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Conceptualizations of Masculinity among a “New” Breed of Male Consumers

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ABSTRACT

Men are increasingly becoming avid consumers of once taboo goods and services such as grooming products, salon services and fashion goods. This consumer, labeled by the popular press as the metrosexual, is purported to signal a departure from traditional notions of masculinity. Marketers are taking notice by increasingly creating goods to target this lucrative consumer. In the current research, eleven “metrosexuals” from Chicago and New York City were investigated through three methods, including collage constructions, in-depth interviews, and shopping trips, in order to understand their prevailing notions of masculinity. Eleven themes of masculinity emerged, five of which were identified as core components. These themes include adventure/outdoors, altruism, appearance, family / love, fun, knowledge, leadership / respect, money / success, spirituality / morality, strength, and women / sex. An enhanced understanding of these consumer’s gender identities is important, not only to develop our theoretical knowledge of this “new” type of masculinity, but also to provide marketers with the tools to effectively target this important segment.

With the onset of the postmodern era, consumption reigns supreme for both women and men (Firat 1994) and there has been a shift from men as producers to men as consumers (Schroeder and Zwick 2004). In fact, men are even becoming enthusiastic consumers of once taboo goods such as personal care and beauty items. For example, according to Advertising Age, men spend over $8 billion/year in grooming products (Neff 2002). Further, the popular press points to a new breed of man in the U.S. who is labeled the “metrosexual.” This man is defined as the heterosexual, hip, urban male who is concerned with his appearance and in touch with his feminine side. Marketers are recognizing this trend and are delving into this growing market. Companies such as Esteé Lauder, Clinique, Nivea for Men, Neutrogena for Men, Old Spice, and L’Oreal all recently introduced or expanded their personal care lines for men. The changing landscape poses an incredible opportunity for companies to go after the lucrative male consumer. Marketers often appeal to male consumers through the use of masculine themes and thus, understanding consumers’ notions of masculinity is important in order to appeal to these consumers effectively.

The term “metrosexual” was first coined by theorist Mark Simpson in his 1994 book, Male Impersonators: Men Performing Masculinity. However, the buzz in the popular press began when Simpson published an article, “Meet the Metrosexual,” on salon.com in July 2002, and discussed the rampant consumption associated with the construction of masculinity. Shortly after, the New York Times published an article by Warren St. John, entitled, “Metrosexuals Come Out.” This popular press buzz culminated with a report released in June.
2003 by Euro RSCG Worldwide, an advertising agency, who conducted a survey titled “The Future of Men.” Since then, there have been thousands of newspaper, magazine and TV stories on metrosexuality and there have been over 25,000 hits for "metrosexual" on Google (http://archive.salon.com). However while its prevalence in the media is important to understand, more critical than the label is the notion that men in today’s society are purported to have a new conceptualization of their gender roles and this is impacting their consumption behavior. It is useful to examine this phenomenon to see if it indeed does signal a shift in male consumers’ identities. It also serves as an important context in which to observe the interplay between gender, identity, and consumption and provides an opportunity to enhance our theoretical understanding in this area.

**PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY**

This study aims to gain an understanding of notions of masculinity held by men, especially men who are identified as metrosexuals, or men who are proposed to have a “new” sense of masculinity. An expression of this masculinity is in part related to avid consumption in the marketplace. It is clear that conceptualizations of masculinity and men’s consumption behaviors are tightly intertwined. However, with few exceptions, male consumers in general are conspicuously absent from research on consumption (for exceptions, see Belk and Costa 1998; Fischer and Arnold 1990; Holt and Thompson 2004; Otnes and McGrath 2001; Peñaloza 2001). Therefore, this study provides the opportunity to expand our knowledge in a much-neglected, yet important domain in consumer research. That is, this research examines an aspect of the broader “new” man in today’s society, a man who increasingly values his physical appearance. An enhanced understanding of how these avid consumers appropriate meaning to the notion of masculinity will aid in both an updated and an enhanced theoretical understanding of masculinity. In addition, it will serve as a tool for marketers who seek to effectively use masculine themes in their advertising and retailing strategies.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Thus, the principal research questions are (1) What is the metrosexual’s definition of masculinity? (2) What are the core elements of the metrosexual’s sense of masculinity? (3) How does the metrosexual’s conceptualization coincide with and differ from traditional masculinity? In order to explore these questions further, the relevant literature in the study of masculinity will be reviewed next.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

This literature review will detail how the central construct of masculinity has been defined over time and the dominant approaches to the study of masculinity. Moreover, research on masculine ideals and gender role norms will be reviewed in order to understand what gaps remain in the study of masculinity. Finally, links between consumption and masculinity will also be detailed due to its direct relevance for consumer behavior.

**What is Masculinity?**

Masculinity can be defined as the socially accepted way of being a man. Further, masculinity can be said to comprise many masculinities, in that being “masculine” can be defined and expressed in many different ways. How a person conceptualizes his or her notion of masculinity depends on several
factors, including the historical context, geographic location, class standing, ethnicity, culture, age, marital status, sexuality and various individual differences. Therefore, masculinity is not a stable construct; it is varied in its construction and in its enactment. It is also important to acknowledge that while men will be the focal point of this research, masculinity can also be expressed by women (see Halberstam 1998).

Different Approaches to the Study of Masculinity

Masculinity has been conceptualized differently depending upon the approach of the researcher. Bourke (1996) outlines the five ways masculinity can be conceptualized, including biological, whereby masculinity is a product of the biological makeup of men; socialization, where masculinity is a result of the “proper” socialization of men; psychoanalytical, whereby differing masculinities are formed as a result of varying socio-historical and cultural environments; discourse, where masculinity is an outcome of discourses; and feminism, where patriarchy not only restricts men but also reinforces the oppression of women.

While the study of masculinity can be approached in various ways as discussed above, there are two predominant approaches in the current field. The first is the postmodern view, where masculinity is constructed through discourses, or through a complex system of cultural meanings in society. Past research in masculinity has tackled cultural issues such as race and ethnicity (Irwin 2003; Wallace 2002), religion (Boyarin 1997), sexuality (Forrest 1994) and class (Holt and Thompson 2004). While some researchers construct masculinity as a product of structural features, others (Butler 1990; Morgan 1992) define masculinity as a Goffmanesque presentation, after Erwin Goffman’s (1971) conceptualization that people are “actors” who use signals in their “performances” or self-presentations. Masculinity as performance follows the socialization tradition, as men are actors following a scripted role on how to be a man. While socialization provides the means for a boy to become a man, some performances are more valued than others, such as that of the young, white, college educated, heterosexual man (Goffman 1963). In this study, gender is held as a cultural space, with its appropriate code of behaviors and culturally acceptable characteristics for men and women.

Historical Nature of Masculinity

Not only are there different approaches to the study of masculinity, and myriad factors that influence the social value associated with the different masculinities that exist, but this construct is often both nebulous and temporal in nature. Not only does a man experience his own masculinity differently over time, but the historical context in which the man is embedded cannot be ignored. For example, in early American history, men’s status used to be defined by their property ownership. By the 1930s, it was clear society deemed a man’s role in life was to be a good provider to his family. The notions of work and masculinity were firmly intertwined in a cultural discourse that was affirmed by both government and business (e.g., see discussion of the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps by Franklin D. Roosevelt in Suzik 2001). Although the notion of the breadwinner continues today, its heyday was in the 1950s where middle-class men fulfilled this role by being “respectable” men through providing financially for their family. Alternatively, working-class masculinity displayed “rough masculinity” by engaging in drinking and
rowdiness, while earning respectability by earning middle-class wages (Meyer 2001).

While these dominant discourses of masculinity in the first half of the 20th century are important, it is also useful to understand that during the 1920s and 1930s, there was an undercurrent of an alternative type of man. This new man was embodied by the Peter Pan ethos and represented the seeds of a new type of masculinity, where men wanted to engage in a never-ending childhood of play, games, thrills, and personal satisfaction through the consumption of goods (Register 2001). This undercurrent later built the foundation for what became known in the 1950s and 1960s as the “playboy” ethic. Unlike his breadwinner countertype, this man was self-indulgent, consumption-driven, and resisted the reins of domesticity (Osgerby 2001). While the outward appearance of this “playboy” changed over time, this consumption continued through the 1980s, with the “yuppie” lifestyle, and still continues today. While past notions of masculinity dominated during certain historical eras, the most significant difference with regard to notions of masculinity at the end of the 20th century is that it was strikingly different from earlier conceptions due to its fragmented nature (Beynon 2002).

In summary, men’s experiences of masculinity are historically situated, with certain ideals more culturally valorized at particular points in history. The content of this changing gender ideology has also been detailed by past researchers and will be discussed next.

Gender Role Norms and Masculine Ideals

Conceptualizations of masculinity have been studied in terms of defining accepted gender role norms (Harris 1995) and detailing masculine ideals (e.g., Brannon 1976; Lindsey 1997). Harris (1995) develops a comprehensive typology of American masculine norms based on an empirical study on a sample of 500 men from various ages, ethnicities, and class backgrounds. After analyzing responses to a series of 24 gender-role messages that men are exposed to in the media, and from the community, family and peers, he developed a list of masculine gender role norms, or a typology for how men should behave. For example, the norm of the Technician holds that men are expected to understand and fix machines.

Other researchers have investigated ideal notions of masculinity, or how men wish to be. Brannon (1976) categorized ideal masculinity into four roles: No Sissy Stuff, or the anti-feminine norm; The Big Wheel, the notion that money makes the man; The Sturdy Oak, exemplifying toughness; and Give ‘Em Hell, which signifies aggression. Lindsey (1997) subsequently added a fifth role, the Macho Man, or a man who seeks sexual pursuits.

Not only has the historical nature and the content of masculinity have been examined but also its link to consumption has been studied. This literature is especially important due to its direct implications for consumer behavior and marketing.

Consumption and Masculinity

One of the most significant influences on masculinities in the last three decades is an increased participation in consumption. Frank Mort (1988, p. 98) captures this notion: “Young men are being sold images which rupture traditional icons of masculinity. They are stimulated to look at themselves and other men as objects of consumer desire. They are getting pleasures previously branded taboo or feminine. A new
Bricolage of masculinity is the noise coming from the fashion house, the marketplace and the street.” Beynon (2002) describes this “new man as narcissist.” This type of new man emphasizes appearance, fashion, and material goods. This characterization can be seen in the yuppy of the 1980s and today’s metrosexual man.

Consumer researchers have also investigated consumption in the context of male sports and retail venues, such as Nike Town (Sherry 1998) and ESPN Zone (Sherry, Kozinets, Duhachek, Deberry-Spence, Storm, and Nuttavuthisit 2004). In doing so, they have observed enactments of masculinity in consumption settings. Sherry et al. (2004) observed ultracompetitiveness, violence, achievement, and high risk behavior, as consumers sought to fulfill their fantasies of being the superstar athlete or celebrity in the realm of the retail store. Moreover, Belk and Costa (1998) explore another consumption setting by investigating the modern day “mountain man’s” enactment of life in the old American West.

While past consumer research has made in roads into masculinity and consumer behavior, little research has investigated consumers that inhabit a shared cultural space between men and women. A few notable exceptions do exist, however, such as the study of male shoppers (Ottes and McGrath 2001) and analyzing issues of control by women who earn substantially more money than their husbands (Stephens, Hill, Commuri, and Gentry 2001). Despite the scarcity of research, men and women increasingly occupy shared cultural spaces. This can be evidenced by the notion of housefathers, women adopting masculine behavior to become successful in business, young women who drink and engage in “laddish” behavior at bars and clubs, and metrosexual men who are fashion and appearance-conscious.

In summary, little research has explored the prevailing gender role ideals held by male consumers. Moreover, there is no theoretical research on ideals held by metrosexual consumers who are purported to exemplify a departure from “old” masculinity but also who actively participate in a shared cultural space in today’s society.

**METHODS OF INVESTIGATION**

To recruit informants, personal contacts and a snowballing technique were used, as it was presumed consumers would likely interact with individuals in their social circles who engage in similar types of consumption behavior. Approximately 23 men were screened informally using a list of short questions inquiring into behaviors such as personal care and shopping. Questions used in the screening process probed into the grooming habits (e.g., manicures, waxing), shopping behavior (e.g., designer clothes), and emphasis on appearance. Eleven metrosexual informants were then selected, seven who reside in Chicago, IL and four who live in New York City, NY. Informants had varying educational, occupational and ethnic backgrounds, but all fell into the Generation X age range. Three methods were used in the investigation. First, in-depth interviews were conducted to investigate how definitions of masculinity that pervade this segment have been formed in the context of larger societal and cultural definitions. The interviews followed the recommendations set forth by McCracken (1988). The semi-structured interviews also addressed the items in a collage created by the informant to express his gender role. In fact, researchers have effectively utilized collages in the past to investigate consumer behavior (e.g., Chaplin and Roedder John 2005a in their
investigation of self-brand connections and Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003 in their study on desire). Based on the finished collages, the researcher probed specific elements of the collage and utilized a star exercise to identify core components of masculinity, in accordance with the techniques detailed by Chaplin and Roedder John (2005a). Collages items were abstracted to capture broader themes. For example, a picture of a sailboat on a collage signaled the broader theme of leadership and respect according to one of the informants in the study.

Finally, by accompanying consumers on shopping trips, an in-depth understanding was gained of how these men enacted their masculinity in the marketplace. As an incentive to participate, informants were given $40 to spend between a grooming item (e.g., face cream) and a fashion good (e.g., tie). This method has been used successfully in past consumer research in conjunction with in-depth interviews (e.g., shopping with women who were planning their weddings; Otnes, Lowrey, and Shrum 1997). The researcher followed the guidelines set forth by Lowrey, Otnes and McGrath (2005) in which they recommend accompanying informants on two shopping trips and conducting follow-up interviews. After each trip, the researcher typed up detailed field notes.

The data was compiled and transcribed, yielding nearly 175 single-spaced pages of text. The researcher then sought out emergent themes in the visual and verbal text, while at the same time referring to existing theoretical research in this area, a process called dialectical tacking (Strauss and Corbin 1998). This technique aided in finding both consistencies with past research, as well as the emergence of new discoveries.

**FINDINGS**

**Definition of Masculinity**

Eleven themes of masculinity emerged from the text as salient to men who actively consumed grooming and fashion goods. All of these themes, which were mentioned by at least half of the informants, will be discussed in the following sections. Moreover, the researcher identified five out of the eleven overall themes as core components of masculinity. These five core themes of masculinity will be discussed next, while the additional six themes of masculinity will be detailed in the second half of this section. (See Table I here.)

**Core Elements of Masculinity**

The researcher sought to uncover the more dominant themes that were central to the informants’ conceptions of masculinity. That is, what were the core elements of masculinity as experienced by these men? In order to capture these elements, the star exercise from the interview was revisited. That is, during the interviews, informants had been asked to place star stickers on the items on their collages that they deemed to be the most important to their sense of masculinity. The items that each informant deemed as a core element were then abstracted and categorized into broad themes. Each of the themes was mentioned by at least half of the informants as central to their sense of masculinity in order to be considered an overall core component. A discussion of each of the five core themes follows. Informants’ demographics will be indicated though abbreviations (for example, CaucSin is a single Caucasian man).

**Appearance.** Informants frequently mentioned an attractive physical appearance
as part of their sense of masculinity. This finding naturally makes sense since metrosexuals are defined as such because they are highly concerned about their appearance. Men often described “being in good shape,” having “style,” and being “well groomed” as all-important characteristics of masculinity. What is more interesting, however, is their motivations for such concerns. The importance of an attractive appearance was tied in part to attracting the opposite sex and assisting in the attainment of success in the workplace. Several informants believed that looking good positively influenced their job success. For example, while accompanying Tom, 27, AfrAmSin, on a shopping trip, he discusses his plans to consult with a personal shopper in order to have custom-made suits and shirts for work. Jay, 26, CaucMar, includes a picture of men in suits on his gender role collage to express the importance of dressing well in maintaining an attractive appearance for work. Jim, 31, CaucSin, felt an attractive appearance would aid in attracting women. He placed a picture of a man in a suit in his collage and stated the importance of first impressions in catching the attention of a mate. In fact, past researchers, such as Frith and Gleason (2004) discuss that clothing can be a means for sexual display for men. The notions of professional and sexual success through consumption that were discussed by the informants can also be seen in the research on male shopping behavior by Otnes and McGrath (2001).

Family/Love. Family, love and children encapsulated the second core theme that emerged. Interestingly, several informants discussed life stages, with family as the relative endpoint, and where women and sex come beforehand. Darren, 32, CaucMar, contrasts a picture of family and a picture of women’s underwear on his collage. From there I move onto tidings of comfort and joy, which moves into family and married life and love for my wife…which is the marriage that we share. The culmination of that marriage turned into a child which I adore. But before that came…you know everybody enjoys a woman’s body [referring to a picture of a woman in a thong] and as beautiful as it is and so I included in there, definitely part of being a male.

Family is also a central part of George, 27, CaucSin, who discusses a picture of George and Laura Bush on his collage as exemplifying “a nuclear family,” and the fact that George Bush is “head of the household, he takes care of his kids…” The idea of fatherhood was also ubiquitous in this study. Nick, 26, CaucSin, also discusses this theme in his collage as he notes that as men mature, family and the role of father becomes central to a man’s sense of masculinity. “After you hit age 30, masculinity sometimes converts from something like chasing women to being a father.” He also points to a picture of a man standing next to a boy at a lemonade stand and states that this exemplifies how a father mentors his son. This idea of fatherhood and teaching future generations can be seen in past research as well. Harris (1994) points to Vaillant (1977) who claims that passing standards and values onto future generations is vital to men in middle adulthood. However, while family and love was seen as a positive part of a metrosexual’s gender identity in this study, some past research on masculinity, such as Harris (1995), found that being the family man is seen as restricting and viewed negatively by men.

Leadership/Respect. Several related characteristics were mentioned by the informants, such as leadership, respect,
control, influence, and responsibility. According to the informants, men are supposed to “make things happen,” and “take charge,” or provide “order to the chaos.” Jim refers to a picture on his collage of James Gandolfini, who plays an Italian mob boss named Tony on the popular television show, *The Sopranos.* “He is strong, powerful and demands respect, which is very important to my gender.” Tom also includes a picture of this character in his collage. He states, “Tony being the king of mafia, deep down I think all guys want to be like the boss.” Ben, 32, CaucSin, discusses the concept of leadership through various items on his collage, such as sailboats. He reflects his ambivalence about having to be a leader.

I think sailboats encapsulate life in a way…so to me, being on a boat and being involved in boats is the closest I’ve come to feeling in charge in my life…That’s a scary thing when you know that you are in charge of everyone’s lives and they are all depending on you…to be the organization in the chaos…it’s very masculine to me.

Indeed, Brannon (1976) includes one element of this theme, or the need to be looked up to, in his Big Wheel ideal. Harris (1995) also describes a gender role norm of Control, where men are expected to maintain control over all aspects of their lives. Thus, the sense of respect and control that this “new” breed of man seeks to portray in their masculinity seems to converge with traditional aspects of masculinity, as observed by past researchers.

Money/Success. The fourth core theme that emerged included money, wealth, success, and owning material goods. Michael conceptualizes success as being well known in his career of medicine. “I think guys in general are supposed to be doing top things…Surgery is a very competitive field and I want to be known and I want to be doing something great. I think that is a big part of being a guy. I think a guy needs to feel his job is important…..” Along with career success, informants’ collages were often filled with material items that exemplified financial success, such as cars, clothes, gadgets, or even actual pictures of money. Darren points to several items on his collage that exemplify owning the finer things in life.

I do love cars. I love Land Rovers. I like any kind of truck, and particularly sports cars. And then the affliction of the moment, that is the Blackberry on there. I like gadgets…I will buy the most expensive one….the biggest, best thing out there even though you just might need the base model for what I typically am going to end up using it for…

Darren’s materialism seems to be central to his masculinity, although interestingly, it is sometimes at odds with his desire to save and invest, as he discusses that the material goods in his collage are “fighting” with aspects such as retirement and savings. Indeed, this conflict has been observed in past consumer research which has shown that materialism can be a source of tension because it can conflict with family or religious values, leading to a diminished sense of well being (Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002). Tom also displays a sense of materialism and need for conspicuous consumption by including a BMW, which he refers to as “a little status symbol,” and a picture of car rims for some “flashiness.” The notion of the Big Wheel, or the idea that money makes the man, from the Brannon (1976) typology, as well as the norm of Money in the Harris (1995) typology both parallel this notion of masculinity as expressed by the metrosexual.
Women/Sex. The fifth and last core theme that emerged was sex and the pursuit of women. Interestingly, this theme seems to be in tension with the family/love theme identified earlier. The theme of women and sex were ubiquitous throughout most of the interviews, collage discussions, and shopping trips. Pictures ranging from porn stars and celebrities to female body parts and even depictions of sexual positions adorned the collages of the informants. Informants also discussed during shopping trips the need to purchase stylish clothes in order to appeal to women. Nick purchases a pair of Nike gym shorts on his shopping trip and explains the need to look good even when working out at the gym in order to meet women.

Tom also discusses several pictures of attractive women in his collage and expresses that part of masculinity is having an attractive mate and in turn, being attractive. He links this theme directly to his lifestyle and consumption behavior. “Everything guys do is for women, if they are straight. You dress for women, you make money for women, you drive nice cars for women, everything is for women…” The notion of being attractive in order to be sexually successful can also be seen in the gender role norm of the Playboy in the Harris (1995) typology and implied in the Macho Man ideal by Lindsey (1997). The pursuit of physical attractiveness in order to acquire a mate has also been noted widely in past research. For example, Burton, Netemeyer and Lichtenstein (1994) claim men select mates largely based on physical attractiveness, while women traditionally select mates based on social power and the ability to be a financial provider. The current study reveals that these roles are undoubtedly changing because men are also increasingly becoming more concerned with their physical appearance in order to attract a mate.

Additional Themes of Masculinity

In addition to the five cores themes of masculinity, which were identified by informants as important through the star task, six additional themes emerged from the text. (See Table II here.)

Adventure/Outdoors. Adventure, travel, and the outdoors were related concepts that emerged from the text. Ben discusses a picture of a leather coat as exemplifying adventure as part of masculinity. “It’s just a very rugged manly coat. It’s made for doing a lot of adventure and traveling.” Tyler points to a picture of Indiana Jones in his collage who he believes exemplifies masculinity in today’s society. Among other ideal attributes, Tyler describes this movie character as an adventurer. The Adventurer can also be observed within the gender role norm typology by Harris (1995).

Moreover, some informants strongly associated masculinity with the outdoors. For example, George points to a picture of outdoor equipment on his collage, “The guy carrying the massive amount of outdoor…gear…I liked to be viewed as someone who is an outdoorsman…” Michael also included a picture of him boogie boarding to exemplify the idea that men should be active. Some of these themes can be seen as rooted in past research. The idea of being out in nature can be seen in the Harris (1995) typology of the Nature Lover. In addition, the desire to live out extraordinary experiences and commune with nature can be seen in past consumer research by Arnould and Price (1993) in their research on river rafting. Moreover, adventure and high-risk consumption behavior has been shown to be a means of identity creation (e.g., Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993 in their study on skydiving).
Altruism. Another theme that emerged from the text was care for humankind, whether it involved helping others or protecting and serving our country. Altruistic depictions often took the form of soldiers, such as in the case of George who placed several depictions of military men on his collage. Other depictions took the form of the noble role of the farmer and contributing to the greater good of society, such as in Nick’s collage. Underlining the notion of altruism, however, is the idea of generativity, or the idea that a man should be productive in the care of future generations (Erikson and Erikson 1981). For example, William, 30, AfrAmSin, emphasized the importance of giving back to the community through volunteering, as exemplified by a picture of children, or the next generation and the words, “service to humanity” he has written on his collage. He states, “We owe it to give back to humanity…through service, art, performance, helping mentoring…I think that is important for our gender role to not just live for our self.”

The notion of generative behavior expressed by men in this study has been observed in past research on masculinity. Harris (1995) observed a related theme empirically in his study of male gender role norms in his description of the Good Samaritan, or the norm states that men should engage in acts of kindness.

Fun. Another theme that emerged from the text was the need for hedonistic pleasures. Several informants expressed the need to have fun, enjoy life and have a carefree attitude. Michael discusses a quote from Ronald Reagan during his interview, “Life is one great big song, so start playing the music.” He states that, “It means to me that life is short, have fun and enjoy it and have a good time.” George has two items on his collage that relate to this theme. One is of a cartoon character on the show The Simpsons, Mayor Quimby, who according to George exemplifies “chasing women around,” and being “full of lust,” as well as the ability to kick back and be aloof to the cares of the working world. In addition, he has a picture of a beach with a sign that identifies it as a nude beach. George explains that this depicts, “freedom of expression,” and “going out and having fun.” William also discusses a picture of people having a picnic on his collage. “This picture if about taking the time to enjoy life, friends, laugh, sense of humor, enjoyment of life, otherwise your life becomes too one-sided.”

Indeed, consumption as “play” and experiential consumption has been studied by past consumers researchers such as Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) and Holt (1995). Holbrook and colleagues define play as such things as leisure activities, sports, and hobbies which lead to fun and other hedonic outcomes. Moreover, Holt (1995) summarizes the three approaches to consuming, and adds “consuming as play” as a fourth approach. However, the goal of these studies was not to explore play in relation to gender identities. The current study reveals a close association between play and the conceptualization of masculinity by metrosexual consumers. While not detailed extensively by researchers of gender and identity, this notion may have its roots in the undercurrent of the Peter Pan ethos in the 1930s.

Knowledge. Informants often described the broad theme of knowledge in terms of learning, acquiring an understanding of the world, and having intelligence as a part of masculinity. For example, one of the pictures in Ben’s collage depicts two Buddhist monks. He explains that this picture signifies,
“exploration, knowledge…I feel a pressure to
discover new things and bring it back to the
tribe....” Michael discusses the picture on his
collage of him sitting next to a statue of
Albert Einstein. “This represents what I feel
about my intelligence…I believe intelligence
is something that is very important to a man.”
George discusses his desire to learn about
wine during his in-depth interview. “Well, I
love learning things I don’t know. I read
constantly…I pride myself on intelligence
…a quest for knowledge kind of thing.” The
comments by Ben, Michael and George echo
the findings by Harris (1995) who identified
the Scholar, or the man who pursues
learning, as a gender role norm in today’s
society.

**Spirituality/Morality.** Several informants also
mentioned spirituality, religion, or moral
values during their in-depth interviews.
Often, this theme was the central focus, or
starting point of the discussion with respect
to their sense of masculinity. William begins
the discussion of his collage by stating, “My
gender role, first of all, as a man, your center,
your strength, your power…comes from the
relationships in your life, your relationship
with your faith in God…” Darren echoes this
notion, “I think, really, it’s kind of centered
here [pointing to a picture of a cross he has
drawn on his collage]. Just talking about me
personally, God and my religion would be
the center of the collage basically, where I
started the collage.” Later in the interview
when he is probed as to whether faith in God
is more about him as a person, rather than as
a man, he states, “As a man and as a person. I
think first as a person, second as a man just
by the decisions you make. I think there is a
godly way you are supposed to act as a man.”

Although largely overlooked in past gender
research, some researchers have noted the
importance of religion in fatherhood
(Dollahite 1998). Beynon (2002) also refers
to religion as one of the central influences to
a man’s sense of masculinity. Thus, this
theme, while prevalent in this study, seems
largely absent from past typologies of
masculinity.

**Strength.** The last theme of masculinity that
emerged was strength. George discusses a
picture of a man with dumbbells in his
collage, “The guy doing the curl, lifting the
dumbbell there, that’s the strong man… I
think it is important for a man to be strong,
be it physically or emotionally.” William
echoes this notion of strength as the word,
“strength,” along with a lengthy description
of what constitutes being strong, is cut out
from a magazine and is placed on his collage.
Indeed, the notion of strength as a part of
masculinity can be seen in the Sturdy Oak in
Brannon’s (1976) typology, which
exemplifies an aura of toughness, which is
related to the notion of strength. Physical
strength is also manifested in the notion of
muscularity, a physical ideal that has been
well documented in past research, especially
within the cultural touchstone of advertising
and media. For example, Wienke (1998)
points to the overwhelming literature that
supports the notion that the ultimate
masculine body type is one that is muscular.
Along with physical strength signified
through muscularity, other researchers have
noted the use of portrayals by advertisers that
exemplify a strong will and a confrontational
attitude. Bordo (1999) discusses the
prevalence of “the rock” portrayal of men’s
bodies in ads to signify a type of “face-off
masculinity,” or the idea that the model in an
ad is staring down an opponent. Thus, it is
evident that both physical and emotional
strength is a widely held norm for men and
manifests itself through body shape and
demeanor. In summary, through thematic
analysis, eleven aspects of masculinity
emerged as salient themes for men in this
study. Moreover, five core themes were
The typology of masculinity as conceptualized by metrosexual consumers presented above holds important theoretical and managerial implications.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND MARKETING IMPLICATIONS

The current study provides a typology of masculine ideals held by a segment of the “new” man in today’s society, labeled by the popular press in the last few years as the metrosexual. While this term may have had it’s hey day in the press, it is still important to theoretically examine the broader masculine themes related to this “new” breed of man. Past research on masculine ideals is outdated and conceptual in nature (e.g., Brannon 1976, Lindsey 1997) or has investigated messages of gender role norms in general (Harris 1995). Therefore, it is important to assess how a “new” breed of male consumers currently conceptualizes masculinity in order to build our knowledge in the neglected area of male consumers. Naturally, ideals of masculinity could vary depending upon the age, class, generational status, and cultural background of the men being investigated. Thus, a limitation of the current study is that only Generation X, American men were examined. Investigating men in different age groups, classes, life stages and from other cultures outside of the U.S. is a path for future research.

Nevertheless, this research provides marketers with insights into how some male consumers conceptualize their gender identities, including highlighting the most important, or core components of this identity. Moreover, the present research highlights how a purported new breed of man defines masculinity and if this conceptualization fits within the broader gender ideology that our society has held over time. Interestingly, several of the ideals of masculinity held by metrosexual informants were rooted in past history, while other themes were largely overlooked in past research. Marketers could use the insights from the typology provided to more effectively employ masculine themes in developing retail strategies and advertising messages that successfully appeal to these consumers. For example, images such as those employing the importance of family and love could be used by marketers to appeal to men in a broad range of product categories. Moreover, spirituality may be an overlooked aspect of a masculine identity that marketers have left relatively untapped. This research will potentially aid marketers in determining what type of masculine depictions consumers will respond to most favorably and how such characterizations will affect their consumption practices.

REFERENCES


Journal of Consumer Psychology, 14 (1,2), 151.


### TABLE 1: CORE THEMES OF MASCULINITY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Themes</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>Importance of being physically attractive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family/Love</td>
<td>Centrality of family, love and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership/Respect</td>
<td>Notions of leadership, respect, and power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money/Success</td>
<td>Desire to be successful and own material goods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women/Sex</td>
<td>Ideas related to obtaining women and sex</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 2: ADDITIONAL THEMES OF MASCULINITY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Themes</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adventure/Outdoors</td>
<td>Desire to engage in thrilling activities, usually out in nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruism</td>
<td>Notions of the greater good, giving back to the community, service to country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Desire to engage in hedonistic activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Quest for learning, intellect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality/Morality</td>
<td>Notions of God, religious or moral values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength</td>
<td>Physical and emotional strength</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>