

MEN'S BODY RELATED PRACTICES AND MEANINGS OF MASCULINITY

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Abstract.

The present investigation is about men and their bodies. Against the increasing visibility of the (idealised and eroticized) male body in Western popular culture as well as claims that men are becoming the new victims of “the beauty myth”, this study aims to examine men’s appearance related practices in relation to meanings of masculinity. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with fifteen men between the ages of 18 and 38. Using that method of discursive analysis developed specifically for the investigation of masculinities by Wetherell & Edley (1999), various subject positions taken up by the men in talking about their appearance related practices were identified. The men positioned themselves as unconcerned with appearance, untraditionally masculine, heterosexual, well-balanced and disembodied. A concern for appearance appears inconsistent with ideals of hegemonic masculinity (as valued by these men), and it is suggested that men are unlikely to constitute a large proportion of those individuals who might be described as “victims” of “the beauty myth”.

INTRODUCTION.

During the past two decades the number of images of men permeating the media and Western popular culture has risen dramatically, and it is argued that a new representational practice has emerged in which the male body is depicted in an idealised and eroticised fashion (Gill, Henwood & McLean, 2000; Buchbinder, 2004). The impact of the commodification of the male body is reflected in the recent growth of the men’s grooming market, which is expected to reach the 191.7 million dollar mark by the year 2009 (Alexander, 2005). At the same time, models of masculinity emphasising an interest in appearance (the metro- and übersexual¹) have become trendy within popular culture as a

¹ The “metrosexual” has been defined as “a male with a strong interest in fashion, appearance and other lifestyle characteristics traditionally associated with women” (MacMillan’s **English Dictionary**, 2006). Interestingly, not long after the rise of the metrosexual, “trend spotters” announced the arrival of the “übersexual”. Described as being confident, masculine and stylish, these men are reported to “groom their minds as well as their hair” (SPC, 2005:20).

result of the media's intense focus on celebrities who embody these notions (Gotting, 2003). It has been suggested that men are accomplishing a sense of self as much through style, clothing, body image and "the right look" as women (Kacen, 2000:350; Gill, Henwood & Mclean, 2005).

The mass media is a pervasive force in shaping ideals of appearance and attractiveness (Agliatta & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004), and the heightened visibility of the male body within popular culture together with the representational shift towards muscularity has led to the perception that the pressure on men to obtain and maintain a particular body type is increasing. A preliminary review revealed a considerable and growing literature concerned with body image amongst men, suggesting that large proportions of men perceive a discrepancy between their ideal and current body size and shape (see for example Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein & Striegel-Moore, 1987; Vartanian, Giant & Passino, 2001; Hatoum & Belle, 2004). In addition it has been suggested that the exposure to images of muscular male bodies and the internalisation of this muscular ideal is putting men at risk for "muscle dysmorphia", a disorder characterised by a preoccupation with the idea that one's body is too small and ill-defined (Olivardia, 2001).

Within this literature body image has largely been conceptualised and investigated in terms of body shape and size, however the men participating in a study by Hatoum & Belle (2004) suggested that it is important to examine other body features beyond weight and muscularity such as body hair, freckles and penis size. Besides for one study by Boroughs, Cafri & Thomson (2005) which examined the occurrence of male body depilation (that is, the reduction or removal of body hair occurring below the neck) in a sample of college men, no studies investigating these or other aspects of male body image were found.

A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF STUDIES OF MALE BODY IMAGE.

It is generally agreed that women experience more social pressure than men to conform to ideals of physical appearance, however findings from studies such as those described above have led some researchers to conclude that body image has become a problem for both men and women (see for example McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001; Stanford & McCabe, 2002; Hallsworth, Wade & Tiggemann, 2005). Men's increasing interest in their physical appearance is commonly being taken to indicate the development of "a unisexual beauty myth" (Askegaard, Gertsen & Langer, 2002:796), in which "gender differences in bodily experience, body practices and cultural discourses on beauty and body alteration are converging in the direction of sexual equality" (Davis, 2003:118). Davis (2003) argues that, while the presentation of men as the new victims of the beauty myth erases women's history of altering their bodies in efforts to meet cultural ideals of femininity, it also denies men's specific experiences with their bodies and the cultural meanings of masculinity in relation to such practices. What is needed then is an approach to studying men's body and appearance related practices in relation to meanings of masculinity.

INVESTIGATING MEN'S BODIES AND MEANINGS OF MASCULINITY.

While some research investigating the male body and the construction of masculinity within bodybuilding subculture has been done (for example Klein, 1993; Wiegiers, 2003), Frith & Gleeson (2004) argue that the more mundane strategies of self-presentation should not be overlooked in the examination of the impact of changing cultural trends on men's

behaviour. In their investigation into men's clothing practices, Frith & Gleeson (2004) discovered that the 75 men in their sample strategically used clothing to manipulate their appearance and approximate more closely cultural ideals of masculine appearance (that is, to appear slimmer, taller, bigger and/or more muscular). Despite many men reporting that they were not very concerned with their appearance, these assertions were, according to the authors, undermined by their careful attention to their clothed appearance. The findings from this study also highlight the fluid, contradictory and contextual nature of body image: men's experience of their body image shifted between "fat days" and "thin days", and different aspects of the body were reported as salient at different times and in different places (Frith & Gleeson, 2004). While this study highlights the varied and flexible nature of men's embodied experience and practice, Gill et al (2005) more fully explore the ways in which men negotiate demands to be simultaneously mindful and unconcerned about their appearance.

Drawing on semi-structured individual and focus group interviews with 140 men between the ages of 15 and 35, Gill et al (2005) note being struck by the limited range of ways in which men talked about their bodies. The men interviewed were asked to talk about their appearance related practices as well as their feelings around body modification. One of the most pervasive themes in the men's talk was that of individualism and the value attached to "being different". Gill et al (2005) report that the men used various means to position themselves as "different" to other men, including critiques of uniformity and conformity, assertions of autonomy in relation to all their bodily choices, and characterisations of other men as "sheep-like" or "clones" (Gill et al, 2005:47). The theme of libertarianism (elicited most commonly in response to questions about cosmetic surgery) was one in which the men stressed bodily autonomy and the individual's right to choose. Here Gill et al (2005:49) note being struck by the construction of the self as entirely "socially dislocated": the men exhibited no sense of self as part of a collective, and there was no recognition of the social context in which people wanting cosmetic surgery feel pressure to look a certain way. Gill et al (2005:49) point out that few men challenged narrow definitions of attractiveness and suggest that a "defiant individualism ... utterly eclipsed any other potential perspective". Interestingly, the remaining ways in which men constructed the meaning of attempts to modify the body set limits around the bodily autonomy so vehemently asserted, and the "rejection of vanity" was one repertoire in which the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate concern for appearance were negotiated (Gill et al, 2005). Vanity was something to be condemned, and the men guarded themselves against accusations of vanity by employing disclaimers about their appearance related practices. For example, the men consistently justified their use of skin-care products in terms of their function rather than their effect on appearance. The "rejection of vanity" was noted to be most evident in talk around cosmetic surgery, where the limits to the discourse of bodily autonomy appeared to fall at that point at which an individual's desire for cosmetic surgery might be interpreted as vain.

Some men subscribed to the notion of a "well balanced self", which was one in which obsession was condemned and things weren't to be taken too seriously. While this theme was not as widespread as the others, Gill et al (2005) note that it played a significant role in the self-definition of those men in whose interviews it was expressed. These men took a position of cool detachment and, eager to avoid being seen as overly enthusiastic about

anything themselves, deployed the notion of obsession almost exclusively to characterize other men. At the same time however, the final discourse drawn upon by the men involved condemnation of not caring enough, and being seen to have “let oneself go” attracted great disapproval. Gill et al (2005) argue that this last discourse employed a notion of “self-respect” to negotiate the boundaries between appropriate levels of care and attention and the risk of vanity and obsession. This discourse requires the individual to take responsibility for their appearance and is highly moralistic: here the body is read as an indicator of self-control and self-discipline, and the appearance of the body is read as an indicator of lifestyle and identity choices (Gill et al, 2005). This discourse demonstrates the influence of consumerist ideology on the meanings these men attached to physical appearance; Featherstone (1982:257) argues that, within a consumer culture where the appearance of the body is regarded as a reflex of the self, “the penalties of bodily neglect are a lowering of one’s acceptability as a person, as well as an indication of laziness, low self-esteem and even moral failure.”

Gill et al’s (2005) findings contribute to an understanding of how men’s bodies are addressed by social norms of gender. The authors conclude that men’s bodies are not only charged with expressing a certain identity, but that they are also implicated in the production of normative masculinity. Here it is important to note that various forms of masculinity are not only constructed in relation to femininity but also in relation to other forms of masculinity; an important element in the reproduction of men’s power over women is the marginalisation and subordination of certain other masculinities (Connell, 1987; 1995). In talking about body modification practices, the men in Gill et al’s (2005) study actively engaged in constructing and policing appropriate masculine behaviour in relation to the body: “scathing censure” was reported to greet those (men) deemed to have transgressed these norms, thus implicating the body in the “profound and intimate regulation” of normative masculinity (Gill et al, 2005:58). This finding illustrates Connell’s (1995) conception of internal hegemonic masculinity, where masculinity is negotiated within and between men and the transgression of regulatory ideals signifies a subordinate male identity. It is thus clear that any study investigating men and men’s bodies is incomplete if it does not do so in relation to meanings of masculinity.

SOUTH AFRICAN MASCULINITIES.

The social transformation occurring in South Africa as a result of the country’s transition to democracy in 1994 has encouraged an increase in interest among local academics in South African masculinities. Two broad themes run across work produced on South African masculinities, namely an emphasis on the multiplicity of South African masculinities and the relationship between masculinity and the social transition occurring within the country. Thus the majority of research on South African masculinities is about masculinities in flux; in a state of reconfiguration and change (Reid & Walker, 2005). Because South African society is one characterised by much interpersonal violence, violence is a dominant concern in work on local masculinities and much research on South African men and masculinities is largely centred around those considered to be “problematic” in some way. There has also been a focus on race and men and masculinities in different geographical and institutional locations, highlighting the varied nature of South African masculinities (Morrell, 2001) and men’s responses to challenges to patriarchal (and white supremacist) norms and values.

Within South African work on masculinities, that most comparable to the current project is Chadwick's (1998) investigation of white hegemonic masculine identity. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven white, heterosexual men between the ages of 20 and 25 years. Using that method of discourse analysis put forward by Parker (1992), Chadwick (1998) identified a range of discourses used by the participants in their talk around masculine identity and the shifting nature thereof². Chadwick (1998:13) notes that the refusal to identify with conceptions of 'traditional' masculinity was unanimous across all eleven accounts; the "traditionally masculine" man was constructed as "Other". This construction was accomplished in some cases by a discourse Chadwick (1998) calls "the move from masculinity to androgyny", in which traditional masculinity is described as belonging to a bygone era and people are not reducible to sex or gender. Chadwick (1998) notes that two discourses ("the masculine cause" and "the essentially masculine man") were constructed around the reclamation of traditional masculinity, sought to reposition such masculinity as "good" and were resistant to change. Intersecting with the above discourses was one of "gender stereotype" in which women were understood in terms of traditional gender roles and transgression was met with criticism by the participants. The author concludes that the rejection of "traditional" masculinity by participants does not necessarily indicate a positive shift in gender relations. She suggests that, while the 'turn to androgyny' by participants "*could* represent a significant discursive opening for the strategy of gender reform", this discourse is also taken up tactically to accomplish different ends and is often intertwined with less progressive discourse (Chadwick, 1998:33, emphasis added).

METHODOLOGY.

This study falls into that tradition of research called discursive psychology. Using the concepts of interpretive repertoires, ideological dilemmas and subject positions the particular method of discourse analysis used was that developed by Wetherell (1998), Wetherell & Edley (1999) and Edley (2001), in relation to gender identity and the investigation of masculinities. The material for the analysis comes from in-depth, individual interviews conducted with a convenience sample of fifteen men between the ages of 18 and 38. All of the men were volunteers and have been provided with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. They are identified in the text by initials only. The majority of participants (eight) were masters' students in the psychology department at the University of Cape Town. Three participants were graphic designers working at various advertising agencies in Cape Town, and one participant worked as an IT consultant. The remaining three men worked as a barman, stage manager and sales manager for an electronic construction company. During the interviews all fifteen men self-identified as heterosexual, and all were white and middle-class in terms of income. All fifteen men could be described as Western in cultural orientation. Interviews were conducted between August and November 2006.

² It is important to note that while each discourse is presented separately, they were in actuality inseparably intertwined and participants positioned themselves within and across a combination of discourses (Chadwick, 1998).

Besides for two interviews that lasted for two and a half hours each, the interviews were mostly between 60 and 90 minutes in length. The start of each interview provided a brief introduction to the topic. The interviews were loosely structured; the aim was to provide a framework for the interview while allowing the participant to direct the flow conversation. Towards the middle of each conversation a series of images of male bodies taken from the June 2006 edition of Men's Health Magazine was shown. Two of these images came from that section of the magazine providing training programmes and each depict the naked torso of a highly muscular man. The remaining five images were fragrance advertisements depicting men's bodies in various ways: one focused on a man's face, one on the torso of a man wearing a business suit, two were images of men's naked upper bodies and the last contained a half naked man and woman. These pictures provided invaluable prompts for further discussion within the interviews, and elicited material that might not have come up otherwise.

ANALYSIS.

Analysis revealed six subject positions or discursive selves taken up by the men in talking about masculinity and their appearance related practices. These included The Unselfconscious Self, The Untraditionally Masculine Self, The Heterosexual Self, The Well-Balanced Self, The Non-Consumer and The Ideally Disembodied Self (or Successful Masculinity).

The unselfconscious self.

As found by Gill et al (2005), the men in this study made sense of their own and others appearance-related concern in relation to vanity and, while none of them denied taking an interest in what they look like, the men used various means to guard themselves against judgments of conceit. Those who admitted an interest in their appearance, for example, often qualified and effectively minimized the extent of their concern. *FM* said: *"I cannot claim that I am not concerned, as I said before I won't buy just any clothes but I mean, I would put a time on it out of my twenty four hours in a day, how many minutes I spend being concerned about what I look like? I think if you reach five minutes that's a lot"*.

Occasionally women served as a foil against which the men positioned themselves in terms of their concern, for example one man compared the amount of time and effort he put into planning what he was going to wear on a night out with the amount of time and effort that he felt women put into the same exercise. This is a clear illustration of the workings of external hegemonic masculinity, where masculinity is asserted in relation to femininity. In talking about their appearance related practices, the majority of men in this study placed great emphasis on 'function'; nearly nothing was done purely for the sake of aesthetics. Amusingly, two men even justified their use of sunglasses in instrumental terms, with *RM* stating that he wore them *"because, well, it just has to do with the sun and the light"*. As in the study by Gill et al (2005), many of the men in this study used various skin-care products but justified their use in terms of the short term effects of the products as opposed to any long term benefits that might come from looking after ones' skin. In fact long-term goals of skin-care (such as "looking younger") were often explicitly rejected. In contrast to the majority of these men who denied having had any active involvement in initiating the use of such products by claiming that it had been their girlfriend or mother who had introduced them to "proper (skin-care) products", were two men who described skin-

care as part of their everyday routine and as having a ritual function: *"It's like basically my start to the morning, to the day, the whole routine process ... it's just part and parcel of the ritual as in 'getting rid of the old and starting a new day' type attitude"* (AD). By locating their skin care within the range of routine morning practices engaged in by the majority of people in Western culture, these two men successfully distance themselves from a position of vanity.

In response to the two images of muscular men presented to them, most men admitted that "it would be nice to look like that", but also recognized that it was not easy to achieve such a muscular physique. Nevertheless, seven of the fifteen men interviewed felt that it would be possible for them to achieve a similar look if they took up weightlifting. What was interesting was that each man described himself as too "lazy" to put in the time and effort required to achieve a similar physique. One man also described himself as "too lazy" to start using a separate face wash as opposed to the body soap he used in the shower. In this context, the attribution of laziness to oneself functions to emphasize a lack of what might be perceived as excessive concern around physical appearance.

Of fourteen of the men interviewed, three attended gym. Two of these men reported that it was primarily for health purposes and the third went "only for karate". As found by Gill et al (2005), the men in this study who did not attend gym characterized gym culture as narcissistic and were negatively critical about men that work out in gyms. In contrast to all of these men was the fifteenth interviewee (AD), who described himself as a bodybuilder and was a regular gym-goer who engaged in intense workouts and performance supplementation in order to build his desired physique. Only AD was prepared to admit that his gym attendance had ever had anything to do with appearance: *"Most guys that go to gym they don't go to gym for the health part they go to gym to look good, to ... make the women look at them ... and I think that's where it started off for me and then I got involved in the whole exercise, started doing personal training and the whole holistic approach I think for me started coming into it and then from there I went into bodybuilding you know, not actually, funny enough not for the way it looks but more for the challenge"*. Despite attributing to other men (and indeed other body builders) the desire to look attractive to women, he consistently denied that his own body building had anything to do with his physical appearance.

In their study, Gill et al (2005) found that the discourse of rejecting vanity was most prevalent in talk around cosmetic surgery, where vanity was repeatedly rejected as legitimate grounds for surgery. In addition to providing examples of "aesthetic" surgeries deemed legitimate, some of the men in this study applied a general rule for deciding whether a particular case was an appropriate one for surgery or not. Their line of reasoning employed the notion of attractiveness (treated as an objective criterion) to determine whether a desire for cosmetic surgery could be characterized as vain and thus illegitimate: *"Cosmetic surgery, I'm kind of okay with it but it just depends, I mean if you're kind of fairly good-looking as it is to go and get cosmetic surgery to make you super good-looking if you're fine to begin with is not really right"* (WB).

The untraditionally masculine self.

A majority of the men in this study, in response to questions around their understandings of masculinity, drew on traditional ideas of masculinity and positioned such masculinity as no longer appropriate: *"I think the traditional masculinity is really heavily uncool these days as well, I think it's uh, it sort of symbolises aggression and lots of negative things, negativity towards females and basically caveman type mentality"* (DP). Descriptions of the 'traditionally masculine' man by the men in this study often included ideas around physicality; traditionally masculine men were described as having "bulging muscles", being "quite big", "tough looking", "sporty", athletic and strong. The men often described images of masculine men that occurred to them in response to the term "masculinity", and these often involved muscular (sometimes "sweaty") bodies engaged in physical activity such as sailing a yacht or "swinging an axe". Ideas around traditional masculinity also often included stereotypical character types which were valued negatively by the men in this study, and included the "man's man", "captain of the rugby team", the "rigger bugger" and, in one case, the "muscular, hairy-chested six foot four rugby playing Neanderthal". It was clear that the men dis-identified with the models of traditional masculinity that they constructed as all fifteen men proceeded to position themselves in opposition to these: *"I've never been like a man's man, um, a hardcore guy, I've never been a big sports fan, I don't feel the need to be a tough guy um...I'm very into things like classical music and singing and these sorts of things and that's traditionally something that's a softer sort of thing, it's not as masculine"* (MO).

Characterizing "traditional" masculinity as extreme (traditionally masculine men were described as "maladapted", "hyper-masculine" and "overcompensating"), the men in this study were clearly invested in presenting themselves as "ordinary" men. Nevertheless most men seemed to feel that, as individuals, they were quite different from men in general. Many interviewees felt that a combination of so-called "masculine" and "feminine" traits was desirable, and often the men attempted to move away from categorising individuals in terms of gender, preferring instead to speak of "people". But while the attempt to move beyond the dichotomy of gender appears progressive it also clearly belongs to the homogenising discourse of which Bordo (1993) speaks. Gender was obscured when talking in terms of "people", but it was clear that the personal characteristics valued by the men were those traditionally associated with men and masculinity.

The heterosexual self.

The men in this study were not asked about their sexual orientation, nevertheless it became clear during the course of each interview that each of the fifteen men identified as heterosexual. While most men struggled to explain what masculinity meant to them, those who had the most well-developed ideas on the topic often understood masculinity in terms of the heterosexual relationship between men and women: *"I think masculinity is to a large degree how I guess men perceive themselves in the context of their relationships with women and how they view women"* (MR). Popular evolutionary theory regularly provided the dominant framework for making sense of these relationships, and the majority of the men in this study understood the role of physical appearance in social life in terms of heterosexual relationships and attracting a partner (or creating a more marketable self). Both their own and other men's interest in appearance was understood to be purposeful in

that once a “mate” had been acquired there was little reason to be concerned about ones’ appearance.

The majority of men at some stage during their interviews signalled their heterosexuality through comments expressing their sexual interest in women, and the subject position of “heterosexual” was taken up most vehemently in interviewees’ responses to the images of naked male torsos presented to them during their interviews. As in the study by Gill et al (2000), the majority of men participating in this study immediately expressed their lack of sexual desire for such bodies through humour: [in reply to a question about how the participant responds to images of muscular male bodies] *“Um, would I want that body? Not in bed with me!”*

The boundary between heterosexuality and homosexuality is obviously crossed by engaging in the evaluation of men’s bodies and, despite the invitation by the bodies offered up in the images shown to them, the fifteen men interviewed consistently refused to assume the “male gaze”. The men clearly read two of the fragrance advertisements depicting naked male torsos as homoerotic, and many were convinced that the advertisements, despite appearing in a men’s magazine, were targeted at women. Only a couple of men acknowledged that the advertisements might appeal to homosexual men. While being invested in the position of “heterosexual”, a number of interviewees expressed their acceptance of homosexuality. Not being “homophobic” was often understood in terms of being comfortable with ones own (hetero)sexuality, and *RM* extended this line of reasoning to include the appropriation of other traditionally feminine behaviours by men: *“A guy who’s really comfortable with his sexuality is just willing to like, doesn’t mind doing commonly feminine things like browsing for clothes and looking for nice sort of deodorants and stuff like that” (RM).*

The discourse around being comfortable with ones’ sexuality holds the potential to positively expand the repertoire of ways of being and behaving that are open to (heterosexual) men; as long as a (heterosexual) man is secure in his (hetero)sexuality, he can engage comfortably with homosexual men and in behaviours traditionally sanctioned for women. Nevertheless, it must be argued that this discourse buys back into the traditionally dominant masculine ideal of heterosexuality by retaining its’ position as the standard against which other men are measured. A man’s claim to normative masculinity is not threatened so long as he can claim and assert his heterosexuality.

The well-balanced self.

In the present study one man (*DP*) drew upon the discourse labelled “the well-balanced self” by Gill et al (2005). What is interesting is that *DP* was the only man in this study to talk about appearance in terms of “image” and, in contrast to the other men, his understanding of men’s involvement in appearance related practices was closely linked to the concept of identity. As opposed to being characterised as obsessional, vain or inappropriate, men’s attention to what they look like was repackaged as “having a laugh”: *“It’s good to see young guys just having a laugh with their appearance and just riffing [sic] on their whole sort of identity, it’s good, it’s a good thing really”.*

This discourse was also associated with a liberal attitude towards more extreme appearance related practices such as cosmetic surgery; *DP* had no problem with the practice and reported that his fear of surgical procedures was the only thing that would prevent him from undergoing cosmetic surgery if he ever desired it. In contrast to the other men in this study, *DP* more readily saw the body and appearance as a medium for expressing ones sense of self.

The non-consumer.

While the images shown to the men during the course of their interviews were part of an attempt to elicit talk around masculinities and the significance of idealized representations of the male body for men, the men in this study clearly read the images as advertisements, and responded to them as such. It was here that a subject position against consumerism was taken as each man refused to “buy into” the images presented to them. In response to the two images of highly muscular men most interviewees admitted that they would not say no to having such a physique, nevertheless each man went on to qualify his admiration for the bodies shown to him by acknowledging the work that goes into achieving that kind of build: *“This is kind of a bit not realistic because I realize this guy eats like raw eggs, he goes to gym you know, six out of seven days a week and takes all these supplements and things like that” (WB).*

A similarly critical distance was assumed in response to the fragrance advertisements presented. Instead of eliciting talk around different models of masculinity and men’s bodies, interviewees responded to the images as advertisements and refused to be drawn by them. A commonly repeated phrase in response to the advertisements was “I can’t relate to that”. Many of the men also presented themselves as being able to “see through” advertising: *“This one’s kind of too clichéd and obvious, I mean you can see it’s advertising, you know, if you take this you could get a woman like that which doesn’t make sense to me you know, I’m smarter than that” (MR).*

Many of the men drew on marketing discourse and described cosmetics houses as creating a need rather than responding to it; the recent increase in availability of men’s skincare products was attributed to cosmetics houses attempting to increase their customer base in order to earn more money. Related to the men’s perception of advertisements using half naked male bodies as being targeted at women was their construction of women as the primary consumers of men’s grooming products. A number of interviewees stated that it was women (and specifically girlfriends) who bought, and made men use, such products.

It is clear that the men in this study subscribed to the traditional gender roles associated with consumerism when making sense of men’s engagement with media images and advertising. In responding to the advertisements the men refused to buy into the advertised images and constructed themselves as impervious to the messages advertisers attempt to deliver. They refused to be sold on images and projections of lifestyle, and again explained their purchase of products in instrumental terms; if it worked well (or smelt good) they would buy it.

The ideally disembodied self (or successful masculinity).

Many of the men interviewed subscribed to the notion that “you can’t judge a book by its cover” at the same time as they acknowledged the significance of appearance in everyday life (“it would be nice if appearance didn’t matter”). While the men felt that it was important to “make a decent appearance” in terms of clothing and grooming, none of the men felt that their appearance was of such concern that they would bother to put in more effort to affect it. This was often expressed from a utilitarian point of view as many of the men stated that they couldn’t see the point of having a very muscular physique or of undergoing cosmetic surgery “just to look a bit better”. While many men’s ideas of traditional masculinity had included ideas around physicality, a number of men distinguished between mental and physical masculinity and valued mental attributes over having a good build. The male body was not associated with success in life: *“I think today largely kind of mental development should like far outstrip physical development because we live in a technological world and I’d say you know a guy who studies really hard and works really hard to develop himself mentally is going to be in a far better position than a guy like this”* [indicating image of highly muscular man] (MR).

The men explained during the course of their interviews that their life goals were to further their careers (or to have their own business) and to live a “comfortable life”. They spoke of success in terms of financial security, job position, being able to provide for a family and driving a nice car. Mental achievement was the route to success, and to be successful was to have ambition, wealth, independence, status and influence.

DISCUSSION.

Gill et al (2005) identified vanity and narcissism as primary constructs used by their interviewees in understanding their own and others’ experiences of embodiment, and argued that the prohibition of these functioned to regulate and police appropriate masculine behaviour in relation to the male body. Similarly the men in this study consistently denied that any of their own bodily practices were aimed specifically at affecting their appearance. The findings from this study provide support for Gill et al’s (2005:51) suggestion that “rather than being unimportant, the desire to achieve a particular look must simply be presented in a way that does not transgress the taboo about appearing vain”. Interviewees’ methods for achieving this were often manifestations of internal and external hegemonic masculinity: the men regularly engaged in comparisons not only with women but with other men as well.

In considering some of the limitations of the study it is emphasised that the interviewees were all young, white, heterosexual men living in Cape Town and the findings of this study cannot be generalised further. Related to the characteristics of the interviewees was the finding that, while the men made reference to homosexual masculinity, they demonstrated absolutely no awareness of black masculinity. In fact, in response to the one picture prompt depicting the naked torso of a black male, WB said, *“I don’t like that one, I mean ... he’s just far too tanned”*! It would appear that Western constructions of masculinity eliminate any recognition of black masculinities, and indeed the persistent whiteness of representations of consumer masculinities has been commented on (Gill, 2003).

While the men in Gill et al’s (2005:44) study explained their divergent body maintenance and modification choices in terms of “being different”, the majority of men in this study did

not speak of bodily practices as having expressive functions; they did not interpret their own practices as saying anything about themselves. With the exception of *DP* (the “well-balanced” self), the men in this study understood appearance primarily within the context of heterosexual relationships and in terms of attracting a partner. Indeed, the “Heterosexual self” was a regular and dominant subject position. It has already been argued that the seemingly progressive and liberal discourse around being comfortable with ones’ (hetero)sexuality buys back into the dominant discourse of traditional masculinity by retaining heterosexuality as the standard against which other men are measured. Herek (1987) argues that changes presumed to have occurred in Western masculinities as a result of the adoption of more flexible behaviour patterns amongst men are counterbalanced by the strengthening of the heterosexual component belonging to traditional masculinity. Thus, he argues, “the man who is ‘secure’ in his masculinity (heterosexuality) may be gentle and may eat quiche” (Herek, 1987:76). In addition Hondagneu-Sotelo & Messner (1994) warn that, when analyzed within a structure of power, the apparently progressive gender displays of contemporary men might best be seen as strategies to reconstruct normative masculinity by projecting domination and misogyny onto other (subordinate) groups of men. Despite claims that they were untraditionally masculine, the discourses and subject positions taken up by the men in this study remained fairly conventional.

Davis (2003:126) argues that in addition to being white, heterosexual and middle-class, Western (capitalist) cultures’ normative masculinity is also disembodied. She argues that it is not “the muscular bodybuilder or the provocative male centrefold” who is at the top of the masculine hierarchy, but “rational man”. Davis (2003:127) suggests that where masculinity is “guided by the dictates of rationality (“mind over matter”)” the body is irrelevant and to be ignored. Indeed, for many of the men in this study the effort required to develop a muscular physique wasn’t perceived to be worth the benefits that might ensue from having such a build. However it is suggested that the findings of this study can be taken to illustrate the efforts of the men interviewed to maintain a kind of masculinity that is situated between the disembodiment of dominant capitalist ideology and the embodiment of consumer culture.

CONCLUSION.

In summary then, the men in this study dis-identified with models of traditional masculinity and positioned themselves as “ordinary” guys. Despite casting “traditional” masculinity as “heavily uncool” and inappropriate, the interpretive repertoires used by these men in talking about appearance related practices and male bodies were fairly conventional. This supports the earlier South African study (using a similar sample) conducted by Chadwick (1998) nearly a decade ago. This finding is of interest in the context of work on masculinities in states of reconfiguration and change.

Against claims that men’s interest in their appearance is increasing, a concern with appearance, cosmetic surgery and consumerism for the men in this study remain highly gendered activities. As far as these men were concerned, the male body had very little to do with what counts as success, and was thus not considered to be something worthy of much consideration. While consumer discourses promoted through mediums such as Men’s Health Magazine may be encouraging men to relate in new and different ways to their bodies, the men in this study constantly distanced themselves from such discourses.

While it is clear that there are men who are engaging in a repertoire of behaviours which includes some of those previously sanctioned for women, we argue in line with Davis (2003:118) that the majority of men are unlikely to fall “into the same cultural traps that have been laid out for women” with regards to their bodies and beauty.

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