

The “Constant Arm Wrestle”: Young Men’s Construction of Masculinities within a Sexualised Culture.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

Signed:

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Anita Nodwell

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Abstract

Sexualised culture in contemporary Australian society is a subject of scholarly attention. The majority of existing research explores the impact of this culture upon girls and women. Meanwhile, relatively less is known about the impact on young men, specifically how they construct and manage their masculinities within this landscape. Male-groups are a key site for the construction and (re)production of masculinities and, therefore, form a critical milieu whereby gendered social approval and acceptance are both sought and sanctioned. In order to address this gap in the research, we conducted three 1.5 hour focus groups with eleven university undergraduate men, aged between 18 – 29 years old. A short music video montage and advertising images were used as stimulus to orient discussion towards the topic of sexualisation. Connell’s Hegemonic Masculinity Theory was employed to frame discussion and to contextualise findings and Discursive Analysis was used to examine how dominant or ‘hegemonic’ discourses shape young men’s talk. We examined the reasons young men engage in the practice of sexualisation and their ability to construct or challenge dominant discourses concerning the sexualisation of women. Analysis revealed three main discourses, each of which were complex, interrelated and often contradictory in nature; namely, *The Malleable Man*, *The Hunter* and *The Deep Down Man*. These discourses required continual negotiation by young men as a means of managing their masculinities and hierarchical positioning. Findings suggest future research should explore the impact of power relations amongst men upon the maintenance and proliferation of sexualised culture within society.

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The sexualised expression of femininity has become increasingly more explicit and available in western societies (Gill, 2012). Whilst literature and research exploring sexualised culture and its impact on femininity proliferates across various disciplines (Attwood, 2006; McNair, 2002; Peterson, 2010; Vanwesenbeeck, 2009). Meanwhile, noticeably less is known about how a sexualised landscape may affect men and masculinities (Garner, 2015). Certainly, it is imperative to highlight the centrality of constructions of femininity within this topic, and not lose sight of the systems of power and sexual politics that underpin them (Jeffreys, 2014). However, what tends to be overlooked is that gender is inherently relational (Henriques et al., 1984): a complex interplay of relationships, power and desire, and a change in the construction and enactment of one gender must entail a change in the other.

Sexualised Culture

Sexualisation is a term used to describe the saturation of sexual representation and discourse within western societies (Attwood, 2006). In recent years, there has been a significant amount of scholarly attention and concern directed toward the notion of the “sexualisation of culture” (Attwood, 2009; Durham, 2009; Gill, 2003). Research in this area indicates an increase in volume and explicitness within the media (Hatton & Trautner, 2012) as well as an increasing acceptance of pornographic material as “mainstream” within popular culture (Attwood, 2006; Yost & McCarthy, 2012).

Sexualised media frequently construct women as passive and vulnerable, whereas men are commonly portrayed as powerful and predatory (Knight et al., 2012). It is perhaps this representation and legitimization of men’s greater status relative to women (Jost et al., 2004) that has resulted in more research toward gendered inequalities (Garner, 2012; Keddie, 2009). Focus is often drawn to the normalisation of male sexual entitlement by sexualised popular culture instead of examining the ways young men “do gender” within this context (Coy & Garner 2012; Garner, 2015). This oversight in the body of research indicates an incomplete understanding of a sexualised culture as the voices of men and masculinities are absent, with the

debate otherwise played out in the lives and bodies of women and girls (Atwood, 2006; Gill, 2012; McNair, 2002).

Masculinities

The idea that masculinity is an inherent characteristic or a stable trait that will reveal itself over time has largely been rejected (Cochran, 2010). Instead, masculinity studies have primarily adopted a social constructivist approach to gender. This paradigm posits that “masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005 p.836). A contemporary social constructionist approach allows ideologies that (re)produce gender inequalities to be challenged. For example, traditional masculine traits such as aggression and sexual-insatiability are not biological givens (Gough, 1998), but are rather enacted through social interactions.

Connell (1987, 1995, 2000) was the first to reject the singularity of masculinity. Her approach built upon existing theories of masculinity and gender identity, and can be located within the traditions of critical theory and feminism (Connell, 1995). In her seminal *Masculinities* text, Connell (1995) outlined a typology of masculine identities, using the terms “subordinate”, “marginalized” and “complicit” with regard to how they were positioned in relation to the dominant or “hegemonic” masculinity. Connell (1995) indicated that “hegemonic” masculinity imposed upon all other masculinities (and femineities), and argued that it is through this domination and marginalisation that men are stratified into these domains of masculinity. For example, according to Connell’s theory homosexual men are “subordinate” to heterosexual men, as the former are not considered “real men” (Kimmell, 1996). Marginalized masculinities form exploited or oppressed groups, similar to oppression on the basis of ethnicity or socioeconomic status (Duck, 2009; Robertson, 2007). All men position themselves and other men in relation to hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Johnson, 1997) despite it being out of reach for most men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Numer & Gahagan, 2009). This is because simply being male affords men the benefits associated with the subordination of women (Coles, 2009). In this way, Connell (1995) recognises that the majority

of men are categorised within “complicit” masculinities, as these are organised around acceptance of the “patriarchal dividend”. The “patriarchal dividend” refers to the prestige and the right to command that men gain from patriarchy, even if they themselves do not occupy a hegemonic position (Connell, 1995).

There are a number of criticisms of hegemonic masculinity as a theoretical and methodological framework (Hearn et al., 2012; Wetherell & Edley, 1999; Moller, 2007), however Christensen and Jensen (2014) suggest that problems are not with Connell’s (1995) framework, but rather with the ways the concept has been adapted and used by different researchers (*see* Hearn et al., 2012). Hegemonic masculinity is not a static position it changes over time and space (e.g. historically and culturally). Men can strive towards hegemony when desired, and strategically distance themselves at other times (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Moreover, while hegemonic masculinity was originally coined to include both (1) male dominance and oppression of women and (2) hierarchical classification of masculinities. It has largely been tied to theoretical and conceptual questions of patriarchal power relations over women, with those between men and masculinities more notably absent from research (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

In order to deal with these theoretical ambiguities, Christensen and Jensen (2014) propose an intersectional approach for analysing the complexities and hierarchical relations of men. Specifically, they extend Connell’s framework (1995) to distinguish between external and internal hegemony as two different dimensions that can, but do not always overlap. Internal hegemony refers to the power relations amongst men and ways men continually (re)negotiate relationships amongst themselves in a hierarchical process; whereas external hegemonic masculinity refers to dominant forms of masculinity that serve as a vehicle for the oppression of women. They argue that an intersectional approach grasps the complexities and nuances that underlie masculinities (Christensen & Jensen, 2014).

It is evident from observation of traditional gender roles that certain assumptions are made regarding the power structures of masculinity and femininity (Connell, 2014). Masculinity projects itself as being self-assured and self-reliant; however its relationship with femininity is

at the core of its existence (de Beauvoir, 1968). The construction of an “independent” masculinity is in fact fragile as it is reliant upon access to female sexual relations for validation. As such, we may view masculinity as both exposed and “precarious” (Horrocks, 1995 p. 9). Masculinity is therefore caught within a paradox of projecting a sense of independence and capacity, while being reliant upon external recognition and connection. It is through the constructed belief that femininity is reliant upon relationships, while masculinity just needs “to fuck” that allows men to protect themselves from having their needs made visible, and from exposing the consequent power this affords women (over men) (Hollway, 1984).

As already intimated, masculinity is not one stable construct. Rather, masculinities are represented varyingly by men through performative acts (Butler, 1990). They are (re)constructed by men through everyday talk (Edley & Wetherell, 1997) and embodied actions (Kehily, 2001). This variability is difficult to capture with standardised measures. Psychometric instruments such as Sex Role Egalitarianism Scale (SRES; Beere, King, Beere, & King, 1984) and Gender Role Conflict Scale (O’Neil, Helms, Gable, David, & Wrightsman, 1986) must measure something that is enduring and predictive (e.g. restrictive emotionality, egalitarianism or success) otherwise there would be no cause to develop them, or test-retest their reliability. In other words, the traditional quantitative approach seeks to establish discrete, stable categories of responses. Such an approach is arguably more aligned with earlier essentialist and biological-reductionist theories that viewed masculinity as a fixed part of the self (Geertz, 1973).

Focus within unequal social systems is often placed solely upon the marginalised party (MacAnghaill, 2000). The reality is that men and women are equally subject to overarching social regimes. As Grosz (1994) highlights “patriarchal power relations do not function to make women the objects of disciplinary control while men remain outside of disciplinary surveillance.” (Grosz, 1994 p. 144). This is starkly evident in the domain of sexuality. Sexual congress becomes stripped of intimacy and defends against emotional connectivity (Kimmel, 2012; Flood, 2008). It is reappropriated as a means of belonging and a sign of mastery. Sexual conquest becomes a kind of “masculine capital” (Anderson, 2005; deVisser et al., 2009) with which an elevated position in the male hierarchy may be obtained (Flood, 2008). Hegemonic

masculinity demands constant re-negotiation in the pursuit of status and security. The urge to obtain power runs parallel with the fear of losing it, and this dichotomy may increase negative attitudes toward women (Gailey & Prohaska 2006; 2010).

Discourses of Sexuality

Wendy Hollway (1984) holds that there are three key discourses of sexuality that structure and inform sexual thought, feeling and activities in contemporary western culture: the male sex drive discourse, the have/hold discourse and the permissive discourse (Braun, 2006; Kippax et al., 1990). The *male sex drive* discourse places men in a socially privileged position that serves as a foundation for the sexualisation of women. Women are constructed as passive in the sexual domain, with men expected to “take” the women (Fitts, 2008). This expectation implicitly requires women to be subordinate, with their sexuality considered a commodity to be exploited. By eroticising power and explaining male sexual urge as biologically driven, the behaviour thereafter is considered natural and unavoidable (Hollway, 1984). This complicates the issue of female consent, framing it more as an expectation than a choice (Luke, 1998; Potts, 1998). Women are thereby positioned to “perform” their sexual attractiveness for men (Gill, 2003). Male accountability is managed through the use of the “wild male” who is uncontrollable and entitled to women’s sexualised and available bodies (Coy, 2009). Women are seen as the object of the male sex drive discourse, whereas men maintain the dominant position of being the subject.

The *have/hold* discourse rests on the principle of the primacy of the monogamous relationship and family life. It proposes that sex should take place within the context of a lasting relationship. Women are the subject in this discourse, in that they must (at least) be in a relationship to enter into sexual relations, whilst men are the objects because women must acquire them (as ‘husband’ or ‘partner’) before a sexual relationship can be entered into. In the *permissive* discourse the principle of monogamy is challenged and it is considered the right of both men and women to express their sexuality in any way they choose (Hollway, 1984).

Heteronormativity

Young men are encouraged throughout their formative years to adopt certain socially constructed versions of manhood (Horrocks, 1995 p.18). These derive from a set of cultural and historical beliefs that depict what “real men” ought to be like: physically and emotionally strong, independent, strong, dominant, courageous, sexually potent (Donaldson 1993; Messner 2002). The sexual scripts in contemporary society are highly gendered, prescribing expected and acceptable behaviours for men, generally in contrast to those expected for women (Horrocks, 1995).

The “Heterosexual Script” defines acceptable sexual goals, courtship patterns and commitment styles for each sex (Kim et al., 2007). This script supports men sexually objectifying and pursuing women for gratification whilst diminishing the value of emotional attachment and commitment (Brid, 1996). Competition lies at the core of the masculine social script (Philaretou & Allen, 2001). Embedded within this competition is both misogyny and homophobia which function to prevent divergence from the accepted masculine behaviours (Kimmel, 2012). Conformity is rewarded by recognition and value; transgression is punished with ostracism (Stoudt, 2006; Sirin et al., 2004). Kimmel states, “homophobia is a central organizing principle of our cultural definition of manhood... [it is] the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men” (2012, p. 35). Here we observe that implicit within acceptance of heterosexual identity is the rejection of homosexuality (Plummer, 1999). This entrenched masculinity allows young men to justify “policing” each other’s interactions with females, condemning or belittling men who “transgress” by establishing emotionally rich, romantic relationships (Hird & Jackson, 2001).

Perhaps the greatest threat to contemporary masculinity is perpetrated by other men (Kimmel, 2012). The urge toward belonging and the maintenance of male hierarchical value creates fragility for men, who are continually negotiating and guarding against emasculation for “unmanly” behaviour (Johnson, 1997). This mutual insecurity serves to maintain male social boundaries by demanding participation in normative masculine behaviours (Flood, 2008).

Johnson (1997) observed that at the core of hegemonic masculinity is power. Patriarchal societies manage power through both control and fear, exerting these upon women or other men (Frye, 1983). The powerful requirement to “prove manhood” maintains this cycle and is the primary organising factor of relationships among men, and between men and women (Kimmell, 2011). This defines male-female interactions in a number of ways. First, sexual activity is considered central to male status. As such men are defined as the audience for these activities, that is, sexual conquest (of women) is a way of performing masculinity to other males (Flood, 2008). Second, heterosexual sex is appropriated as a medium of male bonding (Sabo, 1994). This necessitates the third element, being that male-male friendships are prioritised over male-female relationships, with platonic male-female relationships considered emasculating (Stoudt, 2006). The above elements necessitate a homosocial “storytelling” which is both used to define and sustain this hegemonic masculinity (Flood, 2008).

Competition around “getting women” provides an endorsed practice by which dominant forms of masculinity can be enacted and reinforced (Sabo, 1994). As observed by Quinn (2002), the pursuit of women “functions as a game men play to build shared masculine identities and social relations” (p.387). He observed that men who did not participate in this game would lose “masculine capital”, diminishing their status in the group (Quinn 2002). Similarly, Sabo’s (1994) study of athletes “locker talk” demonstrated the conquest of women was presented by men as a “game” or sport. Within this framework, women are considered the opponent that the man must “defeat” (p.39). This reinforces the notion that men often view sexuality as external to themselves, thus transforming it into something to “seize” from women (Johnson 1997, p. 154).

The role of the media

Media strongly supports the construction of heterosexuality as both natural and normal (Aubrey & Frisby, 2001). This is observable in the majority of popularised music, videos and magazines, which project entrenched and heteronormative scripts (Hubbard, 2008). Often within this model, male sexual infidelity is constructed as an animalistic biological imperative, delivering men from accountability (Vigorito & Curry 1998). This is particularly notable in

music videos, “although sexual objectification is commonplace in media culture, music videos provide the most potent examples of it.” (Frisby & Aubrey, 2011 p. 475). From this we may conclude that heterosexuality is presented as “compulsory”, and hints at the profound institutionalisation within our culture (Rich, 1983). The result is a distorted representation of what relationships are, and how they “look”. Frequently this is further reinforced within music videos using selective focus upon certain body parts and gestures, analogous to the notion of Mulvey’s (1975) “gaze” which conveys attraction and desire to a potential partner. Similarly, magazine media often present “manhood” as being dependent upon heterosexual appetite and skill (Ezzell 2008; Taylor 2005). The heterosexual appetite is often conflated with male sexual infidelity, and is presented as biologically grounded, thus implying its inevitability and blamelessness (McCaughey, 2008).

Law and Labre (2002) examined how the media representation of the male body has changed over 30 years. They demonstrated an increasing emphasis upon men to be strong and muscular (e.g. muscular and V-shaped, emphasizing broad shoulders). Moreover, they found that men who had greater exposure to pictures of muscular and leaner men resulted in those men being less satisfied with their own bodies (Law & Peixoto-Labre, 2002). Similarly, Wienke (1998) conducted a qualitative study with young men using Connell’s hegemonic masculinity theory as a framework. They found that a muscular body was privileged over other types as it reflects a ‘cultural ideal’ that symbolically and visually reinforces the stereotypical view of masculinity. Wienke (1998) found that men responded by (1) exerting more effort to assume the ideal, (2) by distancing themselves from it, as they were unable to satisfy the ideal, these men emphasised other accomplishments for example intelligence, or (3) they completely reject the notion of hegemonic masculinity. Wienke (1998) found that men would reformulate the stereotypical meaning of muscularity in accordance with their own capabilities.

The Current Study

Gender research needs to focus “less on men’s power over women and more on relationships between men as these are regulated by regimes of masculinity” (Gardiner, 2002 p. 14). As such, the present study focuses on what men do, individually and collectively. Through data generated by focus group discussions this study will examine how masculine hierarchies are constructed, sustained and unsettled through various discursive methods and, more specifically, how a sexualised culture forms a site for the discursive construction of masculinity.

The aims of this study are: (1) ascertain what subject-positions young men have available to them within a sexualised context; (2) to establish whether the sexualisation of women is a way to “perform” masculinity; and (3) to explore men’s construction of masculinity using Connell’s hegemonic masculinity (1995) and an intersectional approach (Christensen & Jensen, 2014). By examining the ways young men are encouraged to “be a man” within a culture we not only extend our understanding of masculinities but we also contribute to a broader goal of uncovering what may be influencing gender (in)equity within this milieu.

Method

Participants

Eleven young men were recruited to participate in the study, ranging in age from 18 to 29 ($M = 22$) years old. All participants were undergraduate students with the majority studying psychology (one studying law). Participants were recruited via a psychology research participation website as well as study posters displayed around the university campus. Pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity and participation in the study offered either unit credit, or to be placed in a raffle for a Myer voucher as remuneration.

Discussion prompts

A music video montage and advertising images (see Appendices) were used to orient group discussion toward the topic of sexualisation. These were selected based on Goffman’s (1976) investigation of gender in advertising and Fredrickson and Roberts’s (1997) Objectification Theory. Four specific factors influenced selection, these were; (1) exposure of female body parts or, attention on isolated body parts to the exclusion of other characteristics

(2) the extent to which females were being looked at or touched (e.g. being 'checked out' by men) (3) whether women were positioned as submissive to men and (4), if the females' bodily posture or sexual dancing imply sexual readiness.

Procedure

All procedures for the study were approved by Murdoch University Ethics Committee. Focus groups were conducted as they generate discourse approximating the natural cadences and sequences of everyday conversation (Millward, 1995), and are particularly effective when investigating the lives and standpoints amongst men (Coltrane, 1994).

Three 90 minute focus groups of between 3-5 participants were run in meeting rooms at Murdoch University. They were audio-recorded and later orthographically transcribed, generating a total of 50 pages of transcribed material. A non-directive approach was used to align with the naturalistic aim of the study; however an Interview Schedule (Appendix F) was available should discussions require orientation back to the topic of sexualisation (Willig, 2013; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Participants were asked to discuss their reactions toward the stimulus and were encouraged to respond to each other. Participants were also encouraged to raise issues or arguments that they considered relevant to the topic, which were not otherwise covered within the Interview Schedule. Participants frequently addressed each other throughout the focus groups, posing new questions or directions and extending or challenging opinions presented by others within the group. Despite participants being informed that they were not required to disclose any of their own accounts (or that of their acquaintances) surrounding sexualisation, discussions and opinions often revolved around personal anecdotes.

Approach to Analysis

This study is conducted from a social constructionist perspective (Burr, 1995) and borrows from diverse theoretical frameworks including Connell's masculinities framework (1995) and Hollway's work on heterosexuality discourse (1984). Social constructionism is concerned with identifying the various ways of constructing social reality within a particular culture, as well as exploring the conditions and implications of their use in social practice (Burr,

1995). Social constructionism views language as constitutive where discourses are situated within particular historical and social ideologies (Parker, 1992).

Analysis in the present study was conducted in accordance with the Discursive Analysis (DA) developed by Potter and Wetherell (1987; 1992). This approach has been widely used in masculinity research (Gough & Edwards, 1998; Gough, 1998; Wetherell & Edley, 1998) and is informed by conversation analysis (Sacks 1992), discourse traditions (Edwards and Potter 1992, Potter 1996, Edwards 1997) and studies of rhetoric (Billig 1991, 1998). This approach pays attention to the action orientation of talk (Heritage, 1984), and is specifically interested in the ways speakers manage issues of stake and interest (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

The first stage of analysis was transcription, involving the raw audio data from the focus groups being orthographically transcribed (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The transcripts were then examined for features of variability and consistency. Themes or “body of instances” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 167) were then grouped; for example, “power”, “women” etc. These themes were then further divided into clusters (i.e. “women as objects”, “masculinity as hegemonic”) with connections between themes noted. Finally, a more interpretative analysis was conducted to identify recurrent patterns of discourse (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Analysis and Discussion

Analysis is based on the identification of three main discourses, though these were often interwoven in complex and often contradictory ways. The first discourse, the “Malleable Man” is concerned with the dynamic nature of masculinity and young men’s interface with the media’s representation of masculinity. The second discourse, “The Hunter” was concerned with “being a man” (FG 1, Line 607) who can prove his masculinity to other men through constant pursuit of sexual activity with physically attractive women. Male-male interaction within this discourse was based on competition and surveillance. The final discourse, the “Deep Down” man highlighted the emotional experience of young men and their attempts to actively re-configure any insecurities.

The Malleable Man

This discourse emphasised the plural nature of masculinities. Masculine performances within gender continually emphasised physicality, with young men needing to show strength and physical prowess to prove “manhood” to male counterparts. Though, at the same time, in the presence of women these performances were *not* masculine;

Extract 1 (FG 2, Line 262)

Sam: But in a way, it’s just like finding the perfect balance you know. Especially with, like, but with males and males it’s different with the masculine thing you know, because you’re trying to prove it within each other. Like say, if you all go to the gym and that, it’s all about who can lift the most, who looks better in the mirror you know, but when you’re with girls it’s a whole different story of masculinity you know.

Researcher: Right. Okay.

Sam: Like when you’re with them, you don’t wanta, you don’t come across as ‘oh fucken, look at me’ you know, but when you see you’re mates you’re like.. yeah, you know, to your mate.

Jeremy: When you’re with girls it’s about being a gentleman, and then when you’re with your boys it’s about not being a gentleman (laughs)

Sam: ... yeah, (laughs) it’s about who is the biggest dog in the yard, type thing.
Yeah.

In Extract 1 Sam explains how the “masculine thing” varies based on the social environment. Masculinity constructed as a “thing” suggests that this is not something that a man inherently has; rather it is something young men need to obtain. There is an exerted effort in “trying to prove it [masculinity]” within the male group with Sam contextualising this effort as operating within a gym milieu. By positioning his argument within a gym he can unproblematically legitimise traditional masculine norms of “strength” and “power” as they

naturally function in this domain. Here, masculinity depends on “who can lift the most” and also “who looks better in the mirror”. Masculinity framed as being “peacocked” underscores the shift in masculine appearance culture whereby men are no longer judged purely by what they are doing but also by what they “look like” when they are *doing* it. We can see that “the guys” form the audience that judge and scrutinise their masculinity. Though, in the presence of women masculinity is “a whole different story”. Here young men cannot flaunt masculinity, rather they are required to become a “gentleman”. Whilst this is required with women, Jeremy emphasised the rejection of the “gentleman” in the presence of the “boys”. Here the rewarded masculinity was to assume an animalistic “biggest dog” position. Both subject-positions have the same fundamental transactional goal of achieving or acquiring something that is portrayed as needed from male/female groups *for* [his]masculinity.

Physical displays of strength and power were depicted as the means toward being “the biggest dog” amongst men (e.g. internal hegemonic masculinity). The use of the term “biggest dog” is interesting as it introduces both animalistic and hierarchical themes. Undoubtedly, becoming the “biggest dog” is about ascending the group hierarchy through competition to become the ‘Alpha’, the most powerful member of the “pack” who leads and controls other members. Interestingly, Jeremy extends this analogy to position the “dogs” within a yard. That is, boundaries are described and delineated by something external. Here, even the “biggest dog” is contained.

Whilst physical strength or body mass was a way of affirming male identity to other men, at the same time, this confirms particular forms of masculinity as superior in relation to others. That is, whilst performances of physicality enable young men to “come across as a man” this in turn provides a space for *not* coming “across as a man”.

There was a definite sense of “what women want” that was conflated with sexuality, appearance and particularly a masculine physique. Below, young men discuss the advertising images (see Appendices) with a portrayed sense of inadequacy and urgency;

Extract 3 (FG 2, Line 532 - 546)

Ron: I think it's just like growing-up, like, at a stage where I tried to go to the gym loads, and I really wanted to look like that. And I sort of just thought to myself, look at the things you'd give up to be like that, like, when you're giving up things that you enjoy or things that make you gonna make you happy, like, if I can't go out with drinks with my friends because I'm sitting at home, bored, because I'm like, oh I don't wanta put on weight. I wouldn't do it, like, what's the point?

Researcher: Right.

Nicholas: Yeah to be honest, it does, um, this image more worries me about my partner when she sees a lot of what the guy meant to look like, even though she's smarter than that, but it does go through your mind.

Ron: It's a full time job itself.

In Extract 3 Ron discloses going through a “stage” when he “*really* wanted to look like” [emphasis added] the man in the advertising image. However, he employs a stake inoculation (Potter, 1996) that presents his concern as past tense (e.g. when he was “growing up”). Through this his masculinity is projected as mature and “beyond” such insecurity. He also builds an independent and autonomous masculine self by attributing his progression to a “thought” that he “had to himself”. His decision and subsequent behaviour is portrayed to result from an evaluation. That is, by “look[ing] at the things” he would have to “give up” to assume the masculinity represented by the media.

Nicholas steps in and prefaces his talk with an adverbial disjunct in the form of an emphatic claim to sincerity (“to be honest”). By constructing himself as “truthful” he is therefore depicted as a “good” person. Through a positive presentation Nicholas can disclose his insecurities and buffer against challenges. This disclosure also projects his masculinity as being staunch, and able to speak “truthfully” despite challenges.

Nicholas refers his “worries” directly to his partner and her assumed evaluation of the media image being what a “guy is *meant* to look like” [emphasis added]. Here Nicholas

highlights the existence of a prescribed and elite masculine “look” and indicates his distance from it.

Whilst the media masculinity was constructed as desired by women, it was also hard to obtain (e.g. “it’s a full time job in itself” FG 1, Line 546) and required young men to sacrifice all the things that “make you happy”. Young men’s talk frequently revolved around attempts to modify their appearance to further approximate the masculinity represented by media (i.e. “I tried to go to the gym loads, and I really wanted to look like that” FG 1 Line, 532). In the below Extract 4 one young man talks of finding the brand of clothing (that the man in the advertising was wearing) in a bid to replicate his “look” and thereby “upgrade” his masculinity. Through this young men portray masculinity as flawed in some way, necessitating “correction”;

Extract 4 (FG 2, Line 589 - 604)

Jeremy: These photos here, like, obviously what its advertising is fancy brands and stuff like that you know, and showing that only the best of the best people wear this kind of thing you know. Obviously all these guys and that, they’re all you know, perfect in women’s eyes I guess you know, like.

Sam: Muscly, the hair...

Jeremy: Girls would look at that and go, oh my god I wish I was her you know. Even though that’s completely fucken’ messed up. Some girl being pinned down with three oily guys looking at her. You know what I mean, like.

Researcher: So as a guy, would there be some impact of these kind of images?

Jeremy: Yeah, so if you see that big sign in the City and walking past with your girlfriend and she’s looking at it, like. You’re automatically like, fuck, you know.

Sam: I should be more like him.

Jeremy: I should buck up more, or I should... You know what I mean, and then you know, you go on your GPS and type in the closest Dolce and Gabbana store.

Group: Laughs.

Jeremy: You automatically want to upgrade yourself you know.

Sam: Yeah.

In Extract 4 Jeremy uses an epistemic modality to connote that the advertisement images are “obviously” being used to advertise “fancy clothes”. As it is widely agreed and understood that the media *do* use images to advertise products; this preliminary statement is merely a platform by which Jeremy can then move to deploy a more contestable statement. That is, he couples this with the notion that it is also self-evident that “only” the elite people wear such attire. Here, it is not only the best people, but the “*best of the best*” [italic added] who can clad themselves so decadently. He continues to build his claims as factual, as it is also “obvious” that the masculinity represented by the media is the “perfect” masculinity “in women’s eyes”. Women become a homogeneous group here, without agency or choice. This representation of masculinity is depicted as desirable, with *all* women wishing to gain proximity to it. Women are depicted as being intoxicated by this representation of media, as they seek practices that are “completely fucken’ messed up”. Whereas masculinity is reduced to something that is one-dimensional and void of any other characteristics.

As a disclosed sense of “worry” and talk of not being able to be “more like him” reflects masculinity as insecure or inadequate, respondents would frequently preface such a disclosure with swear words (e.g. “fuck”). As Coates (2003) highlights, “swearing and taboo language have historically been used by men in the company of other men as a sign of their toughness and their manhood” (2003, p. 46). It is also important to note the assumption of heteronormativity. In Extract 4 this occurs by masculinity being something to be “look[ed] at” and desired by women (not other men). Such discourse is further reinforced by respondents adopting heteronormative labels, such as “girlfriend”.

In contradiction, the representation of masculinity within media was considered “un-masculine” amongst men;

Extract 5 (FG 2, Line 197)

Ron: What I find weird to think, well, if that’s perceived as masculinity, like, in order to be like that you’d have to be un-masculine. So like, anyone can have a body like that, but in order to do so you would have to do things, for example, that in

lots of cultures would be considered un-masculine, like for example, he wouldn't be able to drink, he wouldn't be able to eat with his friends, he wouldn't be able to do this, do that, which is key aspects of being masculine. But then he'd also probably fake-tan or spend a lot of time at the beach, he'd be wearing make-up (laughs), he'd be like doing so many things that are aren't masculine to look masculine.

Extract 6 (FG 1, Line 238)

Ron: I don't think, well, people wouldn't associate brands, like Dolce and Gabbana, I know people don't associate them as being like masculine, like being interested in fashion and stuff like that that's not masculine. It's very feminine. Like, so it like doesn't match.

In Extract 6 Ron shifts from a subjective stance ("I don't think") to assume a higher-ordered identity ("people wouldn't think"). By adopting the subject-position of one of "the people" Ron assumes authority and knowledge to speak on behalf of the people. This homogenising discourse obscures gender as it works to position the argument (that Dolce and Gabbana is not associated with masculinity) as a widely-held belief, not only by men – but by "people" in general. A challenge of this argument is now conflated with a challenge of society. Ron upgrades this by suggesting interest in *any* fashion is feminine (and therefore not masculine). Now it is not only Dolce and Gabbana but any fashion that is "*very* feminine" [emphasis added] (Pomerantz, 1986), a position that Ron has now distanced himself from.

In both Extract 5 and 6 the media representation of masculinity was considered "un-masculine" within the male-group. This is because it required and produced "feminised" behaviours, such as "caring". Specifically, caring about fashion and appearance was positioned at odds with "key aspects of being masculine", such as "drinking[alcohol] with friends". Here it was evident that young men had to tread a delicate path between appropriate attention to their appearance, and body and the pitfall of being seen (by other men) as "having the emotion to care" (FG 1 Line, 252). If they appeared too invested in their appearance or body they exposed themselves to being "un-masculine". Though at the same time, if they were not invested enough

they risk of not ‘having’ women (e.g. my girlfriend tells me, she’s like you need to go to the gym (FG 1, Line, 551) and “maybe I won’t get girls as hot as that unless I look like this” (FG 2, Line 630). So whilst the media masculine image was depicted as the path to “getting women”, it also held within it the requirement of great sacrifice – the sacrifice of the “*real* masculine thing” [emphasis added] (FG 2, Line 40) within gender. Talk emphasised a transaction of masculine performances with young men being required them to suppress one aspect to attain to another.

Sex with women was consistently identified as the most rewarded act to signal “manhood” amongst young men (e.g. It’s like you had sex with a woman – bam! Now you’re a man” FG1, Line 644). In this way, for young men, having “all the girls” (FG 2 Line, 140) constituted being “considered maybe higher up” in the hierarchy (FG 2 Line, 141). Below, young men discuss how this complicates sexualisation;

Extract 9 (FG 2, Line 174)

Sam: I think within the group there’s like maybe 50/50 you know, of guys that are against it but will still do it anyway because they don’t want to come across less masculine, you know, less of a man kind of thing, you know.

To stand-up is to be more of a man, but you’re looked down on as less of a man by the other blokes, you know what I mean. It’s a real..

Jeremy: We’re all thinking it but no one wants to say it, cos we all wanta be that top-dog.

Sam: Yeah, we all wanta be the top-dog. But if you do say you’re the bigger man, but you get made look like the weakest link out of everyone, you know what I mean.

In Extract 9 the sexualisation of women is framed as an ‘ideological dilemma’ (Billig et al., 1988). That is, for young men to “stand up” in opposition to the sexualisation of women you are “more of a man” but in doing so you are “looked down on as less of a man” by other men. This is a direct contradiction. Whilst independence is a central feature of hegemonic masculinity, demonstrated here, opposing or “standing up” to the group paradoxically undermines one’s manhood and observed worth within the group. Sam uses a numerical

expression (“50/50”) to make the argument appear self-evidently true and not a product of the individual. Described in this way the dilemma is presented as complex, as young men are “evidenced” to be completely divided on this issue. Jeremy upgrades this to depict that “*all*” men are in opposition to the sexualisation of women. In terms of an inner dialogue, the entire male group now unanimous in the opposition to sexualisation. Expression, however, is suppressed. This is because a challenge to sexualisation surrenders young men a chance at the internal hegemonic position (e.g. “top-dog”). Through a challenge young men can be “*made to look*” [italics added] certain ways by other males, as in the above case, “like the weakest link out of everyone”. For young men, “standing up” was not something “you don’t want to kind of do” because “you’ll get teased or you’ll get bullied” (Mike, FG 1, Line 275).

The Hunter Discourse

“The Hunter” discourse required young men to pursue and engage females as a means toward internal hegemonic masculinity. A man is considered a “Hunter” if he pursues and engages sexually with numerous women.

Young men who performed “The Hunter” were described throughout discussions using animalistic terms, for example, “roosters” (FG 3, Line 234), “top dogs” (FG 2, Line 394). These terms functioned in two ways; firstly, they worked to distinguish the “successful” male so his consequent recognition and elevated status could be afforded. Secondly, they functioned to depict the pursuit of women for sex as instinctual. Female refusal is problematised in the latter, being framed as the denial of a ‘biological’ (Gough, 1998) and therefore fundamental masculine ‘need’ (Hollway, 1984).

It is important to note that, whilst women are the driving factor in this discourse (e.g. “Having women is pretty much what drives us” FG 1, Line 377), throughout all discussions relationships with women was null. Instead, young men’s talk revolved around the need to acquire multiple and “hot” women to prove masculinity to other men. In this way, women are constructed as possessions: something to “have” as opposed to someone “to be with”.

The performance of “The Hunter” occurred through young men’s discussions concerning watching, stalking and waiting for “the next victim” (FG 2, Line 431). The sexual

act was not an end in itself; the encounter was more important as a means to later report and discuss within the male group. The “hunting pack” is one of the analogies that young men used to eroticize the pursuit of desirable women, as if pursuing desired “prey” (Luke, 1998);

Extract 10 (FG2, Line 430)

- Jeremy: I actually see that heaps hey, it’s ridiculous, it’s like hunting packs.
- Sam: They do aye, there’s like three or four of them, just creepy aye. Who’s the next victim aye (laughs).
- Jeremy: Yup.
- Researcher: Right. And if you are successful, what does that say about you as a guy?
- Jeremy: You’re the man really.
- Sam: Yeah. You’re more of a man than anyone else, you know.

In extract 10 Jeremy frames his talk as a factual event. This establishes credibility for his following account and protects him from challenge, as the event is perceived through direct and therefore objective means. An extreme case formation (“heaps”) bolsters his claim (Pomerantz, 1986) whilst a negative appraisal of the practice being “ridiculous” shifts blame so that the practice can be built as “predatory”. From here Jeremy is able to maintain personal distance and security while describing groups of (other) men as a “hunting pack” in their pursuit of women for sex. Sam takes up where Jeremy left off, collaborating the argument. He also manages his accountability by immediately positioning others as the ones that behave in this manner (“they do aye”). He adds to the negative appraisal of the practice (“just creepy”) and in doing so he can contribute to the “pack” notion without implicating himself. The reporting of numbers (“three or four of them”) projects Sam as credible in also having ‘seen’ (and therefore not been part of) the criticised behaviour.

Both speakers in the above discussion adopt negative evaluations of the “hunt” and work through the utterance to distance themselves from it. When asked what it says about you as a guy if you are ‘successful’ through this practice both respondents reflect that this would afford you instant status within the male group, placing you at the top of the masculinity-hierarchy (“you’re more of a man than anyone else”). In this way, the pursuit of women was

depicted as “creepy” but at the same time also the pathway to becoming “the man”, or the ‘alpha’ or socially respected male (Billig et al., 1988).

Competitions amongst young men with a sexual focus served as a means of strengthening internal hegemonic masculinity whilst simultaneously reinforcing the role of women as sex objects (Flood, 2008). For example;

Extract 11 (FG1, Line 83)

Ron: I think definitely yeah, when you go out it can so, like, it’s like a sport.

Nicholas: Yeah, partying days, everyone’s like, who can get the most hook-ups and that’s a sign of your masculinity. Like they were high-fiving each other in that clip.

Ron: It shouldn’t be, but it is (laughs).

Group: Laughs.

Extract 12 (FG2, Line 436)

Sam: Or say, like guys will go out you know and they say, oh she’s hot, you know. And a mate will go, yeah she’s hot. I bet I can take her home you know, and then it’s like, go on then, and its game on you know what I mean.

Extract 11 and 12 describe the “game” as occurring between men and for men as they form the audience that determines a winner/loser. The value of the particular “conquest” was determined in consultation with other men and based on the agreed attractiveness of the female. Females who are not “hot” do not form part of this “game” and therefore cannot be approached by otherwise interested young men. Once there is agreement within the group, young men then challenge each other in a bid to ‘win’ the game (e.g. “I bet I can take her home”). In Extract 11 Nicholas rephrases the “game” as occurring historically during the “partying days”. This stake inoculation (Potter, 1996) presents Nicholas as having a more progressive and mature masculinity, whilst at the same time endorsing the ‘game’ as a ‘rites of passage’ for young men.

Here, Ron challenges this practice (“It shouldn’t be”) though he immediately counters this through a “normative masculinity” repertoire (Kaminer & Dixon, 1995) constructing the behaviour as unchangeable and natural (“but it is”). Kimmel (2004) refers to these as “just-so-

stories” of gender that rarely offered new ways of thinking about actions of behaviours and as such supported dominant societal notions of gender. Naturalising the “game” in this manner also moves the practice outside the realm of moral dispute and alleviates any suggestion of individual agency or responsibility.

To be ‘successful’ here young men need to (1) demonstrate emotional distance whilst objectifying women as “the prize” and, (2) display or report the “win” back to the male group as this formed the site where it was judged (e.g. “It was actually fed from around them.” FG 3, Line 637; “it seems like we praise each other for doing those things to be seen.” FG 1, Line 72). The competition of “getting women”, then, is less about the encounters with women and more about “proving” masculinity to other men. The entire process, from the surveillance of the women, to the consultation and agreement of her attractiveness and subsequent pursuit and competition, all functioned here to (re)enact internal hegemonic form of masculinity for and in competition with other men. In this way, the primary aspect of male-relations was expressed as a compulsively heterosexual script whereby young men governed other men’s encounters with women. The “sign of masculinity” for young men was conflated with the acquisition of multiple, attractive women and the “game” for women was rewarded through recognition and group-status. From this we can conclude young men who resist or challenge the “game” risk a position on the masculinity hierarchy. Or, perhaps worse – have their masculinity questioned, as “real men” will pursue sex (Hollway, 1984).

Sexuality was re-appropriated as capital within the male hierarchy. Relationships amongst men serve as a foundation of competition. That is, the site of the ‘hunt’ was purely within the masculine domain. Deeper relationships with females are constrained as this would prevent further “hunting” opportunities.

At the same time, young men needed to manage their investment within ‘The Hunter’. This is because rejection by a woman exposed masculinity as dependent upon female-reciprocity. Below, young men discuss how they manage female-rejection under the gaze of male-counterparts;

Extract 14 (FG 2, Line 740)

Jeremy: She's a bitch (laughs)

Sam: Yeah, she's a slut anyway (laughs). Or you make a joke about her or something, like, oh she doesn't brush her teeth or something (laughs)

Jeremy: Yeah, yeah (laughs)

Luke: Just down-playing it sort of thing.

Sam: Just so they don't turn around and say, ohhh she rejected you, you know, yeah. She wanted me, you know, that kind of thing, but you just didn't want to go there.

Jeremy: You want to feel good about yourself.

Sam: Yeah, you want to feel good about yourself.

Extract 14 indicates that this utterance occurs within and for the male group thus it is critical we extend interpretation past the more blatant derogatory stance towards women, and explore how this functions between men. The "performance" of masculinity in light of female-rejection is described as needing to be actively re-narrated to the male-group. This is because dependence on the "other" would undermine the internal hegemonic status the "game" would otherwise afford. In a bid to counter this, young men use the rhetorical strategy of vilification of the other (Vanderford, 1998). By demonization and devaluation of the female (e.g. "she's a slut anyway") young men project a sense of power over the 'other' to the male group a stance more aligned with hegemony.

The significance of the pursuit of women is a collective one, constituted here through the respondents (re)telling of how such episodes are reported back to male audiences. Young men describe concealing their "real" experience to the male group by hiding behind more acceptable gendered ways of managing emotion. That is, young men here describe making a "joke" about the woman or her hygiene (e.g. "she doesn't brush her teeth"). This rhetorical strategy is described to defend young men against the depicted 'backlash' of the male group (e.g. "Just so they don't turn around and say, ohhh she rejected you") and importantly, the desire to "want to feel good". The latter provides space for the counter-position. That is, be

“seen” as rejected (by a female) results in young men *not* “feeling good”. This indicates that the degrading of women operates here first and foremost as a function of internal hegemonic masculinity, a means by which young men manage their power and hierarchical status within gender. Though, at the same time this demonstrates how such practices can catastrophically spill over into the experiences with and between genders (Gailey & Prohaska 2006).

Some discussions amongst young men depicted effort in trying to “find the perfect balance”. That is, being socially accepted and capable in the domain of female conquest to be masculine, but also not getting “sucked into being a dick to girls”. As reflected in the extract below, this balanced is considered impossible;

Extract 15 (FG 2, Line 148)

Luke: In a way, you wanta be like that, just to feel good about yourself, but then you don’t want to get sucked into being a dick to girls at the same time.

Sam: Yeah.

Luke: But you find yourself doing it anyway.

Sam: But you wanta kind of find the perfect balance, but you never end up finding it.

Researcher: So how can you find that balance?

Luke: You don’t.

Sam: You can’t.

In Extract 15 treating women poorly is aligned with “proving” masculinity and maintaining male relationships for young men. This is framed as an ‘ideological dilemma’ (Billig et al., 1988) and is based upon a number of discursive constructions and manoeuvres. Young men initially draw from the common-sense understanding that if something “feels good” then it must be positive, this is a rhetorically self-sufficient argument (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) that effectively side steps the moral critique of “being a dick to girls” as wrong. Here “feeling good about yourself” for young men is dependent on being able to ‘prove’ your masculinity to other men. Importantly, being able to ‘prove’ masculinity is based on doing things that are considered as “being a dick” to women.

Young men manage their accountability for “doing it anyway” in two ways. First, they construct themselves as having a desire to want to “find” the “perfect balance”. However, although this is down-played with softeners (Speer & Potter, 2000) and portrays that these young men are “good” in their projected desire and effort towards “finding” the balance. Secondly, young men use the male-group to diffuse responsibly as they depict it as powerful and hypnotic, being “sucked in” to something that would require exerted effort to otherwise resist. Described in this way, young men present themselves as lacking individual agency and, therefore, as not accountable.

The Deep-Down Man.

The “Deep-Down” man requires young men to ignore or suppress their desire for intimacy as a means of becoming socially valuable within the male group. Herein we observe talk of young men being subsumed by the strength of the social system and depicting the sacrifice of their own “wants” to obtain a higher social standing within the male group;

Extract 16 (FG 2, Line 345)

- Luke: I reckon. One guy I know, he just goes through girls like one after the other, and doesn't care. But I know deep down he does care and he doesn't really want to do it, but he does it just for that, like..
- Sam: You're the man!
- Luke: Yeah, yeah.
- Sam: Picked up three girls, you know.
- Luke: He always talks about it as well, I'm like, you don't need to talk about it, like, I know. Just settle down.

In Extract 16 Luke initially builds the idea that the “guy” does not care about “going through girls one after another”. Though because he presents this ‘guy’ as someone he “knows”, he can immediately adopt the privileged position of knowing otherwise, that is, this guy actually does care. From this position Luke can also criticise the behaviour as “disposal-like” without implicating himself.

The expression of “deep down” here is used to depict a core-resistance that originates within the individual; from which the notion of going against what he “really wants to do” can be established. The group then work together to build the idea that going against what you “really want” is something that occurs in light of the pursuit of group status (e.g. “the man”). That is a chance to be acknowledged within the group is worthy of self-sacrifice. Sam then takes-up the position of the “guy” (e.g. “picked up three girls, you know”) and in doing so he highlights the importance of “having” multiple women to report to the male-group. By adopting this position Sam also projects his own experience and therefore history of “success”. The manner in which the “success” is reported also needs to be considered, as Luke outlines an incorrect way (e.g. “always talking about it”) and shows how this can undermine masculinity through comments usually reserved for emotional “others” (e.g. “just settle down”).

A young man’s desire for women can project a sense of vulnerability and dependency that is at odds with the traditional masculine notion of capacity and independence (Connell, 1987; 1995). In Extract 17 below, Sam draws from the have/hold discourse to depict an inner experience and desire for intimacy with women. Whilst at the same time, he uses the male sex drive discourse to portray the actual dialogue between men;

Extract 17 (FG 2, Line 510)

Sam: It’s not like we’re like, go and see your best mate. (crying voice) Oh man, can you come over, you know (laughs). You call up and you’re like fuck her man, she’s a bitch I’m going to replace her, you know. But deep down you just want to say, I feel like crying, just come over you know. She won’t take me back this time (crying voice), but instead you say, fuck her, let’s go out to a club you know, then you don’t pick up you just come home and go to sleep aye. (crying voice)... I’ve been through so much

Extract 17 demonstrates how young men suppress the recognition of being an object of the have/hold discourse. This is done by positioning the woman as the subject and drawing from the male-sex drive discourse to camouflage desire and dependence (Hollway, 1984). Sam talks

of anxieties and distress (“I feel like crying”) with a yearning for comfort and connectedness (“just come over”). Instead, a juxtaposed position of solitude is built (“you just come home and go to sleep aye”) with the speaker drawing from a “best mate” repertoire to illustrate that even the closest of male-relationships cannot reveal these “deep down” experiences of young men, that which they “just want to say”.

A “masculine-mask” of toughness is built projecting control over the other and the situation (“fuck her man, she’s a bitch I’m going to replace her”). Vilification of the other is a rhetorical strategy that discredits adversaries (Vanderford, 1998), but here it is also used to distinguish the speaker from a softer “feminine” position of “caring” about the relationship.

In the above Extract talk revolves a tension between a participation in collective masculine performances and more intimate desires to be with women. It is important to note, this tension is primarily caused by friction between the social expectation of masculine “performances” and the young man’s personal “wants”, overlooking the broader moral or ethical implications associated with sexist and derogatory practices. The distancing and devaluation of women reflects both the inherent sexism within contemporary patriarchal masculinities, and underscores the resulting gender-related dissonance in social privilege and power.

Discussion and Implications

Findings demonstrate that young men are placed in an impossible position, caught between two opposing sets of expectations and values. Within the male group, the young man is expected to emphasise animalistic traits, such competition and ‘hunting’, whilst simultaneously managing an opposing construction of what is considered appealing and desired by women. Here young men had to suppress personal ideals related to intimacy and morality. The result of managing these two competing factors was identified as a profound sense of fear. These fears were related to two overarching themes, a “fear of ostracism by other males”, and “fear of rejection by females”, with the latter increasing the former. Young men were therefore placed in a position of dissonance and uncertainty wherein they continuously aimed to satisfy opposing sets of demands.

Fear of ostracism by other males

In the male-group, young men were required to project a sense of control over others and self, while eschewing weakness or dependence. Masculinity was flaunted through display of power, ability and sexual prowess as this provided hierarchical value within gender. Young men principally guarded against the possibility of being “un-masked” through being “seen” to have their masculinity lacking. Young men depicted concern in being denied access to the “capital” of “having women” as this was perceived as the means of status and recognition amongst male peers.

Fear of rejection by females

In contrast, young men assumed that women desired a physically attractive “gentleman”. This was reinforced by media representations, presenting male attractiveness in terms of muscularity and physical appearance. There was at no point a sense of differentiation within the perceived female group, assuming they were homogeneous in their desires. Media aided this by presenting these traits as irresistible to women. This reinforcing a sense of expectation or entitlement to “have women” through approximating this representation of masculinity. Young men assumed this must be accomplished while simultaneously refraining from flaunting their masculinity to women. It is possible that, as young men interpret their ongoing efforts and sacrifice as necessary to meet female demands as such, rejection may be associated with a sense of resentment toward the woman.

The young man

Perhaps one of the greatest sacrifices young men identified in this study was one’s individuality. Both the male and female groups are depicted to demand conformity and obedience which subsumed individual morals and values. This produces a further paradox: that of attaining so-called ‘individuality’ and superiority within the male group, while sacrificing one’s individual agency and characteristics. The only acceptable means of individuation within the male group is to be “top dog”, which remains an elusive and frustrated concept where attainment of status seems impossible. The experience within the male group is that there is no

“leader” but also no sense of democracy. Democracy was itself discarded and replaced by a socially accepted set of masculine values. Practices associated with the sexualisation of women were opposed by young men though this manifested only in their private thoughts. Young men’s talk revolved around restricting and sacrificing their individual masculinity for the homogenised masculinity considered more desirable to women. Practices such as “working out” were discussed as a method of assuming this “ideal”. The personal health benefits of such practices were absent from discussion. Instead, young men cited these as valuable through their increased ability to “get women”, with the ultimate goal of increasing their hierarchical value. The primary emotional response to the perceived demands of women was anxiety, fuelled by the man’s sense of inadequacy and distance from the masculinity represented by the media.

Young men are driven to develop a small selection of traits in order to obtain social value or recognition, however, the traits assumed to be required by women are often in contradiction to those believed to be demanded by other male peers. The result of this friction and cognitive dissonance is fear, frustration, and a persistent sense of inadequacy – and a sense of urgency to change. It is possible that the frustration generated by this dissonance is, in part, projected upon women as resentment. Ultimately the young man interprets women and other males as being gate-keepers to his sense of adequacy and value as a man.

The consequences of this friction may potentially reinforce sexualised culture. Young men project a collection of often unattainable requirements upon women, and when unable to meet these requirements, mask their injury through practices linked to vilification and sexualisation. Young men fabricate a “closed loop” which is ultimately self-referential within the male group. Men project women’s expectations while simultaneously projecting peer expectations, without ever confirming the veracity of these assumptions. Young men therefore assume there is only one way to be attractive to women, and one way to be a man, and these are largely influenced by sexualised culture.

Limitations

It is possible that variations of these findings exist amongst men according to age, race, education level and other related factors. Unfortunately, the limitations of the sample-pool prevented exploration of such factors. Moreover, male participants may have withheld or “water down” some of the masculine narratives around the sexualisation of women, as so not to offend the female researcher. It would be interesting to examine how young men’s talk operates with a male researcher.

Concluding Comments

Oppression is connected to patterns of experience which are observed within groups, not just individuals (Frye, 1983). We realise that while the male groups may be empowered and capable of oppressing women, the members of the male group seldom relate to themselves as ‘powerful’. No individual man is capable of excelling in all domains of masculinity and, as such, it is unavoidable that men will feel incomplete and often powerless. The participants talk outlined the nature of each paradigm and challenged these discourses at certain points in the discussion, but at each point chose to normalise and accept the power of these structures upon them. Young men managed this dissonance by relinquishing the expression of their true selves, both in their need for intimacy and their own moral guidelines. Here, young men remain in the paradoxical social position of being dominated by social requirements and group expectations while ascribing to a superior and independent masculinity.

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