Between Hegemonic Masculinity and New Man-ism: The Shift from 'Owning' the Gaze to Being the 'Object' of the Gaze in the Representation of the Western Male in Men's Health Magazine

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Abstract

This essay discusses how the representation of the Western male has shifted from one of *hegemonic masculinity* to one of *new man-ism* by exploring the British edition of *Men's Health* magazine (henceforth *MH*). Beginning with a brief definition of the key terms, the essay explores how such a change has occurred via cultural construction by borrowing a theoretical perspective from Judith Butler, of how all forms of identity are not 'fixed', but are rather discursively 'produced' by popular culture media: 'There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ''expressions'' that are said to be its results' Butler (1988). After highlighting the relevant history of men's liberation, the essay then discusses the conditions in which the representation of men has become fetishised in modern Britain by adopting *MH* as a case study. Such exploitative use of idealised depictions of men's bodies in *MH* has resulted in men becoming the 'object' of the gaze rather than 'owning' the gaze. To clarify this sociologically, the essay begins by discussing the feminist movement's rejection of the men's patriarchal image and how men thereby began to embrace new man-ism. Next, it discusses two other causes of this shift to new man-ism: (i) economic changes, and (ii) the crisis of masculinity. My concern here is not to unquestioningly accept the concepts associated with these factors or their implications; rather, I discuss them as dynamic elements within the above-mentioned change in how men are represented by *MH*, which has led men to become the *objects* rather than the *subjects* of the gaze. However, despite the historical performativity-related changes to men and masculinity, no real changes to masculinity's hegemonic and dominant characteristics appear to have occurred. No further detail is given on the content of *MH* (as this can be studied easily enough),[1] nor will I defend the 'dumb' excesses of some men's titles to avoid a burlesque analysis. Instead, I discuss the most prominent themes in relation to men's appearances and bodies to provide a better understanding of the shift from hegemonic masculinity to the New Man depicted in *MH*.
Keywords: Masculinity; New man-ism; Gender identity; Feminism.

Introduction
1.1. Brief Definition of Key Terms

Although masculinity and its types are defined in a variety of ways, I have selected ones that demonstrate my main argument. *Hegemonic masculinity*, one type within the huge umbrella of masculinity, is clearly defined by Connell (1995) as: 'The configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' (77).

True masculinity, according to Connell (1995) is 'almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies'. It is therefore intimately linked with health, providing 'the focal point of self-construction as well as health construction' (Saltonstall, 1993). However, 'masculinity' is, as Berger *et al.* (2012) describe, a 'vexed term, variously inflected,

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[1] See www.theoryhead.com for a detailed discussion of men's magazines since 2001.

multiply defined, not limited to straight forward descriptions of maleness.' Berger *et al.* (2012). What is certain is that 'nothing like one-way determination of the social by the biological can be sustained' (Connell, 1995). Biological determinism, which sees gender differences as biologically based, and therefore natural, inevitable and unchangeable, is an ideological position used to justify and perpetuate male power. In challenging this position, masculinity is often taken to the opposite extreme, and treated as a wholly socially constructed phenomenon, for example: Masculinity is…a concept that bears only an adventitious relation to biological sex and whose various manifestations collectively constitute the cultural, social, and psychosexual expression of gender (Saltonstall, 1993) But, as Brittan (1989) points out, 'men and women…do not exist outside their bodies', and this approach misses the role that bodies play within human interaction and society. In Connell (1995) approach, 'bodies are seen as sharing in social agency, in generating and shaping courses of social conduct'Connell (1995). The biological may not determine the social, but that does not stop men from 'artificially attaching all manner of power and privilege to biological differences' (Klein, 1993) in order to gain power over women. For example, men's 'greater sporting prowess', which is related to biological factors, is given social significance and becomes 'symbolic proof of men's superiority' Connell (1995). However multiple and contested the concept may be, there is one form of masculinity which appears repeatedly in the literature, albeit with different names and slightly different definitions. The names include 'hegemonic' masculinity Connell (1995), 'traditional' masculinity (Helgeson and Kristin, 1995), 'dominant' masculinity (Courtenay, 2009), and 'negative or extreme' masculinity Connell (1995). While styles of masculinity change, what does not so easily change is the 'justification and naturalization of male power' (Brittan 1989:2). Hegemonic masculinity, as an 'expression of the privilege men collectively have over women' Connell (1995), is therefore the least likely to change, particularly in those aspects which exploit biological factors. It is this form of masculinity which leads to the negative health behaviors described by Courtenay (2009), and is most in need of challenging by publications related to men's health.

New man-ism refers to the media's portrayal of men as 'the anti-sexist, caring, sharing man' (Beynon, 2002), who seeks to avoid enacting traditional hegemonic masculinity. Others define this as a 'regime of representation' (Nixon qtd. in Beynon (2002)).

Aspects of these definitions will be highlighted and incorporated within the following discussion about the changes in how males are represented by MH in terms of becoming the 'object of the gaze' and appearing as much 'gay as straight' (Gill qtd. in Benwell (2003)).

1.2. A Historical Review of Men's Liberation

Over the past three decades, the women's liberation movement has raised the profile of the question of what it is to be a woman. Inevitably, another focus which grew from this is the question of what it is to be a man. In the late 1990s, attempts were made at establishing a masculine liberation from the imposed 'distinction between reason and desire, the intellect and the body' (Brittan, 1989); of course, whether it is in fact, possible or desirable to accept such a new image of masculinity is a question that precedes the attempt; however, this was not innovative. To trace this historically, in his important essay *On Male Liberation* (1974), Jack Sawyer argued that men are prevented from becoming complete human beings by the masculine mystique. The work of Perchuk and Rani (2010) among others unveiled masculinity's mystique: it was clear that acceptance of a masculinity that framed men as patriarchal 'breadwinners' began to be dismissed. Paradoxically, men seemed prompted to fit the frame of the New Man, which emerged in postmodern classics. The emergence of the New Man is related to the shift towards new lifestyle magazines and advertisements, which are 'both [a] representative site and mobilizing force of crucial shifts in masculinity' (Benwell, 2003). The central concern of this 'visual exhibit' (69) was to articulate the change in heterosexual masculinity. Men felt that their heterosexual masculinity was threatened. Because men wanted to catch up with the confident progress made by women through feminism, they also needed to 'encompass many of the traits previously thought of as feminine-emotionality, intimacy, nurturing and caring' (Gill, in Benwell (2003)); some of these traits will be discussed in the Male Crisis section. Therefore, *MH* as a 'representative site and mobilizing force' (Benwell, 2003) overwhelmingly depicts men as semi-naked, showing off their bodies, and wearing cosmetics. Men have increasingly become, as Alexander (2003) argues, a 'product available for consumption'. Men's bodies have become, I argue, fetishised objects that are now excessively exploited to bolster consumerism. Given this, Butler (1988) premise of performativity enables us to discuss how this change in the depiction of men from the *subject* of the gaze to the *object* of the gaze has occurred.

1.3. A Theoretical Approach of Gender and Performativity

Butler's account of gender in her book, *Gender Trouble* (1999) aims to question the real identity of individuals' gender, and how it exists. In Butler's view, gender identities are culturally constituted; in this sense, "gender is always a doing" (24). Butler collapsed the distinction between gender and sex, exposing hegemonic conceptions as 'unfixed' identities. Thus, identities are constructed intersubjectively in the context of plurality. Butler explains this as: 'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (43–44). According to Butler, gender is wholly constructed by the behaviours of individuals, so that, there is no essence in gender; all gender is only 'drag' that 'fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space' (174) and so cannot be considered a 'true' gender identity. Thus, I argue that the social and cultural performative context of a society is where real identity is created and crystallised. Relating this to the notion of male representations in the world of the British media and men's magazines in particular, it implies that the new idealised image of men and masculinity is neither true nor false; it is just a 'fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies' (174). Consequently, this

'fantasy' could find a place to be exemplified in the 'expanding consumption order of capitalism' (Stratton, 1996). Indeed, Shannon (2006) who approved of Stratton's view, was very dedicated to the idea of the consumer culture in Britain and its impact on the identity of men and masculinity. He elucidated a direct link between fashion and consumerism in Britain and the gender ideologies of masculinity and clearly stated that the 'new ideologies of manhood were constructed through new kinds of mass-produced clothes' (11).

1.4. Framing of the New Man Mode in Men's Health Magazine

In *Consumerism and 'compulsory individuality'* Cronin (2000) refers to the power of magazines as regimes promoted through the media, through which certain individual identities are purchased. Cronin adopted this point to discuss women's ethical duty to monitor their appearance in response to their performance in lifestyle magazines. As a result, *MH* was launched in Britain in 1995 by Mark Bricklin. *MH* was supposed, I believe, to 'edit' the traditional masculine identity. Giving this gender a specific 'constructed' identity, as Butler theorised, the British male audience as well as women expected to experience a new masculine identity which could free men from the 'shackles' of patriarchy. Driven by consumerist goals, men were portrayed as the 'objects' of the gaze in this magazine. Whereas the cover of the December 2010 *MHM* presented a woman whose body captured the focus of the viewer in the form of a 'fetishized experience' (Stratton, 1996), (see image 1 below), the same fetishised focus on body image was subsequently observed on the cover of the January 2003 edition, but with a male subject.

In the Western world, specifically in Britain with its 'active commodity fetishism' (Stratton, 1996), the reader can recognise this in *MH* through the magazine's depictions of the physical appearances of its models. Thus, the essence of 'masculinity' discourse is no longer predetermined, nor hidden from observation; rather, 'It is out there in society, because it is of society' (Barthel, 1992). Men appear semi-naked and air-brushed, demonstrating through their large muscles and fit bodies, together with the distinguished magazine content, that they lead nutritious healthy lives; the life of the New Man. In *MH*, the technique of appealing to readers as consumers through the overt depiction of idealised and fetishised male physiques succeeded in attracting great attention among both men and women, greatly increasing its circulation in Britain (Gauntlett, 2008).

In *MH*, the 'male' body has become the 'object' of the gaze for both female and male readers. A British feminist cinema theorist, Mulvey (1989), pointed to the idea that the female body, which is an 'icon' of 'physical beauty' (20–21) in patriarchal society, becomes the passive 'object' of the male 'active controllers of the gaze' (21). She announced in her famous essay, ''Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'', how women provide a pleasurable visual experience which is 'coded for strong visual and erotic impact' (19) on men. Drawing on Mulvey's theory of the spectator, I argue that the male representation on the cover of *MH* provides the same pleasurable visual experience by illuminating men as an 'icon' of 'physical beauty' (Mulvey, 1989). These muscular male models with their well-built bodies are intended to evoke the desire of women — as well as men who wish to acquire such bodies. Eventually, whilst the 'castration anxiety' of the female body is considered an active motivation for displaying herself for the male gaze (Mulvey, 1989), the question remains: what is behind this change in how men are now represented as the object of the gaze? Is it the same situation in which the female figure is turned into a 'fetish figure so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous'? (Mulvey, 1989). To provide an appropriate answer to such questions, we should consider the following three factors: the impact of feminism, economic changes, and the male crisis.

2. Discussion
2.1. The Impact of Feminism

One of the most prominent and inevitable motivations behind such a change is the feminist movement. Feminists managed to 'deconstruct some of the binary ways of thinking that constructed masculinity as rational and instrumental against emotional and relational femininity' (Gill in Benwell (2003)). In this sense, I argue that *MH* provides a strategy for change in a way that parallels the representation of women in women's magazine. Rebelling against the outdated figure of the male as breadwinner and allowing for a 'space of libidinous fun' (Gill, 2007) was the central concern for feminist thought where women have 'gone too far', as argued by Farrell (2001) in *The Myth of Male Power*. According to Farrell (2001), the notion of men's global, social and economic privilege is 'false'. Instead, masculinity has been antagonised and become associated with the 'institutional practices, attitudes, personality traits — like aggression and competitiveness — that uphold male dominance and oppress women' (Gardiner, 2002). The feminist attitude towards undoing gender (Lorber qtd. in Gardiner (2002)) puts the need for such a change in hegemonic masculinity firmly on the media's agenda. Hence, a large part of this change is attributed to the assertiveness of the desire of women to resort to Western gender order systems, not only to deconstruct the self-legitimised exertion of masculine power over them but also 'to empathize with men when they challenge and critique masculinity as ideology and institution.' (Kimmel in his foreword on (Gardiner, 2002). Nonetheless, as Gardiner argued in his book, whereas women appear to prefer this new image of men and masculinity as they are aware of 'family responsibilities, financial obligations, domesticity, shopping, emotional exchange, and so on' (2002:347), she still 'accepts the boorish straight man back into her life' (348). This paradoxical feminist attitude interprets a part of how this change is not genuinely aligned with the essence of masculinity.

2.2. The Impact of Economic Changes

Alongside the feminist impact on the emergence of magazines such as *MH* where men and masculinity have become the objects of the gaze, is the effect of specific economic changes. According to Gill (2007), in order to

understand the ideology of modern men's magazines, it is important to pursue an economic perspective. In the 1990s, the rapid growth of the Industrial Revolution in Western societies posed problems for heterosexual men who found themselves unemployed. That is, according to the traditional masculine identity which established a belief in the dominant 'breadwinner' role, unemployment was interpreted as a 'marked stigma' in their 'hegemonic' identity. Besides, because of the mainstream nature of feminist calls for liberation and equation, lots of men lost their jobs. Edwards (2006) argued that 'men feel emasculated without work' (8); while Beynon (2002) depicted the 'emasculated man' in the 1980s and 1990s as an echo of 'male incompetence'. In the chaotic atmosphere of the Industrial Revolution, men were increasingly presented as emotionally and domestically inadequate. In addition, 'men were incompetent at understanding women and, especially, female sexuality' (Beynon, 2002). In response to these inadequacies, I argue that through its new fetishised representation of men and attractive depictions of idealised male bodies, *MH* proposes the New Man lifestyle as a substitute for the incompetent 'emasculated man'. However, due to the problem of male unemployment, there has also been an accelerated move towards masculine consumption culture. Rebelling against the heterosexual masculine identity, Gill (2007) argued that the power of this new consumption culture 'required considerable efforts to ward off its 'lavender whiff'' (206). The source of this effort was created from the anxiety to express the 'modern' man appropriately, in harmony with social developments, and specifically, in line with high feminist expectations. Thus, in order to resolve these anxieties, *MH* adopted its focus on promoting and fetishising the image of the New Man and its glamorous future. This magazine provides an opportunity for men 'to step into the world of consumerism narcissistic style' (Osgerby qtd. in Gill (2007)).

2.3. The Impact of the 'Male Crisis'

Alongside the impacts of feminism and economic changes, this change in how men are represented in magazines such as *MH* has also been affected by the 'male crisis'. As Connell (1995) stated, 'Masculinity, like femininity, is always liable to internal contradiction and historical disruption' (73). Hence, I should add here that I am aware of the problematic nature of the crisis in masculinity, that is, how it constantly relates to the fluctuating situations of British men in their community in the late 1990s. They were almost constantly under accusation as the perpetrators of most violent crimes, child abuse, and the instigators of divorce (Edwards, 2006). In terms of media representation, it was Frank Mort who declared in *Boy's Own* that: 'Young men are being sold images which rupture traditional icons of masculinity' (Mort qtd. in (Beynon, 2002)). According to Mort, men and masculinity have changed in response to their stifled emotions in expressing and communicating with others, and specifically 'the perception of women's rising expectations sexually and emotionally' (Edwards, 2006). Indeed, Beynon (2002) argued that men have changed not only because of sexual politics, that is to satisfy women, but also because of 'commercial pressures' (104). I believe that there is much to say about the commercial pressures as a part of the 'male crisis'. However, I prefer to point out the nature of this crisis in the sense by which it participates in changing how men and masculinity are represented in media such as *MH*. Therefore, although Beynon (2002) devoted Chapter Four of his book *Masculinities and Culture* to the male crisis*,* it was Edwards (2006) who divided this crisis into two levels: (i) the crisis from within, and (ii) the crisis from without, in his article 'Crisis, what crisis? Sex roles revisited'. He argued that men's internal feelings of inadequacy may relate to the sense that masculinity 'is not *in* crisis; it *is* crisis' (17). This leads us to reconsider that the 'crisis from within' has prompted the 'shift in men's *experiences* of their position as *men*, their maleness' (Edwards, 2006) where men have become reluctant to enact their old, hegemonic roles in favour of expressing their inner emotions by putting themselves on the media agenda. Adopting this new agenda, *MH* 'has surpassed the traditional men's books'; this was referred to by Mr David Zinczenko, the editor–in-chief of *MH*, as 'catering to men's anxieties about their bodies and sexual performance' (Kinetz, 2006).

2.4. An Artificial Change

Certainly, the shift to the representation of men as the objects of the gaze on the cover of *MH* is a matter of appealing to consumers and driving up its circulation and is more media-fuelled than real. Despite the macho grooming appearance of the male models in *MH*, which apparently reveals the growth of interest in men's health, fashion, and self-care, there is a hidden message that hegemonic masculinity is alive and well. As Barthel (1992) points out, 'traditional characteristics of masculinity are made to seem so correct and natural that men find … domination … not just expected, but actually demanded.' Moreover, an implicit sense of sexual play is conveyed to the viewer in which the man is the controller, as he stands proud in front of us, showing off his muscles, which suggests that the man is 'still very little shaken by feminist women' Connell (1995).

Thus, it appears that the expansion of male interest in matters of fashion and lifestyle is doubled between machismo hegemonic masculinity and new man-ism. Whereas men do enjoy the New Man image as a 'new dawn in men's inner emotional happiness and expression' (Edwards, 2006), their fear of not 'being properly a man, or being a 'failed' man' (Butler in Berger *et al.* (2012) subverts the dawn of this 'new man-ism'. Besides, Benwell (2003) argued that the role of British men's magazines is tentative as they 'produce representations of masculinity but are also a site within and around which meanings of masculinity circulate and are negotiated or contested' (8). All this inevitably leads us to recognise the view of Edwards, who argued that 'such displays of the artifice and performance of masculinity precisely reinforce the distinction between 'real' and 'unreal' masculinity' (2006:113). Edwards' view of the representation of men and masculinity as the object of the gaze parallels what Georgia Campbell referred to in her article in *The Guardian*: ''Women: Ratfinks by another name-double-crossed.'' She suggested that a 'New man is nothing more than a decoy duck, an advertising image gleefully adopted by the same old opportunistic

chisellers who simply cannot believe their good luck' (*The Guardian*, June 21, 1990). In theory, according to Judith Butler's notions of gender identity and performance, such gender displays are nothing more than 'drag performance'.

Acknowledging Butler's theory of performance, Western forms of masculinity demonstrate the modern incorporation of style and fashion without shedding the trappings of the male heterosexual social position. Although the representation of males in *MH* feeds into ''objectification of men'', as David Gauntlett pointed out, in his book *Media, Gender and Identity* (2008), 'the image of men which emerges from the magazines is not powerful and strong' (188). He argued that although men might welcome their new glossy representation as the object of the gaze, and their idealised masculine bodies appealed for more attention, there was not so much a change in the essence of masculinity itself, specifically in relation to 'hegemonic masculinity'. The instability of male representation in magazines such as *MH* 'can be both enabling and constrating' (189) for the discourse of masculinity. This debate concludes by arguing that this shift in the representation of men as New Man is nothing more than a device analogous to 'A wolf in sheep's clothing', as Campbell stated in her article (*The Guardian*, June 21, 1990).

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, arguing the final point of this 'sham' change in how men are represented in *MH* in relation to how their actual position in society remains largely unchanged (i.e., they remain privileged and largely dominant in comparison to women), I would like to close my argument. It is a returning trajectory to the same hegemonic masculine instinct which exists inside not only the Western man but rather, I believe, inside each man who has grown up in a society where he is raised to be 'dominant'. However, gender identity is undoubtedly subjected to the huge impacts of the mass media, as well as economics and the male crisis. Since the end of the 20th century, men *and* women have been experiencing serious challenges to their respective gender identities, specifically in developed countries such as Britain. Whilst such gender identities can find their representation through the mass media, and in this case, *MH*, this raises the crucial question of whether this representation can really change gender identities? Is it possible for magazines such as *MH* to represent the male gender 'properly'? I argue that there is a perpetual 'push-and-pull' dynamic between male gender identity and media influence which is driven by the conflicts between hegemonic masculinity on the one hand and new man-ism on the other, thus challenging the conventional dynamics of 'owning' the gaze.

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