

Title: 'It's a metrosexual thing': A discourse analytical examination of masculinities  
Dissertation Completed: February, 2014; Nottingham Trent University, UK (Dissertation advisors: Professor Brendan Gough and Dr. Sarah Seymour-Smith)

### *Foundation and rationale of the research*

Men consume, as never before, a plethora of grooming and image enhancing products with many men continuing to spend more than £10 per week throughout the recession. Predictably, the biggest consumers of such products are those aged 18-24. Only the over 55s begin to reduce general consumption, with hair colouring products bucking the trend (Mintel Oxygen, 2012). This trend is not only confined to the more developed nations but also other less developed parts of the world too. Even with cultural differences, manufacturers of non-traditional image enhancing products have enjoyed some of the best market growth challenging market giants such as Gillette. Whilst men's interest in grooming and image enhancement is, of course, nothing new, traditionally it's been practiced only by the likes of sub-cultures, performers, and the wealthy (Osgerby, 2003). But since the 1980s the extent of men's interest in grooming has increased exponentially.

Various explanations have been put forward to account for this shift, crediting the gay movement (Simpson, 1994), feminists (Collier, 1992), late capitalist consumer societies, (Featherstone, 1991), the style press and celebrityism (Gill, Henwood, & McLean, 2005). What this change points to is a blurring of traditional gender-discrete activities and as a result represents a challenge to the dominance of 'hegemonic' or idealised dominant masculine scripts (Connell, 1995).

Such changes in men's practices have not gone unnoticed with media commentators suggesting that this represents a 'new, narcissistic, media-saturated, self-conscious kind of masculinity' (Simpson, 2004, p.1). Scholars have also examined this phenomenon but predominately from sociological perspectives arguing it challenges traditional notions of gender and sexuality through an interest in typically feminised practices (Carniel, 2009), but also that by unhinging it from gender and sexuality it represents an asexual personal aesthetic lifestyle (Coad, 2008). However, what we didn't know was how self-identifying 'metrosexuals' defined, constructed, and negotiated their identity in relation to other gender and sexual identities. By examining 'metrosexuals' own identity boundary work and the challenges to these offered a valuable insight into the construction of contemporary masculinities *in situ*.

### *Hypotheses*

The exploratory aims of this study were fourfold: (1) How do men self-identify with, disavow, and negotiate metrosexuality? (2) How is 'metrosexuality' defined as a category and what are the essential characteristics and practices of membership? (3) How is 'metrosexuality' presented in reference to other gender and sexual identities? (4) To what extent does 'metrosexuality' challenge more conventional forms of masculinity or constitute a new masculine identity?

### *Methodology*

The Internet is routinely associated with freedom of identity in the absence of face-to-face interaction. As such newly forming, and arguably contentious, identities are arguably more easily claimed online and indeed, such spaces provide users with access to geographically dispersed support networks with those sharing the same experiences (Coyle & MacWhannell, 2002).

Given this opportunity I examined four separate but interrelated forms of English speaking online data from 2008-2011 where both self-identified 'metrosexuals' and 'non-

metrosexuals' post electronic talk. Study one examined an article published in a popular online only men's lifestyle magazine. In particular the study focused on how 'metrosexuality' is presented and discussed in the media. I analyse the article and eight reader responses from 'gay' men, women, 'real' men and 'metrosexuals' showing the achievement of 'metrosexual' identity boundary work and some of the issues associated with may be considered transgressive behaviour. Continuing with this theme I specifically examine 'metrosexuals'' own identity work. I analyse a discussion thread involving fourteen contributors where candidate 'metrosexual-bound' activities, behaviours and product consumption are discussed in depth. Since cosmetic use was considered a more extreme aspect of 'metrosexuality' I analysed a video created by a 'metrosexual' demonstrating his daily makeup routine. My analysis of the accompanying electronic talk centres on how the video creator and other eight 'metrosexuals' respondents masculinise their practice. Similarly, study four explores how ten men who posted testimonials on a popular men's cosmetics manufacturer's website manage stake in using these typically feminised items and how these testimonials are deployed by marketers. I analysed these electronic texts with discursive psychological (Edwards & Potter, 1992) and membership categorisation analytical (Sacks, 1992) approaches.

Membership categorisation analysis shows the culturally rich common-sense knowledge contained in identity markers such as 'metrosexual' and how these mundane taken-for-granted 'facts' about gender-appropriate behaviour and characters are worked out in everyday talk. This method shows the negotiation of category parameters and social change in light of challenges to conventional gender-appropriate behavior and the relation to men's presumed obligations to more hegemonic forms of masculinity (Connell, 1995). Discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992), on the other hand, focuses on the selection of adequate descriptions and references from an infinite number of possibilities. Of course, the selection, construction and management of these are not by chance; they are designed specifically to construct and manage identities and social relations, make particular inferences, and promote specific interests.

### *Results*

The analysis of the four separate but interrelated studies found that: (1) Men identify with and negotiate metrosexuality as a modern masculine identity distinguishing it from more conventional forms of masculinity. (2) Metrosexuality is defined as a more liberal and equitable identity which embraces some traditional feminine and/or 'gay' appearance-related practices and characteristics. This includes; enjoying shopping, applying makeup, wearing figure-hugging clothing, cooking, interior-design, childcare, etc. (3) The 'metrosexual' is presented in the media as a stylish heterosexual man, whereas public opinion is mixed which includes presenting 'metrosexuality' as coterminous with homosexuality and effeminacy. (4) 'Metrosexuality' challenges conventional forms of masculinity with its interested in hitherto feminine appearance-related practices. Yet such non-traditional gender practices tend to be reframed with conventional masculine markers such as heterosexual prowess, heroism, career progression, sporting endeavor and individuality. As such 'metrosexuality' presents as traditional masculinities reworked for a contemporary consumer-driven lifestyle.

### *Conclusions and Implications*

Although 'metrosexual' men's appearance-related concerns signalled the emergence of a new masculinity, the reframing of such interests in conventional masculine terms suggests caution in dispatching too early with 'hegemonic' or more dominant notions of masculinity (Connell, 1995). Yet 'metrosexual' men's widespread engagement with appearance-related practices for career progression, sporting endeavour, sexual prowess etc. suggests also that masculinities aren't in 'crisis' (MacInnes, 2001). What these new developments suggest is

that some men are now reworking masculinities in light of modern demands and as a result masculinities are becoming more 'inclusive' (Anderson, 2005). The implications of which are: (1) The trend in dismantling gender-discrete activities and practices seems set to continue. (2) The writing might be on the wall for outmoded masculinities. (3) Whilst some men might find it these developments in non-traditional gender contexts easier (e.g. self-care, work, health), others may need additional support. (4) New forms of gender and sexual identities are emerging.

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