

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘Pack a more powerful punch’ and ‘lay the pipe’: erectile enhancement discourse as a body project for masculinity

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In this article, we analyze erectile enhancement as a postmodern body project that (re)codes hegemonic masculinity through new means. Erectile enhancement Internet ads create a text of masculinity through constructing a crisis of masculinity and selling the solution. The crisis is loss of power, control and the ability to dominate; the solution is a larger and more powerful penis that will give men back their sense of manhood. Although the erectile enhancement discourse suggests new ways of constructing masculinity – through consumption and an elevated importance of the body in gender identity – the ads reassert hegemonic ideals, i.e. the othering of and domination over women and phallocentrism.

Keywords: the body; masculinity; violence; postmodern; erectile enhancement; phallocentrism

Recent scholarly work has addressed the shift from modern to postmodern society in terms of production’s displacement by consumption, and particularly for men, the subsequent elevation of the body from the site of work to the site of identity. Scholars have focused on the consequences of this shift for men, as ‘the body is a site not only for the performance or enactments of masculinity, but also for its profound and intimate regulation’ (Gill *et al.* 2005, p. 58). Addressing this cultural change in the relationship between the body and identity as an ‘identity project’ (Featherstone 1991, Shilling 1993) or ‘body project’ (Haiken 2000, Fishman 2004, Rubin 2004), researchers have suggested that these shifts in postmodern society have reconstructed masculinity in new ways; that men are defined now more than ever through their consumption, sexuality and physical appearance. Some suggest that because of these trends, traditional gender boundaries are becoming blurred and men are becoming, in these ways, more like women. Others suggest that although postmodern society has posed some challenges to traditional constructions of masculinity, men’s subjective experience in response to these trends, as well as how texts code masculinity, indicate various degrees of men’s resistance to becoming more like women or to other indications of gender equality (Messner and Montez de Oca 2005).

In this article, we analyze erectile enhancement as a postmodern body project. Based on an examination of texts, i.e. Internet (email and website) ads for erectile enhancement

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products, we argue that the erectile enhancement discourse (re)codes hegemonic masculinity through new means. Erectile enhancement Internet ads create a text of masculinity through constructing a crisis of masculinity and selling the solution. The crisis is loss of power, control and the ability to dominate; the solution is a larger and more powerful penis that will give men back their sense of manhood. Although the erectile enhancement discourse suggests new way of constructing masculinity – through consumption and an elevated importance of the body in gender identity – the ads reassert hegemonic ideals, i.e. the othering of, and domination over, women and phallocentrism.

Masculinity in postmodern society

Gender and body scholars have focused on relationships between the appearance and function of men's bodies and masculine identity (McCabe and Ricciardelli 2004, Kriegel 2006, Messner 2006) and they have examined the recent increase in media and marketing attention to men's bodies and men's responses to this trend (Kimmel 1994, Bordo 1999, Hatoum and Belle 2004). Some scholars argue that men's greater participation in consumption and the value of the body to identity have begun to blur gender lines. For example, Haiken (2000) traces the historical development of men's use of cosmetic surgery and other forms of enhancement technologies as a reflection of various constructions of masculinity over time. She argues that although men's current relationship to the 'physical market' does appear to be motivated in part by the more traditional 'masculine drive for economic success', it also suggests that they, like women, are now 'vulnerable to market-driven cultural imperatives regarding physical attractiveness' (p. 388). Similarly, Gill *et al.* (2005) point to the increased visibility of the male body in media and popular culture and the depiction of male bodies as idealized and eroticized. They identify the influences on this trend as the gay movement, feminism, the style press, consumerism and ultimately, 'the marketing of heterosexual women's desire' as the source of the gaze (p. 39).

Tiefer (1992) points to the rising importance of sexuality in personal life in postmodern society as other sources of personal fulfillment and connection with others wither. Also emphasizing consumer culture, she argues that an increasing number of products aimed at enhancing sexual experiences will continue to enter the market. Specifically, '[m]en will remain vulnerable to the expansion of the clinical domain so long as masculinity rests heavily on a particular type of physiological function' (p. 463). We discuss this limited definition of masculine sexuality further below.

Additional researchers have begun to explore men's new primary role as consumers and how their bodies have become sites of identity. For example, Alexander (2003) analyzed ads in *Men's Health* magazine to explore its construction of '[b]randed masculinity[,] rooted in consumer capitalism wherein profit can be produced by generating insecurity about one's body and one's consumer choices and then providing consumers with the correct answer or product in articles and advertisements' (p. 551). She found that the magazine branded masculinity as muscles, fashion sense, and the appearance of financial success.

Some scholars suggest that in response to these new emphases on consumption and the body as a site of identity, codes traditionally more associated with femininity, men are experiencing a 'crisis in masculinity' (Kimmel 1993, Media Education Foundation 1999, Poldsaar 2003). They suggest that men are responding to this crisis through increased social space for men's bodies and emphasis on size, strength and violence as valued components of masculinity in popular culture (Kimmel and Mahler 2003). For example,

Soulliere (2005), in her analysis of professional wrestling, demonstrates how male wrestlers reassert dominant masculinity through violence, emotional restraint, competition and toughness, despite any inroads toward gender equality that women wrestlers might have made. Similarly, Messner and Montez de Oca (2005) suggest that, although shifts in postmodern culture pose challenges to traditional constructions of masculinity, there is evidence throughout popular culture of resistance to such change. They identify several themes from the ads that suggest a strong 'revenge-against-women' appeal.

On the other hand, Thompson and Holt (2004) argue that men's consumptive practices are not directly constructed in response to a crisis of masculinity. Rather,

They play off the contradictions inherent in phallic masculinity to serve their particular and varied identity projects, and they soften the rough edges of their phallic pursuits by incorporating feminine motifs. Rather than threatening masculine identity, the feminine becomes a resource that men use to facilitate their own phallic identity games. (p. 334)

Some researchers have identified specific ways in which men resist challenges to new constructions of masculinity emerging in postmodernity that threaten to blur gender lines, even as they engage in consumption and body practices. Two such ways are the rejection of vanity and phallocentrism, which we discuss in the following sections.

Rejection of vanity

Supporting their argument that postmodern, consumer-based society is blurring gender lines, some scholars suggest that men are becoming more vain, i.e. embracing traditionally feminine ideologies. For example, Luciano writes: 'We are clearly witnessing the evolution of an obsession with body image, especially among middle-class men, and a corresponding male appropriation of, in the words of the feminist Barbara Ehrenreich, "status-seeking activities ... once seen as feminine"' (cited in Luciano 2001, p. 4).

On the other hand, some scholars point to both heterosexual and gay men's attempts to justify their efforts to enhance physical attractiveness as motivated beyond pure vanity, resisting charges that they are engaging in feminine behaviors. As Haiken (2000) suggests, the fact that 'the culture of masculinity, as it developed in the United States, was homophobic' (p. 392), prevented men from becoming significant consumers of cosmetics, cosmetic surgery or any other product associated with femininity and aimed specifically at enhancing physical appearance. Hennen (2005) describes ways in which a group of gay men, those who identify with the 'Bear' subculture, engage in identity work that distinguishes them from more stereotypical gay men, including their rejection of more effeminate behaviors and practices such as increased attention to physical appearance that they view as motivated by vanity.

Haiken (2000) similarly points out that men who have used cosmetic surgery have often justified their gender-atypical behaviors as motivated by pursuits of economic independence, a traditionally masculine ideal, such as when World War I soldiers sought reconstructive surgery after experiencing disfiguring injuries in hopes of securing better jobs and starting families. Similarly, in the 1960s, cultural attention to, and men's concerns about, aging and its effects on men's marketability again framed the issue in terms of economic security. Haiken argues that although the economic motivation for attention to physical appearance continues to appear in cultural discourse, as consumer culture has increased in recent years, the economic imperative behind men's pursuits of physical attractiveness has been joined by a more narcissistic pursuit of the 'form' itself. Illustrating 'narcissism as liberation', Haiken describes the medicalization of cosmetic surgery and how plastic surgeons justified the purely cosmetic goal through both protecting consumers

from 'quacks' and addressing the inferiority complex of many individuals, which Haiken describes as 'no longer vanity surgery but psychiatry with a scalpel' (p. 391). Although cosmetic surgery is clearly a different and more invasive practice than taking erectile enhancement products, Haiken's analysis provides an insightful framework for evaluating body-enhancing products and practices and their marketing in terms of cultural norms of masculinity. She argues persuasively that countering notions of vanity has been critical to successful marketing to men in these areas.

Gill *et al.* (2005) similarly found that men who participated in their study of body practices and narratives emphasized various justifications for their use of cosmetic products and surgery and engagement in body-enhancing practices that allowed them to reject charges of vanity. Some men discussed the use of products in instrumental rather than aesthetic terms, and others identified the health benefits over aesthetic benefits of certain activities. Still others, similarly to men in Haiken's historical accounts, justified their use of cosmetic surgery if it were either medically necessary or enhanced one's self-esteem.

In various ways, men who engage in body projects attempt to define that engagement in ways that distinguish it from women's practices that are viewed more in terms of sheer vanity. Another way that masculinity body projects are constructed differently from women's, in addition to the level of subjective experience, is in terms of how they are coded as texts. Of primary importance to erectile enhancement discourse is the enduring centrality of phallocentrism to masculine identity.

Phallocentrism

If postmodern culture has begun to challenge traditional constructions of masculinity in some ways, it has not undermined the enduring centrality of the phallus as the basis for gender distinctions and male domination over women. Although phallocentrism is obvious in erectile enhancement discourse, we argue that it should be problematized and specified in terms of our overall argument that this particular body project challenges claims that consumer-driven attention to men's bodies automatically reflects and facilitates gender equality by placing men on a par with women.

Luciano (2001) suggests that, despite its historical centrality to masculine identity, only recently has the penis gained public attention, 'traditionally [having] been hidden in Judeo-Christian cultures' (p. 185). Rather than attributing this change specifically to demands of the consumer culture, Luciano suggests that, 'In the wake of the insatiable need for new and controversial material, men's bodies could hardly remain immune' (p. 186). Regardless of the impetus, societal attention to the penis is visible along several cultural dimensions. Of particular relevance to the topic of erectile enhancement are hegemonic conceptions of masculine sexuality as constructed through medical and popular discourse. Both types of discourse privilege the penis as essential to sexual activity and power, and to some extent grant agency to the penis independent of men's subjective experience or consciousness.

A specific example of body projects is the emergence of a 'sexual dysfunction' discourse that illustrates how sexuality is a key site of identity (Tiefer 1994, Potts 2000, Arrington 2003, Fishman 2004, Loe 2004). The ability to address and remedy the problem of sexual dysfunction, i.e. erectile dysfunction, which is considered necessary to one's quality of life, is facilitated through the medical establishment. Medical approaches prioritize physical aspects of sexuality over other aspects and view sexuality in terms of universal and biological functions (Potts 2000, Marshall and Katz 2002, Katz and Marshall

2004, Potts *et al.* 2004). Feminists have long criticized the medical establishment's focus on the physical body and its performance around reproductive issues at the expense of attendance to women's subjective experiences. Similarly, in her focus on various texts within popular media and interviews with men and women, Potts (2001) analyzes the separation of man from his body/penis but views this phenomenon in its role as 'an alibi, or excuse, for the enactment of coercive and riskier heterosexual behaviors' (p. 146). There are numerous examples of the cultural representation of the penis as having 'a mind of its own', whereby men are able to separate their conscious intentions from the actions of their bodies through the penis (Friedman 2003). Potts provides empirical evidence that both men and women conceive of 'the penis as an entity in its own right' (p. 149). She argues that this tendency 'can be viewed in part as a consequence of the binary division mind/body, where mind represents the rational superior interior of man and body the inferior exterior "vessel" for his mind' (p. 150).

Scholars have argued that the medical discourse on male sexuality employs a reductionist and mechanistic view of sexual and physical performance that focuses exclusively on erection. The focus on physical aspects of sexuality for men presents a phallocentric view of sexuality and creates a distinction between the physical and emotional dimensions of sexuality and between the body and self in terms of subjective experience (Sabo 2006, Lorber and Moore 2007). This view is consistent with that of gender scholars who have focused on various examples of the emphasis on instrumentality and performance in popular culture discourse around normative masculinity. In the context of sexuality, this focus is illustrated by the narrow view of sexuality as penile penetration. Tiefer (1992) confirms this view as one of the main issues that arises in her work as a sex therapist, and she identifies an additional assumption that men make about sex that reflects this emphasis on performance. She suggests that not only do most men believe that all good sex ends in penetration, but that most also believe that women prefer intercourse to other sexual activities, particularly 'hard-driving' intercourse, and that men are responsible for both their own and their female partner's pleasure (Tiefer 1992). Other scholars argue that normative masculine sexuality and sexual identity are conceived of in narrow terms such that the achievement, sustenance and penetrative action of an erect penis are essential (for example, see Potts 2004, Rubin 2004). The emphasis on instrumentality and performance over emotionality and connection provides men and women with a limited and narrowly defined view of sexual activity that does not allow for variation in behavior, identity, or ways of connecting physically with others.

Not only is the function of the penis critical to the construction of masculine identity and 'hegemonic masculine sexual subjectivity' (Potts 2001, p. 146), its positive value as a symbol of power is reflected throughout popular culture both currently and historically. Psychoanalytic, postmodern and feminist scholars have addressed the equation of the penis or phallus with power. 'By the mere fact of having a penis, men may seem closer to possession of a phallicized virility' (Potts 2001, p. 146).

Researchers have argued that the size of a man's penis has historically had an important impact on his self-esteem (Lee 1996). For example, Haiken found that medicalized attention to the penis did not cross over from reconstructive to cosmetic surgery until the 1990s 'when new medical techniques, combined with inventive marketing strategies, enabled enterprising physicians to tap into what proved to be a significant well of male anxiety about penis size' (Haiken 2000, p. 399). Haiken suggests that most men's ideas of normal penis size are based on pornographic films (where actors typically are in the top 1% of genital size), erotic art, and comic books. She suggests that while researchers have made some attempts to accurately measure normal penis size

in an attempt to reassure men's anxieties, website surveys attest to a continued demand for products to enhance penis size.

We suggest that erectile enhancement ads provide a discourse of masculinity that is both consistent with, and poses challenges to, trends within postmodern body projects in general. Although the discourse is a product of consumer culture and focuses on the body as a site of masculine identity, the ads challenge assumptions of blurred gender lines and new, more androgenous, constructions of masculinity. Phallocentrism as both cultural and medical discourse continues as central to this social construction of masculine identity; i.e. it is still literally about the penis and figuratively about male power.

In this analysis, we specifically focus on products marketed for erectile enhancement rather than erectile dysfunction, because these products and ads suggest that all men are subject to pressure to constantly prove their masculinity through their appearance and performance, even when they are 'normal', and have no particular medical problem.

Conceptual frameworks

We propose a postmodern analysis that treats erectile enhancement (EE) as a discourse that codes masculinity. We treat Internet ads for EE products as text to be read. We also include a focus on the shift from production to consumption as primary organizing principles of social life as well as bases for identity. We also focus on the body as a site of identity, and the EE discourse and commercialization of the body as a body project. For example, Alexander (2003) suggests,

... consumption remains at the foundation of the emerging masculinity of postmodern society ... The proliferation of masculinities is stimulated by the capitalist economy, as the most effective sales pitch (i.e. image of masculinity) for each demographic segment of the market is constructed ... Thus in a society based on consumer capitalism, women and men increasingly share the belief that constructing one's gender identity is merely a matter of purchasing acceptable brand-name products. (p. 552)

Bourdieu suggests that the body has become a source of symbolic capital in postmodern society. He asserts that the body's aesthetic value has displaced physical strength as a source of status and identity, as consumption has displaced work as a primary social structure. He argues that 'highly developed muscles have become "semiotically divorced" from specific class connotations, and are no longer indexical of participation in manual labour' (cited in Gill *et al.* 2005, p. 40). Finally, we focus on the construction of hegemonic masculinity through othering of, and violence against, women.

Fine (1994) defines othering as 'a process whereby the dominant group defines into existence an inferior group' (cited in Schwalbe *et al.* 2000). Stoltenberg (2006) describes this process in terms of men's experiences of constructing a male sexual identity that requires nonidentification with femaleness, arguing that the construction of masculine identity and sexuality depends on a dominated 'other'. Culbertson (1998) similarly suggests that men 'other' and objectify women through the power of the male gaze.

Few scholars examining men's responses to increased attention to the body, especially in relation to consumer society or erectile dysfunction, have addressed the centrality of domination and violence to the social construction of masculinity. Some scholars working in the general area of masculinity have shed important light on this issue, however, and the ways in which violence is central to the social construction of masculinity in various arenas of social life. This scholarship contributes to the conceptual framework of this article.

Messner and Sabo (1994) examine the ways in which male athletes learn to use their bodies as weapons through organized sports. They argue that violence plays a central role

in the construction of masculine identity not only in sports, but often in men's romantic and sexual relationships as well. Similarly, Schwalbe *et al.* (2000) argue that violent sports help to maintain gender boundaries and male superiority through linking male bodies to power.

Stoltenberg (2006) argues that the act of penetrative sex must be learned by men as a way of asserting their gender identity, or gender-actualizing – 'feeling like a real man'. He places this necessity in the larger context of social power and argues that violence is necessary for producing and maintaining dominant belief systems and boundaries. Stoltenberg suggests:

For many people, for instance, the act of fucking makes their sexual identity feel more real than it does at other times, and they can predict from experience that this feeling of greater certainty will last for at least a while after each time they fuck . . . To achieve this male sexual identity requires that an individual *identify with* the class of males – that is, accept as one's own the values and interests of the class. A fully realized male sexual identity also requires *nonidentification with* that which is perceived to be nonmale, or female. (pp. 268–269, 270; emphasis in original).

Schwalbe *et al.* (2000) similarly argue that one of the mechanisms that facilitates the process of othering is the threat and use of violence. Illustrating this argument in the context of sexuality, Potts (2001) provides an eloquent description of the symbolic meaning of the penis in popular discourse as she emphasizes its violent subtext:

The condom spells death to their military manoeuvre (sic) – military, because the ways that heterosexuality is discursively constructed associate masculine sexuality with violence (indeed, Robin Williams endorses this allegiance when he declares: 'Men, we are so driven by this lust that we have a violent streak that comes along with it'); whether it is the sperm 'piercing' the ovum, the penis penetrating the vagina, the man sweeping her off her feet, her passive feminine sexuality succumbs to his active masculine sexuality – an active male sexuality which is at times 'seemingly' beyond his control. (p. 151)

We suggest that men's power, domination over and othering of women continue to code contemporary constructions of masculinity and these themes must be acknowledged and problematized in analyses of these discourses.

Method

Our primary objective is to provide an argument for a more comprehensive analysis of emerging discourses of masculinity that critiques the equation of greater attention to consumption and the body as a site of identity with gender equality. We use a modified snowball sample that collected 20 internet ads and websites between January and August 2005, and then again in January 2008 in order to assess consistency in themes over time. We began with a website advertised in an unsolicited email sent to the first author. From there, we 'googled' both the name brand of the product sent in the email (Longz) and we searched using the term 'erectile enhancement'. We reviewed the first page of links that were retrieved by Google. Several of those sites were lists of links for multiple companies promoting their product for erectile enhancement. Many of the links we followed also had other links to erectile enhancement products embedded in their websites. We reviewed them as well. This sampling method produced a convenience sample that we feel best represents the most popular sites for erectile enhancement products. We base this opinion on the fact that Google uses an algorithm that brings to the top of the search results list those sites that have received the most 'hits' or visitors. By reviewing the first page of search results, we reviewed those erectile enhancement websites that had the most

viewers. Our analysis will be limited to the text presented in these advertisements. Larger generalizations will not be made.

In our analysis, we examine the ads and focus on how the texts code masculinity. We compare and contrast this particular construction of masculinity in postmodern society with both traditional codes of masculinity, as well as those 'new' constructions of masculinity identified by other scholars. As a text of embodied masculinity, erectile enhancement ads construct a particular discourse of masculinity that is both consistent with, and expands beyond, assertions made by other scholars about increased attention to male bodies in popular postmodern culture.

Findings

Erectile enhancement discourse, like other contemporary marketing strategies, codes a consumer product that defines the body as a site of masculine identity and man as consumer of body-enhancing products. The discourse also (re)codes traditional masculinity (rather than constructing a new masculinity) and reasserts gender boundaries and male domination through a new means. The texts code masculinity as resting on opposition to and domination of women, and ultimately, violence as central to this construction. This traditional, hegemonic masculinity is coded through three main themes: (1) phallocentrism; (2) rejection of vanity (a theme of femininity); and (3) othering of women as sexual conquests and objects of domination and violence.

Phallocentrism

The discourse of erectile enhancement constructs masculinity around the centrality of the penis. The penis is the site and source of male power and must be used to define masculinity in opposition to femininity. Where, historically, having a penis has made one a man and given him power, in postmodern society, the ability to purchase products to create a bigger penis can make one even more of a man and more powerful. For example, this line from an erectile enhancement ad says it all:

It's time to make you feel like a man again.

This text, similarly to those studied by other scholars, codes a crisis of masculinity, i.e. that men are experiencing a threat to their masculine power and status, and that this product offers a chance to reclaim that status. The equation of penis size with manhood is clear, as well as the notion that bigger is better, as suggested in this text from the home page of the Longz website:

86% of women want their sexual partner to have a fuller, thicker manhood

90% of men want improved sexual stamina, performance, and a bigger penis

The penis is central to masculine identity, such that vulnerability to inferior penis size threatens one's very identity as a man.

Beyond the obvious phallocentric value of the penis itself, the importance of penile performance is emphasized throughout the ads. For example, later in the Longz ad, this text is added:

You no longer have to go on living with the penis size you were born with! We are so sure that Longz will work for you, that if you don't see a difference in your sexual performance and penis size we will give you your money back.

On another page, this information is provided:

WHAT IS LONGZ?

LONGZ is all all-natural male enhancement and performance system. Our capsules and natural exercises are proven to increase the size of your manhood as well as greatly increasing your sexual performance and stamina.

Again, 'penis' and 'manhood' are used interchangeably, emphasizing the centrality of the penis and phallus to masculine identity. Sexual performance and stamina are also emphasized as a clear statement that while mere possession of the penis qualifies one as a man, ultimately sexual performance through the penis measures one's level of masculinity.

The next section of text continues the coding of phallocentrism but elaborates on the meaning of masculine sexuality:

Erections will also come more often and last longer and you will experience more pleasure during sex ... As mentioned on previous pages of this site, Longz will also increase your potency and give you longer lasting more pleasurable sexual encounters.

While sexual pleasure is included in this text after being absent from much of the initial text, it is the man's pleasure that is identified as important; the partner's pleasure is altogether absent. Similarly, in the following testimonial, the focus is primarily on the size, control, and sustenance of the erection. The benefits are framed entirely around penile performance.

I needed help with maintaining an erection and stamina. I received both of these by taking one Longz pill daily. My penis has grown in size a little over 3 inches and is much thicker. I also find that I stay in an almost ready mode 24/7 and that was an added plus ... I get hard faster, keep my erection longer and have plenty of stamina. (Joe – Charleston, SC)

Again emphasizing size and performance, this text suggests that the feeling of being a man, i.e. feeling ready to penetrate, can be available on a constant basis, rather than only periodically. This again suggests that there are moments in men's lives when they do not feel like men, when they do not experience the status and power of masculinity, and the product promises to help them sustain that feeling perpetually.

This testimonial echoes traditional meanings of masculinity on a number of dimensions:

I'm a 35-year old construction worker here in Boston, Mass. My buddies are all married and have kids – but I've never been able to. It's not that I'm impotent, it's just that I can't get it up most of the time because I work 12-hour days and come home drained. Your pills have changed that – I take one pill every day as you recommend, and as soon as I get home I'm ready to be intimate with my wife. My [penis] can be as hard as a rock now, and I can say that I have complete control over my erections. I've also seen a real improvement in my size, and that combined with my renewed sex drive has really help my life at home. My wife and I are now actively trying to have a child. We're both hoping it's a boy and we've decided on the name Connor. (E. Smith – Boston, MA)

Traditional constructions of masculine identity are coded through this man's emphasis on how working 12 hours a day leaves insufficient energy for him to fulfill his other manly duties such as engaging in sexual intercourse. Erectile enhancement pills help him fulfill all of his manly duties including productive work, sexual performance, and potentially fathering a male child. The overwhelming emphasis is on his performance, both sexually and otherwise, as well as the importance of the size of his penis to this performance. He describes an improvement in his own sex drive and his ability to father a child as the important outcomes, again neglecting to mention his wife's pleasure. The pill has 'help[ed] his life at home', but this seems more related to his ability to perform sexually and father a child than to pleasure his wife, and is identified as a complement to his life at work.

This email ad similarly focuses on performance first, pleasure second, although *whose* pleasure is unclear.

Add stamina, size, more physical output, pleasure, etc.

See site for Incredible details.

Overwhelmingly, the emphasis in the ads is on the value of the penis, its size, power and performance, to masculine identity. An important focus is instrumentality coded as stamina and control. Only peripherally is sexual pleasure addressed, and when it is, the man's pleasure takes precedence over the woman's. As Bass (2001) suggests, in the sexual-performance perfection industry, 'good sex changes the basic nature of a sexual encounter from one of intimacy and pleasure to one of achievement and performance' (p. 337).

The text also identifies another aspect of performance in coding masculinity – the emphasis on men's ability to control sexual activity and their orgasms as the end result. This meaning further expands on the emphasis on instrumentality discussed above, and suggests that the value of a bigger penis is in more than size and appearance – it is in performance.

An emphasis on control within the social construction of masculinity was also found by Gill *et al.* (2005), where in their study, men's self-respect was related to their bodies, and their 'speech forms in interviews ... relied on bifurcation between body and self' (p. 56). The authors noted that men viewed the body as their responsibility to discipline, where 'men had to tread a delicate path between an appropriate level of care and attention to one's body, and the twin pitfalls of vanity or obsession' (p. 56). 'As writers in a Foucaultian tradition have argued, increasingly, the body is becoming read as an indicator of self-control and self-discipline' (p. 55).

The following text similarly emphasizes control, but adds another dimension to control that further constructs the meaning of masculinity.

Nothing compares to the confidence you will have with a truly huge penis, and with Longz there's absolutely nothing stopping you from getting the huge penis that every woman wants. Forget about your partners faking their orgasms.

Here, the emphasis on performance illustrates Tiefer's assertion that male sexuality requires that men control the sexual experience and that they are ultimately responsible for the pleasure (i.e. achievement of orgasm) of all involved. The text suggests that real men's partners do not have to fake their orgasms. The text continues:

With Longz you will be able to penetrate much deeper with much more force. Longz is the tool you need to succeed in giving your partner orgasm after orgasm all night long.

Here are some common Longz results:

MONTH 1: Noticeably Larger erections, increased sexual desire, boost in stamina, more pleasurable orgasms, increase in self esteem.

MONTH 2: Increase in penis size, noticeably thicker penis, more intense orgasms, increase in ejaculate, stronger erections.

MONTH 3: Much larger penis size, noticeable difference in girth, very powerful orgasms, control over orgasms, rock solid erections.

All of the benefits identified here echo the themes of masculinity and presumably increase with use of the product – size, power, performance and control – the possession of which all contribute to greater self-esteem. The partner's orgasms are coded

as successful performance rather than the partner's own sexual pleasure. Similarly, Virility Pro's website shares this customer testimonial:

After taking your VirilityPRO pills as directed for only three weeks, I indeed did get a bigger penis. I gained one inch in length and one inch in width. Thanks for a product that does what the advertisements say it is supposed to do. Any woman that says size does not matter is only trying to make you feel better. My wife said [the] same thing but now she is having more and deeper climaxes than ever before. THANKS AGAIN! (Tom S., Denver, CO)

The defensive posturing of the customer's suggestion that women are only trying to make men feel better, followed by his celebratory exclamation that he has caused her to have better sex (which he defines in terms of more and deeper climaxes) ends with *his* thanking the company for enhancing his performance and ability to control his wife's sexual experience.

Overall, erectile enhancement continues to code masculinity through the penis, coded specifically in terms of size, performance, and control.

Rejection of vanity

Consistent with other analyses of men's consumption of body-enhancing products and the marketing of such products, rejection of vanity is coded in a number of ways in the ads. This helps to define men's attention to their bodies as different from similar practices among women. In this first ad, men are encouraged to use erectile enhancement drugs for a number of reasons other than appearance.

WHAT ARE THE OTHER BENEFITS?

The LONGZ performance and enhancement system will also help combat a wide range of things, from performance on the job, to prostate cancer. While our system is not a miracle cure, you will notice that you have more energy for things like work (and play!) and that you are thinking more clearly, and enjoying your love life a lot more. The health benefits of our system are many, and when combined with a good diet and exercise can completely change the way you think and feel about yourself.

Like other male body-enhancing products, it seems that these drugs enhance a variety of aspects of traditional male roles and masculine identity – job performance, physical health, recreation, and ultimately, self-esteem. Although more subtle than other excerpts, this ad suggests a crisis of masculinity in the need for men to think and feel better themselves. Another text from the Longz website signifies several motivations beyond vanity:

Longz is specifically formulated with a variety of natural herbs known for centuries for increasing sexual desire and will permanently *enlarge your penis up to 3 inches*, help you gain control of your orgasms, give you a huge penis that all women want, and of course that extra boost of confidence that every man with a big penis has. Join the millions of men regaining control of their sex life now!

Clearly, the 'boost of confidence that every man with a big penis has' signifies the justification of enhanced self-esteem resulting from erectile enhancement. Like the men interviewed by Gill *et al.*, these ads define the value of these products beyond sheer vanity about one's appearance. In addition to the continued emphasis on phallocentrism, this suggests that men as consumers of body-enhancing products are still different from, and dominant in relation to, women.

Otherring of women

A final indication that men as consumers and the importance of men's bodies to their identities are not reflective of greater gender equality is the coding of women as 'other'

apparent in the ads. Early images on erectile enhancement websites provided clear examples othering, where women were depicted in positions of inferiority, often gazing upward, expectantly, at confident men.¹ Images of alluring, almost-nude women on the sites coded femininity as sexual objectification, the ultimate reward to men for a successful and powerful performance of masculinity. Like the codes of penis as power and rejection of vanity, the sexual objectification of women works to define this particular body project as different from those through which women construct femininity. We argue that erectile enhancement discourse codes female sexual availability as constitutive of masculine power and agree with Allen (2006) who suggests,

Indeed, women's sexual vulnerability to men is a key locus of male power, something men learn to expect ... We live in a capitalist culture that promises women's sexual availability as a reward to the male consumer of everything from cars to cigarettes. (p. 505)

Most disturbing of all the signifiers of masculinity in erectile enhancement ads is their violent imagery. Consider this text from an email ad for Longz:

Imagine packing a more powerful punch, giving the ladies something they will never ever forget, and leave them wishing they had more.

The blatantly violent imagery is followed by an allusion to female desire, but it emphasizes the significance of masculine performance and control over the sexual encounter, ultimately coded as physical violence and sexual assault. The objective seems to be more to dominate, impress, violate, and ultimately, leave the woman, rather than to fulfill her desire.

Virility Pro email texts include the following violent images:

Really lay the PIPE to the next girl you screw ...

Stick another 3 inches in next time you bang a chick ...

Throw another 1–3 inches in the next girl you Nail ...

ENLARGE YOUR 'Weapon' ALL NATURALLY ... Guaranteed & proven by MD's.

Get serious and start doing it with some drive.

These are further, but more blatant, examples of what Messner and Montez de Oca (2005) identify as the revenge-against-women themes in ads they analyzed. In each excerpt, the penis is a weapon, the woman an object of the man's power and aggression, and ultimately, his performance of masculinity. Additionally, the woman is referred to either as a girl or chick, another way of belittling her importance as a person and emphasizing the dominant status of the man.

This text from a Longz email ad continues to code masculinity and male sexuality as violence against women:

Imagine a new huge Pecker full of energy. Just huge.

Smash the ladies like crazy!

If your [sic] a lady, take a 'monster!'

Cameron (1992) analyzed terms for the penis and placed them in four primary categories – titles of authority, personal authority, tool, and weapon. The erectile enhancement discourse signifies all of these in the code of masculinity, and these violent images reflect the category of penis as weapon, where 'the phallus must act, dominate,

avenge itself on the female body. It is a symbol of authority to which we all must bow down. Its animal desires are uncontrollable; it has a life of its own' (p. 373).

More recent email messages advertising erectile enhancement supplements sent to the authors confirm the continued emphasis on violence and male domination of women. The subject line on one message exclaims, "Watch the lust in her eyes when you whip out your 9 inch monster." The message of the email then elaborates, "Fill her up tight and deep and show her pleasure like never before."

The centrality of violence to embodied masculinity is coded through this text in a way that suggests its normative appeal to men and presumably women, who do receive these emails. The email texts are coded through themes of violence, but the meanings are transformed to self-esteem, performance and romance/relationship in the website. More recently, the emphasis of the websites themselves is on the medicalization of small penis size. Despite the shift away from the blatantly violent text of the emails to the more subtle language within the website, the coding of masculinity on the sites continues to emphasize masculine performance, size, and the othering of women through the images and in the testimonials.

Gail Dines (2006) suggests that pornographic imagery and themes have infiltrated mainstream popular culture in a variety of ways. We suggest that erectile enhancement ads are one example of this trend, a disturbing and potentially harmful discourse of masculinity that is finding its way, unchallenged, into the inboxes of women and men and desensitizing its recipients to the blatantly violent imagery of gender and sex. Erectile enhancement discourse continues to construct masculinity through the othering of and violence against women.

Discussion

Erectile enhancement ads challenge assertions that men's increased attention to their bodies as a response to shifts within postmodern culture has blurred gender lines. They code the familiar, hegemonic, traditional masculinity that, though presumably biologically-determined, must be technologically facilitated; masculinity is still constructed through the power and size of the penis and othering of women. We suggest, like Messner and Montez de Oca (2005), that particular texts of popular culture reassert traditional masculinity in response to its presumed vulnerability as experienced by men that has resulted from shifts in postmodern society. These ads are consistent with Lorber and Moore's (2007) suggestion that 'In contemporary Western society, the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity are embodied in an "ideal type", exhibiting the potential for physical power and violence but acting with total rationality and control of emotion' (p. 115).

An important element that should be included in the analysis of this discourse is attention to various social locations including race, social class, and sexuality. The data we analyzed did not lend themselves to such an analysis, but important questions must be asked. For example, to what extent are various masculinities coded in these texts? Similarly, the discussion could be enhanced through collection of empirical data on men's subjective reading of the ads. How do men from marginalized and privileged groups read these texts? Who buys these products and why?

In the end, erectile enhancement discourse is not simply about creating a masculine consumer, whereby men become more like women and gender boundaries are challenged and blurred. Rather, in these texts, the centrality of the penis to masculine identity reasserts that the penis makes the man, and using the penis to other and dominate women proves one's masculinity.

The discourse of erectile enhancement constructs a crisis of masculinity, i.e. that men no longer experience the power and control that makes them feel like men, and provides a solution – a bigger and more powerful penis. This masculine identity is harmful to men as they risk health problems by consuming potentially harmful products and spend money unnecessarily to achieve a narrowly defined sense of manhood. Basing their sense of self on their ability to perform sexually and prove their masculinity in specific ways leaves men vulnerable to the continued pressure to purchase products and engage in behaviors that are harmful to themselves and to women. The discourse continues to pit men against each other as they must prove their manhood, undermining potential connections among men. It also continues to define masculinity as superior to femininity, and reliant on femininity's domination. Like women, men need alternative definitions of gendered identity that allow for greater variation and flexibility in self-definition, and acceptance and value of who they are rather than the extent to which they achieve generic, externally defined idealized images.

Note

1. The authors were unable to obtain copyright permission to reprint the images here.

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