SESSION INTRODUCTION

What does it mean for men to be capable, consuming subjects? In what consumption domains do men express their masculinities? Do they want to be “subjected” to having their appearances observed and evaluated by others? How do they feel about images of men in advertising? These questions seem relatively straightforward, yet when subjected to historical and contemporary cultural analysis, especially in the context of globalization, a contradictory and mobile relationship between masculinity and consumption comes to light. In this session, we strive to unpack the relationship between masculinity and consumption through the concept of subjectivity: a term that addresses the interplay between being “capable of signifying practice and thus agency, choice” and acknowledging “the effect of subjection to the symbolic order” (Belsey, 2002: 114). It is widely understood that consumers—including men—use goods to define and revise ideas about gender categories and relations. However, controversies have ensued in the context of metrosexuality and other discourses involving the so-called “New Men.” Much of this discourse involves the shifting and overlapping subjectivities associated with the possibility of simultaneously having desire (the subject of the gaze— traditionally framed as masculine) and being desired (the object of the gaze—traditionally framed as feminine). Gendered conventions of looking have operated since the Renaissance in European art, in which “[m]en look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (Berger, 1972, 45, 47). In such gendered systems, feminist film theorists such as Mulvey (1975) have noted how the gaze is based upon uneven power relations that are highly gendered: Femininity is equated with a space of objectification (being seen, consumed), whereas masculinity is framed in terms of active subjectivity (the one doing the looking). Being a “real man” has been constructed as not needing to rely upon another person’s gaze to establish a sense of self-worth. In contrast, femininity has been constructed as requiring consumption in order to be desired, with the (male) gaze as a presumed motivator. This presumption itself can be critiqued on many levels, but in this session, we aim to complicate the extent to which “gender and consumption” has become a code phrase for “women shopping” in modern western culture. Burnard (1999) indicates that between 1860 and 1914, the acquisition and display of clothing assumed heightened feminine connotations. As a result, academic analysis as well as popular discourse virtually wrote men out of part of the history of modernity and urban life; masculine consumption went underground, or became “hidden.” In many ways, advertising has reinforced this through its tendency to place potential consumers into a feminine subject position: manipulable, submissive, and seeing oneself as an object (Barthel, 1992). At the same time, advertisers have used various techniques to re-frame this feminized subject position, drawing on the gendering of the commodities themselves to fashion discourses of masculine desire (for example, beer, cars, and high technology can be seen as “masculine”). More “feminine” products such as cosmetics and clothing have required even further re-framing: cosmetics for men as “skin supplies” or, on Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, merely “products.” Clothing for outdoor activities becomes “outdoor gear.” Such re-framing may help to lower the resistance to formerly feminine products, but men are still placed in the objectified position of being “looked at” (as are women). The discourse of metrosexuality has opened up the possibility of men actually caring about how they look (being the object of the gaze), regardless of sexual subject positioning. This discourse needs to be understood in terms of shifting consumption patterns. By the 1990s, behavioral...
studies were showing that fully 50% of men were buying their own clothes (Otnes and McGrath, 2001). These studies revealed that Internet shopping appealed more to men than to women. Men were beginning to recognize shopping as a creation of self-identity. Retail spaces had become degendered. Shopping could be viewed, by men, as a creative, fun, and skilled (even technical) activity. Although the stereotypical “fear of the feminine” was still evident in some cases, it had become less prevalent. This research indicated that gender rules were being applied with more flexibility (Otnes and McGrath, 2001). The new consuming subjectivity had become one of achievement; whoever has the most toys wins in the world of masculine consumption (Barthel, 1992: 139). Cargo magazine has capitalized on this goal of mastering consumption, featuring high tech toys as well as clothing advice (how to put a look together). Just to make it certain that one can be a masculine consuming subject, the discourse of &amp;#368;hersexuality has emerged to clarify that men can evolve from metrosexuals into men who have “chosen from the abundance of lifestyle choices and successfully channeled [their] narcissistic impulses into a personal style and credo that doesn’t change with the seasons” (“Man vs. Man,” 2005). In this session, we point to various, globally diverse examples of imagery and goods produced to expand concepts of masculine consumption. This session includes four papers, all of which deal in some way with issues of changing masculine subjectivities. The papers also grapple with subject-object relations—what it is like to consume materially and to be consumed visually through media imagery. These papers are interdisciplinary and draw from the humanities as well as the social sciences in order to answer the question of “what men want,” or at least what marketers perceive them to want, to achieve through the production and consumption of images as well as goods. As Schroeder (in this session) indicates in his analysis of advertising, the mirror remains a root metaphor of consumer society. The mirror reflects appearance, beckons us to look, to compare, and to dream. It exposes men as objects exhibited for visual consumption, at the same time men become subjects who consume everything from alcohol to computers. Similarly, Senic and Podnar (in this session) focus on issues of subjectivity and reflection. They analyze the shift in conceptions of masculinity from “intellectual subject” to “sexual object” in the context of Slovenian print ads. In the third paper, Kaiser, Solomon, Hethorn, Englis, Lewis, and Kwon describe a project that involves two parallel series of studies focusing on “men’s fashion,” each employing both qualitative (interpretive visual analysis, ethnographic “design probes”, and indepth interviews) and quantitative (experimental and survey) methods: One series will focus upon a better understanding of menswear dynamics from the perspective of the consumer and the other explores how the textile and apparel complex (including manufacturers, advertisers, and other crucial gatekeepers) understands, articulates, and implements male identities through its marketing strategies. The fourth paper by Diego Rinallo also considers the relationship between fashion and masculinity, by interrogating how gay and straight men “read” media images of men—especially those that cast men in newly ambiguous roles of consumption. As these papers collectively suggest, the interface between masculine subjectivity and consumption is complicated. On the one hand, men are told through aggressive marketing campaigns and other media that they need to look good in order to be cool or cutting-edge. They are expected to care much more than their fathers about looks and personal hygiene, and to be more sensitive and engaged in relationships and fathering (“Man versus Man,” 2005). On the other hand, traditional gendered systems of looking still are very much alive and serve to generate anxiety for men who find themselves in objectified subject positions. Shifts from subject to object (and back) are fluid in a media environment that circulates images of desire. As social theorist Charles Horton Cooley (1902) indicated in his concept of “looking-glass self,” individuals understand themselves through the eyes of others. Individuals use others as mirrors through which they can seek self-understanding. Together, these four papers address the production and consumption of goods in contexts that visually encode and decode what it means to be “masculine.” They point to the ways in which the masculine images men consume may or may not coincide with their own hopes and dreams as consuming subjects. We hope to shed light on the question of what men want: not only in the goods they purchase and use, but also in the images that resonate most strongly with their conceptions of masculinity.

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Gendered conventions of looking have operated since the Renaissance in European art, in which “[m]en look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at (Berger, 1972, 45, 47). In such gendered systems, feminist film theorists such as Mulvey (1975) have noted how the gaze is based upon uneven power relations that are highly gendered: Femininity is equated with a space of objectification (being seen, consumed),
whereas masculinity is framed in terms of active subjectivity (the one doing the looking). Being a “real man” has been constructed as not needing to rely upon another person’s gaze to establish a sense of self-worth. In contrast, femininity has been constructed as requiring consumption in order to be desired, with the (male) gaze as a presumed motivator. This presumption itself can be critiqued on many levels, but in this session, we aim to complicate the extent to which “gender and consumption” has become a code phrase for “women shopping” in modern western culture.

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REFERENCES


PAPER 1

**MASULINITY, IMAGES AND BRAND CULTURE**

Jonathan E. Schroeder, University of Exeter

Visual representations in marketing can be considered socio-political artifacts – creating meaning within the circuit of culture beyond strategic intention, invoking a range of issues formerly reserved for the political sphere, and widely circulating information about the social world. Cultural codes, ideological discourse, consumer’s background knowledge, and rhetorical processes have been cited as influences in branding and in consumer’s relationships to advertising, brands and mass media. Consumers are seen to construct and perform identities and self-concepts, trying out new roles and creating their identity within and in collaboration with brand culture. Largely missing from these insights, however, is an awareness of basic cultural processes that affect contemporary brands (see Holt, 2004; Lash and Urry, 1994; Schroeder, 2003; Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling, 2006).

This paper discusses methodological and theoretical issues of marketing images via interdisciplinary research examples and exemplars, focused on masculine identity. In discussing masculinity, I open up consideration of the ways in which advertising functions as representation within the social contexts of cultural difference (e.g., Borgerson and
Schroeder, 2002). I place visual issues within a broader theoretical perspective of brand culture - the cultural dimensions or codes of brands - history, images, myths, art, and theatre - that influence brand meaning in the marketplace. (See Illustrative Example 1 here.)

In a recent paper, Schroeder and Zwick (2004) argue that advertising imagery helps consumers resolve cultural contradictions. Within the feminized consumption realm, how might men be represented as consumers, without diminishing their power? How might the male body function to represent consumer goals, such as success, attractiveness, or the good life? They assessed several contemporary advertising exemplars that articulate this set of contradictions, providing illustrative examples for reflecting on masculinity, ontology, and desire. In this way, they follow interpretive work that focuses on a limited range of materials in order to make broader points about representation and identity in visual materials (e.g., Gombrich, 1999).

“She was impressed that he ordered their Mudslides with Coloma. Which did wonders for his self-confidence” states a recent print ad for Coloma “100% Colombian Licor de Cafe.” This ad features a black and white photograph of a white man and woman at a bar or restaurant table with a superimposed color photograph of a Coloma bottle next to a lowball glass that presumably contains a Mudslide drink.

The action takes place in an oval, gilt-framed mirror hanging to the left of the couple. The bespectacled man gazes at his reflection, which has curiously transformed him into a much more classically attractive visage. In the mirror’s reflection, the man appears to be in his mid to late twenties, tall, dark, a rakish curl of hair falling seductively down his forehead. He has lost “his” eyeglasses, pointed nose, unstylish hair, and oversize chin – he might be said to resemble Pierce Brosnan as James Bond. The woman – not caught in the reflection that we see – seems to be peering across her companion to look at his rugged reflection. She models a low cut cocktail dress, which reveals a thin frame, a conservative, shoulder-length haircut, and makeup that exaggerates her facial expression – one of bemusement. She appears to be enjoying herself – her right arm reaches over and grasps the man’s right arm. His right hand curls around his Coloma Mudslide, maintaining its fetish-like powers of transformation.

We suggested that the ad represents a portrait of a male-female couple with the addition of another male peering in on them from behind the mirror. This mirrored image may be read in several ways, as the sage from whom the man learned the ways of ordering impressive drinks, or the self transformed by demonstrating taste. To order and consume the right product (even the choice of the restaurant) expresses the man’s cultural capital in the field of middle-class consumer culture. Thus, the ornamental femininity of his date further enhances his capital accumulation, and her apparent pleasure at his beverage brand reaffirms his masculinity, attractiveness and taste in one go. Perhaps more attractive mirror-man admires less attractive man’s drinking partner, thus conferring male status on his ability to attract a desirable date? The alchemical mirror embodies contradictions of the consuming male;
one must be vain and attractive, as well as rational and sophisticated.

Furthermore, the tropes of alcohol involve taste, the pleasures of imbibing, the ability to “control one’s liquor”, and, at a more fundamental level, a ritual of adulthood, especially the male variety. In Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic capital, the conversion of one form of capital into another is precisely what makes it so valuable to vie for various forms of capital in different social fields. Here, we see the conversion of cultural capital into social capital by virtue of acquiring more desirable “body-for-others” (Bourdieu, 1984: 207). Either way, we have a provocative message of physicality and product use.

The “homely” man seems caught, Narcissus-like, gazing at his more handsome reflection, looking away from his date. Mirrors are a traditional trope of vanity, narcissism, lust, and pride in Western art. Usually, mirrors are linked to women, revealing, reflecting, and reinforcing feminine attributes of beauty and vanity. In this ad, the mirror plays a double role – casting a reflection of the newly self-confident man, and echoing the female role of mirroring male identity. Thus, the feminine mirrors the masculine, reflecting back self-confidence, consumer expertise, and embodied transformation. Furthermore, the woman stands in as a mirror. He looks to her to gain a flattering conception of himself – she was impressed which did wonders for his self-confidence. This ad stands out for its representation of the male gaze, and suggests a reordering of limits within the male discourse. The image appears to invert, or perhaps expand, the object of gaze; the man seems quite concerned with himself as an object of beauty, as he vainly pays more attention to his image than to his date. His self-doubts fade – thanks to the woman’s positive impression – his masculinity reaffirmed. However, one might read this ad in other ways, as men to men, perhaps the striking man in the mirror attracts the gaze of the homely man, doubly disrupting the gaze, and transforming the ad into a potentially gay image (see Stern and Schroeder, 1994). This queer perspective finds homoerotic overtones in the gaze between the two men – one reflecting, one reflected – who wink at themselves while wooing others. (See Illustrative Example 1 here.)

A similar visual theme occupies an ad for Gateway computers, The Way Things Should Be. In this example, another apparently unattractive man gazes into a mirrored wall to see a more conventionally good looking ‘reflection,’ transformed, in this case, by his ‘smart, sexy, and always on the go’ Gateway notebook computer. His ‘improved’ reflection has more hair, a more conventionally masculine face, complete with a ‘strong’ jaw, and his clothes seem to fit him better. As in the Coloma ad, he grasps the talismanic product with his right hand, as he straightens his necktie with his left, perhaps signaling grooming rituals that underlie contemporary notions of masculine regimes of appearance. Here, however, the modernist office environment provides the setting, subtly suggesting that looks count on the job as well as on the make.

The mirror remains a root metaphor of the consumer society, reflecting appearance, beckoning us to look, to compare, and to dream, and exposing us as exhibited objects for visual
consumption. Like a fetish, mirrors express social psychological tensions, of appearance versus truth, for example, yet catch the viewer within a circuit of representation, vanity, and consumption. In this way, the act of looking—looking at products, others, oneself, ads, and images—reconfigures the subject of consumption. The classic visual analysis technique of comparing and contrasting helps uncover themes common across product categories and brand campaigns, helping shift our focus to broader cultural concerns than market focused studies, and opening up consumer research to interdisciplinary inquiry.

**DISCUSSION**

This critical visual analysis (Schroeder, 2006) illuminates key tensions within the politics of representation, identity, and marketing. *Humanities* provide theoretical tools to understand image genres, content, and narrative, whereas *social science* affords methods for discussing context, effects, and strategic implications (cf. Philips and McQuarrie, 2004; Stern and Schroeder, 1994). To be clear, the approach introduced here need not rely on ‘structural’ understandings of semiotics; rather, critical visual analysis remains open to consumer response and poststructural notions of image production and consumption (see Borgerson and Schroeder, 2005; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004). Understanding the role that masculinity—and femininity—plays in consumption, visual history, and representation signals a step toward understanding how the market structures and subsumes basic ontological concerns of being, desire, and identity.

Men have long been encouraged by advertising representations to take charge as consumers to construct flawless masculine identities. Via advertising representation, the male body is being transformed into a visual object, and, as such, circulates in the same representational system as other visual objects, such as billboards, ads, and consumer goods. Advertising images show how men can be represented as consumers, how the male body functions to represent consumer goals and in what ways ads articulate (masculine) desire via the male body.

**CONCLUSION**

To more fully understand branding images, researchers must investigate the cultural, historical, and representational conventions that shape brand identity. If brands exist as cultural, ideological, and political objects, then brand researchers require tools developed to understand culture, politics, and ideology, in conjunction with more typical branding concepts, such as equity, strategy, and value. Brand culture refers to the cultural influences and implications of brands in two ways (Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling, 2006). First, we live in a branded world: brands infuse culture with meaning, and brand management exerts a profound influence on contemporary society. Second, brand culture provides a third leg for brand theory—in conjunction with brand identity and brand image, brand culture provides the necessary cultural, historical, and political grounding to understand brands in context. Future consumer research on visual issues must acknowledge images’ representational and rhetorical power both as cultural artifacts and as engaging and deceptive
bearers of meaning, reflecting broad societal, cultural, and ideological codes.

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Sexual appeals are commonplace and are used to promote a diverse range of products, services and ideas not only to attract customer attention but also for the purpose of brand positions and to gain target group identification (Reichert and Lambiase, 2003).

For several decades now, media critics have been examining the role of the media in creating and reinforcing stereotypical representations of women and femininity. On the other hand there is a glaring absence of a thorough body of research of images of masculinity. As Richard Dyer notes, masculinity like whiteness does not appear to be a cultural/historical category at all, thus rendering invisible the privileged position from which (white) men in general are able to articulate their interests to the exclusion of the interests of women, men and women of color, and children (cited in Katz 1995:133-143). However, we are living in a dynamic world where changes are the only certainty. Advertising as a reflection of society as well as a force that influences and shapes the way people behave is an adequate vehicle to question if the role of white males is changing in the modern world. As women become more independent and better established in the labor marketplace we are questioning whether there is a gradual transformation of a man from a dominant actor in social interactions into a less active, even passive object.

One of the most important areas in advertising is gender identity. A huge proportion of advertisements uses images and representations of men and women. These representations are, according to some analysts, central in the advertising strategy. Ervin Goffman (1979) points out that ads do not show the way men and women actually behave, but the way in which we think they behave.

In our research we cannot directly use Goffman's conceptualization because it addresses the representation of women. However, we will juxtapose the elements of his study with our findings on representation of men in the print advertisement in the Slovenian magazines. In the context of dynamic changes among male and female roles we will study the increase of beefcake advertising, in which male models are portrayed in a decorative manner.

In our analysis we will focus on the role and images of men in print ads. We will consider how the ads construct, inform and reinforce prevalent ideas about men and masculinity. We argue that the role of men in society is changing and that men are changing from a dominant subject, whose power originates from the intellect, into a sexual object. This is especially true for men in advertisements designed for women.
To verify our thesis we employ semiotic analysis. The main subjects of our analysis are the print ads that are analyzed on pragmatic, denotative and connotative level. However, we decided not to follow strictly the rules of semiotic analysis but rather to accept the notion of bricolage. It is a pieced-together, close-knit set of practices that provide solutions to a problem in a concrete situation (Becker 1998, 3). In short, the bricolage is a sort of study that enables us to exhaust the meaning of a selected image and to make preliminary research how the audience perceives and responds toward the changing presentation of male and masculinity in advertising.

**MENSWEAR, FASHION AND SUBJECTIVITY**

Susan Kaiser (University of California, Davis), Michael Solomon (Auburn University), Janet Hethorn (University of Delaware), Basil Englis (Berry College), Van Dyk Lewis (Cornell University), and Wi-suk Kwon (Auburn University)

Fashion has claimed its place in a new mutable optical world where no one view of anything is acknowledged to be the true one. In a sense, fashion has simply “come out,” now showing that it has always been engaged in such work; and because of the change in general consciousness, fashion has become more important and considerable as a phenomenon. Fashion confirms the deep importance of all appearance. (Hollander, 1994: 198)

The cat is out of the bag: Men wear clothes, and menswear is susceptible to fashion. One third of U.S. apparel purchases are in the menswear category (Balestri and Ricchetti, 2000), and approximately half of U.S. men purchase their own clothing (Otnes and McGrath, 2001). Still, there is a “disconnect” between the gender-biased paradigm that drives thinking about fashion and the trend toward more male attentiveness to fashion. In this nationwide U.S. project on masculine appearance styles, we aim to explore the factors surrounding men’s thinking about fashion in ways that move beyond the stale dichotomy between women’s fashion and men’s (inattentiveness to) fashion. We also plan to consider the extent to which the menswear industry needs to become more strategic and flexible in order to adapt to a changing market. In this presentation, we share the multi-method, interdisciplinary framework for, and present preliminary findings from, a multi-year, collaborative project (funded by the National Textile Center). Key to this study is a greater awareness of multiple and shifting subject positions that influence the consumption of menswear. That is, there is a crucial interplay among menswear, fashion, and subjectivity.

The United States has an almost uniquely diverse population, which has actively fostered multiple traditions and representations of masculinity. In many ways, we submit in our project, men are similar to women: They negotiate their appearance styles, though they are corralled into fewer categories of expression ordained by dominant traditions and customs—the cornerstones of menswear. Discourses of age, race, and sexuality blur these preordained cornerstones and obviate the need to look toward intersections across identities and subjectivities, in order to think through new ways of appearing masculine.
The concept of subjectivity has some analytical advantages over identity. In some ways, “subject” is a more precise term; it places the emphasis on having a voice or a sense of agency, through language or other venues, such as the appearances or looks individuals create. Additionally, the concept of subjectivity acknowledges ambiguity and ambivalence; it recognizes that there is a flipside to the agency of being a subject. It allows for a range of subject positions, including positions that are contradictory or inconsistent with one another: “Subjects can differ, even within themselves” (Belsey, 2002: 52). “Subjectivity” accounts flexibly for the intersections among multiple “identity” variables (i.e., not only gender, but also sexuality, race, class, age, national identity, etc.). Subjectivity also encompasses the possibility of simultaneously being (a) consuming subjects who have desire and (b) consumed objects who may be desired. That is, it is possible to see, simultaneously with being seen. Schroeder and Zwick (2004) note how it is not sufficient to invert subject positions when analyzing the (traditionally male) gaze in the context of consumer behavior; rather, the concept of the gaze needs to be expanded.

For example, the metrosexual has been defined as a straight, urban man with a heightened aesthetic sense, who spends time and money on appearance and shopping and who is willing to embrace his feminine side (Flocker, 2003). We take issue with the last part of this definition, because it reinforces the simplistic equation that fashion = femininity. In fact, this naive assumption refers to a more basic, modern myth of the “undecorated male”—a myth that has little, if any, historical or cultural support.

In this project, we are attempting to achieve an expansion of menswear, fashion, and subjectivity as interrelated concepts. We are approaching such an expansion through a multi-method study of multiple masculinities, both in terms of the diverse visual images of male fashion in the media and of the various subject positions of male consumers.

**AN INTERDISCIPLINARY, MULTI-METHOD APPROACH**

In our larger project, we aim to provide fundamental research evidence to suggest a new strategic path forward for the U.S. menswear industry. To accomplish this ambitious goal, we have assembled a multidisciplinary team of researchers—representing the fields of consumer psychology, gender studies, textile engineering, and apparel design. We are analyzing shifting masculine subject positions through four key methods:

1) **In-depth interviews.** Qualitative data are being collected through in-depth interviews with male consumers and industry representatives. The questions pursue a line of inquiry regarding personal relationships with changing masculine appearance styles, sources of inspiration for putting a look together, and suggestions for enhanced synchronicity between consumer and industrial perspectives. Interviews with industrial representatives also include in-depth discussions of the changing dynamic of the design, production, and marketing of menswear.

2) **Visual database development.** The images for this analysis are being
collected from a systematic survey of magazines featuring menswear. Part of this survey includes a “visual genealogy” (see Schroeder and Zwick, 2004) of menswear imagery in the featured magazines. Additionally, we are conducting a content analysis of the images to record variations in looks through visual analysis and coding with keywords. Other sources of visual image are being derived from original photographs of street style. The images in our larger database are being organized in a website to facilitate subsequent stages of the project.

3) **Descriptive terminology.** This method refers to the ways in which words are used to describe images, so as to communicate shared meaning, to frame visual expectations, and to set up categories of visual meaning. Descriptive words also have the ability to eliminate potential understanding and at worst, to cast incorrect titles or stereotypes. Because of this power, it is especially important to understand the range of ways that words are used to describe images of men and the styles they are expressing. Using selected images from our database of images, we are collecting responses from groups of viewers to the request to describe what they see. We are also investigating the words and categorization process that others use in the construction of databases of menswear and men’s style.

4) **Design probes.** Design probes are not analytic devices; rather they are information seeking strategies that uncover the imagination, experiential facts, and the ideas of creative gatekeepers. Design probes are created to track the commonplace minutia of daily activity and report such activity. More specifically, design probes are low-tech tools for undertaking remote interviews. Designed to work in the vein of traditional ethnographic methods, the researcher does not intercede during the process of information gathering. Respondents make immediate reactions and record them on a host of media. The probes consist of a package of materials, including disposable cameras and instructions asking subjects to record any aspects of masculine nuance encountered in daily life. Image folders are developed, through which respondents gather assorted images that inspire them and define masculinity in the U.S. Supplementary comments and drawings are made by the subject in a scrapbook that is recorded digitally.

5) **Consumer sorting.** We are empirically identifying a typology of current male “looks” that will enable us to develop a “cognitive map” of masculine “looks” as perceived by both encoders (editors of men’s fashion magazine, stylists, designers and other “cultural gatekeepers”) and decoders (male consumers). Building upon a methodology previously developed by two of the PIs to study female attractiveness (Ashmore, Solomon and Longo, 1996; Englis, Solomon and Ashmore, 1994), we will present a large number of images from our visual database to respondents, who will engage in a Q-Sort (note: in a departure from prior work, we hope to instrument this procedure in an online format rather than the typical manual Q-Sorts that must be done in person). The resulting sorts will be subjected to multidimensional scaling analysis in order to identify commonalities among and between respondent groups. We will also conduct additional analyses to
determine how a current set of male-oriented apparel brands map onto this typology of male looks as perceived by both respondent groups. Through these analyses, we hope to provide the menswear industry with insight into possible cognitive discrepancies between the industry and the male consumer in terms of their interpretations of male looks and brand perceptions. In so doing, we expect that our findings will help identify future market opportunities for the menswear industry as well as offer recommendations for their brand communication strategies.

Through all of the above methods, we are striving to tap and to connect diverse masculine subject positions with diverse images of masculinity, using fashion as a vehicle through which to understand consumer behavior. In our presentation, we will present the methodological model for this interdisciplinary study, along with preliminary data associated with each method.

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THE MALE GAZE AND THE QUEER EYE: STRAIGHT AND GAY CONSUMERS’ READING STRATEGIES OF MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF MEN

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BACKGROUND

One of the major research programs in consumer culture theory regards the
relationship between mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers’ interpretive strategies (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Within this research program, scholars have adopted a feminist standpoint (Bristor & Fischer, 1994) to analyze the role of popular culture in reproducing the disadvantaged positions of women in patriarchal societies (Artz & Venkatesh, 1991; Elliot & Ritson, 1997; Englis, Solomon & Ashmore, 1994; Hirschman & Thompson, 1997; Ritchins, 1991; Schroeder & Borgerson, 1998; Solomon, Ashmore & Longo, 1992; Stern, 1993; Thompson, 1996). Consumer research on representations of masculinities and male consumers, on the other hand, is much more limited (Belk & Costa, 1998; Holt & Thompson, 2004; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Sherry et al., 2004), reflecting the more recent development of men’s studies within the social sciences. Although much of consumer research on gender issues is focused on the role of advertising and the mass media, other studies have investigated the role of fashion as a cultural production system, and consumers’ adaptation to fashion discourses (McCracken, 1986; Murray, 2002; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). In this paper, I join such a conversation by investigating male consumers’ reactions to the recent changes in the representations of male fashion towards non-traditional models of masculinities and the meanings that male consumers construct from such representations.

Research in fashion, until recently, has regarded almost exclusively women, often assuming that “[m]en dress for fit and comfort rather than style; that women dress and buy clothes for men; that men who dress up are peculiar (one way or another); that men do not notice clothes; and that most men have not been duped into the endless pursuit of seasonal fad” (Craik, 1994: 176). These notions may be traced back to early fashion theorists, who observed the diffusion, in the decades following the French Revolution, of the so called “Great Masculine Renunciation” (Flügel, 1930), i.e., the principle that men should dress in the same, dark uniform as other men in order not to call attention to themselves as objects of beauty, and leave the more varied and elaborate forms of ornamentation that were prevalent among the aristocracy to the use of women. Although Flügel’s account is not entirely accurate from a historical point of view (Purdy, 2004), his characterization of the relationship between men and fashion is resonant with traditional cultural values in most Western societies. The construction of fashion as a woman’s preoccupation has in fact made men’s interest in fashion at the very best “suspect” of effeminacy and homosexuality (Crane, 2000; Davis, 1992; Edwards, 1997; Shannon, 2004).

Research in consumer culture theory has not distanced itself much from these foundations. Thompson & Haytko (1997), while acknowledging that the reference to culturally constituted gender categories in consumer narratives is relatively fluid, found anyway men scarcely sensitive to the beauty ideals prevalent in fashion discourse and less concerned with the impact of mass-mediated images of masculinity on their and other men’s lives than their female counterparts. Research on male gay consumers (Kates, 2002), on the other hand, documented the diffusion of consumption practices in dress, personal grooming and adornment that violates hegemonic norms about masculinity, and
the stereotyping of straight men, criticized for their lower standards with respect to style in its multiple manifestations. Yet recent developments in popular culture offer a representation of male consumers and their consumption practices in sharp contrast with the view that emerges from published consumer research literature.

The straight, male consumer: Metrosexuals and beyond

In June 2002, social observer Mark Simpson authored an article on the online magazine Salon.com in which he introduced his audience to the “metrosexual”, a term he had previously coined (Simpson, 1994) to refer to male consumers living in or near metropolitan areas, who spend significant amount of time and money on their appearance and lifestyles, and who, although most often straight, tend to embody the aesthetic sensibility often associated with gay men. The term, of course, gave a name to a phenomenon already in existence in society, and previously noted by several theorists and social observers (e.g., Bordo, 1999; Crane, 2000). Metrosexuality enjoyed however substantial media visibility all around the world. Representations of metrosexuality in the mass media have recently included, among others, several articles on the news media (e.g., Hackbarth, 2003; St. John, 2003), a few books (Flocker, 2003; Hyman, 2004), and a 2003 episode of South Park. The term metrosexual was voted by the American Dialect Society as the 2003 word of the year for its domination of the national discourse, and now accounts for more than 200,000 hits in popular internet search engines as google.com. Several tests are now available on the Internet to help men identifying to which degrees they are metrosexual. And fashion designers, including Dolce & Gabbana and Giorgio Armani, appropriated this new cultural category by representing their men as metrosexual in the hyper-real context of their fashion shows and advertising campaigns.

Arguably, media representation of metrosexuality provided marketers with a focus for their targeting efforts. It is however somewhat ironic to observe that the tone of Simpson’s writings is sarcastically critical of marketing practice, for example in his characterization of the metrosexual as “an advertiser’s walking wet dream” (Simpson, 2002). Yet, the term was soon appropriated by multinational advertising company Euro RSCG, which issued in June 2003 a research report that represented metrosexuals as an existing and viable target group for marketers. Interestingly, while in Simpson’s original definition the sexual orientation of a metrosexual is irrelevant, Euro RSCG’s (2003) report and the subsequent news articles generated by the public relations efforts surrounding its release have constructed metrosexuals as straight men. At the same time, the popular television show “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy” represents the consumption practices stereotypically associated to gay men as “disarticulated from its referent and resignified as metrosexuality” (Miller, 2005). This heterosexual characterization of metrosexuality may be interpreted as an antidote to the cultural difficulties in promoting consumption practices culturally associated to effeminacy and homosexuality to male consumers, and to redefine prevailing notions of masculinity.
After a couple of years of undisputed rule of the media arena, the metrosexual has been deposed by his successor, the ubersexual. As finely described by the creator of the term, “[t]he descriptor ‘uber’ was chosen because it means the best, the greatest. Ubersexuals are the most attractive (not just physically), most dynamic, and most compelling men of their generations. They are confident, masculine, stylish, and committed to uncompromising quality in all areas of life” (Salzman, 2005). As “fashionable” conceptions of masculinity nowadays seem to change quite rapidly, what is left unchanged is the fact that advertising agencies are in both cases behind the media halo surrounding *sexuality. Ms. Salzman is Vice President, Director of Strategic Content of JWT Worldwide (formerly J. Walter Thompson), one multinational advertising companies that, like EuroRSCG, investigates trends in consumer markets to better serve its corporate customers. Competing marketplace organizations are thus entering the media arena to “sell” their own version of masculinities. Media representations of masculinities are relatively easy to analyze. Less is known, however, about how men interpret and react to these shifting definitions of masculinities.

*Researching reading strategies of male consumers: the male gaze vs. the queer eye*

Metrosexuality, ubersexuality and gay vagueness is a clear trend in the cultural production of marketers. The fashion discourse is one of the contexts where these categories resonates the most. Cultural texts in western societies have long presented women as spectacle offered to the male gaze (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975). Male fashion, on the other hand, portrays men as passive objects of a sexual, desiring gaze that is offered to an undefined Other: male or female, straight or gay (Bordo, 1999). How do straight men look at these representations, which often feature homoerotic elements? Do they adopt a ‘queer eye’ that disassociates the look from sexual orientation? This is the first research question my study addresses.

Another issue my study deals with is the reduced semiotic valence of style as an indicator of sexual preference. Fashion has long been a primary method of reciprocal identification for gay men (Cole, 2000) but, as recently suggested by a New York article (Colman, 2005), today it is hard to tell if a man is straight or gay judging on his look only. As a consequence, the so-called ‘gaydar’, i.e. the emic term adopted by the gay community to refer to the ability to identify sexual orientation (Kates, 2002), is not working as well as in the past. Current theory predicts that de-subculturalization processes (i.e., the cultural appropriation by marketers and the mass culture of the distinguishing signs of a subculture) may results in resistance by the subculture, as its members adopt new styles which are alien to the mainstream. But cultural observers are proposing that an increasing number of men (gay and straight alike) have an attitude of indifference to having one’s sexual orientation misread (Cole, 2000). My second research question is thus: How do gay men react to the reduced meaning of clothing as a means to identify other gay men?

To address these questions, I generated textual data from both straight and gay
male consumers through long interviews (McCracken, 1988). At appropriate moments during the interviews, I employed photoelicitation techniques (Heisley & Levy, 1991), i.e. I exposed my informants to selected representations of masculinity from fashion and style magazines that stimulated narratives that proved helpful in the elicitation of reading strategies. My choice of selecting both straight and gay informants also resonates with recent developments in the sociology of masculinities, as it is suggested that gender dynamics can be usefully analyzed within rather than between genders (Connell, 1992; Carrigan, Connell & Lee, 2002). Initial results of the present study suggest the possibility that “semiotic ambiguity” may be enjoyed by both straight and gay consumers as a means to break away from oppresive hegemonic masculinity.

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Figure 1 Coloma advertisement, c. 1999

Figure 2 Gateway computer advertisement, c. 2003