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The Weight of the World: Consuming Traditional Masculine Ideologies

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ABSTRACT

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

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, strength training was regarded as the exclusive province of professional bodybuilders and other athletes (SGMA, 2002). During the last decade, however, the number of males taking to the gym to exercise with weights has increased dramatically (SGMA, 2004; Mintel, 2003; Pope et al. 2000; Wieggers, 1998). The number of males engaging in strength training has risen by more than thirty percent since the start of the decade (Potter, 1997). But why has this become so? Put another way, why, at this historical juncture, are males, of all ages, and in unprecedented numbers, consuming strength training to a greater extent than ever before? The purpose of this paper is to offer some insights.

Drawing on recent scholarship on the body and masculinity (Kimmel, 2004; Holt and Thompson, 2004; Thompson and Holt, 2004; Pope et al. 2000; Mishkind et al. 1987), we propose that, in part, strength training's appeal may, of course, coincide with general concerns about health and fitness, but more than that, we postulate that it also seems to be about gender (Kimmel, 2004). This paper attempts to question traditional 'definitions of masculinity and femininity and provides some evidence for a shifting paradigm in which these spheres are less polarized' (Gunderson, 2004: vi). It attempts to illuminate how the consumption of strength training 'contributes to, and is affected by, the relational process of defining masculinity and femininity' (Fischer and Gainer, 1994). By examining the symbolic meanings of strength training, we hope to gain a broader understanding of the relationship between men, masculinity, and the body. Ultimately, we hope to emphasize some significant issues confronting contemporary males 'in relation to body image concerns, while providing links with the social construction of masculinity' (Drummond, 2002: 79).

INCREASED ABSENCE OF TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES

Traditional definitions of masculinity were constructed through the image of the 'provider' who draws upon self-reliance, diligence, and hard work to earn a 'wage in the public sphere and thereby breadwinning for a dependent nuclear family located in the domestic sphere' (Willott and Griffin, 2004: 53). However, that world, according to Holt and Thompson (2004), among others, is now gone. The changing patterns of the working world no longer define masculinity quite so clearly (Thompson and Holt, 2004). Increased unemployment for growing numbers of males in high-paid sectors, the changing dynamics of the workplace (increased factory mechanization, increased bureaucratization of office work), and the extensive movement of women in the workforce and in other

traditional male terrain has meant that women have increasingly approached equality with men in virtually all aspects of life (Kimmel and Kaufman, 1994). As Mishkind et al. (1987: 46) remark, 'what were once considered exclusively male abilities and domains are decreasingly so. Whereas once a man could be assured of his masculinity by virtue of his occupation, interests, or certain personality characteristics, many women now opt for the same roles'. An indirect consequence of these changes appears to be a growing questioning of what it is to be a man (Thompson and Holt, 2004; Kimmel, 2004). To paraphrase, Potter (1997: 1), women nowadays run companies, compete in sport, and fly fighter planes-leaving males downright anxious about the meaning of masculinity.

Compensatory Consumption

Seemingly, males who have suffered feelings of emasculation in this new environment have attempted to reaffirm their status as real men through compensatory consumption (Thompson and Holt, 2004), namely that of body focused activities (Kimmel, 2004; Edwards, 1997; Firat, 1993), where they have greater ability to conceal themselves in the 'symbolic cloaks of autonomy' (Holt and Thompson, 2004: 426). As opportunities to prove one's manhood have decreased (Willott and Griffin, 2004), males have increasingly begun to adopt the idea that one of the only remaining avenues left to cultivate their distinctiveness from women, and thus, construct their masculinities, is through their bodies (Kimmel, 2004; Pope et al. 2000).

Bodywork, such as strength training enables males to attain a muscular physique, thus, providing them with a unique opportunity to actively divide the genders (Pope et al. 2000). That is to say, whatever else it may be, strength training is a means for enhancing the size of one's muscles (Gunderson, 2004; Mishkind et al. 1987), which a wealth of evidence demonstrates are customary signs of masculinity (Mosse, 1996; Dutton, 1995; Harlow, 1951). Strength training may provide males- 'who have been described as emasculated by recent socioeconomic changes' (Holt and Thompson, 2004: 425)- with a site, their bodies, 'with which to redress personal anxieties through the pursuit of a muscular image that embodies normative masculinity' (Wieggers, 1998: 148). As Pope et al. (2000: 50) remark, 'muscles are one of the areas in which men can still clearly distinguish themselves from women or feel more powerful... One of the few attributes left, one of the few grounds on which women can never match men, is muscularity', The body hormonal makeup of females, according to human performance and nutrition expert, Dr. John Berardi, is one that does not allow women to develop the same degree of muscularity as men (Culotte, 1995).

REVERSAL OF THIS PHENOMENON

Elaborating on this view, it may be reasonable to assume that the current emphasis on thinness for women (Wolf, 1991) represents the reversal of this phenomenon (Kimmel, 2004). That is, while women are concerned with breast size and weight, men are concerned with muscularity: 'both are preoccupied with those aspects of the male and female body that suggest and exaggerate innate biological differences between the sexes' (Kimmel, 2004: 233). As noted by Mishkind et al. (1987: 47), 'the thin female body connotes such stereotypically feminine traits as smallness, weakness, and fragility, which are the mirror opposites of the strength

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and power represented by the muscular male body...the male and female body ideals, which are physically and symbolically opposite extremes, may be a reaction against sexual equality, an expression of a wish to preserve some semblance of traditional male-female differences'. To further develop this notion, a wealth of evidence has demonstrated trends that clearly illustrate that the more equality exhibited between men and women in virtually all aspects of life, the greater the disparity that exists between the shape and size of ideal male and female beauty standards, as purveyed in the media; just as media standards of female thinness have increased in recent years (Wolf, 1991), so too have standards of male muscularity (Wienke, 1998).

INCREASED STANDARDS OF MUSCULARITY

Present day males who look at the major mass media are exposed to a standard of bodily attractiveness that has less body fat and more muscularity than that presented to males at any time throughout history (Olivardia et al. 2004). One just has to recall, for example, the physiques of Hollywood's most masculine men of previous generations- think of John Wayne in the '40s, Burt Lancaster in the '50s, Steve McQueen in the '60s, Burt Reynolds in the '70s- these guys, according to Potter (1997), probably couldn't even point out their deltoid or pectoral muscles, never mind sculpt them. Past ideals of male perfection look like wimps in comparison to contemporary cinema's muscular action heroes (Pope et al. 2000). Similarly, recent empirical evidence shows that just as the centrefolds of women in Playboy magazine have depicted ever-slimmer women over recent years, the centrefolds of men in Playgirl magazine have also depicted men with lower percentages of body fat and greater muscularity (Pope et al. 2000). Another line of related evidence comes from a study conducted to measure trends over a period of thirty years in the muscularity of male action figure toys, such as G.I. Joe and Batman. The researchers discovered that male action figurines have grown far more muscular over the last thirty years in comparison to their original counterparts, with many modern figures displaying the physiques of elite bodybuilders and many display levels of muscularity far greater than the outer limits of actual human attainment (Pope et al. 1999). Of significance, this finding suggests that many young men have absorbed unrealistic standards of muscularity 'long before they were old enough to stop and question whether these images were realistic or reasonable goals for a man's body' (Pope et al. 2000: 46).

In short, males are coming under increasing pressure to conform to an idealized standard of physical beauty, notably, a body that is both muscular and devoid of fat; images of men with chiselled pectorals, bulging biceps and a washboard flat stomach circulate consumer culture at an even greater rate. As a result, it appears that an ever-greater number of males have begun to accept hegemonic masculinity- the notion that muscularity is the defining characteristic of masculinity (Wienke, 1998). Unfortunately, the pursuit of this muscular idealization is damaging to the physical and emotional health of a growing number of males. The muscular 'model' of male perfection is unattainable by most men (Pope et al. 2000), and the over eager pursuit of it has been directly implicated in the virtual increase of exercise dependencies, eating disorders, and the use of muscle-growth enhancing drugs (Botta, 2003; Olivardia, 2000).

EXCESSIVE EXERCISING

Several studies have indicated that many males are making stringent exercise regimes the organizing discipline of their lives (Potter, 1997). Males are no longer engaging in strict exercise regimes to increase health, fitness and/or general well-being, but

rather, in pursuit of the lean, muscular ideal (Hartley, 1998). For instance, in a recent study conducted to determine the primary reason for engaging in exercise among male fitness centre members in the Palm Beach area of Florida, researchers revealed that muscle toning was cited as the number one reason they exercise by eighty-five percent of male fitness centre members (Hartley, 1998). Incidentally, research has indicated that male solutions or remedies for their perceived inadequacy in terms of physical appearance go beyond excessive exercising.

THE USE OF MUSCLE-GROWTH ENHANCING DRUGS

Perhaps the most serious development or consequence of male body image dissatisfaction is the abuse of anabolic steroids, a class of muscle-growth enhancing drugs. Researchers investigating the use of anabolic steroids among males have reported marked elevations relative to a generation, with close to three million American males having used steroids at least once in their lifetime to boost muscle gain (Pope et al. 2000; Olivardia, 2000). Interestingly, similar findings were recently reported in Ireland. For instance, in May of this year, Irish health specialist, Kevin Dawson, who runs an advisory clinic specializing in performance-enhancing drugs, stated that the use of such drugs among Irish males 'had "gone ballistic" in the past four months' (cited in Keogh, 2005: 5). The use of muscle-growth enhancing drugs among males illustrates that they, similar to individuals with anorexia nervosa, engage in deadly practices to attain their goal with relatively little hesitation (Olivardia, 2001). The illicit use of anabolic steroids can cause numerous psychiatric and other adverse effects, such as liver problems, high blood pressure, heart failure, impotence, severe depression, brain damage, extreme aggression, and even death (Kimmel, 2004; Olivardia, 2000). Furthermore, research has shown that individuals who abuse steroids to boost gains in muscularity are far more likely to abuse heroin, morphine, and other opiate drugs at a later stage in their lives (Cromie, 2000).

NOT JUST A FEMALE PROBLEM

Clearly concern with one's physical appearance is no longer a gendered phenomenon (Nolan, 2004; Grogan and Richards, 2002; Phillips and Castle, 2001). Males are no more immune to the same body dissatisfaction disorders women have long faced. For instance, eating disorders, which were once thought to be a problem affecting only women, appear to be affecting an ever-greater number of males (Nolan, 2004; Carlat et al. 1997; Rodin, 1992). Twenty years ago it was suggested that for every ten-to-fifteen women suffering from anorexia or bulimia, there was one man. In 2001, it was documented that for every four females with anorexia, there is one male, and for every eight-to-eleven females with bulimia, there is one male (Nolan, 2004). Although there are no figures available for eating disorders in Ireland, it is believed that approximately fifteen percent of Irish males are affected by an eating disorder (Nolan, 2004). In fact, psychotherapist Marie Campion (cited in Nolan, 2004: 6) of the Marino Therapy Clinic in Dublin- Ireland's leading treatment clinic for body image problems- postulates that the true prevalence of males affected by body image problems may be dramatically higher than previously speculated. She suggests that doctors have traditionally been slow to diagnose the condition in male patients. Specifically, she posits that males find it extremely difficult or embarrassing to seek help for what was traditionally believed to be a "woman's disease". She states that 'many (men) are too embarrassed to seek help so their pain goes on' (2004: 6). In this context, it is reasonable to assume that modern-day males are clearly facing a dilemma in terms of masculine identity.

MEN'S BODY IMAGE DILEMMA

This dilemma hinges on western society's growing objectification of the male body and its cultural messages regarding masculine identity (Tkarrde, 2003). Depictions of the male body in magazines, through male action figure toys, on television, and in the general media, have increasingly come to emphasize physical appearance as a key criterion for measuring masculine worth (Tkarrde, 2003; Edwards, 1997). Adding to this concern is the production of what appears to be an endless supply of exercise equipment, nutritional supplements, and other products designed to improve both the physical and symbolic value of men's bodies (Wienke, 1998). This situation is no different, some may say, from the manner in which women have historically been compelled to conform to virtually unobtainable standards of beauty. But the problem gets compounded further (Pope et al. 2000). Men, unlike women, are inculcated in an environment that encourages men to be stoic (a person who suffers pain without showing his feelings). Media images of masculine perfection subtly pressure men to worry about body image, yet, because of masculine societal expectations they are prohibited from discussing the degree to which body image anxieties or insecurities impinge their lives on a daily basis (Olivardia et al. 2004; Tkarrde, 2003).

Boy Code

Within Western culture, there exist stereotypes or powerful codes of conduct that enshroud and dictate acceptable forms of masculine behaviour (Tkarrde, 2003; Pope et al. 2000; Seidler, 1994). Clinical psychologist Dr. William Pollack (1999) positions the predominant injunctions of masculinity under the umbrella term "Boy Code", which equates masculine identity with being strong, stoic, stable, capable, reliable, and in control. The Boy Code ultimately seeks to instill in young men the notion that one's masculinity is determined in direct proportion with the denial or repudiation of anything deemed to be feminine (Pollack, 1999; West, 1995). That is, within society, males are 'expected to fulfil a male script: to act as males, not to act like girls' (West, 1995: 6). Hence, males are not supposed to worry about something that "only women do". Males are made to feel 'embarrassed and ashamed of their appearance concerns, and keep them secret. They may feel it "wimpy" or "girlish" to worry about their looks' (Pope et al. 2000: 193).

Big Boys Don't Cry

Whereas females are expected to openly admit and display their feelings about their health and personal life, society teaches men to be emotionally repressive, that to be a man is to divulge little of their personal lives, to tackle affliction and hardship in stern silence (Seidler, 1994). As a result, when confronted with the bombardment of virtually unattainable body images and the feelings of inadequacy these images create, males are often deprived the emotional space to discuss their suffering (Rodin, 1992). To paraphrase Dr. Harrison Pope (2000: 5), a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, women, over the years, have gradually learned, at least to some degree, how to confront the media's unrealistic ideals of beauty. 'Many women can now recognize and voice their appearance concerns, speaking openly about their reactions to these ideals, rather than letting them fester inside', whereas men, on the other hand, 'still labor under a societal taboo against expressing such feelings. "Real" men aren't supposed to whine about their looks; they're not even supposed to worry about such things. And so this "feeling and talking taboo" adds insult to injury: to a degree unprecedented in history, men are being made to feel more and more inadequate about how they look- while simulta-

neously being prohibited from talking about it or even admitting it to themselves'.

Paradox of Silence

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

Conveniently, the contemporary conception of masculine stoicism is thought to be beneficial to marketers and advertisers, who attempt to preserve the idea that those who do not conform to the images of physical perfection they see in the media are inherently inferior (Tkarrde, 2003). The male who suffers in silence is unaware that others may feel as he does, or are experiencing what he is, and therefore, he is 'increasingly vulnerable to the advertising messages of the supplement industry and other body image industries eager to capitalize on their anxieties' (Pope et al. 2000: 193/4). As Hesse-Biber (1996: 99) suggests, 'there is a huge financial potential in promoting body obsession and anxiety in men, and it is no wonder that within recent years the market for men's body products has grown dramatically'. Advertisers and marketers are increasingly manipulating males.

GROWING OBJECTIFICATION OF THE MALE BODY

Male beauty image industries- purveyors of food supplements, diet aids, fitness programs and countless other products- now prey increasingly on men's anxieties, just as analogous industries have preyed for decades on the appearance related insecurities of women (Pope et al. 2000). Today, for instance, it is not uncommon to see stereotypically good-looking men displayed in marketing and advertising campaigns in a manner conceivable only for women's bodies a generation ago (Kimmel, 2004; Grogan and Richards, 2002; Mishkind et al. 1987). As eloquently put by Kacen (2000: 350), men's magazines, 'tout articles on "firm abs" and flaunt ads with half-naked men displaying perfect physiques in order to sell underwear, cologne, personal care products, electronic goods and athletic gear'. Advertisers have transformed men's bodies into objects of the gaze (Edwards, 1997). Males have become 'stimulated to look at themselves- and other men- as objects of desire' (Patterson and Elliott, 2002: 235).

Exposure to highly attractive male models in advertising and the mass media makes men far more conscious and aware of their own appearances, encouraging them to 'seek out models of physical beauty, but also more vulnerable to the allure of the consumer market' (Wienke, 1998: 25). Simply put, the media reinforce the value that the road to happiness is achieved by way of physical beautification. As a result, males living in American and European culture are becoming high maintenance and are beginning to invest large sums of money in pursuit of becoming more aesthetically pleasing (Firat, 1993). Males are currently spending billions of

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dollars on food supplements and diet aids, fitness programs, gym memberships, exercise equipment, beauty products, and cosmetic surgery (Pope et al. 2000). As Bocoock (1993: 102) remarks, males are now as much a part of modern consumerism as females, 'their construction of a sense of who they are is accomplished as much through style, clothing, body image and the right look as is women's'. Or, as more bluntly put by Edwards (1997: 55), 'masculinity is no longer simply an essence or an issue of what you do, it's how you look'.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The consumption of strength training was examined within the broader context of daily life in an investigation of the motives underpinning this symbolic consumer behaviour. We offered some insights into why strength training has become such a popular consumption activity among males in recent years. We proposed that the recent increase in the popularity of strength training is not attributed to general concerns about health and fitness, but rather, that the appeal of strength training resides in its ability to enable males to alter their body and body images.

Method

Drawing on existing research in marketing and consumption (MacNevin, 1999; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995; Featherstone, 1993), the exploratory, qualitative study to be later conducted will examine the recent increase in the popularity of strength training by addressing a series of related questions or hypotheses pertaining to the expectations, experiences and meaning of male embodiment in Western society. It will explore the social and cultural conditions surrounding men's increased consumption of strength training, as reported by a sample of males, and will consider, via a detailed examination of these accounts, the implications of ongoing participation for the maintenance or reconstruction of male identity. A number of factors highlight the pertinent nature of this study at the present time.

Rationale

Strength training, as a cultural phenomenon, has largely eluded social enquiry (Monaghan, 1999), and therefore, we lack an in-depth analysis of how it affects men's body images and shapes their sense of masculinity (Wiegiers, 1998). In addition, a study of strength training will highlight an area of sociological research that has, until recently, been somewhat disregarded, namely, the body (Wiegiers, 1998). That is, research on consumption has been slow to deal with the subject area of embodiment, despite the fact that advertisers and marketers have been making large profits through the sale of body-beautification products and services, and by emphasizing contemporary body culture (Patterson and Elliott, 2002; Joy and Venkatesh, 1994). In particular, there has been a conspicuous lack of empirical research about the bodies of men (Olivardia et al. 2004; Wiegiers, 1998). Most research on consumption associated with the body has focused on women, because for the most part, there was a general agreement that societal pressures on women to aspire to idealized standards of physical beauty were more pronounced than pressures on men (Grogan and Richards, 2002). Perhaps, because of this, we have neglected to study the central role that physical appearance and body image play for men (Mishkind et al. 1987).

That is to say, in contrast to the extensive literature on female body image, the literature on males is comprised of only a modest number of studies (Olivardia et al. 2004). Moreover, the majority of these studies are quantitative in nature, which, while providing standardized data, allows respondents very little opportunity, if any, to explain their responses or put them in context (Wienke,

1998). Findings from these positivist studies do not help us understand why a growing number of males, at this historical moment, are paying increased attention to their appearance (Grogan and Richards, 2002; Pope et al. 2000; Mishkind et al. 1987). Thus, exploratory work focusing on men's experiences with their bodies, 'and its relation to health-related behaviours such as exercise and diet, is timely' (Grogan and Richards, 2002: 220). These facts, along with boys' underachievement in school, men's poorer health, and the ever increasing rates of suicide among males, indicate that a greater understanding of both the social construction of masculinity and the importance of body image to men's sense of self is necessary.

In short, a good deal is known about the quantity of males engaging in body related practices, but far less is known about their reasons for such preoccupations, and therefore, studies exploring the 'role of the body in men's lives will be fundamental to our understanding of the male experience' (Mishkind et al. 1987: 48). In summation, to paraphrase Patterson and Elliott (2002: 242), specific consideration of male embodiment within consumer research is required, not just because the representation of female bodies has received far greater attention, 'but also because there is a distinct need to understand the role of consumption and the institutions of consumer culture in the construction of male identities and the buttressing of hegemonic masculinity... we need to understand just what it means to be a man in contemporary society'.

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