Intimacy-Related Male Consumption and Masculine Identity Construction: a Consumer Point of View

nacima ourahmoune, ESSEC BUSINESS SCHOOL/ IAE AIX EN PROVENCE

Our society is going through a change in men’s identity, role, status and image. Also, home-based masculine practices and intimacy-related purchase are changing. Consumer research lacks an understanding of men’s involvement in consumption practices, codes of a whole traditionally feminine culture. In this paper, we attempt to explore how a new masculine consumption – lingerie for men- that had clear divisions between men and women, may shape and reinforce men’s socially defined gender roles/identity construction. We focus on new identity landmarks, which move the social frontier between the sexes. This 21 semi-structured interviews research with French men reveals a duality based on identity

[to cite]:


[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14918/volumes/ap08/AP-08

[copyright notice]:

This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com.
Intimacy-related male consumption and masculine identity construction: A consumer point of view

Nacima Ourahmouné, Essec Business School, Paris

SHORT ABSTRACT

Our society is going through a change in men’s identity, role, status and image. Also, home-based masculine practices and intimacy-related purchase are changing. Consumer research lacks an understanding of men’s involvement in consumption practices, codes of a whole traditionally feminine culture. In this paper, we attempt to explore how a new masculine consumption –the lingerie- that had clear divisions between men and women, may shape and reinforce men’s socially defined gender roles/identity construction. We focus on new identity landmarks, which move the social frontier between the sexes. This 21 semi-structured interviews research with French men reveals a duality based on identity.

Masculine identity construction and the intimacy-related male consumption: a consumer point of view

Introduction

Our society is going through a change in men’s identity, role, status and image in the private and public circles, because of social mutations, which have affected the dominant virile model that used to build men’s identities. For as E. Badinter explains, “if masculinity is taught and builds up, it can undoubtedly change” (1993, P51).

Home-based masculine practices and intimacy-related purchase are changing. For instance, L’Oréal forecasts indicate that 50% of French men will use skincare by 2010! But how shall we understand those new consumption modes in relation to a reflection on the masculine identity, its transformations, its ties? What is the role of those new consumer behaviours in the building of gender identity (self-representation through categories of action and authors suggested the role of social fears: “fear of condoning traditional attitudes about male and female roles; fear of becoming a minority relative to the position of women in society; fear of admitting a feminine side to their self-image (and the corresponding fear of homosexuality); and fear of admitting that products and brands represent important aspects of their public and private self-images » .

Elliott and Elliott (2005) found out quite similar results when interpreting male response to naked male bodies in advertising: an expressed fear of homosexuality by informants in particular. The authors argue that because of a plethora of masculine identities proposed by the ads, male consumers are to find the one manly enough but still reconciling traditional behaviours with current changes among the masculine appearance. This was expressed as a threat for respondents who feel insecure in a period of transition where masculine codes are undergoing rapid changes.

Diego Rinallo (2007) explored masculine reactions to male rep in magazines as well as their practices as regard to fashion. He compared straight Italian men and gays. He concluded that while the discourse of fashion encourages -through aspirational models of beauty- new practices (the use of cosmetics, shaving bodies...), “they are still considered of dubious legitimacy among straight men. Even the style innovators among them refrain from their adoption, as they are still subject to the regime of surveillance of the panoptical gaze in their social interactions” (p89).

The author shows how men negotiate their masculinity through the consumption of fashion by referring to a “safety zone” where they can achieve a certain level of satisfaction as regard to their appearance while still conforming to social norms therefore to avoid stigmatisation. On the other hand, gay respondents seem to see the expansion of new practices associated with their own subculture as a “sign of civilization” and also a way to gain social distinction/acceptability (P89).

Then men experience tensions between conforming social expectations about what it means to be a man and the desire to break away from the constraints of hegemonic masculinity through consumption. This aspect is mentioned in Holt and Thompson (2004) research where some informants engage in an everyday consumption that highlights their feminine side vs. traditional or “macho” masculinity. This tension between the breadwinner model and the rebel one is resolved by male consumers through a construction of a third US model of masculinity “the man of action hero” that embraces both individualism and collective interests.

Finally, the idea of a tension between traditional conceptions of masculinity and the male entrance in even “feminine...
consumption” and shopping behaviour is underlined by Otnes and Mc Grath (2001). The authors suggest that men resolve this tension through the notion of achievement. Then, male shoppers accommodate traditional masculinity (“shopping to win”) with some feminine shopping behaviour (spend a long time in shops, visit feminine shops or buy decorative items). «Future research should explore the multitude of tensions male consumers feel and how they cope with these tensions in the marketplace. By investigating these issues, marketers can begin to understand how they can effectively and ethically manage these tensions. » (Tuncay and Otnes, 2007).

Then, this paper is an attempt to participate in building knowledge on the construction of masculine identity by male consumers that face great changes on the marketplace in Western consumer society. We aim to explore more deeply the tensions and limits experienced by men in the masculine identity construction- consumption dialectic.

Understanding masculine identity construction through discourse analysis

I used semi-structured interviews to achieve a discourse analysis. I managed to find almost all the respondents “among people in the entourage or among people that could introduce me to people they know” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 907). This was in order to avoid anonymity and get introduced in the respondents’ private sphere to create a context favourable to confide about a “touchy” subject. The respondents interviewed (21 in all) were of varying ages, sexual orientations and represented a wide range of backgrounds, including students, full time workers and retired people. The criteria for selection were first the participation in lingerie consumption of various types of men (12 respondents). Then, seeking a “qualitative diversity” (Schwarz, 1990, p. 41), I interviewed different types of men: gay; young heterosexual, and older men not involved in this practice. The sample selection followed “literal and theoretical replication” concepts (Yin, 1989) aiming to construct a theoretical sampling in favor of a rich context and a strong theoretical framework.

The interviews were held on an individual basis and in strict confidence, and were, on average, between one and two hours long. Interviews were carried out in Paris and in the south of France (Marseille/Aix-en-Provence). Interviews were typically conducted in the respondents’ houses to create an atmosphere that allows confiding about intimacy. Men chose times that would be quiet or when they would be alone so as not to be disrupted. Interviews were taped, recorded and the respondents were offered the opportunity to view the transcripts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Sexual</th>
<th>City orientation</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Sexual</th>
<th>City orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gilles</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>Pierre</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>François</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Taxi driver</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>Sébastien</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Pharmacist</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Marseille</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michel</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>Pierre</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>François M</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Aix en Provence</td>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Architect</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Marseille</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alban</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Musician</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Marseille</td>
<td>Alexander</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Marketer</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benoît</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>Pascal</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Jobless</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bertrand</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>Romain</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Fashion salesman</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frédéric</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>Alexis</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Designer</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Aix en Provence</td>
<td>Benjamin</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Technician</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Aix en Provence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Julien</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Barman</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pedro</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Serge</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Paris</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings and Discussion

Through the consumption of new underwear lie men’s representations of beauty. More vastly, lies men’s transformations, their modifications, their readjustments, without forgetting their permanent state and the evolution of social relations of sex within the private sphere.

Examing those results means examining those more-or-less changing men, through the analysis of everyday consumption practices. But if men do change, how do they change and how should those changes be interpreted?

“In sociology, change is an interpretative category, not a descriptive one. In this beginning of a century, the state of domestic places is not the same as in the 1950’s. (...) An interpretative model is necessary to understand the transformations that have taken place. …I would like to take seriously the idea of change in gender relations too, within the private life, for the last 30 years; (...) There may still be a male domination, and yet a change in adults’ relation in the private circle.” (de Singly, 2001, P149-151);

Taking into account the fact that a one-dimensional theoretical interpretation is necessarily reducible, any practice, any interaction, any relation being heterogeneous and that one must acknowledge the complexity by taking the risk of proposing an articulation between the different dimensions of the activity, or of the interaction, I assumed that study results could be read according to a logic based on identity (personal identity, masculine identity, generational identity). How are those new masculine consumption practices concerned with the process of identity construction?

Self-representation and personal identity

Self-representation is a crucial component of personal identity. Indeed, the body, the appearance, constitutes a basis and a privileged medium through which the feeling of identity is expressed. In the construction of identity, self- image is highly important. We need then to understand how the consumption patterns of those new underwear contribute to the construction of the practicing interviewees’ personal identity.

Pleasure, game and happiness

Pleasure is a leading principle of the interviewees’ consumption practices. Self-blooming and free action on the body are what matter. Taking care of oneself, decorate one’s body,
lived as a search for happiness and relaxation, and is related to
the idea of feeling better.

Purchasing underwear is done on a hedonist way, something
fun, in adequacy with the search for happiness; something intimate,
which corresponds to the search for an individualized happiness
and celebrates men’s new relation to the private sphere:

«I find it extremely pleasant... It’s a personal pleasure, above all... I feel good... It’s one the pleasures on earth... It’s good, really...” (Pierre)/“It’s more the pleasure thing; traditional boxer shorts are like something compulsory, not fun, and the rest is more like a pleasure. A personal pleasure, not an obligation.” (Romain)

Therefore, this purchase of men’s lingerie is related to oneself, in order to feel good but also to be at ease with oneself, physically and mentally. This stresses the importance of the relation between the body and the soul, as if this physical wellbeing spread to the mental, or rather as if it were a mental wellbeing first:

« It makes you want to do more... How can I put it? You feel good in our body, so, obviously, you’re more joyful, happier, and you’re in harmony with yourself” (Romain)

Self-image, self-control and self-esteem

Taking care of oneself means controlling one’s appearance, therefore having self-control, working on oneself, in order to reinforce self-esteem. Indeed, taking care of oneself is seen as a search for oneself (done for oneself), but also as a search for social recognition (done for others). Those new masculine practices express self-assertion through the image reflected to oneself and eventually to others. Self-representation aims at having this image confirmed and validated through the eyes of other people. Indeed, one of the essential stakes of human relations is “the face” which we try and get acknowledged by other people (Goffman, 1973). Thus, for our interviewees, working on one’s appearance brings a reinforcement of self-esteem and self-confidence.

« I wanted to take care of myself, to see what I could get from it... But in fact, it helped me a lot because it was like being self-confident...” (Julien)/ “It helps you give the impression that you are more attractive, more charming. In the end, you feel psychologically better...” (Pierre)

Buying men’s lingerie is a strongly personal practice that results from self-representation. Nevertheless, if working on one’s appearance depends on one’s identity, it also refers to the gender identity, which does not come from the anatomical sex, but from the “social” sex, that is to say which leans on cultural models of femininity and masculinity.

Self-representation and masculine identity

Home-based masculine practices and intimacy-related purchase are changing. But how shall we understand those new consumption modes in relation to a reflection on the masculine identity, its transformations, and its ties? What is the role of those new consumer behaviours in the building of gender identity (self-representation through categories of action defined as men’s or women’s privilege)? This means understanding men’s involvement in practices, codes and a whole traditionally feminine culture.

This research will reveal a duality based on identity.

Masculine practices and discourses that stress a distance with the traditional model of virility defining masculinity as opposed to femininity.

By going to a traditionally feminine territory – through the aesthetic representation of appearances and everyday gestures-our interviewees deny a traditional masculine virility based on the opposition to femininity. As for talking, in a general way, the interviewees distance themselves from the virile model that stigmatizes women’s trifles:

« People will say that men are... we are boys, so we don’t need to buy those things but, well, I do buy them because I think differently. People will say boys will be boys, they don’t want to change. I used to be like them and now I’ve changed...” (Sébastien)

“For me, it’s unisex, there’s no difference. Underwear or cosmetics... We have a skin as well! There’s no reason why we shouldn’t take care of it. You also try and look good with nice clothes, so I don’t see why you shouldn’t wear nice and refined underwear if you’re an elegant man in the first place!” (Pierre)

“We both must be good-looking... I don’t see why only women should... It’s just a clothes thing” (Pierre-Henry).

On the contrary, discourses valorize the men-women interactions and the reciprocity of those relations within the public and private circle, which undoubtedly goes against the traditional representations of masculinity. It seems that all the interviewees refer to an egalitarian culture focused on parity and emancipation, which discredits the men-women partitioning that go against democracy.

« It’s natural for a man to take care of himself too. I assume that women have the right to ask men what men ask women to do” (Sébastien)

“I belong to this generation of men who are aware of women’s needs, who understand that women are expecting us to make efforts on different levels” (Eric)

Those emancipatory discourses are to be linked with the principle of tolerance and freedom expressed through the different interviews, especially about homosexuality. Those new men interact even more with women as far as intimacy is concerned, and accept homosexuality:

« Gay men take great care of themselves... This is why people say it looks queer... They are in the forefront of those things... and they’re often aces, physically, so why shouldn’t straight men worry about their look too? Guys who don’t understand that are hung up, they’re not open, they must work on themselves... I am open” (Sébastien)

“Those who will think it looks gay... I meet a lot of people, it’s a way of selecting people: I’m not interested in those who are not smart enough to understand those things...” (Pierre)

Yet, it is important to notice that even amongst non-practicing interviewees, this principle of tolerance which states that everybody is free to do what they will, in particular with their body, is to be found, just like the norm of equality.
« (Cute is not derogatory)... because after all, every man to his own life! If people need to look better, cuter or neater, it’s their business... It depends on everybody... It’s more a matter of being into it than of being a man or a woman...” (Pierre-Henry)

“(Cute is derogatory)... it’s just that... I am not. But it doesn’t mean that I criticize people who are. I am NOT shocked but I’m not interested either... » (Pascal)

In order to keep understanding those masculine identity changes which have been tackled on a micro sociological level until now, it is relevant to pass on to a complementary level, a macro level, the society level, which redistributes men’s and women’s roles, changing thereby social relations of sex and their representations.

Indeed, our society is going through a change in men’s identity, role, status and image in the private and public circles, because of social mutations, which have affected the virile model that used to build men’s identities. For as E. Badinter explains, “if masculinity is taught and builds up, it can undoubtedly change” (1993, P51).

Firstly, masculine identity is not as much work-related as it used to be. In the past, a man only needed to “show his work strength” to be seen as a man, that is to say work would make the man. Industrial development that mostly required a physical and muscular work (“instrumental body”) would perfectly go with the stereotype of a man. Yet, nowadays, under the influences of unemployment, shortage of manual jobs (parallel to the valorization of skilled jobs), but also of women becoming workers, and therefore to women’s professional competition, having a job does not seem to be the main reason for masculine identity.

Above all, the masculine identity is not only elaborated in contrast with women anymore, particularly because of the evolution of social relations of sex, which disorientated the traditional masculine model. Indeed, the virile masculine ideal has lost its entire supremacy/legitimacy with women’s emancipation, the admission and evolution of sex equality, the evidence of sexual evolution. Consequently, the injunction to “manliness”, very powerful code of behaviour as far as practices and representations of men are concerned, has weakened: the foundation of virility seems to have crumbled and old landmarks now mark time. The universal outlines, which used to differentiate values, centers of interests and men and women’s roles, are now becoming blurred. Yesterday’s traditional coherence, which would accompany the building of masculinity and femininity, is now being progressively deconstructed, because of the questioning of traditional roles and sexual identities. While univocal and functional norms of roles. In our much more mixed society, masculine and feminine circles do not convey such a differentiated image, as women have been everywhere that used to be for men only, and socialization of girls and boys is not opposed anymore (mixed schools, end of the compulsory military service, rise of a unisex youth culture...).

The weakening difference between genders has brought a redefinition of the masculine identity, following women’s changes, new social relations of sex, and therefore the rising questions about men’s identity. In order to compensate for this dominant virility, men seem to be taking new identity ways which valorize the private sphere, everyday life, closeness and intimacy (in particular through the improvement on appearances). Thereby, consequently to the transformation of women’s status, a readjustment of men is taking place, in the shift of men’s identity, increasing the importance of the private life within the dynamic of recomposition of social relations of sex. Women now being in the public field, the “outside” seems to have attracted men out of the masculine circles. In fact, “when women change, interacting men change their social status, redefine their position”. From then on “to understand the evolution of men’s behaviour at home, one must look at the global evolution of the men-women relationship in our society” (Welzer-Lang, 1993, P328).

Parallel to the scarcity of areas that used to be for men only (work, sports, café, cars), there is a tendency for men to appropriate feminine territories; men who now seem to emancipate too. Men seem to less and less think that taking care of oneself, valorizing the private and daily life is anti-virile, and they do not hesitate so much about being in places that once belonged to women. Then “enclaves of masculinity are somehow disappearing” (La Cecla, 2002, Cova, Caru, Tissier-Desbordes, 2004). They are looking for new identity paths and do not refer to the unique virile model anymore:

« Man has evolved because he has done so in a new world, a new era. New things are accessible to him. Man evolves, he fits in the society in which he lives!” (Benoit)

“*You can now find new lines of jewels, perfumes, cosmetic products and underwear, of course. Anything intimate, in a way, is brought into the open (...). Some taboos are falling, like men taking care of themselves.” (Alexander)

In reality, men and women fit in the new social relations of sex by recomposing their territories and by integrating new identity landmarks, which move the social frontier between the sexes. Since the 1980’s, our society has seen the appearance of what was termed “new fathers”, whose values - refocusing on the father at home- keep on being democratized. New fathers try to work out an everyday affective relationship with their child, breaking off with the traditional image of fathers. « Those “new fathers”, who tend to develop « father patterns », claim their feminine side and are ready to give up some masculine values...” (Errand, 2001, P194-195). Thus, C. Castelain Meunier (2002, P33) diagnoses that « traditional/institutional fatherhood » seems to « overtake institutional fatherhood”. The recent example of the paternity leave stresses the institutional awareness of fathers’ will to be in the private sphere. Here is a strong generation break: the youngest ones breaking off with the old virility pattern in which the private sphere was minimised. Age is a particularly discriminative element in those new masculine practices. Some might say that today’s men tend to be more willing to get rid of the « tough guy » stereotypes, and to assert some “masculinism” by strategically taking on the private sphere, just like women in the 1960 strategically took on the public sphere (Commaillé, 1993).

Nevertheless, this emancipatory and egalitarian discourse is somehow contradictory and reveals a duality in the building of those men’s identities, taking on women’s traditional practices. “Relying on the fact that today’s men are willing to be more involved in parenthood and in their children’s education, the ideal of a positive change in men’s practices is taking place,
regarding family life and domestic work. Yet the statistics show
that this improvement in men's responsibilities does not mean they spend more time on it” (Errand, 2001, P196). Therefore, if men strategically take on the private sphere, this does not mean that they give up masculine codes. On no account is it just an exchange of men/women marks. This is why one must be careful with the meaning of the expression “feminisation” of society as a general alignment on women’s values, for if there is a feminisation indeed, this expression “does not mean that women-related values prevail, but that those values become more visible, tending towards a certain balance with a “masculine” vision of the world” (de Singly, 2001, P163).

Men’s consumption and discourses where gender limits still matter

If the space between men and women is notably diminishing (in particular with men who dare wear men’s lingerie), the interviewee’s statements also indicate backward-looking and traditional schemes belonging to the male “being” and the female “seeming” in both practicing and non-practicing men:

« (Women more than men) must take care of themselves... Why? Because... what I’m going to say might sound stupid, but because girls will be girls and boys will be boys...” (Benjamin)/
« (Taking care of one’s look) belongs to a whole called femininity... I think men as a sex object are pathetic... » (François)

Stereotypes, which differentiate the “fair sex” from the “stronger sex” are well rooted and internalized by those very men who take care of themselves and use cosmetics or lingerie.

Beauty as a feminine matter is an evidence, a “that’s the way it is” fact which “naturalizes” the image of the female “seeming”. These statements show an incorporation of those indeed inappropriate norms, but which are always there, setting down what you can do as a man or as a woman. Today, men are concerned with their appearance too, but ambiguities still remain in the man/beauty association, which can cause an identity threat for men who worry too much about their look, who spend too much time in the bathroom, who take greater care of their look than their partners do (risk of stigmatization). Therefore, a line can be drawn between the « too much » and the « just », where the principles of normalization of masculine beauty practices are emerging; for normality and standardization must find their way is it” fact which “naturalizes” the image of the female “stronger sex” are well rooted and internalized by those very men who take care of themselves and use cosmetics or lingerie.

Beauty as a feminine matter is an evidence, a “that’s the way it is” fact which “naturalizes” the image of the female “seeming”. These statements show an incorporation of those indeed inappropriate norms, but which are always there, setting down what you can do as a man or as a woman. Today, men are concerned with their appearance too, but ambiguities still remain in the man/beauty association, which can cause an identity threat for men who worry too much about their look, who spend too much time in the bathroom, who take greater care of their look than their partners do (risk of stigmatization). Therefore, a line can be drawn between the « too much » and the « just », where the principles of normalization of masculine beauty practices are emerging; for normality and standardization must find their boundaries in order to become legitimate, “a limit (being) an instrument of control which separates what can/must be done from what cannot/mustn’t be done” (Kaufmann, 1995, P103).

An idea of limit, which marks the legitimate territory of masculinity, can be seen in the practices and statements. Where is this masculine limit? Which masculine practices refer to a too “feminizing” behaviour that is therefore deviant for men who yet take great care of themselves?

Fine underwear is often classified in a stigmatized way in order to legitimate trendy men’s underwear, whose cuts or materials are updated yet not too feminine, unlike women’s. Otherwise, it is not natural. Yet, artificiality traditionally belongs to women. Here is the boundary between what is “normal” and what is not, according to whether you are a practicing person or not and, even though you are, there seems to be a sort of balance to strike or a boundary not to go beyond.

“...I wouldn’t go for something too lacy. Don’t go too far! Being a guy means being more natural, simpler than a woman... If I have a sexy date with a girl, I’ll make sure I’m wearing tight boxer-shorts, something fun and sexy, and well, a little see-through. But not lace shorts or a tiny thong like my girlfriend’s... I don’t want a society where men and women wear as much make-up, wear mini-skirts and exchange their underwear because they look the same! You gotta be sensible! Now and then, less ordinary underwear do spice up your life, but you don’t need to go for something absurd!” (Alban)

Several interviewees refer to wearing fine underwear as something exceptional. Lace is often their limit. They also refer to a particular moment, a date, when seduction is at stake:

« G-strings are a little too eccentric... I’d wear them less often than low-cut boxer shorts with sexy details on them... It’s much more punctual. It’s for when I’m going out... I wouldn’t go for lace, because then you go into a homosexual category, it’s really gay... You shouldn’t go into extremes...” (Pierre)

Besides, several interviewees spontaneously refer to the boundary between beauty care, seen as normal, and make-up products, seen as less normal:

«Don’t go and confuse people! Still, woman has to be feminine and man masculine ... Men shouldn’t wear make-up like women do. It’s the same for underwear, don’t go too far by wearing lace... I prefer men to be more natural.” » (Pierre-Henry)

Once again, here is expressed the limit between the « too much » (“the extreme”, “the excess”) and the “just” (“natural”, “sober”). From then on, this limit leads to a moral condemnation (the “just”) marked by a tenseness on this very boundary, “where an evident fear of disorder in customs and values is expressed” (Kaufmann, 1996, P53):

« If, by saying lingerie you mean the new generation of boxer shorts, less upright, oh, yeah, men can wear them. On the other hand, I don’t think G-strings or lace are for men, it’s not meant to be made masculine...That’s the way it is... It’s made for women (...) Men’s seduction is something... natural... that’s why, for instance, I don’t think G-strings for men are a good idea... men should wear tight boxer shorts... I’m not sure it would work because it’s a more provocative approach, just like make-up.” (Gilles)

This moral condemnation, this rejection, also marks the limit of the principle of tolerance and of the bodily autonomy which appear on the first level of the statements:

« I’m not shocked at all (G-strings for men or lace boxer shorts), I don’t see any problem as long as I’m not the one wearing them!” (Gilles)/ “This whole thing about being well-groomed can sometimes be excessive... the way they (gay people) are totally waxed and all... I think it’s over the top.” (Pierre-Henry)

It is fundamental to understand this idea of a boundary defining men’s legitimate territory, for if norms are changing, the frontier between what is acceptable when being a man or a woman still exists. By conquering some of the self-caring practices, men have not erased the frontier between the male and the female consumption of underwear. They have just changed it. If this is
indeed a reconstruction of male and female territories towards more activities and things in common, there still are two territories, two different ways of putting the bodily and aesthetic model into practice. There is still a “we” and a female “they”.

Men who buy new products traditionally belonging to women, do not deny nor ignore their masculinity even so. This is absolutely not a total rejection of manliness, but more of a renegotiated virility, a “neo-virility” which involves a moderate interest in their look:

“I’m ok with it and I’m a guy. I say it loud, I claim it, and I’m not a queer (…) Being a man… does it mean having a deep voice, being imposing, athletic, tall, handsome, taking care of yourself, being hairy? It takes a lot to be a man! So, in general, I see myself as a man. Do I see myself as a manly man? Yeah… I think so… I don’t consider underwear or even cosmetics as criteria of masculinity! (…) Manliness is not being effeminate because some guys are a little effeminate.” (Sébastien)

Some of the interviewees also reject the idea of looking “cute” as a masculine value; these very people being the ones who want men to be free to take care of their image. Indeed, their very concern must not be interpreted as trying to look cute, for, so far, it does not go together with the idea of what a man should be like, beauty traditionally referring to femininity:

“I think (the word cute) is derogatory because a cute person belongs to a feminine dimension. I wouldn’t refer to someone as “cute”, but to someone who takes care of himself, who’s smart, who likes to dress well” (Eric)

Therefore, there is still a distinction between male and female practices and representations as far as appearances are concerned, even though they tend to progressively become similar.

Concluding comments

While asserting the masculine/feminine opposition, men seem to escape this binary system by proving themselves capable of playing a game of coming-and-going to the sex frontier.

As for Schroder and Zwick (2004) argue rather than inverting (eg Patterson and Elliott, 2002), the gaze has expanded to offer multiple possibilities for masculine identity to be expressed within the gender opposition. Consequently, several recurrent principles of opposition have been observed as far as appearances are concerned:

- A couple, « I »/« we »/« they» (fem), indicating a tension between the personal, intimate identity and the masculine identity, that is to say between self-appropriation and sense of belonging to a sexed group in a dual mechanism of differentiation, singularization, identification and conformism.
- A natural couple, masculine/artificial, feminine
- A sober couple (normal)/too sophisticated (abnormal)
- A tolerance-freedom-equality couple/rejection, frontier, boundary

Hesitations can be found amongst those tendencies: compromises, arbitration and identity negotiations which are reflected by the gap between practices and statements; male tensions regarding traditions (the traditional virile model of the man/woman opposition) and mutations (new models of self-assertion which valorize privacy, intimacy, appearance, in other words traditional feminine spheres); and the building up of the system of representations aiming at resolving the consequent contradictions. Indeed, those interviews “explain how men’s transformations are not linear, unlike a time when cycles and ways of life were clearly marked and irreversible” (Welzer-Lang, 2005, P22)

The most important question as a contribution to knowledge remains in this extremely complex interrogation: what is being a man? The interviewees obviously answer this question by referring to the traditional role of men (work, head of the family, opposition with the woman) but also by showing difficulties in talking about the masculine identity, in other words in talking about the specificity of their own identity (Duret, 1999, La Cecla 2004…):

“I don’t know… Being a man means being a human being. (Full stop). It’s not just about muscles… » (Pierre) “Being a man… I find it quite difficult… you don’t need to be a man or a woman, you just need to be someone… Boy or girl, you knew it when you were born… but in life, at work, it doesn’t make any difference anymore… Being a man, for me, only refers to sexuality, procreation… You won’t find that many roles that are only for men, you know…” (Sébastien)

Thereby, there is a tension between the « I » in an individualistic society where self-identity seems to come first and leads to singularisation and differentiation, and a “we” as a gender identity, a will to identify oneself and to belong to a group of peers. Several interviewees show a certain pride in daring to cross the frontier of a women-only territory (“I managed to do so… it gives you more confident”). Those words refer to a sense of freedom, of liberty and to the positive feeling, the satisfaction to dare, to assert oneself. Buying products that traditionally belong to women seems to act as an instrument for standing up and going beyond inner resistances, psychological restraints coming from gender socialization, from the incorporation of traditional masculine and virile norms, yet not completely denying them, as we have seen.

While consistent with previous research evoking social fears as barriers to the consumption of aesthetic/traditionally feminine products and images (Rinallo, 2005; Elliott and Elliott, 2005, Kimmel and Tissier-Desbordes, 2000), this paper shows evolving masculine identity. Some interviewees clearly claim the right to cross the line even if they might experience social stigmatization. By doing this, they do not abandon their masculine values. This states the possibility of a complex myriad of masculinities in a fragmented postmodern world, where traditional masculine values are negotiated with hedonic and aesthetic values in a pursuit of individual happiness. Consumer Research still needs to explore and theorize deeper the masculine identity evolution as regard to new figures of masculinity in the consumer culture.

SELEcTED REFERENCES


