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Masculinity and Consumption: A Qualitative Investigation of French and American Men

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a qualitative investigation of masculinity and consumption. Depth interviews were conducted with 42 French men and 14 American men of varying ages in order to determine the extent to which products, brands, and consumption play a role in the development of self-image and conceptualizations of masculinity. The findings revealed four main issues reflecting gender differentiation, the denial of consumption, reserve and discretion, and the changing image of man as central aspects of the lives of male consumers. The various differences noted between our French and American respondents suggests the important role of culture in studies of masculinity and consumption and highlights the fact that a generalized portrait of the masculine consumer cannot be expected.

Since the early 1960s, researchers have considered the impact of changing gender roles on marketing strategies and consumer decision making (Aiken, 1963; Dickens & Chapell, 1977; Hawkins & Coney, 1976; Stuteville, 1971; Tucker, 1976). As societal expectations play a part in shaping the norms that define acceptable and unacceptable behaviors for men and women, the resulting role differences invariably have implications for consumption decisions. Nevertheless, gender researchers and marketers have devoted relatively scant attention to the realm of masculinity and consumption. Within the social and behavioral sciences, the focus on men has occurred largely within the context of a long tradition of examining how they differ from women in attitudes, experiences, relationship behaviors, and the like. This work has relied on such concepts as sex role identity, gender role orientation, and attitudes about gender roles in order to explore individual differences among males and females (Winstead & Derlega, 1993). While the subject of gender also has been widely treated in the consumer behavior literature, it is mainly feminine roles (Joy & Venkatesh, 1994; Thompson, 1996), differences between men and women (Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran, 1991), gender biases (Bristor & Fischer, 1993), or sex role differences (Meyers-Levy, 1988) that have been emphasized. Given the paucity of research on masculinity and its relationship to consumption, little is known about man's relationship to products, both sex-typed and non-sex-typed, and the ways in which products and brands serve as vehicles by which men can achieve a desired level of masculinity.
Traditionally, it has been assumed that people generally acquire either a masculine or a feminine gender role. Accordingly, it is presumed that the self-concept of the individual who has acquired a masculine role would include such traits as dominance, independence, self-confidence, assertiveness, strength, and ambition. By contrast, an individual who has acquired a feminine role would have an emotional, affectionate, yielding, submissive, gentle, dependent, and gullible self-concept. Based on this distinction, it was concluded that femininity and masculinity were merely end points on a single continuum of gender or sex roles, and that people could be characterized as falling somewhere on a range from feminine to masculine. Consistent with cultural expectations that accord the masculine role to men and the feminine role to women, these traditional role assumptions tend to be firmly ingrained in many marketing communications (Arzt & Venkatesh, 1991; Bellizzi & Milner, 1991). During the 1970s, researchers began to question the assumption that masculinity and femininity exist as opposites on a single dimension (Bem, 1974; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). For example, social psychologist Sandra Bem (1974) argued that masculinity and femininity are separate dimensions, such that individuals can be described as varying in the degrees to which they exhibit masculine and feminine characteristics, regardless of their biological category.

In order to better understand and measure the influence of gender roles on consumption, some researchers have focused on the links between the sexual images of consumers and products. Consumers often opt for products and brands that provide a congruence with their self-image or enable them to achieve a more desired self-image.

In one early study, Vitz and Johnson (1965) obtained an association between the masculine image of a product and the masculine image of a person. Elsewhere, Fry (1971) found that masculine men were more likely than feminine men to smoke masculine cigarettes. More recently, data from the 1988 National Survey of Adolescent Males revealed that American males who held traditional attitudes towards masculinity were less likely to use condoms than males lower in masculine ideology (Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993).

The influence of gender on consumption has also been observed in terms of sex differences and shopping behavior and buying goals. For example, a survey of Christmas gift shopping patterns revealed that while women report being more involved than men in the activity, men tend to be more involved if they hold egalitarian gender-role attitudes (Fischer & Arnold, 1990). Dittmar, Beattie, and Friese (1995) found that men tend to impulsively buy instrumental and leisure goods projecting independence and activity, whereas women are more likely to purchase symbolic and self-expressive goods that are linked to appearance and emotional aspects of the self. This sex difference is apparent in the purchase of clothing, with men stressing the functional (self-oriented) benefits of clothing and women emphasizing benefits more associated with social (other-oriented) concerns. While such investigations are interesting in the sense of identifying gender differences in consumption, they...
Over the course of the twentieth century, a variety of approaches to the study of masculinity can be discerned, ranging from the psychoanalytic approach, which links masculinity to developmental conflicts in the child and to various unconscious processes (cf. Samuels, 1995; Seidler, 1997), to the new social science approach, which views masculinity as a concept that is deeply enmeshed in the history of institutions and economic structures and further shaped by social interactions (cf. Connell, 1995). The perspective on masculinity that has predominated in the behavioral science literature during recent decades is the sex-role approach, which originated in comparisons of men and women in attempts to explain their respective places in society. As applied to gender, roles are seen as specific to definite situations or societal expectations. From this social-psychological perspective, two broad theoretical approaches have been adopted in attempts to provide greater insight into the nature of the male gender role. Trait perspectives emphasize the sources and consequences of the extent to which men actually possess characteristics that are culturally defined as masculine, such as independence, self-sufficiency, and virility. By contrast, normative perspectives, derived from the social constructivist view of gender roles, focus on the nature and consequences of the standards used to define masculinity within a culture.

Pleck, Sonenstein, and Ku (1993) have explained the difference between these two sex-role approaches by suggesting that one can define a "traditional" male in terms of gender-related personality traits, as a male who actually possesses culturally defined masculine characteristics, or in terms of a normative conception, as one who believes that men should have these characteristics. These two interpretations of masculinity imply different approaches to assessment at the individual level, with an emphasis on trait measures or attitudinal measures, respectively. A related concept within the normative perspective is "masculinity ideology," a subset of sex-role attitudes that "refers to beliefs about the importance of men adhering to culturally defined standards for male behavior" (Pleck et al., 1993, p. 12).

The concept of masculinity has been the focus of renewed interest in recent years in large part because the place of man in society and the image of man have continued to undergo changes. Some attributes and objects traditionally associated with masculinity have been overtaken by women, including knowledge, work, money, vote, the control of procreation and birth control (Sullerot, 1992). Other traditional attributes have lost their importance or utility for society, such as physical strength. Technical developments have decreased the difficulty of numerous tasks; for example, the truck driver has power steering, the farmer a tractor, and so on, and these changes have opened up such traditionally masculine jobs to women. Moreover, the evolution of economy from industry to services favored the rise of women in professional milieus.

These changes have led to corresponding modifications in gender
roles, particularly in everyday life and in consumption (Costa, 1994; Fausto-Sterling, 1992; Fischer & Arnold, 1990; Menasco & Curry, 1989; Schmitt, Leclerc, & Dubé-Rioux, 1988). Women now play a greater role in purchase decisions once regarded as falling within the traditional responsibility of males and are progressively considered as serious buyers of traditionally male products. For example, more than 60% of American new car buyers under the age of 50 are women (Candler, 1991) and approximately half of all condoms sold are now bought by women (Cutler, 1992). Other changes in sex roles are evident in the depiction of men and women in advertising, where reversals in the traditional portrayals of the central characters are becoming more common. For example, the recent American positioning of cigars as a symbol of rebellion for successful, trendy consumers includes images of female cigar smokers in marketing communications. Although women continue to be depicted in traditionally stereotypic roles in a majority of advertising messages, men are progressively presented as sex objects, helpless, or incompetent vis-à-vis competent or powerful women. This is seen in a recent campaign by Kookai, a women’s clothing firm, which has run attention-getting mass media and outdoor advertisements in France depicting miniaturized men at the mercy of dominant women. In short, traditionally masculine values have come to be increasingly disparaged as feminine values have taken on progressively greater importance. The man is no longer the absolute reference, the one with the absolute power.

As threats to the universal dominance of man continue to become manifest in contemporary society, changes in consumption behavior can be anticipated and represent an area of growing research interest. For example, within competitive, consumerist cultures, men constantly compare themselves with others; products and brands become an obvious overt sign of one’s standing relative to the competition. Thus, the power to purchase new commodities is not only linked to the expectation that personal satisfaction will follow, but also becomes the way in which men may assert themselves in relation to other men (Seidler, 1997). In this way, owning a fast car provides a boost to one’s self-image because it is an indication of success; owning a faster car than others strengthens one’s masculine image because it conveys the idea that one is doing better than others. In this way, consumption objects represent a focal point for protecting the male ego and helping to shape the masculine self-concept.

Just as female role expectations and conceptions of beauty change with the times, the nature of masculinity has varied across the ages, and the evolution of the male sex role is typically accompanied by corresponding changes in the marketplace. According to Badinter (1992), during the 17th century, “les Précieux” appeared, a new kind of man who adopted some attributes of femininity and moved closer to women in both clothing and manners. A similar sort of male ideal seems to have reappeared in recent years. Although many products have a sexual dimension, such as cars, cosmetics, beer, and the like, products related to the body have emerged as increasingly relevant to the masculine self-concept. A growing number of marketers seem to have recognized that the way a man cares for his body is demonstrative of the way he desires to be perceived as a man. Thus, formerly
“feminine products” like fragrances, hair dyes, jewelry, and personal care products have begun to be marketed to male consumers, but not with complete success in some countries. These products are often positioned as appealing to men who do not conform entirely to the masculine stereotype, but who embrace an ideal personality that includes such traits as romantic, tender, and playful, albeit accompanied by confidence and independence (Solomon, 1999).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The present investigation was intended as a further step toward a more complete understanding of masculinity and consumption, particularly in terms of how the symbolic nature of products and brands serves as a vehicle by which men can achieve a desired level of masculinity. Using an exploratory, depth interview approach, we attempted to shed light on contemporary masculine self-images, product and brand symbolism, and the product usage and brand selection of male consumers. A primary interest in this research was to identify the various representations of men and masculinity as revealed by male consumers, and to suggest implications for marketing strategy. This interest stems from the expectation that the traditional image of masculinity has changed—not by moving closer to the traditional image of femininity, but through a representation that differentiates masculinity from femininity in a new and different way. Another intention was to investigate, through a comparison of the responses of separate samples of French and American male consumers, the extent to which culture plays a mediating role in the link between masculinity and consumption. Culture has been identified as an important variable in the areas of gender and consumption. (McCracken, 1986, Peplau et al., 1999).

Consistent with these goals, our investigation centered on two guiding questions:

- How do French and American men define themselves, and in what ways does product consumption help assist them in their self-definition?
- How do product purchases help male consumers project their masculinity or play out their male roles?

In order to narrow the scope of this study, we focused the depth interviews on products related to the body—specifically, fragrance and personal care products. In recent years, researchers have begun to focus their attention on the "sociology of the body", in attempts to discern how consumers naturally draw distinctions between self and body (Synnott, 1993; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995), and the implications of body image on consumer rituals of self-care (Rook, 1985) and the pursuit of beauty ideals (Bloch & Richins, 1992). Body-related products have grabbed the attention of marketers in recent years and there is growing evidence that the way a man cares for his body is indicative of the self-image he wishes to convey.

We chose to utilize the comprehensive interview approach in order to better understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it—in this case, male consumers of various ages and backgrounds. This approach was successfully utilized by Kaufmann (1995) in a related subject: the presentation of women's bodies on beaches. Because of the interpretive nature of the qualitative interview
approach, the methodology also enabled us to benefit from the dual culture (American and French)/dual gender (male and female) makeup of the authors of the present article who served as interpreters of the interview texts.

RESEARCH PROCEDURE

In order to examine the relationship between men and products, we utilized a semi-structured interview guide with questions intended to stimulate an open-ended conversation between the interviewer (a female business student) and the interviewee. The first part of the interview guide pertained to the relationship between men and products and between men and the universe of consumption. Respondents were asked about products and brands that they considered to be masculine, products that are specifically for men, products that a man cannot use or cannot buy, shops that pose difficulties for themselves or male consumers in general. Explanations (such as physical, cultural, and the like) were sought relative to responses to items dealing with products that our interviewees held as inappropriate for men.

The second part of the interview guide focused on specific products which the interviewee was to consider in terms of whether they projected a masculine image. The product list consisted of the following: umbrella, scarf, ring, bracelet, earring, suit, fragrance, face cream, shaving cream, skirt, tight T-shirt, shoes with heels, bleached or dyed hair. They also were asked to identify magazines and television programs targeted to men. The final part of the interview pertained to a general consideration of men and masculinity in contemporary society. Respondents were asked to describe what it means to be a man today; how they differed from their fathers or grandfathers; desired and appropriate qualities that men must have; and the importance of appearance, attire, and personal care for men.

Each interview was conducted individually in a private setting and lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. Respondents were informed about the general nature of the research objectives and were assured that their anonymity and confidentiality of responses would be protected. A total of 56 males were interviewed, including 42 French respondents and 14 American respondents ranging in age from 18- to 65-years-old and varying in educational level, profession, and place of residence. Thirty of the French participants originally were interviewed by a woman (either the second author or a female student). An additional 12 French participants were interviewed by a male student in order to check for variations in response as a function of interviewer gender. There were no apparent differences in the substantive nature of the responses, with the exception of a somewhat cruder use of language among respondents interviewed by a male. The American participants had recently arrived in France (less than 4 months) and were interviewed by an American male student. The interviews were conducted in the French language for the French men and transcribed into English by the second author, and in English for the American men.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1 Six out of 30 interviews were conducted by the second author.
Although the interviews touched on a number of marketing-related issues, our participants’ responses tended to revolve around four basic themes: (1) gender differentiation; (2) the denial of consumption; (3) reserve and discretion; and (4) the image of man in daily life and advertising. Not surprisingly, there were both similarities and differences among the French and American respondents relative to these themes, the most important of which are described below along with representative interview excerpts.

1. Gender differentiation.

This theme reflects the extent to which our respondents recognized differences between men and women with respect to consumption behaviors and attitudes or suggested a form of egalitarianism among consumers, regardless of gender. In this context, several differences between the French and American respondents were apparent.

Comments from our French respondents reflected the belief that in contemporary society, the differentiation between men and women in terms of sex roles and gender-typed behaviors is no longer evident, or at least is less apparent than in the past. For example, one respondent commented that “there is no longer any difference between a man and a woman... today in behavior; it is no longer really the man who leads the couple.” Another stated that “products are for everybody; only advertising tells you if it is for men or women or the presentation, the packaging, but the products are the same.”

This egalitarian view is exemplified by magazines, which, according to one respondent, “Are for everybody, not only for men; even magazines for men can interest women and vice versa.” Relative to magazine consumption, one French respondent pointed out that perhaps the only gender-specific exception is for sex magazines (and videos), which is viewed as a more hidden or private example of consumer behavior. Such perceptions of egalitarianism in products and product usage extends also within the realm of sports and other recreational activities: one respondent pointed out that bicycle riding “can be shared with men or women.”

Several of the French interviewees were rather adamant in their denial of sex-typed categories for people and things. According to one respondent, “I refuse categories, so except for the differences of nature, nothing is specific.” When the French respondents identified gender differences, they focused on the obvious, biological/physiological ones, such as hormonal or physical capabilities linked to strength: “The biological man can be found at work, with his aggressive instinct, the definition of territories there are the dominant ones and the dominated.” It is only for biological differences that distinctions in product usage were mentioned; that is, in terms of the difficulty for men to use body products for women.

In contrast to the French notions of egalitarianism, the American respondents were more apt to define differences between men and women in terms of traditional role distinctions at work, in the home, and in the marketplace. For example, one respondent commented that at work “men tend to be more task-oriented, whereas women are more people-oriented. Women tend to get the team to work well together and men tend to want to solve the problem.” Similarly, another respondent depicted men as less able than women “to accept ‘no’ for an answer, especially if it’s something that they want or want to accomplish... a
man would much rather be making the rules than be abiding by the rules." Another respondent commented that "men aren't trying to prove something as much as women are."

Several of the American men interviewed stated that there is greater sharing of responsibilities in the household and perhaps a greater blurring of roles. For example, one respondent explained the man's tasks at home as involving "laundry, washing dishes, taking care of the kids, changing kids' diapers...you name it. I don't think that those need to be devoted to one gender or the other. I don't think that there are any roles that need to be devoted to one gender." Nonetheless, some comments seemed to undermine this opinion, with respondents explaining that it is the man's job to make repairs, take out the garbage, and accomplish tasks requiring strength. Further, the view that the man is more likely to be the provider and caretaker of the family—the "take charge" authority figure in the relationship or "head of the household"—was a common one. The notion of differentiation was most clearly evident in one respondent's personal definition of masculinity as "the antithesis of femininity": "Masculinity is the opposite of being feminine. Pretty much anything that a guy does that's not feminine, I guess, can be seen as masculine."

With regard to specific products, the American respondents also diverged from their French counterparts in that they claimed not to read feminine magazines and had difficulty identifying them by name. However, the Americans were apt to mention more magazines for men—especially sports magazines—than were the French. No mention was made by any of the American respondents relative to erotic magazines or pornographic materials as being within the realm of masculine consumption. Also, unlike the French respondents, they viewed the role of sports as predominantly masculine, as something that is shared with a father or male friends. This view extends to their positive reactions to advertising depicting masculine sports role models like Michael Jordan.

Relative to the identification of specific products as masculine or feminine, a denial of differentiation was apparent in the reactions of a majority of our respondents, whether French or American. A large proportion of responses revealed a difficulty in linking traditionally sex-typed products such as umbrellas, bags, scarves, skin cream, tight T-shirts, hair coloring, and fragrances with either male or female usage. The denial of gender differentiation with regard to specific products may be attributed to the changing marketplace, where unisex products (e.g., CKI fragrance) and advertising have become more commonplace. In such a context, admitting differences could also be seen as admitting a traditional or conservative point of view, out of touch with current trends, which might be disparaged in interview and non-interview contexts.

The differences among the French and American respondents in terms of egalitarianism in masculine and feminine roles were somewhat surprising and do not suggest any ready explanations. The refusal of differentiation among the French respondents was consistent with their apparent view that it is impossible for men to have their own products and still maintain a desire for equality. Further, to deny equality would pose the risk that men could become a minority, further threatened by the growing social and
economic gains won by women. These notions of egalitarianism extended into the realm of certain household tasks, such as cleaning the table or washing dishes, which are performed not so much because they represent masculine activities, but because they enable the man to obtain equity relative to the work done by the woman in the relationship. As one respondent described it, it is the man's responsibility "to wash up when the woman has prepared a good meal." For this French respondent, such distribution of tasks was apparently perceived as a clear indication of egalitarianism in the relationship, but this could be interpreted differently in other cultures.

The American respondents seemed less affected by these concerns, perhaps suggesting a greater degree of comfort with their masculine roles and greater clarity in defining masculine and feminine roles. As a result, there were few indications of guilt or fear in the American responses relative to being male or acting in traditionally masculine ways. Whereas an American respondent would admit that it is part of the masculine identity to like cars, a French respondent would be apt to add the disclaimer, "but women like cars, too."

2. The denial of consumption.

In a number of regards, our interviewees appeared reluctant or unable to acknowledge that consumption plays a major role in their lives. Generally speaking, consumption was perceived as more of a feminine concern, associated with the household and tasks typically performed by the woman. According to our respondents, men are more oriented toward the domain of work, which is outside the home, with the exception of household tasks for which they are more apt to take responsibility, such as electrical or other manual repairs.

More specifically, the denial of consumption was reflected in our respondents' comments regarding personal objects, which are not seen as a fundamental male preoccupation. For example, one French interviewee commented that "a man doesn't need a bag because he doesn't need products to take care of him, like beauty products ... a man only needs his keys and (identity) papers." When asked to freely recall brand names associated with male products, the majority of our interviewees were unable to list more than three or four. The brands Gillette, Mennen, and Brut were commonly cited, which corresponds to the respondents' tendency to identify shaving as the only truly masculine consumption area. Overall, however, younger respondents were able to identify and name more so-called masculine products than were older respondents, especially for fragrance brands, and American respondents evidenced greater diversity in the nature of the masculine products and brands identified. For example, while each American respondent was able to name only a few brands, the range of masculine products included items that were not mentioned by their French counterparts, such as tires, cars, trucks, guns, sporting goods, baseball caps, cigars, underarm deodorants, and hair shampoo.

A common tendency among our respondents was their assertion that products for men are much less numerous than those available for women. According to one respondent, "for clothes, it is much more limited than for women for body care products, all that is not soap or shampoo is less for men. Very few men use face cream when they use it it is because they have
skin problems.” One point that was emphasized has to do with the labels used to name products; that is, when men use certain products typically associated with female consumption, the products are often called something else: hair spray for women vs. hair gel for men; a bag for a woman vs. a wallet, saddlebag, or backpack for a man. Other examples that were cited are reflected in different French words for the same product, depending on whether the product is for a man or for a woman: a woman’s scarf (“foulard”) vs. a man’s scarf (“écharpe”); a woman’s suit (“un tailleur”) vs. a man’s suit (“un costume”); a ring for a woman (“une bague”) vs. a wedding ring (“une alliance”) or seal ring (“une chevalière”) for a man. Similarly, American respondents differentiated between “massage oil” for men and “massage lotion” for women, women’s “perfume” vs. men’s “cologne,” and a “sack” or “bag” for men vs. a “pocketbook” for women.

In the view of our respondents, products, tasks, and activities considered as masculine are generally exhibited outside the home and traditionally associated with men. Three categories of products and activities were apparent: (a) economic products linked to the traditional role of the man to earn money and to take part in urban life (e.g., business magazines, politics, “a suit and a tie”); (b) products or leisure activities requiring strength or violence (e.g., judo, karate, boxing, football, weapons, taking out the garbage can, closing the windows and shutters, cleaning large windows, alcohol consumption) or linked with nature (e.g., fishing and hunting); and (c) technical products or leisure activities (e.g., cars, computers, remote control). Some products were discussed by combining the technological and aggressive elements; for example, the masculine car is perceived differently from the feminine car in terms of power, size, and aggressiveness.

While few of our respondents were willing or able to identify products that they perceived to be masculine in nature, they were more apt to discuss products as linked with man’s identity, as defined by their jobs and the work they perform (outside of a consuming world). For them, the identity of men is not in the area of consumption or shopping because these are viewed as aspects of the feminine world. Indeed, shopping has long been stereotyped as a woman’s pastime and our respondents appeared to maintain this feminine connotation (cf. Firat, 1991). Masculine products were not associated with the body, appearance, or fashion, with the exception of shaving.

Shaving is also the masculine activity for which our interviewees were most able to offer masculine brand names; they also exhibited familiarity with technical brands.

Overall, the interviews portrayed the world of consumption as a foreign one for our respondents. They had difficulty naming and speaking about brands, and their comments tended to reveal that consumption is not a domain that is central to their lives. Familiar brands were largely limited to sports (e.g., Adidas, Nike, Spalding, Champion), fashion (e.g., Hugo Boss, Armani, Levi’s, Celio), and shaving (e.g., Gillette, Mennen, Bic).

2. Reserve and discretion.

Consistent with the overall tendency among French consumers towards discretion (Mermet, 1996), our French respondents revealed an aversion to the ostentatious presentation of traditionally masculine conduct in public settings. This tendency was perhaps most evident
in their reluctance to outwardly display their bodies, which, in their view, would reveal an overt attempt to attract or to seduce. This “denial of the body” is apparent in one respondent’s belief that “men can’t use overly exuberant products, not too showy products, because it is more women who show themselves.” This notion of physical reserve was not apparent in the interviews with the American respondents; however, for both samples, it was rare that products were spontaneously offered as relating to the body or to seduction, with the exception of fragrances and shaving products. The product most frequently mentioned as inappropriate for the man is nail polish, which combines seduction and artificiality. The interviewees indicated that they do buy soap or shampoos, but primarily in order to clean themselves rather than to be handsome or seductive. According to one interviewee, “a man cannot be too interested by body products.” Overall, it was the younger interviewees who gave more importance to appearance.

Our respondents also revealed that they find it difficult to buy products specifically for women, such as hygiene products, lingerie, or women’s make-up items, and rarely purchase such items for women; however, there were indications that while it might be possible for them to buy such products, it is the use of such products that is seen as more forbidden. This contrasts with the tendency for many women to make purchases for men of such items as underwear, shaving products, and the like. Four of the American interviewees specifically mentioned Victoria’s Secret as the sort of store where they would feel most uncomfortable shopping.

Finally, it should be noted that a greater degree of discretion and reserve was apparent among the French interviewees overall in terms of their reluctance to speak about their private lives or about masculinity in general. By contrast, the American respondents tended to be more direct in their responses to specific questions about their private roles, including their tasks and responsibilities in the home, and appeared to have less difficulty discussing what masculinity means to them.

3. The image of man.

A number of comments from both samples of interviewees reflected a belief that the image of man has undergone a variety of changes in recent years, to the extent that it is quite different to be a man today than during previous generations. The French respondents were more apt than the Americans to speak of these changes in terms of work and family life. According to one French respondent, to be a man today “is to have a good job, this hasn’t changed, but what has changed is in what the family means; a man is not admired because of the cohesion of his family, but more because of his job.” The importance of work was emphasized by several French interviewees, including one who maintained that “men get from their work a social position so for them it is very important, it is through their work that they represent something.” Today’s man is also viewed very traditionally as “courageous, strong with muscles, all that looks natural.” While there is perhaps nothing new about these portraits, unlike their fathers’ generation, men today “now have to share,” in the sense that the concept of head of the family no longer exists and there are now shared responsibilities for educating the child.

While not ignoring these changes in work and family life, the American interviewees tended to focus their
comments about what it means to be a man today on specific characteristics that reflect contemporary masculinity and socially acceptable masculine qualities. Several comments reflected the belief that because of conflicting demands it is more complicated to be a man today. One American respondent used the term "mixed bag" to refer to the fact that it is more socially acceptable than in the past for men to reveal their feminine side, while another respondent emphasized the need to be "more balanced" in the presentation of masculine and feminine qualities. The need to show both sides (e.g., strength and sensitivity) was attributed to the greater social acceptability of feminine qualities in the man. For example, one respondent pointed out that "society has changed from the time of my father and grandfather. I think that society is much more accepting of men, being more conscious of their fashion and more flamboyant, things that would have perhaps seemed more feminine in the past are more accepted today." Another interviewee hinted that such changes have led to a weakening of the traditional male image, noting that "the time of my father and grandfathers was much more masculine; phrases like "be a man," "don't whine," "take it." Now a man can be more compassionate. Back in the days of my father and grandfather, there weren't many tears shed, that wasn't normally allowed. Now you can show a little more feelings."

Our French respondents revealed varying conceptions of masculinity: for one, masculinity represents vanity, a word for women to qualify men; for another, it means "bestiality: masculinity is to be a male, and to be a male is to be an animal." Another respondent characterized masculinity as "strength, not physical strength, but interior strength." Also evident in their remarks was a fear to be revealed as a minority, in the sense of being in a weaker position relative to women. Thus, one respondent commented that "some men don't like to go into clothes shops or underwear shops with their women because here, for the first time they feel discomfort they are in the minority." Other indications of this fear were apparent in their suggestions that men feel guilt with respect to not taking care of their family or in their refusal to receive orders from a woman. According to one respondent, "to assume the difference from the other gender without trying to be too close with the other gender is to be normal, to be considered as somebody, to feel well in one's skin." The younger respondents, who perhaps have more to prove, were more likely to focus on the social side of masculinity than were the older respondents. One spoke of masculinity as being "handsome, big, with muscles and [body] hair," and another spoke of "a big guy full of muscles with hair everywhere."

Our French respondents also revealed how a fear of homosexuality makes it difficult for men to accept equality with women: equality implies that one recognizes the feminine side of man and the possibility of homosexuality. One respondent admitted that "it is difficult for me to imagine buying products which would give a feminine connotation to the use of these products, for instance, toiletry products that would give a too feminine side or clothes which would give the illusion of homosexuality or something like that." Consistent with this view, another respondent suggested that some products that have a feminine association are linked to "the dark side of men, sometimes homosexuality, sometimes marginality, violence."
Earrings on men are associated with hooligans, bad boys, evil company.” These notions relating to homosexuality and fears of accepting equality with women were not apparent in the interviews with our American respondents.

A final apparent distinction between the French and American samples pertains to the portrayal of men in advertising. In general, our French respondents were critical of the depiction of men in advertising. A typical view from one respondent claimed that male characters are portrayed as “too feminine, too sophisticated, artificial, precious, and over-refined men and women in advertising look similar with a lot of muscles and a baby!” Another respondent suggested that the man in advertising “is diminished to some extent, like before they [were relentless, tough] towards women, now they [victimize the men].” The aversion to advertisements that present men in unnatural ways, as too affected or mannered, to some extent may reflect the denial of the body notion evident in our interviews with the French respondents.

In sharp contrast with their French counterparts, the American interviewees responded more positively to the ways men are portrayed in contemporary advertising, consistent with an overall favorable American attitude toward advertising that has been observed in previous research (Savitt, Lowrey, & Haeffer, 1998). While several mentioned that they could not personally relate to the male characters in the sense of identifying with them, they seemed to admire certain qualities projected by the characters, such as “strong,” “attractive,” “athletic,” and “physically fit.” In this regard, one respondent stated “I don’t look at a poster and go ‘Ah, man, I see myself there’ but I see those athletes and I aspire to be like them.” Similarly, another respondent commented, “In general, the people you see advertising clothes or shaving products and colognes are attractive looking, are sort of macho types. I wouldn’t necessarily say that I relate to them per se, but I find myself influenced by it nonetheless, because when I decide not to shave for a few days, then I kind of think, ‘OK this is cool.’ So I wouldn’t say that I necessarily relate to them, but I’m definitely influenced by what I see.

CONCLUSION

Do men define themselves and their masculinity in terms of the products and brands they use? Our interviews with male consumers suggest that the answer to this question is not an obvious one. Respondents exhibited a degree of difficulty in discussing products and brands in general, as well as in terms of gender associations, and their comments reflected an unwillingness to admit that products and consumption represent central aspects of their lives. At least for our French respondents, there were indications that these tendencies may be based in part on fear: 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. Our American respondents appeared less influenced by these concerns, more direct in their descriptions of contemporary masculine roles (including their private lives at home), and more open in noting
differences between men and women in terms of traditional role distinctions. According to the majority of participants from both samples studied, the image of man has undergone significant changes relative to previous generations. While these changes have added complexity to the masculine role in the work and home contexts, their effects have yet to be seen in terms of men’s relationship to products and brands. The fact that our younger respondents appeared more knowledgeable about products, more aware of brands may suggest that this situation is about to change.

We expected that the symbolic nature of consumption objects would serve as a vehicle by which men develop their sense of self and their masculinity. To whatever extent this is true, men tend not to be willing to admit it. However, care should be taken when considering the generality of our findings in light of the limited nature of our respondent samples. Given that our samples were limited to French males residing in the Paris region of France and American males recently arrived in France (including both tourists and expatriates), it is unclear whether similar results would be obtained from other kinds of participants. Also, longer interviews might have revealed additional insight into the personal and private lives of our respondents.

Nevertheless, our qualitative findings suggest that culture represents a critical factor in studies of masculinity and consumption.

Further research is necessary in order to clarify the marketing implications of our results. Some of the issues worthy of future consideration include the apparent difficulty in targeting men when marketing products with gender-specific symbolic associations; the importance for advertisers to project an image of man that is more consistent with the way their targets perceive themselves and their place in society; the implications for retailers of the reluctance of men to enter women's shops; and the importance of labeling similar products differentially for men and women. Finally, future studies on masculinity and consumption might benefit from a focus on age as a moderating variable and on women, in terms of their conceptions of masculinity and the consumption circumstances that stimulate the masculine side of their personalities.

REFERENCES


Bellizzi, J. A. & L. Milner (1991), "Gender positioning of a traditionnally male-dominant


