

# Constructing Masculinity through Images: Content Analysis of Lifestyle Magazines in Croatia

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**Abstract**—Diverse social, cultural and economic trends and changes in contemporary societies influence the ways masculinity is represented in a variety of media. Masculinity is constructed within media images as a dynamic process that changes slowly over time and is shaped by various social factors. In many societies, dominant masculinity is still associated with authority, heterosexuality, marriage, professional and financial success, ethnic dominance and physical strength. But contemporary media depict men in ways that suggest a change in the approach to media images. The number of media images of men, which promote men's identity through their body, have increased. With the male body more scrutinized and commodified, it is necessary to highlight how the body is represented and which visual elements are crucial since the body has an important role in the construction of masculinities. The study includes content analysis of male body images in the advertisements of different men's and women's lifestyle magazines available in Croatia. The main aim was to explore how masculinities are currently being portrayed through body regarding age, physical appearance, fashion, touch and gaze. The findings are also discussed in relation to female images since women are central in many of the processes constructing masculinities and according to the recent conceptualization of masculinity. Although the construction of male images varies through body features, almost all of them convey the message that men's identity could be managed through manipulation and by enhancing the appearance. Furthermore, they suggest that men should engage in "bodywork" through advertised products, activities and/or practices, in order to achieve their preferred social image.

**Keywords**—Body images, content analysis, lifestyle magazines, masculinity.

## I. INTRODUCTION

TO be a man means to behave like a man. Thus, biological characteristics are no longer preconditions which determine one to be a man or a woman. Both men and women have opportunities to construct their masculinities or femininities according to their wishes, affiliations, cultural norms and values, etc. Contemporary society allows men to be actively engaged in making themselves and in constructing their masculinities within specific social and historical contexts. The processes of creating masculinities are not equal and different cultures define what it means to be a man in relation to "the others" such as racial minorities, sexual minorities or women. On the other hand, every culture has

specific dominant model which is "hegemonic" while other varieties are subordinated. Thus "gender is always relational, and patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imaginary) of femininity". As such, masculine domination can be viewed through a role, status, perspective, appearance, sexuality, occupation or behaviour and should be analysed on three levels: local, regional and global [1].

Whenever dominant masculinity is challenged through different social processes, a new hegemonic form emerges because masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice accomplished in social action [1]. Even though each culture defines elements of dominant masculinity, it has usually been constructed within heterosexuality, marriage, authority, professional and financial success, ethnic dominance, physical strength and in relation towards different social groups. However, social changes (for example led by feminist or gay movements) lead to the emergence of new forms of masculinity such as metrosexuality, new man, laddism etc. References [2]-[4] also stress the importance of economic and cultural influences in society where the media play a significant role. Thus, media construct an ideal image of man in a specific society suggesting how a man should look like but they also spread trends and changes in the views on desired men (such as, for instance, eroticized men's images). Thus the image of men has changed and the presence of male images in media has increased over time.

Many of the characteristics of ideal men are global and are spreading through imagery in the media, especially in advertisements. Reference [5] calls such masculinity based on consumption the "branded masculinity". In other words, advertisements and commercials of branded products in Western countries represent a single model of masculinity although it can be adjusted to local culture specifics (referring to age, race, relation to women, etc.). Such presentations of men in advertisements have been aimed at transforming men into consumers through the legitimization of their body beauty. Therefore, the body becomes an object that is manipulated, disciplined and viewed by others and which serves as the most important object in creating men's identity [4]. In such context, men are encouraged to work on their bodies (by using special products) in order to succeed in relations, work, etc.

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## II. THE ROLE OF LIFESTYLE MAGAZINES IN CONSTRUCTING MASCULINITY

Lifestyle magazines include a large number of advertisements representing various products such as cosmetics, fashion, technological objects, etc., that support man/woman performing in the society and construct their gender identity. Furthermore, the men's lifestyle magazine is a relatively new accomplishment. In the past, a typical man did not need them because his role was taken for granted. Along with the changes in social roles, lifestyle magazines are "all about social construction of masculinity" [6].

Many lifestyle magazines focused on display of preferred body type, for example, thin for women, muscular for men. Recently, women's rise in power caused the crisis in male masculinity theory, because "the traditional male role as bread-winner and protector has declined" and "machine has replaced muscle" [7]. Thus, men have developed muscles not for using them, but for the mere representation of masculinity. Nevertheless, a muscular ideal plays an important role in increased muscularity among men and is still present in lifestyle magazines.

In the 1970s, there was the first appearance of the image of so-called "new man" whose image has been recreated in a variety of forms since then. He is defined as the one who had the right to be self-expressive and to be emotionally involved in relationships. He can be artistic or intimate with others and still considered masculine, as long he has 'the inner strength' which determines his masculinity. Very similar to the "new man" was the "erotic man". The erotic man lived in a culture feminized by consumerism, with men occupying roles once portrayed by women and where men are objectified ridiculously and erotically [8]. Nowadays lifestyle magazines cover all the aspects of men's lives with an increase of sexualized men in advertising in recent years.

Reference [9] conducted a study on male sex roles in magazine advertisements in the period from 1959 to 1979. Their results show that in women's magazines the male roles changed the most. Namely, advertisements where men are portrayed as sexual objects or decorations increased from 12.5% in 1959 to 55% in 1979, while the number of advertisements with the traditional images showing men in their stereotypical masculine roles such as authority figures, sportsmen or businessmen decreased from 87.5% in 1959 to 40% in 1979.

Reference [10] conducted content analysis of the functions of the male roles in magazine advertisements. Their results showed that advertisements present prototypical roles such as the athlete, cowboy and outdoorsman. Reference [4] also examined the sexualized depictions of masculinity in advertising focusing on the erotic male. Some elements of this study are further exploited for the purpose of our data analysis. Because of the increasing use of erotic male in advertising, sex in advertising is somewhat relevant to the current research of male roles in advertisements. Therefore, with the male body more scrutinized and commodified, it is necessary to highlight the ways of representation of male models. Advertisements for personal accessories (e.g. watches, pens and cars) presented as

conventional 'status symbols' are mediated through a certain type of male models, usually through a white, middle aged, dressed, middle-/upper-class masculinity, because these products are tied to notions of tradition, exclusivity, craftsmanship and prestige. On the other hand, if the products/services are innovative and unconventional male models are presented in a different manner. They seem to be younger, more active, less dressed, more engaged in promoting the images of social and cultural differences. Male models in advertisement for men's fragrances, are not so 'exposed and naked' as women are. They are frequently represented in more casual positions, emphasizing lifestyle rather than sensuality. Nonetheless, there is an increasing tendency to show men in identical ways to their female counterparts, and the exploitation of men's body in advertising has become increasingly more common [11].

## III. REPRESENTATION OF (NEW) MASCULINITY: DATA ANALYSIS

Our research interest was to illustrate the type of men's depictions in advertisements (further referred to as "ads") in *Playboy* and *Men's Health* (as men's magazines) and *Cosmopolitan* (as women's magazine), published from January 2012 to December 2013 for the Croatian market. Selected and analysed ads contained only male model/s (N=231), while children and illustrations were excluded. This paper is the result of a larger project that we conducted during 2014/2015. In previous analysis [12], we concentrated on the representation of femininity and the overall sample that included 638 bodies was structured in the way that allowed comparison of men's and women's bodies within different magazines. In this paper, we conducted content analysis in order to identify different aspects of men's body and appearance. For that purpose, we constructed analytical categories of gaze, type of ads, physical features (age, race, body appearance), looks (clothes) and body-product relationships and applied them together with Rohlinger's depictions of masculinity and touch categories [4].

The way in which the body is treated in ads suggests that different masculinities can be and indeed are, represented mainly through aspects of body and appearance. Therefore, we tried to explain the construction of masculinity in ads identifying different body features on men's images by using conceptual categories of body metaphors: consumer bodies, instrumental bodies, objectified bodies and homogenous bodies, taken from Rubio-Hernández, and on the basis of analytical categories.

Analytical categories like depictions of masculinity, gaze and touch are defined according to the object of analysis and they are intertwined with conceptual categories. Each of the body metaphor is presented through the use of related categories. Accordingly, our aim was to analyse which categories and features of the body are used and combined in ads in relation to these metaphors.

Since the concept of masculinity is socially constructed, advertisements can be seen as the "right place" to highlight the connection between that concept and the construction of men

as consumers. From this position, (re)formulations of male identity respond to the strategy to represent men as new consumers. To encourage consumption, traditionally exclusive to the feminine realm, men were portrayed from a new perspective and through images different from traditional depictions such as representation of men in productive sphere [3]. Therefore, the first metaphor of consumer bodies links depictions of men to the consumption of specific product/service/object. In our analysis, most of the ads (69.7%) advertise products (nutrition, fashion, print press, cars, techniques etc.) rather than services/objects. Nevertheless, images of men indicate that consumer bodies are more closely related to the products itself, while other metaphors highlight some other features. Regarding to that, our analysis of body-product relationship indicates that men in general are presented as consumers of the products (39.8%) and as those who suggest using them (35.5%). In other words, the concept of masculinity is depicted through images of men's bodies consuming the product or promoting it. Our previous analysis [12] showed differences in presenting the relation between body and product. Men's magazines had more body-consumer relationships and men's bodies were more often depicted in the course of suggesting the use of a specific product.

The second metaphor of the instrumental bodies is underlined through attractive bodies. Lifestyle magazines emphasise the physical appearances and perfect bodies as synonymous with achievements. Celebrities often represent that kind of appearance, which in our analysis is one of the most prominent categories – the depictions of a hero as the result of his celebrity (14.7%). Furthermore, touch behaviour could contribute to the different way men and women bodies are portrayed and positioned in ads. According to Goffman [13] women's bodies are engaged in self-touch which depicts women as "ornamental object", while men's bodies are engaged in active touch behaviour indicating men as "instrumental subject". Thus, our analysis includes five categories of the touch behaviour: (1) The self-touch; (2) Touch with a female; (3) Touch with a male; (4) Touch with something else (such as different objects in the ads or product being advertised) and (5) No touch. Even though 29% of men are presented without touching anything or anybody, men are mostly depicted in active touch behaviour (41.6%) which indicates that men's bodies are still used in instrumental way. Active touch behaviour includes touch with either female (14.7%) or male (0.9%) and touch with something else (26%), for example with products. On the other hand, passive touch behaviour such as self-touch is presented in 27.7% of analysed bodies. That might indicate shifting perspective of the men's depictions through images suggesting that self-touch behaviour is not just "taken" by women. Furthermore, we did not notice any significant differences within the type of magazines as the active touch behaviour is concerned ( $\chi^2=0.176$ ;  $df=2$ ;  $p>0.01$ ).

Men are not only instrumentalized, but are "increasingly and unapologetically objectified, both in terms of erotic spectacle and as targets of advertising for products beyond cars and beer, including many items once thought to be

marketed for women alone" [8]. Some representations of men draw attention to the bodily practices moving away from the traditional image, "[...] since it refers to a man who is extremely aware of his appearance and is devoted to it by buying cosmetic and fashion products" [3].

The third metaphor of objectified bodies could be illustrated through several analytical categories: Depictions of masculinity, type of advertised products and type of gaze. Our data show that among categories that depict masculinity, the erotic male has the highest distribution (25.1%). Moving away from traditional image of men, referring to them as consumers and stressing their appearance, also indicates changes in the domain of the advertised products.

Men's images are the most frequent in ads promoting fashion (clothes, shoes and accessories) (26.8%), followed by ads promoting nutrition (food, drink and food supplements) and oral medicaments (14.3%) and cosmetics, hygiene and outer medicaments (11.7%). This analysis illustrates the shift in the way men are portrayed in ads because it "moved" men into other product domains such as fashion, which is traditionally supposed to be feminine. Men in fashion ads may gaze at the viewer or the product advertised, but rarely at another model, thus avoiding the intimacy and preserving their masculinity despite the category of advertising [8].

Accordingly, types of gaze can suggest changes regarding objectification of men/women in ads. In our previous research [12] we defined six categories of eye contact between the viewer and the men/women in ads: (1) direct gaze at the viewer (eye contact with the reader); (2) averted gaze; (3) gaze at her/himself; (4) gaze at a product; (5) gaze at other person/s and (6) absence of gaze (bodies are without faces or looking in another direction). Some authors claim that direct gaze is "traditionally associated with women" [14], so men do not look directly at the viewer. Thus suggesting an interest in something else, as well as the idea that his mind is on higher things, that he is not just an "object".

Reference [15] argues that the male model feels bound to avoid the "femininity" of being posed as the passive object. However, it has been a notable countertrend in men's representation in ads, featuring men including the direct view. It can be explained with "a more explicit concern" about the way men are perceived and acknowledged in the eyes of women or other men [14].

Our analysis shows that men in ads often gaze directly at the viewer (39%). The absence of gaze is noticed in 29% of images. The distribution of gaze at another person (9.5%), product (4.8%) or himself (2.6%) are far less significant. Averted gaze, on the other hand, represents avoidance of the gaze, and may involve looking up, looking down or looking away [15] and is observed in 15.2% of images. According to this, men are engaged in direct gaze behaviour and are exposed to the viewer, which corresponds to traditional notions of masculinity oriented towards the "active" and typically engaged in direct gaze behaviour. On the other hand, almost one third of men's images focuses on the product, other person, or avoid gaze by looking away, thus showing behaviour conventionally performed by women. It goes along

with the claim that “[...] men tend to avoid the posing of the passive object by averting the gaze, thus underlying their supposed indifference towards the viewer and suggesting their other possible actions and interest” [12]. By doing it they tend to avoid objectification.

#### IV. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS HOMOGENEOUS BODIES

In the context of changing features of dominant men and emerging characteristics of new men, the analysis of ads shows that construction of men images is based on consumerism and product selling. The emphasis on images of male bodies as good/healthy looking, stresses the importance of physical appearance and serves the social purposes of convincing audience in the significance of being a man in relation to themselves but also in relation to the other.

The men's bodies are usually idealized and eroticized, presented in such a way that it is possible for them to be looked at and desired by others. Therefore, the representation of men's bodies and construction of masculinities in ads is primarily based on those body features which might sell the product they advertise. Ads in lifestyle magazines serve “as an agent of masculine socialization by branding products in men's minds and men's body become the walking billboards for brand-name products” [5].

The masculinity in such sense is defined by what men consume and not by what men produce. Our analysis showed that men within analysed ads are mostly presented as young adults (53.2%), of white race (89.2%), fully dressed (69.7%), wearing casual clothes (38.5%) or even suits (12.6%). Their appearance is also highlighted with the presentation of upper bodies (50.2%) which are attractive (55.8%), firm (38.5%) and muscled (28.6%).

Finally, men in ads appear mostly in fashion ads (26.8%). These features are the external expression of lifestyle which is again underlined through depictions of urban (14.3%) and successful man (16.9%). Thus in construction of masculinity within men's and women's lifestyle magazines, images of men have tendencies to be defined through homogenous bodies [3], meaning that above mentioned body features are repeatedly represented while others are less prominent.

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