

---

# Healthy Masculinities: Are You Sexy Enough?

by Rohini Rajadorai  
Graduate of Master's of Communications and Media Studies,  
Monash University Malaysia

Health and the pursuit of beauty have often been associated as feminine traits, evidenced by the plethora of magazines and advertisements that commonly cater towards promoting a healthy lifestyle amongst women. Fitness regimes advocating women to achieve the ideal feminine body, healthy eating habits which highlight the importance of a balanced meal and various other beauty tips are splashed across media, calling on women to achieve stereotypical notions of visible feminine markers. It is interesting to note however that in more recent times, the male body has gained considerable visibility in the media, with emphasis on the constituents of the ideal masculine body. Previously a well-established form of stereotyping and sexualising women, men are now increasingly taking centre stage in media depictions, thus turning the tables on the age old objectification of women.

Images and texts of men in the media play a key role in reflecting and reproducing scripts of masculinity which influence men greatly in guiding their everyday masculine roles. One of the many areas of focus on men that are increasingly being portrayed in the media is that of men's health and their health-related behaviour. Men are often thought to subscribe to masculine ideals of appearing tough and strong as part of their dominance and power, thus feeling an aversion to overtly caring for their health, which is considered to be a more feminine trait. "By successfully using unhealthy beliefs and behaviours to demonstrate idealised forms of masculinity, men are able to assume positions of power ... in a patriarchal society that rewards this accomplishment" (Courtenay, 2000: 1397). This view further solidifies existing notions that men legitimise their manhood by dismissing their health needs in a bid to demonstrate masculinity.

Men's approach to caring for their health is ultimately viewed as a demonstration of achieving and exhibiting



Rohini Rajadorai is a self-professed nerd who enjoys reading and spinning words together. She graduated with a Master of Communication and Media Studies (MCMS) from Monash University Malaysia in 2015 and has since gone on to tackle communication in the banking industry. Although she currently deals with facts and figures and enjoys working on public policies, her passion lies with preserving nature. She has a penchant for all things quaint and quirky, and her zen includes hot cups of tea and Korean dramas with happy endings!

masculinities and is most times portrayed as such in men magazines (Jeffries and Grogan, 2012: 899–900). *Men's Health Malaysia* ("MHM"), a leading lifestyle magazine for men in the country emphasises the importance for men to maintain a healthy lifestyle, while aspiring to achieve ideal displays of masculinity – thus making healthy a sexy choice for the modern man of today. In this study I used a qualitative analysis method to identify the various forms of men's health that are promoted in *MHM* and analyse individual images and words from the text that will inadvertently reveal embedded messages of masculinity. My findings are based on an analysis of 86 articles across two issues of *MHM* magazine, January 2015 and February 2015. To guide the study in outlining accepted notions of masculinities and how they affect men's health practices, I predominantly draw from West and Zimmerman's definition of gender and concept of to "do gender", Grosz's concept of essentialism and Connell's concept of "hegemonic masculinity".

## Healthy is Sexy

The language and textual imagery used in the quotes that follow are lifted from *MHM* and emphasise health-practices that are aimed at breaking past the common misconception regarding men's health and instead advocate leading a healthy life as the true mark of

---

masculinity. The first of which being:

How Would You Like Your Bug? Creepy crawlers may be the next big thing in nutrition. According to a new study published in *Food Quality and Preference*, more than 75% of young men are willing to eat insects as meat substitute. In the study, one out of five participants claimed to be open to the idea, but the acceptance rate decline the older the age group. (*MHM*, January 2015: 22).

“How Would You Like Your Bug?” The title of the article itself is noteworthy as it quite simply appears to assume that all men will be attracted to eating bugs. The title, which is often considered to be the focal attraction of any article, does not enquire as to whether or not men would like to eat bugs, but instead asks how they would like the bugs prepared. This assumption underlies the intrinsic nature of men and the concept of “essentialism” which according to Grosz (1995: 47) is the “attribution of a fixed essence”, in this case one that is predominantly linked to the masculine act of risk-taking and adventure. In this quote, the notion of “essentialism” implies that all men are thought to have these masculine traits in them and are not subject to individual differences and preferences. The possibility of men not wanting to eat the bugs in the first place does not appear to be taken into consideration in this quote.

In this quote, it is quite apparent that the intent is to promote insects as a source of nutrition in the bid to achieve a healthy lifestyle free from meat. The language used in the quote not only appeals to the healthy aspect of eating insects, it is also an effective framing of masculinity. *MHM* positions eating insects as being an almost desirable practice instead of the common instinct to shy away from consuming such creepy crawlies, with the proclamation that “Creepy crawlers may be the next big thing in nutrition”. This line is a direct appeal to men to consider insects as part of their diet regiment as it is soon to be an in thing.

It is interesting to note however, that in this quote, eating insects which have been positioned as being healthy and nutritious has an almost positive impact in reaching out to men. The fact that in the study “one out of five participants claimed to be open to the idea” of consuming insects, indicates that men do in fact care about their health and are willing to take the necessary measures to stay healthy. This in fact runs counter to Courtenay’s concept of men practising “unhealthy beliefs and behaviours in order to demonstrate manhood” and men are instead choosing to portray their masculinity by consciously making healthy choices (Courtenay, 2000: 1397).

The implied notion of masculinity is further punctuated with statistics which proclaim that “more than 75% of young men” who were part of a study were more than “willing to eat insects as meat substitute”. The inclusion of

this statistic further solidifies that men associate risk-taking and a sense of adventure as part of being masculine. In addition to this, eating meat especially red meat has often been attributed with a positive image of masculinity owing to the link between eating meat and developing muscles. According to Adams (1990 in Stibbe, 2004: 41) meat is “a symbol and celebration of male dominance”, indicating that by eating meat, men are exercising their gender role as men and proving their societal standing as men. Positioning insects as a substitute for meat instead of promoting healthy eating through increase in intake of vegetable for example is a clever take on depicting healthy eating while encouraging men to be in touch with their masculinity.

In this manner *MHM* has captured the notion that “doing health” is a form of “doing gender” (Saltonstall, 1993: 12) as eating insects is not only adventurous but is also in keeping with their need to remain dominant and powerful. While Courtenay believes that men use unhealthy beliefs “to demonstrate idealised forms of masculinity” to “assume positions of power ... in a patriarchal society that rewards this accomplishment”, in this instance men are instead claiming their position of power as “masculine men” by engaging in healthy eating practices, which at the same time are masculine (Courtenay, 2000: 1397).

### Healthy is Visible Masculinity

In complete contrast to the preceding quote on eating insects to be healthy, the following one is all about staying healthy by engaging in physical acts that are positioned as being masculine:

Stretching, sword fighting, boxing, fight choreography – it’s like learning an intricate dance, and it’s an amazing workout. (*MHM*, January 2015: 42).

This quote was said in context of an interview with Actor Zach McGowan when asked about his exercise regime in preparation for his role in an upcoming film. The actor’s workout as depicted in the quote appears to consist of various forms of physical activity which are meant to contribute to his overall health and fitness.

“Sword fighting”, “boxing” and “fight choreography” are all extremely combative and aggressive activities which draw heavily upon notions of masculinity in being physical, dominant and displaying great amounts of strength. In this context however, these combative events appear to be portrayed as almost a necessary norm when working out, as the following lines allude to these activities as being “an amazing workout” and even equating them to the likes of “learning an intricate dance”. Positioning these activities as a dance and as part of a workout routine appears to solidify the violence and aggression that are the nature of these combative sports and almost make them commonplace in a man’s regular exercise routine.

---

These traits of masculinity are a part of displays of a “hegemonic masculinity” that men are expected to demonstrate and recognise as part of their gender achievement. “Hegemonic masculinity” is recognised as the “configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell, 2005: 77). Normative ideas of masculinity that are currently recognised by society as being hegemonic, in other words dominant, are considered to be the ideal benchmark by which men must practise their gender in realising their claim to authority and solidifying the current position of men as the more dominant sex in the social order. Highlighting an exercise routine that focuses on combative exertions of strength and power quite effectively calls on men to demonstrate “hegemonic masculinity” even when engaging in healthy activities.

Recognising and maintaining attitudes and activities that are considered to be masculine in the eyes of society will enable men to proclaim their identity and sustain their membership as men through these “identificatory displays” (West and Zimmerman, 1991: 63). It is not enough to be born with the biological markings of a male, it is through adopting normative conceptions of gender activities that a male will be recognised as being a man. In addition to this, the advocating of this exercise regime by a renowned actor who often takes on masculine roles in films further adds to the validity of these healthy activities as being masculine. As Dixon says, masculine practices can only be deemed as worthwhile if there is “an audience that can recognise and applaud it” and the relationship between an actor and his audience is an ideal testament to this as they see his words as being put into practice and the outcome can be seen to be “gender-appropriate” and masculine (Dixon, 1996: 155).

The following quote however takes being healthy and exercising masculinity to a whole different level:

Everything will die out. Your forearms burn out; you probably can't feel the last contraction, but you've got to finish the rep regardless. You're fighting yourself till the end. (MHM, February 2015: 36).

The very essence of this quote evokes the need to be extreme, aggressive and to push oneself beyond comfortable limits. Described as part of an exercise regime practised by a personal trainer, in addition to urging readers to train healthy and follow the tips and guidance provided, the words used in recounting the routine are laced heavily with notions of masculinity.

Lines such as “Everything will die out” and “Your forearms burn out” are indications of the overtly severe demands the exercise routine will have on the body. While exercise steps are meant to instil pushing perseverance and dedication in achieving the desired body and health and fitness levels, in this context the displays of masculinity

appear to be more apparent than the need to be healthy. This notion of masculinity is further reiterated by David and Brannon (1976 cited in Gentry and Harrison, 2010: 79) who as part of their four main components of masculinity have identified one part as being “Give ‘em hell”. This component emphasises that society expects men to be aggressive in all areas of their life. They must exude an aura of daring and be willing to push themselves beyond reason and fear. This is evident in the quote with the lines “you probably can't feel the last contraction, but you've got to finish the rep regardless. You're fighting yourself till the end”. Despite their exhaustion and the physical pain they feel, they are urged to push themselves further and overcome their psychological state of mind to prove their autonomy as men in building their muscles and strength.

It is a demonstration of “doing gender” at a more extreme level. Men in the eyes of society have to be strong, powerful and disciplined and by exerting themselves and pushing themselves as called for in the quote they are establishing themselves as being masculine even when doing something that should be considered as natural; exercising. When at the gym and when exercising amongst other men, embodying a strong and enduring persona as described by the trainer will not only solidify one's membership as being a man, it is also an expected demonstration of their masculinity. This is further reiterated by Connell (2005: 54) who believes that men are displaying hegemonic masculine ideals by partaking in “bodily performance” – in this context an extreme exercise routine – and by doing so are demonstrating their superiority and performance as men. Personal setbacks, exhaustion and failing to persevere are unacceptable behaviours in being masculine and men must do all that it takes to be accountable as men.

The next quote will examine the male body as an outward demonstration of masculinity:

Take a peek at the inner workings of your metabolism and how to fine tune it for an optimal performance:

- i. **In a car's engine**, molecules of gasoline are broken down to carbon dioxide and water. Our body also breaks down molecules into carbon dioxide and water.
- ii. **This break down** releases energy as explosive bursts of heat that moves the pistons in the engine, while our body releases energy as heat that maintains the body's temperature and anaerobic metabolism.
- iii. **Just like a car's engine**, your body needs fuel in order to function. You wouldn't risk driving on empty - the same applies to your body.

- 
- iv. **The better quality the fuel**, the smoother your engine runs. In this case, nourishing your body with wholesome nutrient dense food will keep your weight in check.
  - v. **Remember racing to beat the yellow light?** You floor the car to give it extra gas to run faster and then you have to stop to refuel - the same applies to your body when you workout, it needs to be replenished.
  - vi. **If you have driven a big car** with small engines before, you'd understand how impossible it is to function with 1,300 calories when you are a 70kg man. 1kg of muscle demands more fuel than 1kg fat.

(MHM, January 2015: 79).

This section of the article is from a larger write-up titled "Is your diet making you fat?" which focuses on the common misconceptions men have in achieving much desired abs and leanness, while outlining health tips that men should focus on instead if they hope to build their ideal bodies.

This part of the article uses analogies to describe the inner workings of metabolism. It presents a clear and almost visual imagery of the body, enabling readers to picture for themselves the different components at play in their bodies. While metabolism and the factors that affect them as well as the steps required to increase and maintain optimum levels differ biologically between men and women, there are underlying notions of healthy practices that should be maintained between both sexes. This article however has chosen a more gendered approach to addressing the issue of metabolism by choosing to use depictions of machinery, specifically cars and their various parts – which are considered to be masculine – to explain metabolism.

Mellstrom (2003: 19) in his research on the link between masculinity and technology of machinery discovers that men "create truly gendered spaces through their interactions and relationships with machines". Men have a sense of identification with machinery which plays on the concept of power, control and the pleasure they derive from tinkering around with machinery. Machinery, in this case cars, are codified as being masculine and men's identification with them is thought to be self-evident and essentially being interested in the workings of these machinery are a "part of what it means to be a man" (Mellstrom, 2003: 19).

For example the line "**The better quality the fuel**, the smoother your engine runs. In this case, nourishing your body with wholesome nutrient dense food will keep your weight in check". These sentences appeal to the preconceived notion that men have a strong relationship

with their cars and by ensuring that they use good quality fuel, the engines will run smoothly, just as nutritious food is good for the body. By drawing a connection between the engine and the body, men will be more inclined naturally to follow the health tips of the statement.

Other indications of masculinity and health in terms of using the analogy of the car can also be seen in the following lines, "**Remember racing to beat the yellow light?** You floor the car to give it extra gas to run faster and then you have to stop to refuel - the same applies to your body when you workout, it needs to be replenished." This statement appeals to masculine notions of risk-taking and living on the edge, in accordance to the "Give 'em hell" concept which involves being daring beyond reason. In this instance "racing to beat the yellow light" instead of slowing down as stipulated by the law and flooring "the car to give it extra gas to run faster" both allude to masculine notions of taking chances despite the possible dangers involved. These opening statements of masculinity are then tied to how workouts burn energy and the importance of eating right.

In addition to positioning and utilising the imagery of machinery as being an intrinsically masculine notion, the article also appears to draw on the concept of "essentialism" (Grosz, 1995: 47) in assuming that all men are interested in cars. The implied notion that men understand the inner workings of a car and engine and are familiar with occurrences such as "bursts of heat that moves the pistons in the engine" is an assumption that all men share the same essential masculine inclinations of cars and their inner workings. Society validates and has often stood by the notion that technology and machinery are domains of masculinity and MHM has used this concept to explain being healthy by caring for one's metabolism quite effectively.

## Conclusion

Health behaviour and practices which contribute to maintaining and leading a healthy lifestyle are often dictated by gender roles and traditional social stereotypes as is the case with men and masculinity. The positive effects of a healthy lifestyle have overarching importance in enabling men to lead a fulfilling life. The successful management of these areas contribute to their positioning as being sexy masculine men. As traditional masculine notions appear to incite men to embody unhealthy practices as demonstration of their masculinity, health messages imbedded in recognised masculine behaviours as in MHM are introduced as ways in which men can "do health" without compromising their masculine ideals. While this might be an effective method of urging men to get healthy, perhaps what needs to be challenged and examined further is the very notion of "hegemonic masculinity" and slowly breaking away from preconceived notions of masculine barriers to health.

---

## References

- Connell, R. W. (2005), *Masculinities* (2nd edition), Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Courtenay, W. H. (2000), 'Constructions of masculinity and their influence on men's well-being: a theory of gender and health', *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 50, pp. 1385-1401.
- Dixon, C. (1996), 'Having a Laugh, Having a Fight': masculinity and the conflicting needs of the self in Design and Technology', *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 147-166.
- Gentry, J. & Harrison, R. (2010), 'Is advertising a barrier to male movement toward gender change?', *Marketing Theory*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 74-96.
- Grosz, E. A. (1995), *Space, Time and Perversion: The Politics of Bodies*, Routledge, Sydney.
- Jeffries, M. & Grogan, S. (2012), 'Oh, I'm just, you know, a little bit weak because I'm going to the doctor's': Young men's talk of self-referral to primary healthcare services', *Psychology and Health*, vol. 27, no. 8, pp. 898-915.
- Mellstrom, U. (2003), *Masculinity, Power and Technology: A Malaysian Ethnography*, Ashgate Publishing Company, Hampshire.
- Men's Health Malaysia magazine, January 2015.
- Men's Health Malaysia magazine, February 2015.
- Saltonstall, R. (1993), 'Healthy bodies, social bodies: men's and women's concepts and practices of health in everyday life', *Social Science and Medicine*, vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 7-14.
- Stibbe, A. (2004), 'Health and the Social Construction of Masculinity in Men's Health Magazine', *Men and Masculinities*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 31-51.
- West, C. & Zimmerman, D. H. (1991), 'Doing Gender', in J. L. Lorber & S. A. Farrell (Eds.), *The Social Construction of Gender*, Sage, Newbury Park, pp. 62-74.