

MASCULINITY
and
REPRESENTATION

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MASCULINITY and REPRESENTATION

*A Multimodal Critical Approach
to Male Identity Constructions*



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Foreword

This book is a brief attempt to critically discuss some, and only ‘some’, emerging ways of representing ‘masculinities’ in contemporary media discourses. The confluence of very diverse discourses on gender, men, and hegemony has often resulted in the creation of a general, rather fuzzy category we frequently refer to as ‘hegemonic masculinity’. This somewhat arbitrary phrase has been *ab-used* in different fields of research for over 60 years, and surprisingly, it still carries considerable weight today. On the one hand, ‘hegemonic masculinity’ tends to anchor the extensive field of men’s studies, also known as masculinity studies (the critical studies of men) within feminist accounts of patriarchy and sociological models of gender. On the other hand, and this is the main acceptance, the expression is often held accountable for the dissemination of popular anxieties about men and, to a greater extent, ‘boys’ as actors in social practice.

(Mis)Applications of this blurred category can be found in various research fields, ranging from education and social sciences to psychology, and health and counselling, to name but a few. The literature on the topic abounds with references to heterosexual hegemonic masculinity, traditionally acknowledged as the normative gender within the ideological structure of patriarchal culture. This angle of observation, however, does not cater for the diversity of identities we live by, and the manifold ways in which *gender* is articulated through a variety of positioning, languages, apparatuses, organisations and institutions. Different forms of masculinities have been and are constantly constructed, so that what masculinity really means today is inevitably forged by historical influences, cultural circumstances and social discourses, and not merely by accidental biology. According to Berger *et al.* (1995: 3) “gender roles, the subject positions we occupy in society, are constructed from a complex web of influences: some of these effects we control, others we do not”. Thus, the working hypothesis presented here is anchored to the notion that since “our identities are historically forged, it is also important to retain the substance of our individual experience as a theoretical resource” (Seidler, 1989: 1).

In this book, I strongly posit that it is only by engaging with the individual, personal accounts and perceptions of masculinities that it becomes possible to understand and critically discuss what masculinity, or rather different forms of masculinities might, at present, be. Identities are shaped by the multiple, personal experiences each individual has in

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the world. Davies (1989: 230) suggests that “our subjectivities are experienced as if they were entirely our own because we take on the discursive practices and story-lines as if they were our own and make sense of them in terms of our own particular experiences”.

Against this backdrop, this volume intends to explore the discursive construction of masculinities through an accurate observation of linguistic and multimodal gendered *other*-representation. By exploring the nature of systemic functional representation through Halliday’s ideational, textual and representational meta-functions (1978) and their re-elaboration by Kress and van Leeuwen’s analysis of visual resources, this study aims to critically analyse male discourses and their agency within society. The main endeavour of the present research is to bring to the fore the strong link which exists between stereotypical representations of men and discourses of both femininity and sexuality in the construction of dominant tropes of masculinities in British print advertisements. As an engine of consumption, advertising plays a strong role in construing dualistic gender roles and prescribing sexual identities. Within this logic, iconic masculinities such as shaving, having a hearty appetite, smoking cigars, driving fast cars, and drinking liquor, are contrasted with feminine activities such as applying makeup, being on a diet, driving a minivan, doing the laundry, and looking after the home.

Using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis as a methodological framework, this book outlines how masculine identities interact with the consumption of products, desires, and passions in consumer cultures. Representations of the male body are seen as discursive ‘ploys’ construed at the intersection of consumption and marketing across cultures in multimodal discourses such as advertising. The book analyses a small corpus, the *MALE*corpus, comprising 10 print covers from the British edition of the well-known and bestseller magazine *Men’s Health*. In view of this, the book investigates how masculinity is constructed, both verbally and visually, on the ten covers of the British men’s magazine. It will do so by adapting Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar and Kress and van Leeuwen’s model of visual grammar.

The author is well aware that the conclusions drawn from this study cannot be generalised, since the analysis was conducted on a very small data set. However, it would be interesting to see the same methodology applied on a larger data set in order to provide a more convincing evidence of the way contemporary men are portrayed by the media.