

# Idealized images of the male body in advertising: a reader-response exploration

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**ABSTRACT** *This study used an interpretative methodology for exploring men's reactions to the representation of male bodies in advertising, particularly when men are portrayed in a sexual or naked pose and complemented past studies by investigating whether or not men felt that they were being objectified or exploited in advertising in the same manner as critical and feminist literature has suggested in relation to women. The extent to which men felt that the representation of idealized male images in advertising had an adverse effect on their self-image and self-esteem is discussed. Emergent interpretive themes include homophobia, gender stereotyping and the legitimization of the exploitation and use of sexuality in marketing. The implication for brands is explored.*

**KEY WORDS:** Gender, advertising, men, sexuality, homophobia

## Introduction

A considerable literature in consumer research has studied the use of representations of the female body in advertising in relation to its adverse effect on women, their emotions and their self-esteem. The unintended consequences of idealized advertising imagery have been explored mainly from the basis of social comparison theory (e.g. Richens, 1991; Martin and Gentry, 1997; Hogg *et al.*, 1999). The common findings are that idealized images in advertising raise comparison standards for attractiveness and lower women's satisfaction with their own attractiveness.

However, as pointed out by Patterson and Elliott (2002), these studies have tended to assume, despite the weight of critical evidence (e.g. Mick and Buhl, 1992; Ritson and Elliott, 1999), that advertising is a linear communication process in which audiences understand and acknowledge messages uniformly, rather than an active process of negotiation that entails complex emotional processes.

This study set out to explore the extent to which men may be similarly negatively affected by idealized representations of male bodies and the ways in which they

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negotiate the meaning of representations and their coping strategies for any emotional disturbance.

### **Representations of the Male Body in Advertising**

Since the 1980s men's bodies have appeared more frequently in advertising, offering a similarly idealized body to that presented to women. An increasing number of advertisements are showing men as sex objects (Kimmel and Tissier-Desbordes, 1999). Pope *et al.* (2000) undertook a study of male body obsession and found that advertisements for everything from cars to underwear were using body-builder images with 'washboard abdominal muscles, massive chests, and inflated shoulders [...], a combination of muscularity and leanness probably achievable only by drugs' (p. 34). They claimed that an industry of men's lifestyle magazines focused on body image has exploded over the last couple of decades. They argued that, as traditional masculine roles have eroded with women gaining greater equality in society, men have become more preoccupied with muscularity because it is still perceived as a cultural symbol of masculinity. Men are developing an 'Adonis complex' and eating disorders after being overexposed to idealized and unattainable male bodies in advertising. Connel (1995) suggested that a muscular body 'has become an aesthetic norm for straights as well as gays' (p. 185). Hellmich (2000) claimed that men are being 'bombarded with images of muscular, half-naked men on the covers of men's magazines' (p. 06D), many of which are unrealistic. It is suggested that men now have to deal with exploitation and objectification with its adverse effects in the same way as women have had to for years.

Kolbe and Albanese (1996) conducted a content analysis of sole male images in men's magazines and found that the majority of the bodies in advertising were not 'ordinary', but those of strong and hard 'male icons'. The study found that men were usually represented in an objectified and depersonalized manner in advertising. A study by Patterson and England (2000) also identified a relatively uniform depiction of male bodies within lifestyle magazines, where the audience was routinely presented with mesomorphic (strong, muscular and hard) male bodies that were hyper-masculine in their iconography. The depiction of ectomorphs (thin and lightly muscled) was limited mainly to the advertising of clothing where products may look more attractive on the slimmer, taller man. Endomorphs (soft and round) were rarely used and, where they were, tended to be the object of humour. Moreover, Patterson and England (2000) indicated that representations of male bodies were often used irrespective of whether they were relevant to the product category being advertised.

### **Men's Responses to Representations of the Male Body**

Even though images of male bodies are on the increase in advertising and in men's lifestyle magazines, consumer research in this area is extremely limited. A study by Gulas and McKeage (2000) extended the work on social comparison theory to men and found similar results to those previously found with women. In an experimental study they found that exposure to idealized images of men in magazine advertisements produced lower mean responses on a self-perceived physical attractiveness scale and on a self-esteem scale compared to those of a control group.



Mort (1996, pp. 72–3) documented how advertisers in the 1980s believed that ‘camp’ images in advertising were ‘damaging’ to men’s fashion, that men could not relate to each other in the same way as women and that ‘camp’ images were too threatening for ‘men’s men or conservative men’ who felt that homosexual imagery was threatening to their masculine sense of self. Bhat *et al.* (1998) found that the majority of heterosexuals viewed images of homosexuality in advertising negatively and that these views negatively affected advertisements and products viewed as ‘gay’. However, the study used simple simulated black and white advertisements, manipulated whether a picture showed a man and a woman or two men in fully-clothed proximity and involved quantitative measurements of only three emotions: approval, disapproval and surprise.

Kimmel and Tissier-Desbordes (1999) conducted a study with 30 French men in order to determine whether brands and consumption played an important part in their lives. The study suggested that men were uncomfortable with products that presented men as feminine. Their study explored men’s relations to products and masculinity in general, but was not related to body image and provided only limited insight into men’s reactions to advertisements.

To date then, very little is known about how men react emotionally to the portrayal of male bodies in advertising. There is a suggestion that some of the men in the study by Kimmel and Tissier-Desbordes (1999) demonstrated ‘a fear of admitting a feminine side to their self-image (and the corresponding fear of homosexuality)’ (p. 240).

### **Reader-Response Theory**

Advertising researchers have usually assumed that the advertising text provides all of the meaning in the text-viewer interaction (Mick and Buhl, 1992). As a result the focus of message research will inevitably be biased towards the study of the textual features of advertising, relegating the role of the advertising viewer to an assessment of the degree to which the audience correctly ‘gets’ the message. An alternative approach explores the role that mass-communicated meanings play in the lives of their audiences, focusing on the meanings that audiences bring to the interpretation of a text (Jensen, 1991). Developing on the work of Iser (1974) and Fish (1980), Scott (1994) brought this theory of ‘reader response’ into the domain of advertising research. A reader-response interpretation is based on the assumption that there is no one ‘correct’ reading of an advertisement. Scott (1994) showed how an advertising text interacts with the knowledge, expectations, emotions and motives of the reader and that each reader may make an individual interpretation of the meaning of an image: ‘... pictures have been treated as producing affect by their mere presence—as opposed to eliciting a response on the basis of what they signify’ (p. 477). She pointed out that images that relate to the self ‘... can inspire feelings of hopelessness, frustration and the like’ (Scott, 1994, p. 477). She called for

a change in the basic ideological orientation of research in this area ... audiences and readers simply do refuse to listen, refuse to care, refuse to process and just generally reject the message (Scott, 1994, p. 477).

Scott also called for more research to focus on the social context of the interpretation of advertising meaning and Hirschman and Thompson (1997) suggested that

audience members bring to their viewing of mass media vehicles a wide range of unique personal experiences and a wealth of socially derived knowledge grounded in their occupation, gender, social class, and ethnicity (p. 475).

Patterson and Elliott (2002) described the 'negotiated character of male identities' and the way in which one element in this negotiation/dialogue has been the inversion of the 'male gaze'. The young man must look, as it were, within himself to select one of many potential expressions/definitions of 'masculinity'. The 'multiple' nature of the 'subject positions' offering themselves for selection (primarily in this case from the 'polysemic nature of advertising texts') can be experienced, like most forms of freedom, either as an opportunity or as a threat. This state of complex fluidity implied in the male personality could be seen as in parallel with the social phenomenon of 'viscosity' of brand meaning described by Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998). In the case of the male gaze, agreement as to the nature of reality has to be reached between multiple possible internal entities as opposed to between members of a group, e.g. an interpretive community. In both cases the final stage is reached by means of a transitional one.

This theory of a complex interaction and negotiation of meaning was explored empirically in an ethnographic study of advertising from the perspective of the reader by Ritson and Elliott (1999). This approach has also been applied to the imagery used in advertising. In a study of gendered responses to overt representations of sexuality in advertising, Elliott *et al.* (1995) found that both genders used a variety of coping strategies for dealing with emotional discomfort prompted by sexual imagery. Some of the men in the study evinced a strong antipathy to the portrayal of the men in the advertisements, which seemed to function to protect them from any suspicion of homosexuality by other members of the focus group: 'These men seem firmly constrained by their perceived need to establish a "refusal of taste" to define themselves as heterosexual' (Elliott *et al.*, 1995, p. 88). Conversely, Kates (1999) showed how gay men critically interpret the representations of gay men in 'heteronormative' advertising.

### Research Questions

This study complemented past studies by investigating whether or not men feel that they are being objectified or exploited in advertising in the same manner as has been found in relation to women. Specifically, the following questions were addressed.

1. How do young men respond to the representation of male bodies in advertising, particularly when men are portrayed in a sexual or naked pose?
2. How do young men negotiate the sexual meaning of advertising images in a social setting?



## **Methodology**

In line with Scott's (1994) call for exploration of the negotiation of meanings between images and reader, which allows for both individual interpretations and social influences, a combination of one-to-one in-depth interviews and focus groups was used. The one-to-one interviews would allow trust to be established and allow the exploration of underlying motivations, beliefs, attitudes and feelings, while it was expected that social pressures in the focus groups would result in more 'laddish' answers and that men would express some body consciousness, but that they would be uncomfortable talking about their emotions and their bodies in a group situation. This interpretive approach of individual interviews and group discussions is both the recommended research strategy in audience research (e.g. Jensen, 1991; Alasuutari, 1999; Schroder *et al.*, 2003) and widely used in empirical audience studies (e.g. Moores, 1993; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; Ang, 1996).

Twelve in-depth interviews were carried out, ranging from 40 minutes to 2 hours in length. The ages of the respondents varied from 18 to 31 years, with the majority of respondents being in their early twenties. The respondents were a purposive sample of male students at a traditional UK university. It is recognized that students are usually highly involved with fashion and brands and are an appropriate sampling frame for exploratory studies in this product area (Cholachatpinyo *et al.*, 2002) and are in the target group of the specific advertisements that were used in the study. The majority were British, two were American and one was from Bangladesh. This selection was purposive as reactions to the depiction of naked bodies in advertisements may vary across cultures as well as genders. However, it is acknowledged that the respondents were predominantly of Anglo-Saxon descent and did not constitute a significant cultural mix. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for analysis.

Approximately 25 advertisements were collected from major men's lifestyle magazines such as *Arena*, *GQ*, *The Face*, *Loaded* and *FHM*. Five of these advertisements were chosen (Fig. 1) as stimulus material so as to allow the examination of responses to different advertisements and different body types. Item 1 was chosen because it contained men and women and was believed to allow for comparison between male and female bodies in advertising. Items 2 and 3 were chosen because of the more overtly sexual nature of the pictures and were expected to provoke highly emotive responses. Item 3 was particularly relevant to a discussion about exploitation as the image depicts a bare-chested man without including his head. Item 4 was chosen because it represented a more classic beauty ideal. It was believed that the less sexual nature of the image would balance the selection of advertisements. Item 5 portrayed a more muscular body type, which was seen to represent the traditional ideal male masculine body. The selection was pre-tested with two separate groups of students and their interpretation was found to be in accordance with the researchers' assumptions. The stimulus material was presented to interviewees as A4-sized colour photocopies and it was decided to present the images to interviewees one at a time and then the subjects would be free to arrange the advertisements and talk about them in the order they chose.

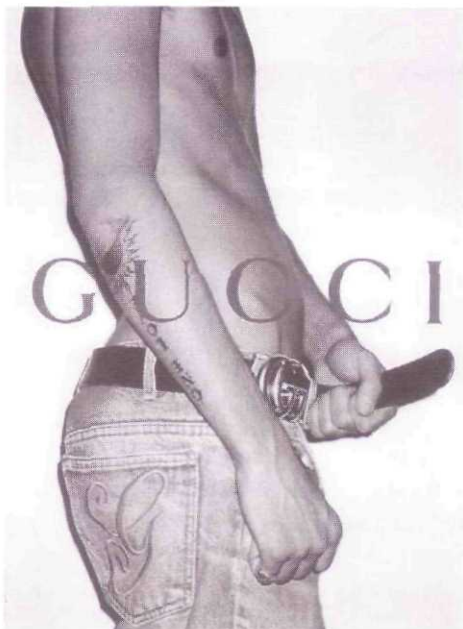
Four focus group discussions were also carried out, all with male respondents recruited from the same sampling frame. The focus groups were used for studying



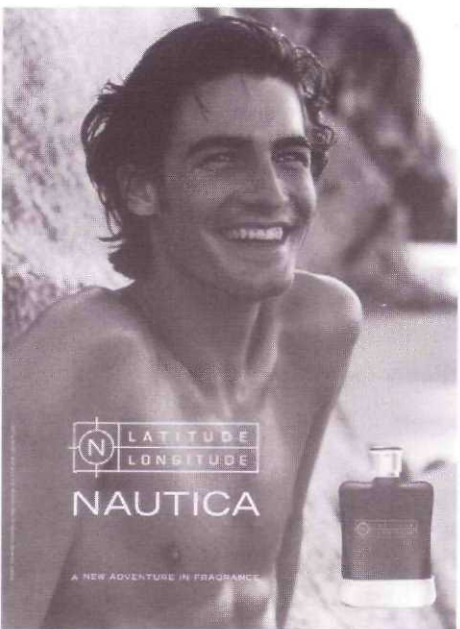
No. 1



No. 2

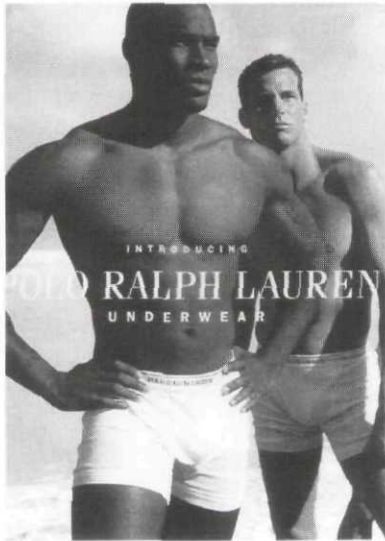


No. 3

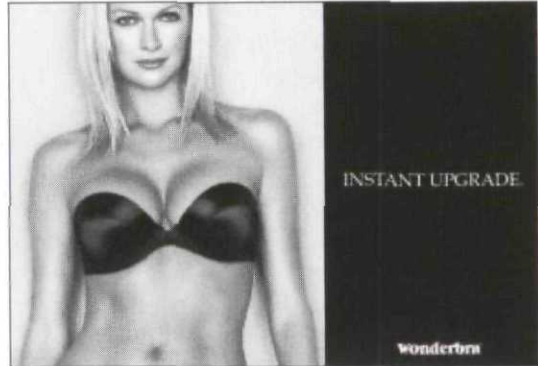


No. 4

Figure 1. The stimulus advertisements.



No. 5



No. 6

**Figure 1.** (Continued.)

whether the male respondents would alter their responses to the advertisements when in a peer group environment. The number of participants in the focus groups varied from five to eight men with the same age spread as in the individual interviews. It was expected that the male respondents would be more reserved in a social setting, so in order to initiate discussion it was decided to add a sexual female image as stimulus material (item 6). The addition of the sixth advertisement was also intended to prompt a discussion amongst the respondents about whether there is any difference between using a female body and using a male body in advertising. The Wonderbra advertisement (item 6) was presented first and after an initial discussion about women, while the remaining stimulus material was placed simultaneously on a table in front of the participants in multiple sets so that all the participants could see the same advertisements at once. The focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed for analysis.

The transcripts were analysed for interpretive themes, relationships with the literature and assumptions using pattern-coding methods (Miles and Huberman, 1984). After the prevalent themes were identified, the material was related to previous literature and examined for its implications for society and further research in the area.

## **Findings**

### *Emergent themes*

Six themes were identified after analysing the transcripts from the individual interviews and focus group discussions. Two major themes were negative concerning



'homophobia' and 'gender stereotyping'. Two general themes emerged as 'legitimization of exploitation and the use of sexuality as a marketing ploy' and 'disassociation with unattainable muscular body ideals'. Positive themes were 'admiration of realistic male bodies' and 'the naked body as art'. There were no noticeable differences between the responses given in the one-to-one interviews and those in a focus group environment. However, it was noticed that the participants in the focus groups used humour and a more 'laddish' discourse as a form of defence mechanism to a greater extent than in the one-to-one interviews. Extracts are presented in order to illustrate the interpretive themes.

*Homophobia.* Almost all the male respondents expressed dislike or aversion towards advertisements they perceived as being 'too feminine', 'too overtly sexual', 'not manly enough' or 'gay'. They reacted by not wanting to look at the photographs, flipping the advertisements over, swearing or making jokes.

It doesn't appeal to me ... I've got nothing against gay people, but the guy looks GAY!!

Men just look wrong when you get really skinny blokes, they look ill.

This dislike was particularly aimed at the portrayals of the man in the Patrick Cox advertisement (item 2) and the Gucci advertisement (item 3). The perceived lack of masculinity in these advertisements seemed threatening to some respondents, who made strong claims about their own rejection of gay sexuality.

It's HOMOSEXUAL and REVOLTING ... I might look at the brand name, but I'd flick straight over because he's soooo gay!!! The only reason why I'd take notice is so I can have a laugh about it down the pub with my mates. I don't like to see that! It's practically a *female* guy. He's shoving his arse ... I don't like looking at him. Male models tend to be *gay* anyway (Patrick Cox advertisement).

Well that's a gay porn star body isn't it? It's a very young boy's body ... very flimsy arms, I don't really like this one, um I don't know, he's got a really funny body ... I think it's too much of a *vain* advert (Patrick Cox advertisement).

Well he's gay, look at the way he's taking his trousers off and doing that thing with his bum (Patrick Cox advertisement).

Oh no, that is just gay porn, gay homosexual porn!! (Gucci advertisement).

There was also an element of negative meaning transfer between these advertisements and the products they were promoting as several respondents felt that the 'gay image' of the advertisements would prevent them from buying the brand advertised.

It's too in your face, I wouldn't want to wear the shoes that he was wearing, I wouldn't want to associate myself with him (Patrick Cox advertisement).



Very camp ... don't like it at all especially in the foetal position. Too skinny, not *manly* enough. I don't aspire to be like that ... definitely wouldn't buy the shoes because of the camp image (Patrick Cox advertisement).

Cringe worthy ... if my mum bought me Patrick Cox shoes I probably wouldn't wear them (Patrick Cox advertisement).

I've written off buying P Cox merchandise forever (Patrick Cox advertisement).

*Gender stereotyping.* Many of the male respondents identified body consciousness and vanity as female traits. The general consensus was that women worry more about their bodies and they are more affected by advertising.

Men are not really into glamour adverts like with models and stuff.

I think *women* have been exploited for years.

I don't register clothes ... It doesn't mean much to *men*.

Ads tell *women* what to look like ... it gets drummed into them ... what is expected of them. Girls want to emulate ads.

Several of the male respondents rejected the idea that consumption played any part in their lives. It was seen as a female activity. Some of the male respondents seemed to want to give an impression that they were 'smarter' and less susceptible to advertising than women.

They are really designer ads which I wouldn't see that much. I think *women* are much more at risk and vulnerable when it comes to media imagery in general.

Men are more optimistic about what they look like than women.

I *don't* believe that you buy this because it makes you feel better ... I buy them because they are nice and they fit and they're a pair of pants.

Men can accept the fact that they will never look like this ... and women feel that this is still attainable.

Women are more influenced by brand image, adverts ... I'm not immediately going to go out there and buy it whereas women are more inclined to do that.

*Legitimization of exploitation and the use of sexuality as a marketing tool.* Most of the respondents recognized that the advertisements contained elements of exploitation, such as presenting a bare chest, sexually suggestive body parts or not including the person's head. However, the general view was that sex is a legitimate marketing tool because 'everyone' knows that sex is just used as a 'trick' to sell products and we should not take it too seriously and that it takes more than a naked body to shock us these days as advertisers are driven to find ever more ways of trying to gain our attention.

They [the advertisements] all contain semi-naked people. But that's pretty usual—how *many* advertisers use sex to promote their products!

Such an *obvious* phallic symbol ... but *sex sells* ... it [the advertisement] goes a bit further with these shock tactics (Gucci advertisement).

A prick! ... well they've done it *so* deliberately, it's just pathetic!!! (Gucci advertisement).

At the end of the day *sex sells*. You don't see exploiting the male form, you just see an ad.

It is almost pornographic ... it's *intended* to catch your attention ... shock value!

Ads are getting more and more risqué ... shocked us once so now they must outdo themselves.

It was felt in general that the advertisements were not exploiting men and women because the models got paid, they were willing to do it and it was just people's own fault if they were naïve enough to 'believe' advertising.

I don't think they're exploited—they get a fat wad of cash for a few minutes work—especially when celebrities endorse products.

He's a man, he's in charge, he's not the one being victimized by society ... so you actually can't victimize him by doing something like this.

He *is* getting opportunities ... he might *get* somewhere, *be* something. Who are we to say that's not right? No one can say they're degrading ... if something isn't right ... they've got to say 'no'! But if he's [the model] alright with that, that's cool. We can't blame anyone else. You can't say 'oh, *you* said if I bought this pair of pants I'm going to have a big dick and a big chest' ... it's just naïve. Fuck 'em all ... I think it's boring to a degree ... It's only a poster, only an advert. That's *all* it is. Turn the page!!!

*Disassociation with unattainable muscular body ideals.* Most of the male interviewees gave the impression that they were reasonably happy with the way they looked. They admired the muscular bodies in the advertisements, but rejected any suggestion that it affected their self-image or self-esteem, which was in stark contrast with the findings from studies with women.

Having grown up ... I'm much more comfortable with it and bodies and all that ... and sometimes *like* the fact that I don't fit all those things ... because I mean it makes it easier that I'm not close enough to try basically. I'm not going to suddenly become that ideal ... so I feel I don't have to play that game.

No, I don't believe in ideal bodies. I would consider it more to be a situation of the body's ideal for the individual.



I acknowledge that the models have good bodies, but I *don't* aspire to be like them.

Looking at these adverts *doesn't* make me think I have to look like that, half the time no-one gives a toss anyway ...

The respondents disassociated themselves with the traditional male ideal represented in advertising because they could never look like that no matter how hard they tried, so there was no point in getting upset about it. The general view was that 'other people care', 'I cared when I was younger', 'it is an American thing' or that having big muscles was not natural.

These ads *wouldn't* make me run to the gym to get the same kind of body as these guys. They probably spend their whole life working out and not having fun. They *obviously* take steroids and that's something I wouldn't do.

I don't have a problem with my body at all ... Although I do think wow he's huge or I don't look as good but it wouldn't put me off.

No aspirations to the muscles and pecs at all!

It's so obviously aimed at the *American* culture. The American way of thinking—everything BIG.

I would like to improve my body a bit, but they [the advertisements] *don't* make me feel like I shouldn't have any confidence in myself just because I don't look like them.

However, the respondents did recognize that some brands have a 'muscle image' so you would expect to find muscle men in their advertisements, but that the meaning did not necessarily transfer from the brand to the consumer.

You'd expect to see muscles in a Ralph Lauren ad ... it goes with the brand.

It is somebody that we would want to look more like (Polo) but *wouldn't* make me want to go to the gym ... I know that I will never look like him.

If I bought a pair of these, I know I *can't* pull it off ... I'll just go and buy a pair of Tesco value boxers (shorts) thank you very much and be happy.

*Admiration of realistic male bodies.* More realistic bodies in advertising were seen as less threatening by most of the male respondents because they did not portray an unattainable image. Many of the respondents liked the Nautica advertisement because the male model in it seemed to be a 'normal', more 'realistic' man. He was perceived as 'natural' and a more 'average guy'.

I like this [Nautica advertisement] because he looks like a *normal* guy ... there is something nice about somebody just smiling ... (Nautica advertisement).

He's more average than some of the other guys in the ads. He looks chilled, like he's enjoying the whole thing ... this is his kind of environment—he fits the product well (Nautica advertisement).

I like this one a lot more, it's much more natural and it reminds me of being on a beach and it's a better-looking bloke. It's nice and simply a good-looking model ... there's no fancy stuff—they are not trying to be cocky or anything ... it's more natural or neutral (Nautica advertisement).

It's not in your face and he's a bit more real ... a man with a nice tan and a nice smile (Nautica advertisement).

Looks just like a picture I took of a friend last summer (Nautica advertisement).

The male respondents could relate more to this leaner body type and also had associations to a healthy, adventurous lifestyle and sailing. The respondents felt it would be more effective using an 'average guy' in advertising as they could relate more to him and were more likely to aspire to an attainable goal.

They don't exactly use normal guys in these ads. Maybe if they did it would be so novel that it would be eye-catching. It might make you think more about the brand being right for you as you are, rather than what you wish you could be.

Maybe if they used more 'normal' people I would think they were aiming the product more at me.

The guy's really tanned ... he travels, probably an adventurous lifestyle ... looking happy!!

*The naked body as art.* The respondents responded positively to a 'sexual' and 'naked' image when it was perceived as a piece of art. The image was then seen as pretty and not pornographic. This response was mainly aimed at the Dolce & Gabbana advertisement (see item 1).

The modern 'let's all be androgynous' thing' ... It is an interesting *image*, but it is an interesting image in spite of the fact that it is made up of a bunch of human beings. Even if they are completely naked, it is less *in your face* and you focus I guess less on their individual bodies than in some of the others (Dolce & Gabbana advertisement).

They are using the 'mirror images thing' ... can't tell males from females (Dolce & Gabbana advertisement).

Half the time you don't realise it's an advert because they've done it in the arty style of the magazine (Dolce & Gabbana advertisement).



Androgynous ... you can look at it from any angle ... much more involving (Dolce & Gabbana advertisement).

I like this picture. It's both sexes, but does not look sexual at all ... more like a piece of art ... cause you can't see the difference between men and women (Dolce & Gabbana advertisement).

The perceived equality of the genders in the Dolce & Gabbana picture aided this perception, as the male respondents were more comfortable with the image of a naked man when a woman was present.

There are men *and* women!!? I didn't see that at first ... it takes a while to work out which are men and which are women (Dolce & Gabbana advertisement).

I think this one is *really* good ... I would just have to look at it ... I would think they were all women at first ... I think it's a *really* good ad ... the collage of all the bodies is really cool, and it's *pretty* to look at. There's no cocky slogan (Dolce & Gabbana advertisement).

## **Discussion**

The participants in this study expressed overt homophobia towards images of men that were seen as too feminine or sexual. A study of overt sexuality in advertising by Elliott *et al.* (1995) found that men evinced a strong antipathy to the portrayal of men in advertisements for Obsession perfume and this vocal expression seemed to function to protect them from any suspicion of homosexuality by other members of the group and this was related to the advertisements being created for females rather than for them. Similarly, the reaction of the respondents relates to the notion of 'sexuality as art', which

legitimate[s] positive interpretations by changing their category from sexual which would be unacceptable to art in which the same representation could then be given approbation (Elliott *et al.*, 1995, p. 87).

As pointed out by Ritson and Elliott (1999) cultural meaning is constantly in transit and the symbolic meanings of advertising are transported from culture, invested into the advertising text, extracted from that text by interpretation and then finally re-applied to the cultural world through the metaphoric sense making of the interpreter. Meaning can transfer between world and goods and between goods and individuals. When looking at the responses of the individuals in this study the process of meaning transfer could be identified as men transferred the 'gay' or 'camp' meaning from the Patrick Cox advertisement to the product and, hence, the shoes became associated with homosexuality. The respondents therefore expressed dislike and rejection towards the image and the advertised brand as a result of meaning transfer.

Masculinity is culturally defined and can include traits such as 'dominance, independence, self-confidence, assertiveness, strength and ambition' (Kimmel and

Tissier-Desbordes, 1999, p. 3). The standard male ideal of 'the Marlboro Man' conveys masculine attributes that become associated with the brand advertised. In an attempt to maintain a masculine persona, the respondents in this study rejected or disassociated themselves with images that did not fit masculine traits. By accepting an image that was feminine, they could risk breaking culturally established gender codes and allow suspicions of homosexuality. Kimmel and Tissier-Desbordes (1999) found that a fear of homosexuality made it difficult for men to accept the feminine side of a man. Pope *et al.* (2000, p. 23) termed these reactions 'threatened masculinity', which is men's need to establish a sense of 'maleness' within society. Connel (1995) saw homophobia as the 'expression of a secret desire, driven out of consciousness and converted into hatred' (p. 40). The respondents in this study clearly demonstrated that some men are uncomfortable talking about their bodies.

The other negative theme that emerged was 'gender stereotyping', where male respondents labelled consumption and body consciousness as female traits or female problems. These responses were very similar to the findings of Kimmel and Tissier-Desbordes (1999) who found that French men tended to deny that consumption plays any central part in their life. They suggested that personal and social fears underlay this sense of denial. Consumption was seen as a female concern and, since masculine bodies were seen by the respondents to be 'big' and 'muscular', they showed aversion towards advertisements that portrayed men as too feminine.

Several of the respondents evinced a disassociation with muscular body ideals, but they also displayed an association with normal bodies and were very aware of marketing ploys. They seemed to pride themselves on this fact and were quick to voice their independence and ability to resist advertisers' 'tricks'. Hirschman and Thompson (1997) suggested that consumers feel a sense of autonomy when 'treating media influence as a matter of personal choice' (p. 17) and that 'male respondents were more comfortable in describing themselves as individuals who managed to stand outside the institutional influences they could see affecting others' (p. 17).

In addition to the many anxiety-provoking/arousing features of life in the West, the man represented/personified by our young male interviewees is confronted with another dilemma. Presented as he is with such a plethora of possible identities and with the task of selecting one for himself that can be defined as masculine or manly, the male consumer reacts as if to a threat. As the way out of this period of transition (like most transitions painful in its insecurity) he must reconcile the traditional behaviours and appearance of men with the current changes in expectation and increased range of what is now acceptably masculine. These changes involve the inclusion of what have always been seen as feminine ways of being: attracting the male gaze and then continuing to function without alienating it.

If a young man is to be put in the position of either the gazer (at other men) or the gazed upon, he responds by seeking power over the feminine. Not a new strategy, but this time it is the feminine element that he perceives as internal to himself that he must negotiate with. As the traditional male act of aggression fails him now and as the traditional male bonding in groups is no longer available (while he relates solo to the magazine) few resources are left to him but to subdue the 'inner female' in himself. He must find a way to incorporate this part of himself without becoming homosexual. Ironically, it is the finding or creating of a new kind of male identity



that will liberate him from the uncertainty about who he is, but ironically making the choice from among so many alternatives causes him increased worry, insecurity and threatened integrity of identity. As anyone in a period of transition must, he waits in a half-passive, half-active way to be shown by changing circumstance outside himself and by the process inside himself for his rescue/enlightenment to emerge, bred of the compromise between his will and his limitations.

These findings present both an opportunity and a challenge for brands to represent to the questing male a role complex enough to incorporate this femininity in a form not seen as homosexual: the rounding out of the male personality/identity/psyche conceived as an opportunity for development rather than a threat to male power.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

There are several limitations to this study that must be acknowledged. Given the homophobic theme that emerged, it would have been useful to have information on the respondents' sexual orientation and attitudes to homosexuals. However, because of the exploratory and qualitative nature of the research for which a sense of trust between the researchers and respondents was required, this study eschewed using formal measurement instruments and opted instead for open-ended discussion. Thus, it was not possible to ask the respondents to complete an instrument such as the 'tolerance for homosexuality' scale used by Bhat *et al.* (1998).

It is likely that there were some instances of socially desirable responding in the study, as people reflect on gender stereotyping and their own positions. As Mick (1996) pointed out, socially desirable responses are potentially most likely in studies that explore the so-called 'dark side' variables in consumer behaviour. Future research in this area might benefit from using ethnography, which by involving extended time in the field might help gauge the amount of distortion between expressed attitudes and actual behaviour (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003).

The possibility that brands might be able to offer men a resource for the development of their gender identities through their advertising and representations of the male body is certainly worthy of further research.

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