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Masculinity in the Making: Men's Increased Consumption of Strength Training

Roger Sherlock

Dublin Institute of Technology, roger.sherlock@dit.ie

Olivia Freeman

Dublin Institute of Technology

Andrew Dunne

Dublin Institute of Technology

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roger sherlock Mr
DIT, roger.sherlock@dit.ie

Olivia Freeman Ms
DIT

Andrew Dunne Mr
DIT

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The Weight of the World: Consuming Traditional Masculine Ideologies

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between the body, masculinity and the consumption of body-focussed activities. It examines the meaning and importance of strength training for men. Strength training is of interest because its increase in popularity is occurring at a particular point in time when a growing number of men are experiencing insecurities over their masculine identities as a result of recent socio-economic changes. This paper proposes that men today are facing a dilemma in terms of masculine identity. This dilemma hinges on the growing objectification of the male body in the media and its cultural messages regarding masculinity.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Traditionally, males have constructed themselves as masculine through their behaviour and their achievements. However, recent socioeconomic changes have threatened the masculine identities of many men (Holt and Thompson, 2004). Increased unemployment for growing numbers of males in high-paid sectors and the extensive movement of women in the workforce and in other traditional male terrain has meant that women have increasingly approached equality with men in virtually all aspects of life. An indirect consequence of these changes appears to be a growing questioning of what it is to be a man (Atwood, 1990). For instance, men can no longer realize their significance and their essentialness in relation to women through their role as breadwinner or sporting man, as women have increasingly come to share such traditional male roles. Seemingly, men who have suffered feelings of emasculation in this new environment have attempted to reaffirm their status as real men through consumption (Holt and Thompson, 2004), namely that of body focussed activities (Pope et al. 2000). Men have begun to adopt the idea that one of the only remaining avenues left to cultivate their distinctiveness from women, and thus, construct their masculinities, is through their bodies (Tkarrde, 2003; Pope et al. 2000). 'One of the few attributes left, one of the few grounds on which women can never match men, is muscularity' (Pope et al. 2000: 24). The body hormonal makeup of females is one that does not allow women to develop the same degree of muscularity as men (Venuto, 2002; Pope et al. 2000).

In this context, strength training is an interesting practice. Strength training provides men with a site- their bodies- 'with which to redress personal anxieties through the pursuit of a muscular image that embodies normative masculinity' (Wieggers, 1998: 148). Since ideas about masculinity are often inscribed on male bodies, increasing one's level of muscularity becomes a compensatory means by which men can build and validate a particular identity (Klein, 1986). Bodywork, such as strength training enables men to attain a more muscular physique, thus, providing men with a unique opportunity to actively divide the genders (Monaghan, 1999).

Moreover, depictions of the male body in magazines, through male action figure toys, on television, and in the general media, have come to emphasize physical appearance as a key criterion for measuring masculine worth (Tkarrde, 2003; Edwards, 1997). Essentially, men now live in a society that puts increasing emphasis on form and fitness (Grogan and Richards, 2002). Men are being presented with a limited number of male body types that are deemed socially acceptable. Images of men with sculpted pectorals, sleek abdominal muscles and bulging biceps are so pervasive in the media that many men are beginning to feel inadequate (Pope et al. 2000; Potter, 1997). Adding to this concern is the production of what appears to be an endless supply of exercise equipment, nutritional supplements, and other products designed to improve both the physical and symbolic value of men's bodies (Wienke, 1998). Unfortunately, this increased emphasis on muscularity is damaging to the physical and emotional health of a growing number of males. A wealth of evidence shows that males who are interested in developing a greater degree of muscularity often engage in health-endangering behaviours such as excessive exercising, disordered eating and the use of muscle-growth enhancing drugs and supplements (Botta, 2003; Olivardia).

Clearly, men are now confronted, more than ever, by the very same pressures that women have faced in attempting to attain the ideal physical form. However, what is very different with this situation is that men, unlike women, live in a society where stereotypes or codes of conduct strongly dictate acceptable forms of masculine behaviour (Pope et al. 2000; West, 1995). Men are inculcated in an environment that encourages men to be stoic (Pollack, 1999). Men are pressurised to worry about body image, yet, because of masculine societal expectations they are prohibited from discussing the degree to which body image anxieties or insecurities impinge their lives on a daily basis (Tkarrde, 2003). In this sense, conformity to dominant masculinity ideologies may be hazardous to men's mental and physical health (Kaufman, 1994). For example, it has been widely documented that adherence to the societal expectation of masculine stoicism may contribute to barriers in seeking help (Carlat et al. 1997). Thus, an important task for researchers studying the social construction of masculinity is to gain a greater insight into whether certain types of masculine behaviours or expectations are associated with dangerous behaviour and illness, such as excessive exercising or abusing diet supplements or muscle growth enhancing drugs in pursuit of a more muscular physique.

This paper explores the nature of contemporary consumption in relation to the body and societal constructs of masculinity. Research on consumption has been slow to deal with the subject area of embodiment, despite the fact that advertisers and marketers have been making large profits through the sale of body-beautification products and services, and by emphasizing contemporary body culture (Patterson and Elliott, 2002; Joy and Venkatesh, 1994). Moreover, most research on consumption associated with body image has focused on women, because for the most part, there was a general agreement that societal pressures on women to aspire to idealised standards of physical beauty were more pronounced than pressures on men (Grogan and Richards, 2002). Far less is known about how men perceive their bodies. This paper proposes that research has failed to adequately study the meaning of body image from the viewpoint of men's everyday experiences, and therefore, provides an incomplete assessment of men's perspectives of body image (Wienke, 1998).

THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD: CONSUMING TRADITIONAL MASCULINE IDEOLOGIES

We live in an age that is obsessed with physical appearance (Featherstone, 1991). People living in the western world are immersed in a society that creates standards of idealized beauty and then associates those standards with personal worth. Our culture is predisposed to accept the notion that self-worth is derived from external characteristics. For example, being thin and/or muscular is equated with being hard working, successful, popular, beautiful, strong, and self-disciplined, while being fat is associated with being lazy, ignorant, ugly, weak, antisocial and lacking discipline (Bordo, 1993).

Consumer culture has seen the body become a medium through which meanings about identity are transmitted, that is, a tableaux or canvas upon which can be read messages about an individual (Corrigan, 1997; Featherstone, 1991). The body has also come to reflect and symbolise the preoccupations and anxieties of specific cultures. This is clearly displayed by the increasing number of males and females suffering from body image disorders in American and European culture, and the emergence of the many multi-billion-dollar industries that have explicit body focus, such as diet and exercise programs, fitness equipment and services, cosmetic surgeries, diet and health-orientated foods, books and magazines (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995).

As a result of the omnipresence of the physical form 'which assault daily the individual within consumer culture' (Featherstone, 1991: 142), it is suggested that the body today has become an 'object of obsession' (Baudrillard, 1998). The body is compared to a cultural artefact, suggesting that nothing is more 'precious' or more 'dazzling' (Baudrillard, 1998). Individuals are spending large amounts of time and money attempting to transform the size and shape of their physical selves. For instance, nowadays- in comparison to the 1950's where annual diet industry revenues were in the range of \$100 million- it is estimated that in the United States more than \$33 billion is spent every year on weight reduction products (including diet foods and soft drinks, artificial sweeteners, and diet books) and services (e.g. weight loss programs and fitness clubs) (Venuto, 2002). The body no longer portrays how we fit into the social order, but rather, is the means for expressing oneself, for becoming who we would most like to be (Patterson and Elliott, 2002; Woodward, 2000). The body can be compared to an object that must be managed, repaired and maintained in order to remain a valuable commodity (Baudrillard, 1998; Bourdieu, 1984).

The body has, therefore, become a form of capital, requiring investment in order to produce bodily forms of the highest value (Baudrillard, 1998; Bourdieu, 1984). Similar to private property, people are encouraged to engage in activities that are likely to increase the value of the body, such as exercising. The closer one's body approximates to the images of the 'ideal body' that circulate within the mass media, the higher its exchange value (Featherstone, 1991). If one's body is to hold on to its marketable value in a world where appearance is of the utmost importance, it must be maintained (Corrigan, 1997). In this way, people become almost forced to invest ample time and energy into their bodies- 'health today is not so much a biological imperative linked to survival as a social imperative linked to status' (Baudrillard,

1998: 31). Failure to conform to the idealized body images circulating in the media becomes almost indicative of the insufficiency of the self and its consumption (Patterson and Elliott, 2002). The balance has, thus, moved from bodies producing commodities to commodities producing bodies and failure to live up to these ideals, such as being lean and muscular, indicates an inadequate consumer self.

This idea of the body as an object to be altered is not entirely new. However, it is only in recent years, as a result of technological developments in science aimed at transforming one's body, such as plastic surgery, sports nutrition and exercise equipment, that the body has become less of a given, and more a phenomenon of opportunities and choices (Baudrillard, 1998; Corrigan, 1997; Featherstone, 1991). An individual's body becomes the product of 'labor (body work) that necessitates consumption and the use of consumer goods' (Patterson and Elliott, 2002: 234).

MALE BEAUTY IDEAL

A cultural ideal of physical beauty is a particular model, or exemplar, of appearance (Solomon et al. 1999). Although beauty may be only skin deep, throughout history both men and women have worked hard to attain the ideal standard deemed socially acceptable. For instance, in pre-industrial China, tiny feet were seen to be a sign of beauty; the Suya Indians of Brazil inserted plates into their lips as a means to achieve the ideal body (Solomon et al. 1999). In contemporary American and European culture, however, one thing for certain is that the idealized body form for men is one that is strong, lean and muscular. Males are coming under increasing pressure to conform to an idealized standard of muscularity (Pope et al. 2000; Potter, 1997). Images of men with chiselled pectorals, bulging biceps and a washboard flat stomach circulate consumer culture at an even greater rate. As a result, it appears that males, in ever-greater numbers, have begun to accept hegemonic masculinity- the notion that muscularity is the defining characteristic of masculinity (Wienke, 1998). Unfortunately, the pursuit of this muscular idealization is damaging to the physical and emotional health of a growing number of males. The muscular 'model' of male perfection is unattainable by most men (Pope et al. 2000), and the over eager pursuit of it has been directly implicated in the virtual increase of eating disorders, exercise dependencies, and the use of muscle-growth enhancing drugs and supplements (Botta, 2003; Olivardia, 2000).

Excessive Exercising

Indeed, the number of males taking to the gym to exercise has increased dramatically in recent years. According to Potter (1997) the number of males exercising in America has increased by more than thirty percent since the start of the decade. The leisure industry in Europe and particularly Ireland has also experienced huge growth in recent years. Mintel (2001), the International Forecasting Organisation, forecasts that the health and fitness sector in Ireland will grow by seventy-five percent in the next five years.

Several studies have indicated that many males are making stringent exercise regimes the organizing discipline of their lives (Potter, 1997). Males are no longer engaging in strict exercise regimes to increase health, fitness and/or general well-being, but rather, in pursuit of the cultural ideal (Hartley, 1998). In a recent study conducted to determine the primary reason for engaging in exercise among male fitness centre members in the Palm Beach area of Florida, researchers revealed that muscle toning

was cited as the number one reason they exercise by eighty-five percent of male fitness centre members (Hartley, 1998). Incidentally, research has indicated that male solutions or remedies for their perceived inadequacy in terms of physical appearance go beyond excessive exercising (Pope et al. 2000).

The Use of Muscle-Growth Enhancing Drugs

Perhaps the most serious development or consequence of male body image dissatisfaction is the abuse of anabolic steroids, a class of muscle-growth enhancing drugs. The use of anabolic steroids to boost or enhance physical appearance can cause numerous adverse effects, such as severe acne, increased cholesterol, liver problems, high blood pressure, impotence, severe depression, brain damage, withdrawal, extreme aggression, and several other side effects (Olivardia, 2000; Klein, 1986). The use of anabolic steroids among men illustrates that they, similar to individuals with anorexia nervosa, engage in dangerous practices to attain their goal with little hesitation (Olivardia, 2000). The results of two recent American studies have shown a significant increase in the use of anabolic steroids among adolescent males in recent years. Approximately fifteen percent of American high-school boys have admitted to using steroids to boost muscle growth, and those are just the ones who admitted it, says Olivardia (2000). These findings appear to mirror previous findings with regards to adolescent females' abuse of diet pills; the use of anabolic steroids among adolescent males as a means to increase muscularity appears to be growing steadily, similar to the extent at which weight loss pills have become extremely popular for young women seeking to lose weight (Tylka et al. 2002).

What we are witnessing in present-day consumer culture is a growing generation of body-conscious males who engage in strict diet and exercise regimes, not for health reasons, but in pursuit of the lean, muscular male beauty ideal (Hartley, 1998). However, the attainment of the modern-day muscular beauty ideal for men is not liberating by any means. Men are presented with a demanding ideal of physical perfection that appears to be achievable through hard work. As a result, males adopt the idea that maybe, with enough time spent exercising they too could attain the ideal of male perfection (Potter, 1997). Men who embark on a stringent exercise regime in pursuit of the beauty ideal are almost inevitably setting themselves up to fail, as the 'model' of male perfection is virtually beyond the reach of the majority of ordinary men, without the use of illegal anabolic steroids or cosmetic surgery (Pope et al. 2000).

Furthermore, several studies have shown that men who engage in vigorous exercise regimes in pursuit of increased muscularity have a greater degree of body focus and appearance concerns (Davis et al. 1991). 'Men are more likely than women to express their insecurities about their bodies by becoming addicted to exercise' (Solomon et al. 1999: 197). That is, the very muscular physique represents the standard of male physical attractiveness and since it is a body form that most men are unable to attain, this leaves many males feeling worthless after their attempts at exercising fail (Potter, 1997; Davis et al. 1991). When males fail to achieve their ideal body image they assume that they did not put 'enough effort in' and as a result they become dissatisfied. This causes males to engage in far more assiduous and strenuous exercise, as they become somewhat convinced that more exercise and a greater degree of body focus will increase their chances of achieving the ideal male body. These

men get caught in a downward spiral of repeated exercising and more intense body dissatisfaction (Pope et al. 2000; Potter, 1997).

DISSATISFACTION WITH APPEARANCE

Clearly concern with one's physical appearance is no longer a gendered phenomenon (Nolan, 2004; Grogan and Richards, 2002; Phillips and Castle, 2001). Men are no more immune to the same body dissatisfaction disorders women have long faced. Surveys by Psychology Today magazine have discovered that almost one-half of American men (forty-three percent) are dissatisfied with their appearance, a figure that has increased by three hundred percent in the past twenty-five years (Phillips and Castle, 2001; Pope et al. 2000). Echoing this finding, recent research conducted in America discovered that ninety-five percent of college men were unhappy with some part of their body (Pope et al. 2000). Also, eating disorders, which were once thought to be a problem affecting only women, appear to be affecting an ever-greater number of males (Nolan, 2004). Twenty years ago it was suggested that for every ten-to-fifteen women suffering from anorexia or bulimia, there was one man. In 2001, it was documented that for every four females with anorexia, there is one male, and for every eight-to-eleven females with bulimia, there is one male (Nolan, 2004). Although there are no figures available for eating disorders in Ireland, it is believed that approximately fifteen percent of Irish men are affected by an eating disorder (Nolan, 2004). In fact, Marie Campion of the Marino Therapy Clinic in Dublin-Ireland's leading treatment clinic for body image problems- postulates that the true prevalence of males affected by body image problems may be dramatically higher than previously speculated. She suggests that doctors have traditionally been slow to diagnose the condition in male patients. Specifically, she posits that males find it extremely difficult or embarrassing to seek help for what was traditionally believed to be a "woman's disease". She states that 'many (men) are too embarrassed to seek help so their pain goes on' (cited in Nolan, 2004: 6). In this context, it is reasonable to assume that men are clearly facing a dilemma in terms of masculine identity; men are pressurised to worry about their appearances, yet, because of stereotypical expectations they are prohibited from discussing the degree to which body image anxieties or insecurities impinge their lives on a daily basis (Tkarrde, 2003; Pope et al. 2000).

MEN'S BODY IMAGE DILEMMA

This quandary hinges on western society's growing objectification of the male body and its cultural messages regarding masculine identity (Tkarrde, 2003). Depictions of the male body in magazines, through male action figure toys, on television, and in the general media, have come to emphasize physical appearance as a key criterion for measuring masculine worth (Tkarrde, 2003; Edwards, 1997). This situation is no different, some may say, from the manner in which women have historically been compelled to conform to virtually unobtainable standards of beauty (Tkarrde, 2003). However, what is very different with this situation is that men, unlike women, are inculcated in an environment that encourages men to be stoic (a person who suffers pain without showing his feelings).

Men live in a society where stereotypes or codes of conduct strongly dictate acceptable forms of masculine behaviour (West, 1995; Klein, 1986). Pollack (1999) positions these stereotypical expectations under the umbrella term "Boy Code," which emphasizes the ideologies surrounding the conventional definition of masculinity,

including self-reliance and stoicism. Boy Code reinforces the notion that 'real men' are independent, stable and stoic. As a result of these codes of conduct regarding masculine identity, men are almost forced to suppress their insecurities concerning body image. That is, within society, males are 'expected to fulfil a male script: to act as males, not to act like girls' (West, 1995: 6). The masculine myth seeks to instill in young men the notion that one's masculinity is determined in direct proportion with the denial or repudiation of anything deemed to be feminine (Pollack, 1999; West, 1995; Klein, 1986). Hence, males are not supposed to worry about something that "only women do". Males are made to feel 'embarrassed and ashamed of their appearance concerns, and keep them secret. They may feel it "wimpy" or "girlish" to worry about their looks' (Pope et al. 2000: 193).

Whereas females are expected to openly admit and display their feelings about their health and personal life, society teaches men to be emotionally repressive, that to be a man is to divulge little of their personal lives, to tackle affliction and hardship in stern silence (Seidler, 1994). As a result, when confronted with the bombardment of virtually unattainable body images and the feelings of inadequacy these images create, men are often deprived the emotional space to discuss their suffering. As noted by Pope et al. (2000: 5) 'real men aren't supposed to whine about their looks...So this "feeling and talking taboo" adds insult to injury: to a degree unprecedented in history, men are being made to feel more and more inadequate about how they look- while simultaneously being prohibited from talking about it or even admitting it to themselves'. To discuss their emotions would counteract contemporary conceptions of masculinity. A consequence of this appears to be that a growing number of males tend to believe that their preoccupations with appearance are rare or unique. They adopt the notion that they are the 'only one' who is concerned with achieving the ideal male body. They have a difficult time accepting the idea that other men could possibly be victims of similar concerns (Pope et al. 2000). As a result, men tend to suffer in silence.

Paradox of Silence

Fulfilling male gender role expectations involves having to constantly present an appearance of strength and capability in relation to one's fears and insecurities. For example, a young man suffering with body image concerns is not supposed to admit such a 'weakness' since it would threaten his very sense of masculinity (Carlat et al. 1997). Society prohibits men from discussing their feelings of vulnerability and inadequacy (Pollack, 1999). Men who talk about their concerns and anxieties may be dismissed as 'whingeing' or 'wimpish' or a 'sissy'. As a result of this inability or reluctance to discuss one's emotions, males often find it extremely difficult to seek help. For example, in a study involving men hospitalised with an eating disorder, researchers discovered that males with bulimia felt ashamed of having a stereotypically "female" disorder, which might help explain their delay in seeking treatment (Carlat et al. 1997).

The norms and values of masculinity have foisted the requirement upon males to behave in a way that is expected of them rather than by responding to an inner sense of themselves (Seidler, 1994; 1985). A male is taught that it is better to 'sustain the pretence of being able to cope with emotional situations that we can barely grasp' than it is to acknowledge personal emotions and personal conflict (Seidler, 1985: 159). Men have become so inundated with the message that "real men" are supposed to be brave, fearless and physically strong that they find it extremely difficult to

accept the notion that real strength is achieved by recognizing one's own weakness, as this threatens their very sense of masculinity. Men are taught to deny their needs, to view strength as a matter of having no needs (Seidler, 1994).

However, it has been documented that the suppression of emotions leads not to less, but too more emotional dependency (Kaufman, 1994). Silence only results in more isolation and internal suffering, increasing the likelihood of anger, depression and even suicidal tendencies (Tkarrde, 2003). When an individual does not acknowledge or openly discuss their emotions it is almost inevitable for these unmet needs not to disappear, but rather, to spill into one's life at work and at home (Kaufman, 1994). The growing objectification of the muscular male body has thus produced a scenario in which those men who cannot conform to the masculine ideal of muscularity are at a greater risk for depression, low self-esteem, isolation, feelings of inadequacy, eating disorders, excessive exercising, and even drug use (Tkarrde, 2003). The silent aspect of this crisis should not be overlooked, as it is this part of the problem that most strikingly distinguishes issues concerning male body image from those that impinge Women (Tkarrde, 2003).

PRESSURE TO CONFORM

Conveniently, the contemporary conception of masculine stoicism is conducive to the continued exploitation by advertisers, who attempt to preserve the idea that those who do not conform to the images of physical perfection they see in the media are inherently inferior (Tkarrde, 2003). Advertisers and marketers are increasingly manipulating men. Male beauty image industries- purveyors of food supplements, diet aids, fitness programs and countless other products- now prey increasingly on men's anxieties, just as analogous industries have preyed for decades on the appearance related insecurities of women (Raunch, 2000). The advertising industry uses the symbolic properties of male bodies in compelling its audience to consume (Schroeder and Swick, 2004; Patterson and Elliott, 2002). Advertisers explicitly target the body image of men in their marketing campaigns in order to sell their products and services. As eloquently put by Kacen (2000: 350), men's magazines, for instance, 'tout articles on "firm abs" and flaunt ads with half-naked men displaying perfect physiques in order to sell underwear (Ralph Lauren), cologne (Davidoff Cool Water), personal care products (Gillette), electronic goods (Samsung) and athletic gear (Nike)'. Advertisers have transformed men's bodies into objects of the gaze (Patterson and Elliott, 2002; Edwards, 1997). Men have become 'stimulated to look at themselves- and other men- as objects of desire' (Patterson and Elliott, 2002: 235).

Exposure to highly attractive male models in advertising and the mass media makes men far more conscious and aware of their own appearances, encouraging them to 'seek out models of physical beauty, but also more vulnerable to the allure of the consumer market' (Wienke, 1998: 25). Advertisements are encouraging men to adopt the belief that they are not okay as they are and urges them to search for the answers to their problems through consumption. To illustrate this, consider, for example, in a study conducted to measure the relationship between health and fitness magazine reading and body image disturbances, the researchers discovered that health and fitness magazines were an important predictor of body image disturbances in males. Reading was linked to increased muscularity, which meant that the more time the subjects spent reading health and fitness magazines, the more they intended to purchase products (food supplements and diet aids) in order to help achieve the

physique of the men as shown in the magazines (Botta, 2003). In other words, advertising works by lowering its audience's self-esteem (Bordo, 1993). The health and fitness magazines encourage men to compare their bodies with those of the models in the magazines. The average reader's body is not fulfilling the media standards of a healthy body as presented in these magazines, and as a result he suffers from a poor body image. The media reinforce the value that the road to happiness is achieved by way of physical beautification. As a result, men living in American and European culture are becoming high maintenance and are beginning to invest large sums of money in pursuit of becoming more aesthetically pleasing. 'Men have become as much a part of modern consumerism as women. Their construction of a sense of who they are is accomplished as much through style, clothing, body image and the right look as is women's' (Bocock, 1993: 102). Or, as more bluntly put by Edwards (1997: 55), 'masculinity is no longer simply an essence or an issue of what you do, it's how you look'. To illustrate this, consider the following findings. Research conducted in Ireland has found that Irish men are spending millions of euros on grooming. A straw poll of some of the country's top beauty salons revealed that around twenty percent of customers are men and that proportion continues to increase (Meagher, 2004). A report from market research firm Datamonitor revealed that British men between the ages of twenty and forty now spend on average €164.76 per year on beauty products- only €40 less than women of a similar age (cited in Meagher, 2004). Furthermore, research conducted in 1999 found that American men spent are spending billions of dollars on men's toiletries and grooming products, on gym memberships and home exercise equipment, and on cosmetic procedures (Pope et al. 2000; Potter, 1997).

In addition, the media images purveyed today are not only far more fixated on the male form, but the physiques of the male models are far more muscular than those of even the recent past (Spitzer et al. 1999). The use of nude men in marketing campaigns and advertisements has also increased dramatically in recent years, positioning the male form in a spotlight, which was once exclusive to women. Researchers at Harvard Medical School conducted a study to compare the percentage of males and females appearing in a "state of undress" in prominent beauty magazines for women over the last forty years. The researchers discovered that over the forty year period, the number of women shown in a "state of undress" stayed relatively constant, but the percentage of men displayed in a "state of undress" revealing increased from virtually zero, until it surpassed the number of undressed women by the 1990s (Raunch, 2000; Pope et al. 2000). Also, not only did the number of men shown in a "state of undress" increase substantially, but the undressed men were far more developed in terms of muscularity. In addition, just as the centrefolds of women in Playboy magazine have depicted ever-slender women over recent years, the centrefolds of men in Playgirl magazine have depicted men with lower percentages of body fat and more muscularity (Pope et al. 2000).

It should be noted that similar theories have been proposed for several years concerning cultural ideals of thinness in women (Pope et al. 1999). For example, a vast amount of literature has documented the inappropriate thinness of Barbie, and the relationship that such an unattainable figure could have on a young women (Pope et al. 1999). Incidentally, recent research has found that the modern-day Barbie doll now displays a physique, which is far more humanly proportional (McPherson, 1997).

In contrast, a recent study has shown that male action figure toys have grown far more muscular over the last thirty years in comparison to their original counterparts, with many modern figures displaying the physiques of elite bodybuilders and many 'display levels of muscularity far exceeding the outer limits of actual human attainment' (Pope et al.1999: 70). Of interest, this finding suggests that many young men have absorbed unrealistic standards of muscularity 'long before they were old enough to stop and question whether these images were realistic or reasonable goals for a man's body' (Pope et al. 2000: 46).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper aimed to explore the nature of contemporary consumption in relation to the body and societal constructs of masculinity. We have examined motivations for engaging in bodywork, namely that of strength training, for the construction and elaboration of male identity. To paraphrase Patterson and Elliott (2002: 241/2), this paper has direct 'implications for the study of consumption and identity, for it foregrounds the importance of embodiment and consumption to identity projects'. As previously documented, 'explicit consideration of embodiment within marketing and consumption has been relatively sparse'.

A number of factors highlight the pertinent nature of this study at the present time; research indicates that eating disorders, exercise dependencies and the use of food supplements, diet aids, and muscle-growth enhancing drugs are increasing sharply among males. That is, an extensive review of the wide range of literature surrounding body image has indicated the extent to which physical appearance has become a major concern for a growing number of males (Grogan and Richards, 2002; Olivardia, 2000), however, very few studies have attempted to explore in-depth the motives and the self-concept dynamics that underlie the growing number of males becoming increasingly preoccupied with their bodies.

Drawing on previous research in marketing and consumption (Sturrock and Pioch, 2002; MacNevin, 1999; Schouten, 1991), it is anticipated that the research to be later conducted will provide empirical evidence for the claim made by authors like Featherstone (1991) and Thompson and Hirschman (1995) that the male body is the medium for self construction, by exploring the motivations men voice for engaging in strength training and the reported implications of continued participation for male identity.

In summation, to paraphrase Patterson and Elliott (2002: 242), specific consideration of male embodiment within consumer research is required, not just because the representation of female bodies has received far greater attention, 'but also because there is a distinct need to understand the role of consumption and the institutions of consumer culture in the construction of male identities and the buttressing of hegemonic masculinity...We need to understand just what it means to be a man in contemporary society'.

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