

Magazine and reader constructions of ‘metrosexuality’ and masculinity: A membership categorisation analysis.

Matthew Hall and Brendan Gough

Since the launch of men’s lifestyle magazines in the 1980s, academic literature has predominantly focused on them as a cultural phenomenon arising from entrepreneurial and commercial initiatives and/or as cultural texts that proffer representations of masculinity such as ‘new lad’ and ‘new dad’. This paper steps aside from the focus on culture and, instead, treats magazine content as a discursive space in which gender and sexuality are oriented to, negotiated, and accomplished within and beyond the magazine itself (i.e. through readers’ responses). Specifically, membership categorisation analysis is deployed to explore how the relatively new (and perhaps alternative) category for men - ‘metrosexual’ - is presented and received. Our analysis suggests that masculinity concerns are central in debates about ‘metrosexuality’, with self-identified ‘metrosexuals’ invoking heterosexual prowess and self-respect on the one hand, and critics (e.g. self-identified ‘real men’) lamenting ‘metrosexuality’ for its perceived effeminacy and lack of authenticity on the other. Implications for understanding contemporary masculinities are discussed.

Keywords: gender, membership categorisation analysis; metrosexuality; masculinity; men’s online lifestyle magazines

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Introduction

Since the British columnist Mark Simpson first published an influential article entitled ‘Here Come the Mirror Men’ in the national newspaper *The Independent* in 1994, identifying and naming a ‘new, narcissistic, media-saturated, self-conscious kind of

masculinity' (Simpson 2004) - the term 'metrosexual' has become ubiquitous, as evidenced by 21,500 non-academic online articles and 1.2 million Google hits (as of May 2009). Men's lifestyle magazines in the U.K. have been identified as important spaces for discussions and debates regarding masculinity (Jackson *et al.* 2001, Benwell 2003, Edwards 2006). Yet surprisingly, the magazines have rarely engaged directly with the phenomenon of the 'metrosexual', even though they continue to promote various 'metrosexual' grooming products (e.g. men's moisturisers and anti-ageing creams) and cosmetics (e.g. men's illuminators¹ and eyeliners). Academic studies have predominantly focused on the more explicit and widely available magazine representations of the 'new man' of the 1980s and 90s, with his narcissistic and feminine side, or the current 'new lad' who has returned to 'reactionary *pre*-feminist values' (Edwards 2006, p. 39), with an eye on what the shift from 'new man' to 'new lad' can tell us about contemporary men and masculinities (Edwards 1997, Benyon 2002, Benwell 2003).

Studies of men's lifestyle magazines have provided valuable insights into how masculine identities are represented and constructed in the media. However, they often fall short of offering a detailed analysis of how men *consume* these masculinities (notable exceptions include Jackson *et al.* 2001, Wheaton 2003, Benwell 2003, 2004). For example, does the individual reader decode these masculinities as advertised by the writer/editor of the magazine, or does the content have only partial or no resonance for the reader? (Morley 1992). In light of the paucity of such studies, this paper focuses on the fluidity of meanings attached to 'metrosexual' masculinity and how these are portrayed in the men's online lifestyle magazine AskMen.com – and how these are received by a variety of readers.

UK Men's lifestyle magazine market

Since the launch of *Arena* and *GQ* in the 1980s the number of men's lifestyle magazines has risen steadily. The market includes health-orientated titles such as *Men's Health* and

¹ A cosmetic concealer cream dispensed from a pen and used to revive facial skin. Often used under the eyes to remove imperfections and signs of tiredness.

Men's Fitness, up-market glossies such as *GQ* and *Arena*, the more 'laddish' magazines *Nuts* and *Zoo*, and online only versions *Askmen.com* and *Pixacom*. A measure of their popularity could be gauged by circulation figures – *FHM* reached 500,000 a month at its peak (Beynon 2002). However by 2005, Mintel (2006, p. 3-5) market research pointed to a steady decline, identifying a 'like-for-like drop of 16% in average issue circulation. Six out of 12 titles were down with the sales decline sharpest for the larger-selling publications'. The trend seems to have continued, although unevenly, with some top titles such as *Maxim* and *Arena* ceasing print publishing in the UK (Brook 2009). The reason for this decline is unclear. Some commentators (O'Carroll 2009) point to competition from free paper publications. For example, *Shortlist* is enjoying a 5.1% increase in distribution figures. MediaWeek's (Crawley-Boevey 2009) ABCe figures suggest a shift to free (and paid) online versions, with top titles such as *Menshealth.co.uk* having 'increased its unique users by 131% to 697,132 in January 2009'. This is also substantiated by Brand Republic (2007) and Reuters news agency (2009), both of whom identify Rupert Murdoch's *AskMen.com* as by far the most popular men's global online lifestyle magazine, boasting a 34% online market share, equating to 7 million readers a month. It seems then, that the phenomenon of men's style magazines is here to stay, albeit with a shift to online versions.

Men's magazines have enjoyed a much longer history than these recent developments, but what differentiates this batch is a shift in focus from the provision of information on men's hobbies and activities like cars, building and shooting, to promoting style and image-conscious consumption (Edwards 2006, p. 37-8). Men's consumption is nothing new and can be dated back to the Victorian era, but it was then in the main confined to subsistence and work related items. Women's relationship with consumption on the other hand was transformed in the 19th century, with the rise of the department store, from a subsistence practice to a leisure-based activity. As a consequence gendered identities developed in opposition to become 'a 'feminine' realm of consumption and a 'masculine' realm of production' (Osgerby, 2003: 59). For men to visibly display an interest in pleasures of shopping risked having their masculine credentials challenged.

However in the 1980s, consumption patterns began to be:

...redefined as an activity that is suitable for men – rather than simply a passive and feminised activity – so that new markets can be penetrated...shopping is no longer a means to an end but has acquired a meaning in itself (Moore 1989, p. 179).

In other words, we have seen the emergence of new forms of masculine expression, or rather, some men re-imagining their identities through their consumption choices. Various explanations have been put forward to account for this, crediting the gay movement (Simpson 1994, 2002), feminism (Collier 1992), late capitalist consumer society (Featherstone 1991) and the style press (Gill 2005, p. 44). While the reasons remain contested, it appears without doubt that men's lifestyle magazines were pioneers in opening up a new space for the circulation of different representations of men and masculinities. However, Benwell (2004) argues, that a tension still persists within men's style magazines between the promotion of consumption with its feminised undertones and a continued allegiance to more hegemonic forms of masculinity, which have tended to result in a presumed stability where questions of sexuality and gender difference are concerned (Edwards 2006). Yet in spite of this, the persistent fascination with the 'metrosexual' suggests that perhaps a shift is occurring in the perspective of some men's style magazines (e.g. *AskMen.com*).

Gender, Sexuality and Consumption in Men's Style Magazines

Osgerby's (2003) historical study of men's consumption of fashion and beautification products indicates that this phenomenon is nothing new, citing the 'dandy', 'dude', 'playboy', and so on. He suggests that these men managed their stylistic consumption as a form of 'robust heterosexuality' (2003, p. 60), that is, carefully signposting consumption as heterosexual prowess in light of the culturally established feminisation of consumption. Even so, as Edwards (2003, p. 142) points out:

A well-dressed, well-groomed and 'stylish' man still tends to arouse anxieties concerning sexuality and masculinity or the terrifying twosome of the homosexual and the effeminate. Stereotypically, 'real' men don't care what they look like and

just ‘throw things on’ whilst women go shopping and agonize over matters of self-presentation.

The problematic issue underlying heterosexual men’s self-presentation is that it invites, not only attention from women but also from other men - the homoerotic gaze (Cole 2000). In other words, such practices disrupt conventional notions of looking, where ‘men look at women and women watch themselves being looked at’ (Berger 1972, p. 47).

Moore (1989) and Cole (2000) suggest the eroticization of men and men’s bodies became more evident in the 1980s through television adverts such as the famous Levi’s ‘Launderette’ advert flaunting Nick Kamen’s semi-naked body, which increasingly invited heterosexual men to view gay-inspired images. On a similar note to Berger (1972), Simpson (2004, p. 2) suggests that the commercial initiatives in pursuit of new markets for beautification products had:

...“queered” all the codes of official masculinity of the last hundred years or so:
It’s passive where it should be active, desired where it should be desiring, looked at
where it should be always looking.

In his book, *Male Impersonators: Men Performing Masculinity* (1994) Simpson argued in the chapter ‘Narcissus Goes Shopping’ that the potential for a ‘homoerotic gaze’ is more pronounced in men’s style magazines because the reader is offered countless visual images of semi-naked male bodies advertising fashion, health regimes, aftershaves, razors and so on. The ‘queering’ of the male gaze unsettles traditional heteronormative hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) in opening up a space in which to raise questions of gender and sexuality identity. Men’s style magazines, according to Edwards (2003), are acutely aware of this tension and the imperative of disavowing homosexuality and promoting gender difference in order to allow readers to enjoy images of other men and hitherto feminised grooming and cosmetic products.

Jackson *et al.* (2001) draw on the work of Ulrich Beck (1997) to provide a useful framework for understanding how magazines deal with the undermining of traditional heteronormative hegemonic masculine scripts. Where the potential for uncertainty arises (e.g. other men’s semi-naked bodies and advertising feminised products), magazines attempt to construct certainty by dismissing alternative forms of sexuality altogether or

by rendering consumption unproblematic. In other words they ‘construct certitude’ in order to ‘attempt to replace questioning and doubt with more certain frames of reference’ (Jackson *et al.* 2001, p. 129). Their content and interview research with male readers and editors of men’s style magazines showed that this is often achieved by relegating male body images and cosmetics to the back pages, men being photographed with women or in sporting poses, thus providing a reference to heterosexuality and gender difference.

In more discursive formats the magazines often use humour and irony to dismiss any risk of them being taken too seriously (Benwell 2004). In places where a serious tone is required, for example regarding health issues, ‘constructed certitude is most apparent in the profusion of ‘how to’ sections’ (Jackson *et al.* 2001, p. 128) thereby providing a normalized tone. Edwards (2003) argues, men’s style magazines tend to produce a constructed certitude based on sexual politics since it is more palatable for the magazines readers to draw on traditional notions of heterosexuality and gender binary opposition than raise potentially ‘tricky’ questions over consumption and sexuality. Therefore the ‘New Lad’ is represented as a return to more conventional masculinity featuring heavy drinking, sport, heterosexual promiscuity, and so on. He is also portrayed as a conspicuous consumer e.g. casual and uncaring but still looking good, thereby retaining self-respect and manliness. The ‘metrosexual’, on the other hand, with his explicit narcissism and consumption of more feminised products e.g. cosmetics (see Harrison 2008), is less easy to construct with any certitude. This is perhaps why ‘lads mags’ such as *FHM*, *Loaded* and *Nuts* has been slow to engage explicitly with the ‘metrosexual’ phenomenon.

When ‘metrosexuality’ is covered it tends to be implicit (e.g. grooming products), or with a fleeting reference to the ‘metrosexual’ practices of iconic ‘metrosexual’ global football superstars such as David Beckham and Cristiano Ronaldo. In these contexts, ‘metrosexual’ practices are excusable as part of the footballer’s celebrity status (Carniel 2009), in much the same way as David Bowie was able to wear make-up in the 1960s and 70s. Coad (2008) suggests that problems may also arise due to the ‘metrosexuals’ dual status. On the one hand the ‘metrosexual’ can be seen as challenging gender and sexuality by participating in historically feminised practices and/or invoking a

homoerotic gaze, whilst on the other, the ‘metrosexual’ can be unhinged from gender and sexuality to become an asexual personal aesthetic (2008). Despite the apparent difficulties, some magazines (e.g. AskMen.com) are now beginning to engage with the ‘metrosexual’ phenomenon and attempt to re-construct and redefine the ‘metrosexual’ as a young *avant-garde* ‘metropolitan’ and ‘heterosexual’ man (Coad, 2008).

Approaching the study of magazines

Until relatively recently, the vast majority of magazine studies have focused on the content, ideology, and readership of women’s magazines (Ballaster et al. 1991, Hermes 1995, McRobbie 1991, 1999). McRobbie’s work suggested that magazines are able to open up a space for the negotiation and contestation of identities, which points to the multiple, shifting, ambiguous and often contradictory construction of femininities, which engages/disengages the reader. Recent studies of men’s lifestyle magazines have found similarities in how men’s style magazines construct masculinities (see Jackson *et al.* 2001, Benwell’s 2003 edited collection of essays and Wheaton 2003). However, as Edwards (2003, 2006) argues, most studies either deal with the magazines as a cultural phenomenon (why these magazines now) or as cultural texts (what these magazines mean for their readers), which tend to draw simplistic or deterministic conclusions of readers’ relationships with the magazines. For example, Chapman and Rutherford’s (1988) analysis of men’s style magazines suggested demand for the magazines was a product of men’s responses to second-wave feminism in the guise of the ‘new man’. Edwards (2003, p. 134) argues that such interpretations are highly contentious since it is not clear whether the magazines were ‘commercial initiatives in the market place or solely something men were demanding’. Indeed, this is supported by Jackson *et al.*’s (2001) research, which interviewed male readers of men’s lifestyle magazines in the UK. Their interviewees expressed ambivalence towards both the content of, and the existence of the magazines.

Other studies have attempted to circumvent such issues, instead focusing on the language of the magazines and what this can tell us about cultural representations of femininity and masculinity. For example, Taylor and Sunderland’s (2003) critical

discourse analysis paper *'I've always loved women': the representation of the male sex worker in Maxim*, takes language as a choice in order to examine how it contributes to gender discourses. These they argue 'can reflect and construct social inequalities between men and women' (2001, p. 182). When men are paid to serve women sexually, the magazine presented these potentially demeaning practices positively (in contrast to their female counterparts).

Although Jackson *et al.*'s (2001) interview research and Taylor and Sunderland's (2003) critical discourse analytical research warrants merit, neither method is able to provide a detailed micro-textual level understanding of how readers receive and engage with magazine representations of masculinities. This paper therefore, deploys the tools of Membership Categorisation Analysis, which allows for an analysis of both the representation of masculinities and way in which readers' negotiate and contest these identities at the micro-textual level of the magazine space - and what such exchanges tell us about men's relationship to discourses circulating within the media.

Methods and procedures

Analytic approach

This paper draws on Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) (Sacks 1992)² as a method for examining how identity markers such as 'metrosexual' are represented and deployed in the text of men's style magazines. The use of categories depends largely on the interactional business that the text-as-talk is designed to achieve. So for example, a celebrity in *Men's Health* magazine may be categorised as a 'father' 'runner' 'movie star' and so on, but the relevant category selected at each moment will depend on the context in which it is deployed. Hence, the use of each category will rely on the culturally rich common-sense knowledge carried within it – its 'inference richness' (e.g. 'runner' may invoke meanings of fitness, health, speed and so on), but also their relevant 'category-

² Sacks developed MCA in a series of lectures from 1963-4, which found their way into print in 1972 and 1992.

bound activities' (e.g. 'movie star' and acting). Yet if the link between category and appropriate predicate is brought into question, a disjuncture can occur leading to a potential accusation of "an exception", 'different', or even a defective member of the category' (Schegloff 2007, p. 469).

These facets of categories tell us something about how social identities; realities, social ordering, social relationships and moral activity are played out in the deployment of categories. Nilan's (1994) work shows how the rights and obligations of members of gender categories are maintained as the category-bound activities for being a 'man' or a 'woman'. This process also applies to how gendered categories are textually represented (Jayyusi 1984). For example, in men's style magazines the 'new man', with his presumed typical feminine attributes such as 'caring' and 'communicativeness', or interests in 'food preparation' and 'fashion', tended to be held in much less regard and therefore more morally accountable in some magazines (e.g. *Nuts*, *FHM*) (Edwards 2003) whilst more conventional masculine identity labels like the 'new lad' were favoured (Stevenson *et al.* 2003). The existence of these different masculinities, how they are deployed and regarded, allows us a glimpse into how categories can lock gendered meanings into place, or as noted above, construct certitude in light of the potential ambiguities, as in the case of the 'metrosexual'. Conversely, they also allow us to see how:

The corresponding flexibility of categories means that category labels and their associated predicates and activities can be "revolutionized" – something that lesbians and gay men have relied on in their reclaiming of words that were traditionally used as terms of abuse – such as 'queen' and 'dyke' (Speer 2005, p. 119-120).

Two routes Speer suggests we have in seeing this action in text-as-talk is to 'explore what happens when such categories are used contrastively, or when one category is used, and then repaired' (2005, p. 118). These tools allow us to view the negotiation of category parameters and social change in light of challenges to conventional gender-appropriate behaviour (Hester and Eglin 1997). MCA then, will be used to explore how 'metrosexuality' is negotiated and constructed in men's style magazines in relation to men's presumed obligations to more hegemonic forms of masculinity (Connell 1995).

This method allows us to examine how mundane taken-for-granted ‘facts’ about gender-appropriate behaviour and characters are worked out in everyday talk.

Data

The data we use was identified from a comprehensive Google search of men’s free online lifestyle magazines as identified by Mintel (2006), where discussions of ‘metrosexuality’ were explicitly taken up. Although there were frequent articles discussing typical metrosexual activities such as ‘how to shave body hair’ and ‘getting manicures’, there was only a limited amount of material which directly engaged with ‘metrosexuality’ as a phenomenon. Of those remaining dedicated articles, Jake Brennan’s (2007) article ‘*Are You A Metrosexual*’ in AskMen.com was specifically selected for its number of reader posts - 54, its popularity (78% of readers rate it as excellent) and the magazines readership numbers – 8 million per month. Moreover, this article has drawn a variety of differing responses, with readers variously identifying as ‘metrosexuals’, ‘rugged’ men, gay men and women. We considered the readers responses for their length, depth and clarity of discussions. In particular, we selected 2 responses from each of the 4 categories, which stood out for their richness in detail and diversity of perspectives.

AskMen.com is a unit of Rupert Murdoch’s Fox Interactive Media, which is based in Canada and with editions in the US, UK and Australia. The data for this analysis is primarily from the UK edition. Since 1999 AskMen.com has provided a daily online resource for men, with features on topics such as fashion, fitness, dating, money, sports, and entertainment. It also offers men advice and guidance on things like relationships, fashion, health, the use of technology and ‘hot sex tips’ for heterosexuals. Heterosexuality, as in most of the popular men’s style magazines, is underpinned by foregrounding scantily clad women. Where men’s bodies are shown they are in typically framed in sporting or muscular poses and tend to be truncated. Where the face is visible direct eye contact tends to be avoided, thereby allowing the reader the ability to enjoy the image without raising anxieties over sexuality.

As with other free online men's style magazines, AskMen.com boasts a variety of computer-mediated communication opportunities for readers to engage with the content, such as blogs and discussion forums. This paper focuses on a popular and fairly ubiquitous resource – 'readers' comments/posts', which is located either at the bottom of each electronic page or at the end of the article. Readers are able to pass comments of up to 800 characters in length and rate the article on a scale of 1-5, where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent. Readers also anonymise themselves with 'tags' or 'avatars', and produce their 'talk' without face-to-face interaction; however, they are still able to achieve identities for themselves and each other through categorisation (see Vallis 2001). The extracts appear in the original including spelling mistakes and vernacular expressions, albeit with avatars and signature omitted. We have included line numbers for ease of analysis.

Analysis

We begin by considering the lead article by Brennan - '*Are You A Metrosexual?*' – in order to contextualise the reader responses, which we then analyse. We suggest that the article is structured around two main themes of interest regarding the construction of 'metrosexual' masculinity. The first theme focuses on the fluid meaning of 'metrosexuality' with respect to a range of often feminised practices. The second theme concerns attempts to construct certitude by defining and clarifying the parameters that constitute membership of 'metrosexuality'. Both themes are discussed in the following two extracts that are drawn from the first two pages of Brennan's article.

Extract 1

1. David Beckham has been called the poster boy for metrosexuality, but
2. don't you want to know if you're "metro" too?
3. Metrosexual
4. With so many buzzwords making their way onto, across, and off the scene

5. before you can say "supercalafragilisticexpi" -- okay, before you can say
 6. "boo" -- you've probably already noticed that you need help keeping up
 7. with today's hippest terms. One of the latest to confuse alert readers is
 8. metrosexual.

9. *Witness this:*

10. Joe says to Tyrone, "So this... guy , at work today, he calls
 11. me a metrosexual at lunch in front of a bunch of people at the coffee
 12. machine. I didn't know what to do!"
 13. "Whatever did you do ?" implored
 14. Tyrone, with mock interest in Joe's latest miniature social crisis.
 15. "Well," said Joe, taking the cue, "I wasn't quite sure what he meant. So I
 16. says to him, 'What did you mean?' But before he can say anything... I'm
 17. just filled with this rage, you know?" says Joe.
 18. "So what did you do?" implored Tyrone, this time with genuine interest in
 19. his friend's violent tendencies.
 20. "I don't wanna tell ya. First, ya gotta tell me what the hell this metrosexual
 21. business is about, so's I'll know if I done the right thing or not. So spill,
 22. brainiac."
 23. Tyrone considered his response carefully, finally coming up with
 24. "Uhh...?"

25. If a situation like this one has befallen you or someone you know, don't
 26. worry friend, you're not alone. The term in question is so close to
 27. something you firmly identify with, but as with "murse" (or "manbag," i.e.
 28. a man's purse), that first letter changes everything. So before you go
 29. punching some guy in the mouth that you shouldn't have -- or worse, go
 30. missin' out on poppin' some guy ya shooda (which would probably
 31. indicate that you're not a metrosexual) -- how about a little edification, for
 32. the road.

Brennan begins his article by directing readers' attention to David Beckham 'the poster boy for metrosexuality' (1), thus providing readers with an internationally known icon as a reference point. This immediately implies 'metrosexuality' as a normative (although new) masculine category, since David Beckham can be considered successful in business, marriage, fatherhood and sport – all classic markers of masculine status (Donaldson 1993). However, what is also evident from Brennan's introductory sentence is that there is potential for ambiguity and therefore the consequent need to construct certitude (Beck 1997). Brennan's implicit position as an authority -'don't you want to know if you're "metro" too?' (2) - echoes the 'how to' and 'advice and guidance' sections in men's style magazines commonly given to constructing certitude (Jackson *et al.* 2003, p. 128).

But 'why in this community (of readers) does it seem to trouble identity?' (Wetherell 1998, p. 404). Brennan provides the answer: the metrosexuality question 'confuse(s) alert readers' (7), implying fluid or multiple parameters. He demonstrates this in a short vignette in which one of the characters, Joe, is telling Tyrone the story of his reaction to a guy who called him 'a metrosexual at lunch in front of a bunch of people at the coffee machine' (10-12). The colleague's categorisation of Joe as 'metrosexual' resulted in him filling with 'rage' (17) - Joe presumably read 'metrosexual' as another term for 'homosexual' and therefore a term of abuse. The categorisation work that Brennan achieves at this point in the article suggests that the category-bound activities and predicates of 'metrosexuality' are coterminous with 'homosexuality', which is commonly regarded as a 'defective', 'different' or 'phony' category (Sacks 1998, Schegloff 2007).

Brennan deals with the potential destabilisation of 'metrosexuality' and its presumed association with homosexuality by attempting a re-alignment with heterosexuality. Firstly, he identifies 'metrosexuality' as coterminous with heterosexuality: 'The term in question is so close to something you firmly identify with, but as with "murse" (or "manbag," i.e. a man's purse), that first letter changes everything' (26-28). Drawing on Speer's (2005, p. 119-120) description of categories, this move can

be read as an attempt to lock a heteronormative meaning of ‘metrosexuality’ into place. This is also evident in Brennan’s second strategy, which invokes a subtle form of homophobia: ‘So before you go punching some guy in the mouth that you shouldn’t have -- or worse, go missin’ out on poppin’ some guy ya shooda (which would probably indicate that you’re not a metrosexual) (28-31). Brennan’s category work also highlights the ‘corresponding flexibility of categories’, especially relatively new categories like ‘metrosexual’. In other words, the category label ‘metrosexual’, which was positioned in the extract as a potential term of abuse (for some heterosexual readers) – homosexual – is in the process of being reclaimed or “revolutionized” (Speer 2005, p. 119-120).

The following section of Brennan’s article defines the category predicates associated with ‘metrosexuality’. The activities and attributes in the list provide readers with an ‘orientated-to-procedure’ (Jefferson 1991, p. 68). In other words, it provides them with a means to position themselves in relation to a list, such that they can either ascribe to, or disavow membership, based on the items provided. Jefferson (1991) also noted that lists serve to normalise the cited practices thereby attempting to remove uncertainty. However, as Jefferson also noted, a list is always contestable, therefore it can be seen as ‘weak’ or containing inappropriate items, thereby potentially rendering identification problematic. In Brennan’s listing, ‘metrosexuality’ and its ambiguous category-bound activities and predicates, are manoeuvred into more heterosexual masculine territory.

Extract 2

33. What is a metrosexual?

34. The newly popular media and marketing buzzword seems to mean
35. different things to different people, but in general, a metrosexual :

36. * is a modern, usually single man in touch with himself and his feminine
37. side;
38. * grooms and buffs his head and body, which he drapes in fashionable
39. clothing both at work or before hitting an evening hotspot;

40. * has discretionary income to stay up to date with the latest hairstyles, the
 41. newest threads, and the right shaped shoes;
 42. * confuses some guys when it comes to his sexuality;
 43. * makes these same guys jealous of his success with the ladies -- for many
 44. metros, to interact with women is to flirt;
 45. * impresses the women who enjoy his company with the details that make
 46. the man;
47. *Among them:*
48. - his appreciation for literature, cinema, or other arts
 49. - his flair for cooking
 50. - his savoir faire in choosing the perfect wine and music
 51. - his eye for interior design
 52. - is a city boy or, if living a commute away from downtown, is still
 53. urbane, if not rightly urban;
 54. - enjoys reading men's magazines...

Brennan acknowledges 'metrosexuality' as a fluid identity with various interpretations 'seems to mean different things to different people' (34-35). His response is to produce a general list of 'metrosexual' category-bound activities and predicates, which facilitates reader orientations to 'metrosexuality'. However, many of the items on the list, and indeed the very notion of consumption itself, are commonly associated with femininity, for example, a concern with fashion (38-41), food preparation (49), interior design (51), and so on. Citing such predicates with their feminine undertones has the potential to produce anxieties concerning masculinity (e.g. effeminacy) and sexuality (e.g. homosexuality) (Edwards 2003). Brennan deals with this unease by positioning these conventional feminised practices as part of a concomitant heterosexual masculine script. That is, linking 'metrosexual' predicates to more conventional masculine behaviours and attributes like 'partying' (39), 'wealth' (40), 'sexual promiscuity and

proWess' (43-46) and 'sophistication and culture' (48-54). This serves to re-masculinise the ambiguous 'metrosexual'-bound activities, a common strategy found not only in men's magazines (Stevenson *et al.* 2003), but also in other areas where men are involved in typically feminised realms (see Simpson 2005, Gough 2007, Harrison 2008). What is also an interesting point with the article is that it highlights the potential transformativeness of categories and the flexibility pertaining to the deployment of aspects of masculinity (e.g. consumption), at least for some men. Glossing specific hitherto feminised metrosexual practices as masculine works to legitimise a contemporary consumer-oriented version of masculinity – and to hold traditional masculine disinterest in appearance as morally accountable (Jayyusi 1984).

Readers' responses

The following extracts are a selection of readers' responses to the Membership Category Devices (MCD) 'sex' (Sacks 1992). Readers explicitly define themselves as either 'men' or 'women'. However, the category 'men' also acts as an MCD because readers perceive their identities as distinct from other male categories, for example 'gay men', 'rugged men' and 'metrosexual men'. Membership of these categories, as our analysis will show, accrues certain rules largely determined by the perception of distinct category-bound activities and predicates. When a reader juxtaposes a category with activities that are not normatively associated with that category a disjuncture can occur requiring some level of moral accountability (Baker 2000, Jayyusi 1984).

'Gay' male responses: Metrosexuality as superficial strategy

The following two examples have been posted by self-identified gay men:

Response 1

Posted 2007-08-17 03:15 Rating: ★★

55. *phillyphotoscott* says:
56. Nonsense. Metrosexuals are simply straight guys that do all of the things that
57. gay guys have done or been for years. They are the copycats of wearing
58. earrings, getting eyebrow trims, body hair trims or waxings, manicures, are
59. well-groomed, fashionable dressers, polite, intelligent, culturally aware and
60. respectful of women as people instead of as conquests. They follow our
61. hairstyles, decorating styles creative directions, music cues, and more. Many
62. see the attention we get and want it themselves, especially from women who
63. regard us as fun friends and not circling buzzards. BTW: Check out a gay
64. club to find out what the buzz will be next year. Oh, and it's spelled
65. Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.

Phillyphotoscott's immediate response ('nonsense', 56), allied with his two-star rating of Brennan's article, provide an initial backdrop for his subsequent critique. *Phillyphotoscott's* statement 'Metrosexuals are simply straight guys that do all of the things that gay guys have done or been for years' (56-7) suggest heterosexual and homosexual identities can be contrasted on other aspects aside from sexuality (Speer 2005, p. 118) and, moreover, that a blurring of heterosexual and homosexual identities is occurring. *Phillyphotoscott's* suggestion that 'straight men' 'are 'copycats' (99) of 'gay' identity casts 'straight' men's co-option of gay-associated practices as illegitimate, inauthentic and self-serving. Specifically, drawing on Hester and Eglin's (1997) 'category, predicate and task', a 'metrosexual' orientation serves to increase heterosexual prowess: 'Many see the attention we get and want it for themselves, especially from women' (61-2). *Phillyphotoscott's* critique of 'copycatting' allows us to see how members of a particular category perceive their identities as distinct from other identities and that potential identity forays are often met with challenges and defensive actions.

The next self-ascribing gay reader response also positions 'metrosexuals' as 'copycats', but this time of women's category-bounded activities and predicates as well as those of gay men. The contrasting of categories and their associated activities and predicates work less as an attack on 'metrosexuality', but more as a defence against

social perceptions of gay men as effeminate. Thus the only apparent difference between homosexual and heterosexual men's identities is their sexual preference and not their other category-bound activities and predicates.

Response 2

Posted 2009-07-24 22:34 Rating: ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

66. *chameo* says:

67. Metrosexuals are men that look and act like women. Not all gay men act like
68. women believe it or not. I'm gay myself and my friends at the lgbt club are not
69. feminine. Only 2 out of 7 are full on feminine like "straight men think."
70. Metrosexuals are not gay they just have good style like the stereotypical gay
71. guy. So ya metrosexual is a man who has gay features. So what.

Chameo's statement that 'Metrosexuals are men that look and act like women' (66) sets the metrosexual up as a transgressor of feminine identity and consequently as occupying a non-normative masculine identity. This statement is followed by an immediate defence of gay identity 'Not all gay men act like women believe it or not' (66-7), further reinforced by a members insider knowledge: 'myself and my friends at the lgbt club are not feminine' (68-9). Non-normative categories such as homosexuality and 'metrosexuality' are often seen as delicate categories because they contravene the common-sense knowledge, or what is known about a masculine category, in a predominantly heteronormative society with perceived gender distinctions. Homosexuality therefore, is seen as 'exception', 'different', or even a disjunctive category by virtue of its member's sexual orientations (Schegloff 2007, p. 469). Since homosexuality contravenes heteronormativity, it has often had feminine attributes ascribed to its members (Whitehead and Barrett 2001). Therefore, *chameo's* response can be read as suggesting that the majority of gay men 'only 2 out of 7 are full on feminine' (112) are potentially more masculine than the heterosexual 'metrosexual', which Brennan suggests 'has gone mainstream' (88, extract 4).

Both *chameo's* and *phillyphotoscott's* responses then work to reposition gay identities as superior to conventional heterosexual and heterosexual 'metrosexual'

identities in their masculinity or fashion styles, which serves to challenge the authenticity and newness of ‘metrosexuality’ that Brennan is suggesting. This also provides us with a valuable insight into how members attempt to lock category meaning into place, such that homosexuality and heterosexuality are distinct identities, whilst at the same time demonstrating how heterosexuality as a category label is in the process of being ‘revolutionised’ by incorporating non-normative category-bound activities and predicates (Speer 2005, p. 119). In other words, the way categories and the meanings attached to them are ‘challenged, preserved, overthrown and renewed’ (Nilan 1995, p. 71).

Responses from women: Metrosexuals as love/hate figures

In the next two responses from women readers there is a mixed response to ‘metrosexuality’. The first can be seen as an attempt to preserve conventional gendered identities, whereas the second supports this contemporary form of masculinity.

Response 3

Posted 2009-07-10 18:46 Rating: None

72. *A girls opinion* says:

73. HATE METROSEXUAL GUYS! THERE ALL INSECURE AND GAY AND

74. THEY WILL NEVER LOOK AS GOOD AS WOMEN CAN.

An initial gloss of this response is just a simple disdain for Brennan’s article and ‘metrosexuals’, demonstrable in capitalisation and extreme case formulations (‘HATE’; ‘ALL’; ‘NEVER’: 73-4). However, if we use Hester and Eglin’s (1997) ‘category, predicate and task’ we can see that she presumes that ‘metrosexuality’ and its associated activities and predicates constitute an attempt by men to look better than women, which she objects to. What is also evident is the presumption that male and female identities should normatively be distinct from each other, with gendered practices and ideals retained as

separate spheres, which provides security of identity. ‘Metrosexuals’, on the other hand, are seen to be challenging this discreteness and so her response contains a three-part list (Jefferson 1991) of terms designed to undermine this category: ‘THERE ALL INSECURE’... ‘GAY’... ‘NEVER LOOK AS GOOD AS WOMEN’ (116-117). The list (and the whole response) therefore works to challenge the positive stance of the article, halt men’s forays into feminised identity spaces and lock or preserve conventional gendered meaning (Speers 2005).

Response 4

Posted 2008-04-22 19:15 Rating: ★★☆☆☆

75. *Monica* says:

76. Hello. I came upon this article as I was googling the term metrosexual to find
 77. out if I was right about my ex. I probably shouldn't be posting since this
 78. seems to be a site for men but I just wanted to say that this is a great article. It
 79. describes my ex 100%. And it's true metrosexuals are not gay they just care
 80. about the way they look and therefore like to be clean and have good hygiene.
 81. My ex also liked cooking and dancing. He was very understanding and well-
 82. mannered too and lived on his own downtown. And was good at flirting.
 83. People would think he was gay from the way he looked since he was well-
 84. groomed (did the eyebrows etc.). I thought so too when i first met him. But I
 85. just want you all to know that you are right -- Girls do like Metrosexuals! I
 86. would definitely date one again

Conversely, *Monica*'s positive response sees Brennan's article as advice and guidance: ‘this is a great article. It describes my ex 100%’ (78-9). She presents the article as usefully confirming suspicions about her ex and his non-normative category-bound activities and predicates, such as investment in personal hygiene and self-presentation. *Monica* supports this new type of ‘metrosexual’ masculinity, actively drawing on aspects of Brennan's list of ‘metrosexual’-bound activities and predicates (see extract 2). This

endorsement also serves as an implicit critique of more conventional masculinities, particularly a disdain for self-presentation. However, although *Monica* voices support for these developments in masculine identity she is careful to maintain, like Brennan, that this does not raise issues concerning metrosexuals' sexuality, since 'it's true metrosexuals are not gay' (79) and that 'Girls do like Metrosexuals!' (85). *Monica's* support and construction of 'metrosexuality' allows us to the 'social identity boundary maintenance work' of new (and old) gendered identities in which speakers categorize and position themselves and others in relation to particular conceptions of gender (Nilan 1994, p. 142).

Responses from traditional men: backlash!

In the next two responses from self-identifying 'real men', we can see that 'metrosexual' trends are seen as a challenge to orthodox masculinity.

Response 5

Posted 2008-10-06 14:57 Rating: ★★★★★

87. *Robert* says:

88. Men today are too concern about the way they look is true. but many times is
 89. not their fault, society makes them that way..for ex; when someone goes for a
 90. job interview; oh you gotta shave that ruggedness..oh you have to have those
 91. finger nails clean..oh you have to use moisturizers oh your face and hands..
 92. and oh of course you have to use hair product of some kind. But Real
 93. Men shouldn't worry much about the way they look and is that rugged manly
 94. grossness that most hot and sexy women are attracted too.

So, when men opt for 'metrosexual'-style practices, it is not a free choice, nor can they be blamed ('not their fault, society makes them that way': 89). The lengths to which men are supposedly now required to go to are emphasised in a four-item list ('shave'; 'nails clean'; 'moisturizers'; 'hair product'), rendered in a satirical way to undermine

their provenance ('oh you have to have...'). Such excessive and unnecessary activities are then contrasted to the preferred essence of the capitalized 'Real Men' who are unconcerned with appearance since their natural state of 'rugged manly grossness' (93-4) enhances his (hetero-)sexual attractiveness (to 'hot and sexy women': 94). By implication, a 'metrosexualised' man, albeit time- and situation- limited, is a mere false shadow of masculinity unable to secure sexual success.

Response 6

Posted 2008-08-10 21:32 Rating: None

95. *Kem* says:

96. I would be offended being called a metrosexual, which I am not. I definitely
 97. would be punching somebody or at least confront them. That's why I dress
 98. like a man and behave like one. Guys are getting too soft out there. Women
 99. hate that. They like rugged men, just like we are supposed to be. Peace out.

Kem's response appears to relate to the Brennan's introductory section by providing the reader with an account of how he would respond to someone calling him a 'metrosexual' 'I definitely would be punching somebody or at least confront them (96-7). This repudiation of metrosexuality is predicated on an unmanly dress sense and general 'softness' (97-8), and *Kem* positions himself firmly in the non-metro masculine camp ('I dress like a man and behave like one': 97-8). A trend towards softness is critiqued ('too soft': 98) on the basis that such an orientation is unappealing for the opposite sex ('Women hate that': 98-9) – precisely the same warrant invoked previous pro-'metrosexual' discourse (see below)! The use of sweeping categories ('guys', 'women'), allied with short, definitive statements ('Guys are getting too soft'; 'Women hate that'), lends the account an authoritative air. The claim about women's preferences is then elaborated ('They like rugged men...': 99), deploying an alternative male category that is then given a positive moral gloss ('just like we are supposed to be': 99). Thus the status of traditional men is worked up while the contemporary 'metrosexual' man is

subordinated. In more Membership Categorisation Analysis terms, *Kem*'s display of appropriate category knowledge for a 'man' (74) positions him 'as powerful knower of the 'right' way for 'real' men to act" (Nilan 1994, p. 158) – and how such actions will be received by others, notably women. As a result he implies 'metrosexual' dress sense is coterminous with 'homosexuality', and it follows that, if the 'metrosexual' does not attract women, then he must presumably attract other men.

Responses from 'metrosexuals': Defending the modern man

The following two responses from self-ascribing metrosexuals can be seen to defend and negotiate their identities in relation to potential charges such as 'effeminacy' and 'homosexuality'; they can also be read as claims to the authenticity and legitimacy of a new masculine identity. The first response by *Rafael* makes explicit reference to *Robert* (response 5), but also appears to draw on Brennan's list of category-bound activities and predicates. In this post it is 'real' men who are pilloried while men who qualify as 'metrosexual' via grooming habits and body care are construed as more masculine, as indicated by heterosexual success:

Response 7

Posted 2008-11-06 03:10 Rating: None

100. *Rafael* says:

101. Robert, just like you think now, once I thought that metrosexual
 102. was a gay guy that dresses like a man, or something too delicate to be a man.
 103. Later I found out, I was a metrosexual myself. A man that does care for his
 104. looks, the way he smells, the way he behaves, the way he approaches women
 105. and a man that goes to the gym trying to keep his looks up. I am 32 and I can
 106. say I have been successful with woman my entire life never needing to pay for
 107. one to please me, like some real man as they think they are with their rugged
 108. manly grossness need to do, because a sane sexy woman can not take his beer
 109. and tobacco smell unless they pay her to do it. I am married now, I am the
 110. father of a beautiful girl and the husband of a stunning woman I love, and you

111. know what guys, I am still a metro.

Rafael's response is easily glossed as a simple 'metrosexual' rebuttal to Robert's post (response 5), but it extends to asserting 'metrosexuality' as more assured, effective and masculine than conventional masculinity. This stance is first advanced through recourse to knowledge and enlightenment: 'just like you think now, once I thought that metrosexual was a gay guy that dresses like a man, or something too delicate to be a man. Later I found out, I was a metrosexual myself' (101-3). Secondly, Rafael emphasises masculine identity markers of self-respect: 'A man that does care for his looks, they way he smells, the way he behaves' (103-4), and heterosexuality: 'I have been successful with woman my entire life' (106). What is also interesting about *Rafael's* post is that rather than only construct an argument that accounts for his non-conformity to conventional masculinity, he makes conventional men morally accountable for their lack of self-respect, which he claims affects their heterosexual masculine status 'I have been successful with woman my entire life never needing to pay for one to please me, like some real man as they think they are with their rugged manly grossness need to do, because a sane sexy woman can not take his beer and tobacco smell unless they pay her to do it' (106-9). What *Rafael's* response does then, is to allow us to see how the emergence of a new identity category can be used to hold more conventional identities morally accountable for not succumbing to social change, whilst at the same time drawing on aspects of conventional masculinity to bolster the vaunted contemporary configuration of masculinity (Jayyusi 1984).

Response 8

Posted 2008-10-07 08:18 Rating: ★★★★★

112. *man* says:

113. I have been called a metrosexual multiple times by girls and I thought it has a
 114. bad connotation. After reading this article, I feel more comfortable about
 115. myself now. I like the comment about how being a "metrosexual" is the new
 116. word for cultured men. I know how to cook, clean, sew and groom myself. I

117. use two types of hair styling products, use cleansers, use moisturizers, wear
 118. fashionable clothes, not averse to shopping, and i am a romantic. All of those
 119. point towards me being a metrosexual and I like it. I am being hit on a lot
 120. more now after my transition of being a bookworm to a chique guy.

Man's initial response is similar to Brennan's introductory account (extract 1 above) of metrosexuality being used and frequently understood as a term of abuse: 'I thought it has a bad connotation' (113-114). However, *Man*'s subsequent response is to treat Brennan's article as an 'advice and guidance' magazine section, which reveals some kind factual truth or a 'constructed certitude' (Beck 1997) for the phenomenon of 'metrosexuality'. *Man* relates to the category of 'cultured man', which is treated as a coterminous category for 'metrosexual' (115), and which carries a variety of category-bound activities and predicates traditionally associated with women and femininity e.g. 'cook, clean, sew' and so on (116). However his account of metrosexual identity seems to suggest that these 'metrosexual' activities as more masculine and trendy than his previous categorisation 'being a bookworm' (120).

Yet since 'metrosexuality' involves traditional feminised activities, *Man* appears to be aware of the potential for these to be seen as a 'phony' masculine category e.g. 'homosexual' or 'effeminate' (Sacks 1992). As such, rather than simply identify with 'metrosexual' practices, he explicitly links his new persona of 'chique guy' to (hetero-)sexual attractiveness: 'I am being hit on a lot more now' (119-120). In other words, *Man* re-masculinises his 'metrosexual' identity. This response demonstrates the difficulties in transgressing socially defined gender binaries - and the perceived need to normalise and legitimise these activities. What is also evident from this response is that 'tell it like it is' magazine articles appear to act as important benchmarks for those readers seeking clarification for participation in non-normative activities.

Conclusion

This paper drew on MCA to engage with a unique example of a men's lifestyle magazine article engaging with the 'metrosexual' phenomenon to identify how common-sense

cultural knowledge pertaining to gender identities is invoked in the naming and development of new categories and predicates associated with particular groups. With the apparent turn to online consumption of men's magazines, the paper explored readers' electronic engagement (via comment posts) with magazine content. The amount of posts suggests this format as an effective way of attracting readers, particularly bearing in mind the potential for extended debate long after the stimulus magazine content has been published. The main focus of the analysis was the new and emergent contemporary identity 'metrosexual'. Although 'metrosexuality' is often glossed as simply a man participating in personal adornment, certain fashions and the use of grooming and cosmetic products, the magazine article and readers' responses to it suggest that aspects of conventional masculinity are being challenged - but also reproduced and re-worked to incorporate contemporary consumption and lifestyle patterns.

The analysis has shown that 'metrosexuality' has elicited both positive and negative responses and raised questions over the fixity of traditional gendered identities. Brennan's article provided an argument for 'metrosexuality' as a new and exciting heterosexual masculine identity, an argument enthusiastically endorsed by self-ascribing 'metrosexual' readers who nonetheless framed their identity in terms of classic masculine markers such as self-respect and heterosexual success. However, non-'metrosexual' responses were mixed. *Phillyphotoscott* challenged the newness of 'metrosexuality', claiming it to be a 'copycat' gay identity co-opted by straight men. *Chameo*, on the other hand, suggested that 'metrosexual' men were appropriating women's pursuits. The two women respondents positioned themselves at either end of the spectrum, with *Monica* supporting these changes in men and masculinity and *girl* viewing them as challenges to feminine identity. Challenges to gendered identity were also visible in the responses from 'real' men *Robert* and *Kem*. *Robert* attributed the metrosexual phenomenon to social pressures to conform, whereas *Kem* located blame with the individual. Thus we have a range of responses to 'metrosexuality', with some predictable and oppositional stances from self-identified metrosexuals and men classing themselves as 'real' or 'rugged', while the contributions of gay men and women proved mixed.

What is common to all data covered in this paper, however, was a reliance on the cultural commonplace that society is predominantly heterosexual comprising two sexes

associated with distinct gendered attributes and category-bounded activities. As the analysis showed, it is extremely difficult for other membership categories to emerge which encompass attributes and activities normally associated with the opposite sex – new members risk being positioned as ‘defective’ or ‘phony’ (Sacks 1992, Schegloff 2007). When such categories are articulated they face moral accountability for transgressing conventional gender identity boundaries (Jayyusi 1994). Many of the charges by non-‘metrosexuals’ were seen to have materialised from more normative (‘real’) forms of masculinity, constructing ‘metrosexuality’ as superficial, inauthentic and unmanly. The pull of conventional masculinity is highlighted by ‘metrosexual’ supporters’ moves to masculinise ‘metrosexual’ activities (self respect, sexual success). The analysis therefore, shows how the practices of newly forming categories are important to study if we are to gain a greater understanding of how identity categories regulate practices and the difficulties people face in challenging the boundaries of gendered identities. Studying everyday category use is important for understanding how everyday interaction is achieved through categorisation, how they are used, what is involved in setting out categories and what is known about the members and the properties of the category.

More generally, the moves to masculinise ‘metrosexual’ activities highlight the enduring appeal of hegemonic masculine ideals and practices. While ‘metrosexuality’ can readily dispense with denigrated, unfashionable aspects of the traditional male repertoire (poor hygiene, disinterest in appearance, sagging physiques), it nonetheless draws on still powerful masculinised markers such as self-respect and heterosexual success. Such analysis concurs with other work in men’s studies which underlines masculinity as a multifaceted resource which can be creatively deployed to fulfil various functions (Wetherell & Edley 1999; Gough 2009; DeVisser & Smith, 2008). At the same time, our analysis reminds us of the continued power exerted by particular aspects of hegemonic masculinity and the way these can be incorporated into newly forming identifications and practices, repackaged for a consumer-driven image-conscious society.

Further work is required to examine the construction and negotiation of ‘metrosexuality’ in other online and offline contexts. We have already analysed data from a discussion forum dedicated to ‘metrosexuality’ (Hall *et al.* submitted) but it would be

interesting to study how metrosexuality is invoked in non-magazine contexts; for example, we are currently scoping data from YouTube where ‘metrosexual’ activities are advocated by men (e.g. wearing make-up). Such a focus on the ‘doing’ of ‘metrosexuality’ (e.g. the application of eyeliner) would add a much needed visual dimension to the research while capturing ‘metrosexual’ practices in situ. Offline interviews, focus groups and video-diaries featuring self-identified ‘metrosexuals’ and their significant others would also help extend our understanding of contemporary masculinities. We invite other gender scholars to join us in researching this important and fascinating phenomenon.

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