The interviews yielded over 300 pages of text, which was analyzed through a process called “dialectical tacking” (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Several findings emerged from the text. One of the aims of the research was to understand, how do men respond to images of ideal masculinity in advertising? Six “types” of responders emerged. These were the Skeptics, the Avoiders, the Indifferents, the Enhancers, the Strivers, and the Chasers. First, Skeptics attempted to avoid engaging in comparison to the male models depicted in the ads because they believed these depictions were unrealistic or unauthentic. They displayed negative emotional responses to the ads, sometimes even derogating the spokesperson. Next, Avoiders also avoided comparison to the models in the ads, but this was due to the fact that they felt threatened by the ideal standards set by the images. Individuals in this category sometimes shifted their own personal standards of masculinity as a coping mechanism. Indifferents claimed they were unaffected by ideal images of masculinity and did not believe advertising held any standards for them personally. Unlike the previous response styles, Enhancers often engaged in comparison, although their comparisons were relatively passive in nature. Moreover, the Enhancer felt motivated by ideal depictions and believed they were attainable through incremental improvements in the self. Strivers also felt motivated and believed the ideals depicted in advertising were attainable through hard work. These individuals often discussed “imagined selves” (Scott 1998). Finally, Chasers actively looked to advertis-

ing for standards of masculinity, although these standards often times were beyond reach. It is important to note that informants often displayed characteristics of several “types” of responders depending upon the focal point of the ad. This is due to the fact that different masculine themes interact with the consumers’ own personal histories and life projects (Mick and Buhl 1992). Moreover, informants expressed that as they progressed through their lives, their likely responses would have changed as well. Thus, these response styles are not only fluid in nature, but temporally situated.

The response styles to depictions of ideal masculinity in advertising were examined further in order to uncover what men’s reactions revealed about their own notions of masculinity. While these response styles emerged, it is important to note that the crux of the analysis was what these response styles meant about notions of masculinity rather than providing a typology of how these men read the ads. For example, to Skeptics masculinity meant authenticity while for Avoiders, masculinity was experienced as vulnerability. For Indifferents, masculinity meant individuality in thought while for Enhancers and Strivers masculinity was experienced as achievement. Finally, for the Chaser, masculinity was experienced as elusiveness.

Thus, the present research sheds light on how men respond to depictions of ideal masculinity in advertising. The findings reveal how images in advertising influence men’s conceptualizations of their own sense of masculinity, including creating feelings of vulnerability and elusiveness, among other outcomes. Future research could examine the ethical issues surrounding these findings. Finally, this research holds managerial implications for advertisers and retailers who target male consumers.

“The Challenge of the New Masculinity: Conservative Reactions to a New Consumption Ethos”

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It has been proposed that we today see a “new hegemonic masculinity” (Patterson and Elliott 2002), which includes a feminization of masculinity, and invites men from all social positions to partake in the carnival of consumption in ways previously reserved predominantly for female consumers (Scoeder and Zwick 2004). Due to this change in mainstream masculinity, the traditional elite—who have long been concerned with appearances and are expressing their masculine identities through a knowledge and practice of refined consumption—is challenged in their roles as tastemakers par excellence (Osgerby 2001). The advent of popular-culture outlets for new gender ideologies—such as the TV-show Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, self-help books such as The Metrosexual Guide to Style, not to mention the abundant availability of men’s lifestyle magazines—make the (sub)cultural capital previously reserved for the higher social classes available to the masses. Members of the traditional elite therefore need to find new ways to manifest their masculinity in unique ways. In this paper, I look at strategies utilized by the traditional elite to strengthen their sense of masculinity in light of this new, allegedly feminized, consumption ethos.

Previous research has looked at how changes in dominant masculinity ideologies force men to negotiate their identity projects (May and Strikwerda 1992). Focusing more on consumption practices, Holt and Thompson (2004) have looked at how men from the “stuck-in-the-middle socioeconomic profile” are afflicted by the crisis of masculinity and how they tackle this by adaptive consumption behaviors. What this research adds is a focus on how the changing gender ideologies in our consumer society ripple through the social classes and affect the groups that, according to their own
mythology, are not easily influenced by consumer fads and fashions.

Data was collected during a 12-month immersion in an enclave (cf. Firat and Dholakia 1998) of young, well-off consumers in Stockholm. The principle means of data collection was observational studies in three different online communities where the whereabouts of this enclave is documented and commented on. In addition, participant observation was conducted at venues where the members of the enclaves hang out. Through the analysis of the data—which consists of editorial material from the webpages, transcripts of chat-room conversations, and field notes—I detected various strategies used by the members of the enclave to construct masculine identities.

The first characteristic of the traditional elite’s consumption is that they do not regard themselves as representing something new, or as following contemporary trends. Instead, they see themselves as defenders of stability and providing a timeless, classic (and classy) masculinity as an alternative to all available fast-moving consumer fads. They are characterized more by conservatism and a willingness to uphold—what they perceive to be—traditional values, than the more rebellious traits usually upheld by similar youth constellations (cf. Hebdige 1979). Instead of manifesting their identity by rebelling against the parent generation, they act in a rebellious fashion by trying to resurrect conservative values of an imagined past. They are thus escaping the temporality of contemporary, faddish consumption, of which they would regard the new feminized masculine consumption as a prime example, by attaching themselves to a timeless ethos of style. In the online communities, references are many times made to how they—the traditional elite—do things with style, whereas others—particularly the new elite—lack the ability, both economically and culturally, to be stylish. One principal way for them to distinguish their consumption from that of the new elite is to frame the latter’s consumption behaviors as overly conscious or even girlish; if one really has style, one rarely has to show it in the explicit way utilized by the new elite.

Another common denominator for what is deemed stylish, and thus a suitable blueprint for the construction of masculinity, is that it should be connected to what other, imagined, groups of similar consumers around the world are engaging in. In this way, the traditional elite is trying to escape the spatial restrictions of their present consumption by attaching themselves to an imagined community of global cosmopolites. By viewing these global soul-mates as their points of reference rather than the upward-striving new elitists, they manage to downplay the similarities between their respective consumption behaviors. Another device utilized by members of the traditional elite in order to strengthen their sense of masculinity in light of the new masculine gender ideologies is to reframe women’s roles. The underlying logic is that as consumption becomes feminized, having support from women to prove one’s masculinity becomes even more important. In the online communities, there are explicit calls for women to accept a more stereotypically old-fashioned, passive role in the company of these men. In the enclaves under investigation, women appear content with playing only supportive roles in the males’ identity game. This stands in stark contrast to contemporary nightscapes that have been characterized as “feminized”, where young women are adopting “predatory” sexual attitudes and are thus playing a more active role (Chatterton and Hollands 2003, 155).

This study of the traditional elite’s responses to the new hegemonic masculinity offers three major contributions. First, it extends research on the crisis in masculinities by looking at a group neither directly addressed by the marketers of the products and ideas behind the alleged new masculinity, nor studied by previous researchers. Despite not being the target group, the crisis of masculinity reaches this group by altering the positions among the different subcultures of consumption on this particular market. Second, it taps into the rather undeveloped area of conspicuous non-consumption by looking at how the traditional elite can afford not to engage in_pollatch-style consumption of branded goods in order to build their masculine identities, whereas the aspiring new elitists resort to this means of consumption. Finally, it addresses the issue of how men use women to manifest that they are still “real men” despite engaging in the allegedly feminized consumption patterns prescribed in contemporary consumer culture.

REFERENCES


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