‘BIG, HARD and UP!’ A healthy creed for men to live by?

The social construction of reality is influenced extensively by the mass media. Commercialised images of masculinity, including discourses to interpret it, are continuously reflected and/or created by sources of mass media, in a myriad of ways. These images are subjectively loaded, but still effectively communicate to us, and even entice and persuade us. It furthermore wields extensive power over men – especially over their self-images, passions, and egos. In this article, dominating images and discourses concerning manhood and male identity – particularly those displayed in men’s health magazines (MHM) – were critically examined. This was done through a thematic analysis of 123 issues (spanning more than 10 years) of MHM cover pages. The investigation showed that MHM is infused with traditional masculine ideology. Moreover, MHM fails to confront discourses that endorse hegemonic masculinity, for the sake of holistic health. It was suggested that a sober, precautionary, health strategy should challenge men to critically engage with MHM’s reigning creed: ‘big, hard and up’. This creed incites a utilitarian view of sexuality within a culture of performance-driven masculinity, which subsequently fuels anxieties that can lead to unhealthy issues, such as body image dissatisfaction. From a pastoral care perspective, it was asserted that (specifically) Christian men need to search for alternative ways to instigate their capacity to experience and facilitate authentic intimacy, in order to work toward the social construction of more balanced and healthy discourses on male identity.

Introduction

The socio-psychological importance of contemporary mass media within a consumerist society cannot be overestimated. Global networks are progressively connected and simultaneously diverse in terms of cultures. It comprises a hypertext with astonishing integrative capacities (Castells 1999; Chamberlain & Hodgetts 2008). Our different contexts are more and more saturated with diverse media and networks of communication. These networks send intentional messages to targeted parts of audiences. Therefore, within this so-called Network Society where media networks also reconstruct power relationships, mass media are vitally important in maintaining modern culture. Popular music, advertising, television, and other forms of media culture such as magazines, set forth global icons, lifestyle images, and fashion hints, as well as gendered role models. It was indicated by Durham and Kellner (2001) that:

...discourses and narratives within media cultures offer moral messages, ideological conditioning, and various patterns of proper and improper behaviour, sugar coating social and political ideas with pleasurable and seductive forms of popular entertainment. (p. 1)

Being a Christian today implies cautious but intentional as well as meaningful engagement with current media and culture. Furthermore, pastoral caregivers and practical theologians need to be more aware of the significant power of media images. We need to discover effective ways to scrutinise these images. And we need to find opportunities to influence that which so pervasively (even if subconsciously) shapes us. By theologically exploring magazines, we concretise practical (and pastoral) theology as valid interpretation – in other words hermeneutical analysis – of culture. We then engage in interpreting the material in these forms of media as expressions of core themes in society, in effect re-presenting aspects of globalising culture in theological terms.

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1. The Network Society can be defined as a major upcoming social structure system that was started after the 1950’s. Castells (1999:398–400) asserts that it is a typical feature of global (non-industrial) capitalism, based on information technology. Castells highlights the composition and interrelatedness of this so-called Network Society, which he contends, is the outcome of the merging of three independent processes in the flow of history, namely in short: (a) the information technology revolution (1970s); (b) the reorganization of capitalism and statism (1980s); and the cultural social movements with its concomitant effects, specifically feminism and ecologism (1960–1970s).

Note: This article was partially presented as an academic paper at a conference which was held at Stellenbosch University in September 2012, called Work/Force: South African Masculinities in the Media. Furthermore, for a separate article, which can be viewed as an introduction to this article, see Van der Watt and Louw (2012). This article is published in the section Practical Theology of the Society for Practical Theology in South Africa.
In this article I propose that we need a pastoral care hermeneutic that is sensitive to gender issues. Practically, it should challenge women and men to take responsibility for their lives, in order to bring to the fore vital issues of accountability within the church and broader society. Thus, pastoral theological clarifications concerning the content of men’s magazines can and should enhance the co-creation of gendered identities. This can encourage men and women to foster fundamentally healthy and meaningful lives that embody human dignity.

The apparent ‘crisis of masculinity’ as well as the perpetual critique on men’s patriarchal rule, cause confusion about male identity within the quest for equality. Therefore, this article distinctively attempts to focus on a useful yet critical evaluation of the impact of particular mass media representations – that is, those displayed in magazines – on diverse enactments of masculinity. According to Boni (2002:476), these magazines present a kind of ‘globalisation of the male body, where the global media represent a single model of masculinity, which is hegemonic and globally disciplined’. Research indicates that diverse men’s magazines portray an array of masculinity forms. However, aspects of hegemonic masculinity – that is culturally indicative ideals of masculinity within socially structured relationships where some men are deemed inferior – are indeed intertwined throughout (cf. Ricciardelli, Clow & White 2010).

As gendered beings, men individually deal with disparities between various discourses of masculinity. Recent studies assert that men’s magazines in many ways try to present collective resolutions to these conflicts (Toerien & Durrheim 2001; Viljoen 2008). Therefore, men’s lifestyle magazines are deemed as vital media to investigate in order to grasp male identity more comprehensively. More specifically, this article aims to give a pastoral care perspective on male identity discourses and masculine images as depicted in Men’s Health Magazines, within the South African context. This is done in order to enhance the aspect of finding meaning, as well as the manifestation of male identity within a framework of integrated, healthy masculinities.

Men and masculinities in the media – New ways of seeing male identity performed

Susan Bordo (1999:215) contends that our lives are profoundly influenced, even ‘ruled’ by images. Lemon (1991:126) asserts that media messages transmit ‘preferred meanings’, which mirror the concerns of society’s dominant group(s). Consequently, the media preserve and revive images and discourses, such as binary gender distinctions, which are consistent with the aims of the dominant group(s). The internet, newspapers, advertisements, music lyrics, and magazines all contain gendered images which can sustain or disrupt our ideas about gender. Therefore, the media fulfils a crucial role in continuing and regulating patriarchal ideology along with the traditional male sex role, often with abusive and dangerous side effects (Van der Watt 2012:92–100).

How we relate to our own emotional needs, our intimate partners, and our bodies, are also pertinently influenced by media images. But in complicated ways, these relations will also be altered by our social interactions and experiences. Transforming discourses and descriptions regarding manhood will, thus, demand a deliberate confrontation with illustrations of power and basic realities of power in social spheres of life. Masculinity can be assumed to be a social construct. Given this conception of masculinity, what part do the media perform in defining it? How do men (as well as women) know what behaviours are ‘manly’? In what way can (specifically) Christian men discern between healthier and less healthy depictions of manhood that influence their male identity?

Recent representations of commercialised masculinities and men in the media

During the early 1980s films, television, and adverts began to display fresh images of masculinities. Similar to the objectification of female bodies, men’s bodies were now objectified and portrayed erotically, as part of the growing commercialisation and profiteering on men as sex objects. Female bodies were always packaged as visual erotica, but the objectification of male bodies, male bodies were now objectified and portrayed erotically, as part of the growing commercialisation and profiteering on men as sex objects. Female bodies were always packaged as visual erotica, but the sexualisation was now transferred onto the male body, for marketing purposes. According to Tasker (1993:242), the inclination of Hollywood action films leans toward the formation of the male body as spectacle, accompanied by the recognition of masculinity as performance. Most movies still displayed singular support for archetypical, hypermasculine, macho images. However, since the 1970s more and more films and television programmes began to confront some of the traditional notions of masculinity. Men were now also being portrayed as capable of being caring and sensitive,

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2. Pastoral Care can be defined as a subfield of study and practice within Practical Theology. It aims to highlight resources for spiritual care and healing in a broken world, notably by its focus on the human life cycle. A pastoral-theological hermeneutic (i.e. framework of interpretation) assesses human life, especially its significance and value, not only in terms of absolute competitiveness or success. Rather, it seeks to interpret God and salvation in terms of existential life issues, and to express Christian faith practically, in terms of our human quest for dignity, meaning and identity (cf. Louw 2008:42–50; see also Woodward & Pattison 2000:1–19). Amongst other skills it aims to develop pastoral caregivers’ capacity to listen with empathy, to respond sensitively, to think contextually and psycho-dynamically about pastoral situations. This is done in order to engage in theological-ethical reflection, and to provide moral leadership in an array of cultural contexts. This article is written from this pastoral care perspective, and its main tenets direct the thematic analysis of Men’s Health magazines (as will be described later). It will implicitly guide how I eventually interpret the empirical data, as well as inform how I will (briefly) infer meaning from it.

3. In different cultural contexts, discourses on male identity and masculine images will however be interpreted differently. According to Stella Viljoen (2008:317) “Men’s lifestyle magazines in (British and American) contexts presented men with self-affirming, consumption-driven short cuts to their masculinity that cemented the various aspects of (new?) manhood. But given the melting pot of idiosyncrasies that defined the South African context, the question of whether South African men would be ready for the kind of “answers” provided by the more media-savvy developed world remained.” (own italics)

4. Lemon (1991:183) indicates that masculinity depicted in terms of insistent sexual desire, forms the main ingredients for today’s popular advertising, magazines, hard- and soft-core pornography etc. This aspect of the archetypical male sex role is significantly perpetuated by the mass media. Lemon explicates that sexual illustrations of phallus power – as the conclusive symbol of male virility and domination – grow rapidly in the mass media.

5. See Pettigrew (2007), who provides examples drawn from early 19th century history to show the pervasiveness of hyper-masculinity in American thought.
giving rise to (among others) the ‘New Man’ image of the 1990s and so forth.

Moreover, physical looks and possessions were now deemed as tools that transmit meanings. Young and prosperous masculinity, portrayed sensuously, now became the wellspring for a revived consumerism. Beynon (2002:108–109) asserts that the fresh, lustrous men’s style magazines functioned as the main conveyance for this business enterprise founded on male narcissism. It has indeed prompted the public mind into the area of an ambiguous and unspecified ‘new manism’.

Notwithstanding, new ‘types’ of men are continuously being created by the media. Before the start of 2000, *Millenium man* was readily spoken of; between 2003 and 2005 two popular and new catchphrase notions – namely *Metrosexual* and *Übersexual* – were minted and popularised by Marian Salzman and others. Famous ‘icons’ such as popular sportsmen, musicians, and actors spurred the trendsetting. More recently, Salzman (2012:94) contends, ‘The pampered man’ is alive and well and shopping at a beauty counter near you’.

There is apparent global consensus that masculinities have changed markedly in the last two decades of the twentieth century. But, it appears as though there is no longer any lucid agreement concerning what the ‘new man’ really represents, and this fact amplifies the so-called crisis of masculinity. Is there evidence of real change in masculinity/masculinities, or has it merely grown into something which is now marketed as a ‘branded’ or ‘design-driven’ project? Furthermore, how do these new developments, as reflected in the mass media, hinder or create an integrated – that is emotionally, psychologically, bodily, and spiritually – healthy masculine identity?

**Interpreting discourses and images from global men’s magazines**

International men’s magazines – for example, *GQ*, *FHM*, *Esquire*, *Loaded*, *Maxim*, *Arena*, and *GQ* – currently exhibit barely dressed women on their covers, and on other pages. These magazines are now brazenly teasing with pornographic material in ways that would, according to Viljoen (2005:41, 60), have been inconceivable even in the early 1990s. These magazines’ momentous financial success has caused other media areas to follow suit. Soft-core images are all the more common in advertising, as well as on television, in women’s magazines, the internet, and newspapers. However, these nude female expressions all seem to point to a significant fracture in the heterosexual male’s self-image. Sharkey (2000) contends that — amidst all their excessive flashing of macho postures, and the seemingly ironic display which accompany them – men’s magazines are ‘desperately trying to mask the poverty of contemporary masculinity’ (Sharkey 2000:173).

Men’s magazines internationally constitute a new moneymaking enterprise and serve as lifestyle handbooks providing fresh ways of positioning men-in-the-mirror’. Viljoen (2008:313) indicates how this may also serve to construct ‘consumption-driven or ‘profitable’ masculinities’, through new markets for the continual restoration of masculinity (via utilisation). Not all men read these magazines, and everyone who does give them a look, will do so selectively. Nevertheless, it remains an important locus for discourses about masculinity, which are portrayed, replicated, and sometimes even exploited on their cover pages. In light of these assertions I will hereafter offer a more detailed investigation of the primary discourses and images depicted specifically in men’s health magazines (MHM). The goal is not just to assess what their main contents denote, but also to critically investigate its effect on integrated (i.e. holistic) male health.

**Men’s Health Magazine – Something essentially healthy or not!?**

MHM is quite similar to women’s lifestyle magazines and has a wider ascription than its title proposes. It differs from many other global men’s magazines noted above, in the sense that it features scantily clad men (instead of women) on its covers. MHM’s core focus is on men’s bodily appearance, highlighting weight loss tips, healthy diets, and fitness programs. It hooks up with types of the *new man* who regard physique and fitness as primary ideals. Therefore, it clearly mirrors the nineteenth century physical culture heritage, as well as its self-improvement ethos.

MHM furthermore proposes a strong focus on psychology, including a significant amount of tips on improving self-esteem and utilising positive thinking in order to succeed. It also features sexuality advice, from erection problems to advanced techniques, purportedly packed to the brim with tons of ‘useful stuff’. But to what extent do strong assertions like ‘tons of useful stuff’ and/or ‘the magazine men live by’ (on MHM cover pages) hold truth? Is it possible that poor male health is exacerbated by many men’s excessive attempt to try and attain the macho images transmitted by MHM? Can popular, commercialised male lifestyles in effect be perilous to health? How is men’s health built up or threatened by the central images and discourses and propagated in MHM? I presume it greatly depends on one’s view of integrated health.

According to the WHO (World Health Organisation) (n.d.), health can be defined as ‘a state of complete physical, social, and mental well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’. It is an affirming notion highlighting social and personal resources, including physical capacities. Moreover, 6.In her book Looking Good, Lynne Luciano (2003) addresses in chronological fashion the new cult of male body image in post-war America, and subsequently the many ways in which men became obsessive about the way they looked.

7.Research (Budgeon 2003; Davis 2002; Pope, Phillips & Olivardia 2000) indicates that not only women often succumb to the cultural trap of trying to live up to unattainable standards of bodily appeal through aesthetics, body alterations, fashion etc. Men are indeed also falling for the same allurement, as component of the move towards consumer-oriented societies.
it is important to note that there are significant disparities between the health options of lower-class men, men with HIV, prisoners, non-white men, and their relatively privileged white, professional (middle- and upper-class) male equals. Thus, present disputes on the question of men’s health should focus enough on personal and particular viewpoints and discourse of maleness.

Men’s health has been getting more and more focus in the media during the 1990s. Sabo and Gordon (1995) conclude that health and macho attitudes are not allies and that men are the weaker sex (concerning health). Courtenay (2000) proposes that male power, the construction of masculinity, and unhealthy behaviours are intertwined:

By successfully using unhealthy beliefs and behaviours to demonstrate idealised forms of masculinity, men are able to assume positions of power – relative to women and less powerful men – in a patriarchal society that rewards this accomplishment. (p. 1397)

The reality of men often acting in manners that hamper their health in order to gain advantage and power, has serious impairing overtones for both gender equality, as well as for health betterment as a whole (cf. Sabo 2004:330–331).

**South African MHM – Analysing 123 issues**

MHM is the largest male magazine brand in the world. From 2000 to 2005 it was consecutively selected as South Africa’s best men’s magazine. This particular magazine was selected for investigation because it has a very wide readership globally and in South Africa, and because it overtly disseminates the core aim of empowering men with instruction on health affairs. As a result of the fact that I am also keen on promoting men’s emotional and spiritual health, this specific magazine’s focal point appropriately suffices as essential research data to gain insight into the cultural discourses regarding men’s health. A data set of 123 issues of MHM was used, including most of the months between April 2001 and December 2011. The study is split into two main areas of analysis: (1) front cover images and (2) the thematic content of cover stories and/or discourses.

**Cover page images**

A magazine’s cover page characterises how it prefers to display its perspective on the world and differentiate itself from its rivals. Front covers revolve around the display and development of genre identity and are unmistakably the main selling feature. According to McCracken (1993:19), ‘the cover serves to label not only the magazine, but the consumer who possess it’. Cover pages of men’s magazines can indeed be seen as significant codes of visual dogma and necessitate critical interpretation. Alexander (2003:541) expounds that it can be viewed as ‘windows of the future self’. He asserts that cover pages serve as selective scaffolding that influence both our ideas about ideal masculinity and of what follows in the magazine. I discovered that MHM cover pages disclose some particular patterns and themes. The main feature is the photographic illustration, which mirrors a uniform ‘future self’ to a particularly distinct crowd of men.

**Who is featured on the covers?**

Approximately 89% (110 out of 123) of the covers in the data set highlighted white men considered to be between 23 and 36 years of age. The remaining 13 men were African or (so-called) Coloured men, in the same age group.

**The type of masculinity presented in the embodied images**

- 100% (123 out of 123) of the cover page images display the image of masculinity as a strong-muscled and vigorous body.
- On 92% (113 out of 123) of the issues a very handsome model man was depicted from around the waist upwards.
- 72% (88 out of 123) of the covers signify a sense of masculinity which Alexander (2003:542) typifies as ‘wholesome masculinity’. Here the fixed stare of the model is neither aggressive nor indifferent. Instead, he smiles at the viewer, either openly or self-consciously. Out of the outstanding 28%, 21% (26 out of 123) can be classified as Face-off masculinity, and 7% (9 out of 123) as The Lean (using Bordo’s terms, 1999).
- 59% (73 out of 123) of the cover page model men are without shirts (all of them are very muscular – pectorals, arms and ‘six-pack’ abdomen muscles are prominently
developed); the other (50) models were wearing mostly disclosing shirts that highlight their well-toned, muscular upper torsos.

Content of presented discourses via cover stories/features: a thematic analysis

MHM cover pages reveal bodies to be adored but, notably, achieved with the least effort or displeasure. A close study of these covers’ primary written content exposed these particular themes:

- 98% (120 out of 123) of the MHM issues uses the word sex or consist of sexual material (usually indicating virility or efficacy). The other three issues omit this, reason being that they are special editions (e.g. January 2004 – ‘Anniversary 75th edition’).
- 82% (101 out of 123) uses themes or formulations linked to a ‘hard body’, in other words: best body, muscle, firm abs and power.
- 48% (59 out of 123) refer to themes or formulations linked to ‘fat reduction or weight loss’, for example: lose your gut, less fat, in shape and get fit.

In summary, the most significant theme about masculinity, which is displayed on roughly all 123 cover pages, is that men should be (hetero-) sexually16 robust and urged to achieve, with regards to exhibiting sexual potency. A solid body with muscular power17 needs to be shaped and kept intact, in order to attain a dynamic sex life. Secondly, masculinity is specifically forged as being able to design a particular look: a hard-muscled (and stylish) sexy body. The third and little less flashy group of motifs – that is of fat or particular look: a hard-muscled (and stylish) sexy body. The third and little less flashy group of motifs – that is of fat or

The harmful roots of hegemonic masculinity in MHM’s focus

Arran Stibbe (2004) scrutinised six issues of (the USA version of) MHM (from June to December 2000), to reveal that the primary discourses of MHM are founded on particular dogmatic premises. Stibbe’s analysis (2004) indicates that:

Men’s Health magazine, while giving abundant health advice, does so in a way that reproduces a type of hegemonic masculinity associated not with health, but with a variety of negative health behaviours. (p. 31)

The core issue at stake is, according to Stibbe, that MHM is drenched in stereotypical masculine beliefs and does not succeed in confronting the rhetoric of hegemonic masculinity, to the benefit of health. These assertions confirm the findings of the thematic analysis explicated in this article. It indeed amplifies the paradoxical fact that the typical way of life for men, as well as the core features of conventional, hegemonic, masculinity appear to be detrimental to male health. It has been confirmed by research that a large part of men’s high death rates is connected to their gender roles and socialising habits. In effect, although many men are currently considering their bodily and psychological health, the proof for soaring ratios of stress-related illnesses and deaths, remain. (cf. Courtenay 2000; Helgeson 1995).

The exhaustive examination done by Stibbe (2004), is conducted within a critical discourse analysis framework18. He points out many dimensions of the ideal man created by MHM. These ideals seem to stretch outside the limits of plain health concerns. Stibbe (2004:34–36) describes the ideal man as a bodybuilder; a meat eater; a beer drinker; a convenience ideal, as an icon of a generally healthy society. But questions which spontaneously come to mind are: if these discourses are suggested as the ideal male image, what would men with severe physical disabilities, or men living in poverty, or men with erectile dysfunction, or a homosexual man feel or reflect about, upon reading the MHM? It can therefore be assumed, in light of the thematic analysis and arguments thus far, that the failure to fulfil a particular masculine ideal on a personal level may result in a crisis of identity and a disintegration of health.

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food eater; a sexual champion; and a television watcher. For the aim of this article, I concisely focus on the two aspects of 'bodybuilder' and 'sexual champion', in order to indicate further how MHM is drenched in stereotypical masculine beliefs and does not succeed in confronting the rhetoric of hegemonic masculinity, to the benefit of health.

The ideal man as a bodybuilder

In what way can the so-called ideal man use his body to verify that he advocates hegemonic masculinity? Researchers (cf. Mishkind et al. 1986) discovered that most boys and young men strive to mirror the muscular man image; i.e. a well-grown and broad chest, powerful arm muscles and shoulders, as well as a narrowing down to a slim midriff. MHM primarily praises the male body as a commodity to be idolised and relished. It supplies an explicit acumen into the way in which the ideal bodily depiction of manliness is displayed in the second millennium, while designating power, energy, health, and a fit physique implicit of material prosperity.

According to Stibbe (2004:36–37) the main aim of MHM, set up via compulsory objectives, is reproducing male power through boosting muscle size. Cover page models – a crowd of men shaped alike – mirror the ideal body figure: sleek, bronzed, enormously muscular, etc. Thus, the creation of the ideal man as immensely muscular, aids the utopian ambition of duplicating male power. However, Stibbe also pinpoints the fact that ideals of huge muscles can cause unhealthy body images, eating disorders, steroid habits as well as the present 'muscle dysmorphia' disorder in bodybuilders. This echoes research findings (e.g. Barlett, Vowels & Saucier 2008; Botta 2003; Morry & Staska 2001; Spitzer, Henderson & Zivian 1999) that specifically explicate that there is a direct parallel between repeated use of steroids, elevated degrees of body image discontent, and the amount of time spent reading fitness and health magazines.

According to Frederick, Fessler and Haselton (2005:82), various studies on the topic of body image satisfaction indicate that most men, when given a choice, will opt for a more idealised version of their present body, i.e. one with more powerful muscles. Thus, the media’s influence – and here specifically magazines – on men’s body ideals and its powerful ability to bring about bodily discontent, seems irrefutable.

The ultimate question however begs to be asked: is this 'big, hard and up' creed a really healthy one to live by?

The ideal man as a sexual champion

It is very clear that supreme heterosexual sexual intercourse is one of MHM’s aims. But, contends Stibbe (2004:47), the target is not merely sex of an excellent kind, but 'tons of sex'. Consequently, an important discourse in MHM cover pages' displays of intimate relationships is a rendering of sex as simple, unavoidable, and without strings attached. Readers receiving and giving of sexual fulfilment is apparently guaranteed. Many intimate, heterosexual relations are indeed currently characterised by 'plastic sexuality', as identified by Giddens (1992:2). In other words, sexuality becomes decentralised, liberated from the requirements of conception. See illustration number 1 of the February 2008 edition here below as an example, used with permission of Jones (pers. comm., 22 June 2008) (Figure 1).

Within this framework of thought about sexuality, reaching sexual gratification or emotional closeness is perceived of in technical means of fabrication, i.e. as if within commercial domains. Furthermore, the notion that readers must incessantly go all out to attain unattainable ideals of sexual elation, is amplified by the magazines’ maxim, i.e. sex constitutes an integral component of the meaning of manhood.

Anna Rogers (2005), after analysing MHM and Loaded magazines through qualitative research, asserts that in these magazines:

A methodical approach is recommended ... This extends to issues such as performance anxiety, failed sexuality, or 'bad sex' in that they are addressed using terminology that suggests the reader might work on his sex life just as one might work with a car: 'Sex garage'. (p. 188)

24. Dittes (1985:140–141) proposes that ‘To be a man is to be expected, and to expect oneself, to be forever “up”, even “one-up”, however capricious a man’s private parts in responding to appeals to performance-on-demand: “Batter up: You’re up, kid!” “Get your spend up.” “Wake up!” “Chin up!” “Grow up.” “Measure up.” This striking concept of so-called ‘up-manship’ has influenced the choice of title for this article.

25. Bauman (1991:202) states therefore that relationships ‘tend to be confused, ambiguous, tension-ridden... likely to generate profound anxiety’, whilst Plummer (1996:xv–xx) confirms this notion by highlighting the increasing uncertainty of a so-called ‘supermarket of sexual possibilities’.
FIGURE 1: Illustration 1.

The idea of a sexual mode of production ... seems to have very little to say about closeness and commitment in sexually intimate relationships. (p. 191)

It has been pointed out by research (cf. Courtenay 2000: 1391–1392) that men are more inclined to be sexually active while intoxicated, and to have more sexual companions than women. Therefore, men are also twice as likely as women to contract STDs. Indeed, in this article’s analysis of discourses on MHM cover pages regarding advice on the ultimate ways to enjoy sex, as well as in all the narratives and depictions of euphoric sex, contraception (e.g. condoms) are not at all referred to. This generates an unproblematic and affirmative image of uncommitted sex, and risky sex. Moreover, there is no mention of building intimate relationships as strong and well-rooted connections, distinguished by long-term commitment and mutual trustworthiness – values that are generally accepted as normative within Christian notions of sexual relations. Instead, it can be inferred from the thematic analysis of its cover page images and discourses, that MHM favours an eternal and thriving bachelorhood and can thus foster a culture of unaccountability and irresponsibility.

With regards to intimate relationships, the MHM’s celebration of autonomy and fear of dependence seem to project a view of committed relationships, and by implication marriage, as a form of social constraint, preventing young men from living a life of consumptive and sexual freedom. Marriage seems to represent a restriction on masculine forms of self-definition. From a responsible Christian pastoral care perspective27 this is problematic and can lead to unhealthy and disintegrated masculinity forms.

Conclusion

In this article, by theologically exploring magazines, I attempted to concretise practical and pastoral theology as valid interpretation frameworks of culture. Therefore, in this article contemporary cultural discourses concerning masculinities were investigated, in order to assist practical theologians and pastoral caregivers to reflect critically on current images and themes in the media that co-regulate male identities.

Via this investigation I assert that theory formation within practical theology can be augmented and pastoral care interventions fostered that resist harmful and corrosive masculinity types. Pastoral caregivers are invited to help create and endorse men and masculinities that embody integrated health, through respectful intimacy and human dignity.

The MHM’s thematic analysis exposed the latent uncertainties and problems which the wider mass media, as well as men’s lifestyle magazines in particular, produce for understanding masculinity nowadays. The main discourses, as well as MHM’s objective of making maleness profitable, bring about less healthy consequences. This causes a moral impasse, because when unreachable and mythical ideals of maleness are utilised to fuel the consumer mindset, masculinities can become detrimental and ruinous, instead of bringing about life-giving vitality and dignity. Furthermore, this heralds the possibility of a masculine self-realising its deepest meaning not through sacrifice and ethical responsibility (as within a Christian worldview), but through the tragedies and triumphs of love and sex, and the idealisation of having a perfect, hard macho body.

In light of these above-mentioned trends I therefore contend that – from a pastoral care perspective, many men (including many Christian men) need an alternative interpretation framework other than the reigning cultural trends to live by. We need a fresh pastoral hermeneutic in order to discover deeper meaning and authentic relational intimacy, within a digitally networked society. I am aware that the mass media sometimes contribute valuable aspects toward the establishment of healthy masculinities. However, for many men – maybe especially for Christian men – the mass media’s in-your-face illustrations and its themes and/or motifs, will not suffice.

Fundamentally, most men require an integrated view of health. One that is able to produce a substantial manhood

27. As researcher I am aware of the fact that I cannot discharge myself of my epistemological (i.e. practical theological) engagements. Thus, I know that I did not interpret the analysed data in an epistemological void. I attempted to (very basically) infer the significance of the patterns/themes and their broader meanings and implications theologically. It has been made clear that the theoretical framework within which this thematic analysis is done, is a pastoral care perspective (i.e. hermeneutic). From this perspective, I place significant value on marriage as a God given space for relationships that are (amongst other things), distinguished by long-term commitment (fidelity) as well as mutual trustworthiness and sacrifice.

26.Viljoen (2008:239) asserts that MHM as well as FHM and GQ ‘all employ the silent but emphatic omission of almost all references to wives and children, preferring instead to depict their subjects and readers as eternally uncommitted’.

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within shifting expectations of diverse, global societies and cultural discourses. This article explicates the core issue at hand: men are basically required to rearrange themselves relative to the dominant power relations that surround them, as well as to their own embodiment. This repositioning can align them to become able to create and re-invent fresh ways of being healthy men.

It was suggested that men need to combat the adverse dimensions of stereotypical masculinity that threaten their health, and simultaneously cling to the constructive features of manhood and male lifestyles that boost men’s bodily vigour. In other words, a realistic and proactive health scenario requires of men to critically assess the so-called ‘big, hard and up’ creed. I indicated how this creed incites a utilitarian view of sexuality within a culture of performance-driven masculinity, which subsequently fuels anxieties that can lead to unhealthy issues, such as body image dissatisfaction. It was made clear that it is indeed possible that poor male health is exacerbated by many men’s excessive attempt to try and live up to the macho image propagated in MHM. And furthermore, that popular commercialised male lifestyles – promoted by main images and themes found in MHM – can actually be dangerous to men’s holistic health.

Pastoral care practitioners and caregivers are therefore encouraged to help men to meaningfully challenge the reigning ‘big, hard and up’ creed, and to instead facilitate integrated and life-giving theological perspectives on masculinities, that can generate lasting vitality and a vulnerable (spiritual-emotional) courage to embody manhood.

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