

# Breasts Are for Men: Media, Masculinity Ideologies, and Men's Beliefs About Women's Bodies

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**Abstract** Although masculinity ideology (MI) has been shown to predict men's sexual risk-taking, less is known about MI's contribution to men's beliefs about women and their sexual bodies. Accordingly, we examined associations between masculine ideology, media consumption, and men's attitudes about women's reproductive body functions among a sample of 656 undergraduate men. Participants completed measures assessing their endorsement of traditional gender ideologies, their levels of media exposure and engagement, and their attitudes toward childbirth and breastfeeding. It was hypothesized that media use would contribute to traditional MI, and that traditional MI would contribute to negative views about breastfeeding and childbirth. Results supported these individual connections, but not a mediated model. Discussion focuses on implications of these findings for women's lives.

**Keywords** Masculinity · Media · Television · Breastfeeding attitudes · Childbirth attitudes

Men's beliefs about how men are expected to behave and respond are core aspects of masculinity ideology (MI). According to this perspective, men act the way they do not because of their level of masculine traits or their male role identity, but because of the conceptions of masculinity they

have internalized from their culture (Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993a). In the dominant culture within the United States, these conceptions of masculinity focus on toughness, restrictive emotionality, anti-femininity, sexual virility, achievement and status, and self-reliance, among other things (David & Brannon, 1976; Mahalik et al., 2003; Thompson, Pleck, & Ferrera, 1992). These conceptions shape both men's views of themselves as well as their decisions and behaviors in several domains, contributing, for example, to levels of substance use, delinquency, and hostility (e.g., Mahalik et al., 2003; Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993b).

However, because men do not live in isolation, their beliefs about masculinity are likely to influence not only their own behavior, but also their interactions with the key women in their lives, including their romantic and sexual partners. Attempts to understand contributions of MI in this domain have typically focused on its connection to men's sexual promiscuity and sexual risk-taking. Here the arguments are that because traditional MI focuses on the power of the male sex drive, on men as sexual agents and initiators, and on women as sexual objects and gatekeepers, then greater acceptance of these ideologies will lead to higher levels of casual sexual involvements and sexual risk-taking. Existing findings indicate that this is the case. Adolescent boys and undergraduate men who offer stronger endorsement of MI report greater numbers of sexual partners in the past year, lower levels of emotional intimacy with their current partners, greater belief that the relationships between men and women are adversarial, less consistent use of condoms, and more negative condom attitudes (Noar & Morokoff, 2002; Pleck et al., 1993a; Shearer, Hosterman, Gillen, & Lefkowitz, 2005; Sinn, 1997).

However, because men's lives *interact* with women's lives in complex and diverse ways, men's acceptance of

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traditional MI will likely affect multiple facets of their behavior with female partners. For example, how might such belief systems affect how men view a female partner's body? Indeed, marital relations, in most cases, involve seeing a partner both as a sexual object and, eventually, as a maternal figure. As mothers, women's breasts and reproductive organs take on a functional role, one that diverges from the sexual role highlighted by MI. Might viewing women's bodies as sexual objects make it difficult for men to see them in any other way, especially in terms of their reproductive capacity?

Accordingly, we argue that dominant gender ideologies, as exemplified by the media, consistently paint women as sexual objects, highlighting their bodies as being mainly for the pleasure of men instead of as multidimensional (i.e., including both reproductive and sexual functions). Although evidence indicates that sexual objectification affects women's views of their bodies (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), little is known of how it affects men's views. We propose a mediated model, arguing that heavy media use leads to the adoption of certain gender ideologies that characterize women's bodies as sexual objects built for male pleasure, not childbearing. Holding these beliefs, in turn, constrains men's ability to embrace women's reproductive functions and to see breastfeeding and childbirth positively.

### **Diverging Views of Women's Bodies: Sexual versus Reproductive Functions**

A central feature of our argument is that endorsing ideologies that construct women's bodies as sexual objects may make men less comfortable accepting reproductive aspects, such as breastfeeding and childbirth. Although giving birth and nursing are natural body functions, views toward breasts and breastfeeding are shaped by larger cultural values and assumptions. In dominant American culture today, the sexual significance of the female breast rivals, if not exceeds, its biological significance (Forbes, Adams-Curtis, Hamm, & White, 2003). Although breasts are multidimensional, having both sexual and reproductive functions for women, a dominant value in our culture is that breasts are to be looked at and enjoyed by grown men, not babies (Carter, 1996). Indeed, Dettwyler (1995) maintains that use of the breast for the sexual pleasure of men and women is learned through western culture, and that this limited view of the breast is so pervasive it has limited women's ability to successfully breastfeed. As a result, American women and men often have little exposure to public breastfeeding and little opportunity to grow comfortable with breasts in this role. This is unfortunate because research has consistently demonstrated that breastfeeding is the healthiest choice not only for babies (Rubin

et al., 1990; Walker, 1993), but also for mothers (Newcomb et al., 1994). Breast-fed babies are at a reduced risk for gastrointestinal, urinary, and respiratory infections; breastfeeding enhances neuro-development; and breast milk may offer some protection from allergies, eczema, and juvenile onset diabetes. As such, the American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended that mothers breastfeed for at least 6 months exclusively and for at least a year combined with other food (Gartner et al., 2005).

However, although the many benefits of breastfeeding are both well established and well known, less than 25% of American mothers follow these recommendations. Data indicate that whereas 60% of new mothers initiate breastfeeding, only 22% are still nursing at 6 months (Gartner et al., 2005). It is argued that one reason women have difficulty choosing to breastfeed is their discomfort with the culture's sexualization of the breast (Dettwyler, 1995; Morse, 1989). Many women choose to stop breastfeeding or avoid it altogether because they report being uncomfortable nursing in the presence of others (Carter, 1996; Dettwyler, 1995). They and their male partners worry that breastfeeding will make their breasts ugly (Arora, McJunkin, Wehrer, & Kuhn, 2000; Freed, Fraley, & Schanler, 1993) or will interfere with sex (Freed, Fraley, & Schanler, 1992, 1993). In addition, many women and men express concern that public breastfeeding is inappropriate or embarrassing (Freed et al., 1992, 1993), and breastfeeding women talk about their feelings of embarrassment, disgust, and desire for privacy (Earle, 2000). Many argue that the reason it is embarrassing is that breasts are not viewed as body parts to feed babies but as body parts to be enjoyed by men. Morse (1989, p. 239) quotes one mother as saying, "Yuck, those are for your husband!"

Yet not only do larger cultural views about the sexual nature of the breast affect women's choices, but so do the views of their male partners. Men's attitudes toward and support of their partner's breastfeeding have been found to be critical factors in pregnant women's decision to breastfeed and in their persistence of this practice. Findings indicate that a male partner's actual or perceived attitudes toward breastfeeding predict a mothers' desire to initiate breastfeeding (Kessler, Gielen, Diener-West, & Paige, 1995; Kloebler-Tarver, Thompson, & Miner, 2002; Littman, Medendorp, & Goldfarb, 1994; L. Rempel & J. Rempel, 2004), actual breastfeeding initiation (e.g., Scott, Binns, & Aroni, 1997), and the duration or persistence of the breastfeeding (Arora et al., 2000; L. Rempel & J. Rempel, 2004). Moreover, one reason women often give for choosing bottle-feeding is their desire for father involvement with feeding (Earle, 2000). Therefore, fathers have proven to be a significant influence on the success and maintenance of breastfeeding, and men's attitudes in general likely shape women's choices and behaviors in this domain.

## Media Messages and the Sexual Objectification of Women's Bodies

What remains unclear, however, is where men's attitudes about breastfeeding develop. With a minimized presence of public breastfeeding, we argue that media portrayals of breasts and their functions play a significant role in shaping men's views in this area, long before they become fathers. In today's media the traditional image of the nurturant housewife has been replaced by frequent depictions of women as sexual objects, whose value is based solely on their physical appearance and sexual appeal. These women are often scantily clad and portrayed in provocative poses that highlight their curves and cleavage. They are merely decoration, reduced to being body parts rather than treated as whole persons with unique thoughts and feelings. These images have emerged as a dominant presence in virtually every medium, including prime time television programs (e.g., Grauerholz & King, 1997; Ward, 1995), TV commercials (e.g., Lin, 1997), music videos (e.g., Gow, 1995; Vincent, 1989), and magazines (e.g., Krassas, Blauwkamp, & Wesselink, 2003; Plous & Neptune, 1997).

Visual examples of the sexual objectification of women are especially prominent in the world of advertising, particularly in magazines. Research on this medium illustrates several provocative trends. First, findings show that the role of sexual object is a central way in which women are featured (e.g., Lindner, 2004; Reichert & Carpenter, 2004). For example, Busby and Leichty (1993) found that 73% of women's roles in ads in 1989 were decorative or alluring roles, versus 5% that were employment roles and 10% that were family roles. Similarly, analyses of photographs from *Maxim* and *Stuff* found that 80.5% of the women were depicted in sex object roles (Krassas et al., 2003). Second, evidence indicates that such sexual objectification occurs more frequently for women than for men (e.g., Krassas et al., 2003; Plous & Neptune, 1997). For example, in an analysis of nearly 3,000 ads from six magazines published in 1992 and 1998, Reichert (2003) found that in magazines for young adults, female models were 3.7 times more likely to be dressed in a sexual manner than were male models. Finally, findings document that such patterns have been increasing over time, with greater percentages of magazine ads featuring sexually objectifying images of women (e.g., Busby & Leichty, 1993; Reichert & Carpenter, 2004; Soley & Reid, 1988). Indeed, Sullivan and O'Connor (1988) reported a 60% increase since 1970 in the portrayals of women in purely "decorative" roles. Therefore, evidence consistently indicates that the sexual nature of women's bodies is a dominant focus throughout much of the mainstream media.

What is the known impact of exposure to such imagery on men's views of women's bodies? Currently, most

"effects" research in this area has focused on whether exposure to these images encourages men to adopt stereotypical views about gender or about women in general; little has focused on men's views of women's body functions. In existing findings, frequent, regular exposure to genres high in sexual content, such as music videos, and deeper levels of media involvement, were both associated with men's being more accepting of traditional gender ideologies (e.g., Morgan, 1982; Strouse, Goodwin, & Roscoe, 1994; Ward, 2002). Experimental studies have yielded similar outcomes. Across several studies, men exposed to sexually objectifying images of women from mainstream media were found to be significantly more accepting of gender and sexual role stereotypes, rape myths, sexual harassment, and adversarial beliefs about sexual relationships than were men in control conditions (C. H. Hansen & R. D. Hansen, 1988; Lanis & Covell, 1995; MacKay & Covell, 1997; Milburn, Mather, & Conrad, 2000). Such exposure has even been shown to affect how men treat and respond to real women in subsequent interactions, making their behavior more sexualized. For example, undergraduate men exposed to 16 sexist and objectifying commercials later asked more sexist questions of a female confederate posing as a job applicant, recalled more about her appearance and less about her personal background, and rated her as friendlier and more hireable, but less competent than did controls (Rudman & Borgida, 1995). Finally, experimental work with adolescents demonstrates subtle links, for some boys, between media exposure and their judgments of the attributes of the ideal woman (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003).

Thus, evidence indicates that regular and experimental exposure to mainstream media content does lead men to adopt traditional gender ideologies and to be more accepting of women as sexual objects. Although none of the existing research looked at links between media use and masculinity ideologies directly, they did show links to traditional gender roles, sexist attitudes, and objectifying notions of women.

## The Current Study

In summary, it is often argued that both traditional MI and dominant media content commonly construct men as sexual agents and women and their bodies as sexual objects. As such, the sexual aspects of women's bodies, such as their breasts and sexual organs, are framed as being mostly for men's sexual pleasure and less for reproduction and nursing. Our goal, then, is to test the validity of these claims. We propose a mediated model, one in which media use contributes to the adoption of traditional MI, which in turn encourages men to overemphasize the sexual nature of

women's breasts and bodies and to be less accepting of their reproductive functions. We test this model in four steps. Testing the first path (A→B), we examine connections between media use and men's acceptance of traditional MI. We define media use broadly, noting its potential to shape beliefs both via the amount of exposure (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994) and via viewers' level of cognitive engagement, as assessed by their viewing motives (i.e., for learning or for entertainment), their identification with media characters, and their perceived realism of media content (Bandura, 2001; Potter, 1986, 1988; Rubin, 1994). It is our expectation that more frequent exposure to mainstream media, and deeper levels of engagement with media content, will be associated with stronger acceptance of traditional MI.

As the second path (B→C), we examine links between traditional MI and men's beliefs about breastfeeding and childbirth. We hypothesize that greater endorsement of MI will be associated with less positive attitudes toward breastfeeding and childbirth, and with seeing these activities as an interference to marital and sexual relations. Testing the third path (A→C), we investigate direct and indirect connections between media use and men's feelings about breast-feeding and childbirth. We expect that heavier and more engaged media use will be associated with less accepting attitudes toward childbirth and breastfeeding because these actions will be seen to conflict with the sexual functions of women's bodies. As the final test of the mediated model, we investigate whether links between media use and men's beliefs about women's reproductive body functions remain once MI is accounted for. We anticipated that links between media use and men's views of women's reproductive bodies would work mainly through MI.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 656 undergraduate men aged 17 to 27 ( $M=19.0$  years) attending a large university in the Midwestern United States. Approximately 72% of participants self-identified as White/European American, 17% as Asian/Asian-American, 5% as Black/African American, 5% as Latino/a, and 0.8% as Multiracial. The participants were generally from well-educated, two-parent families (93%), with their fathers and mothers having completed an average of 17.1 and 16.1 years of schooling, respectively. In addition, 96% of the sample identified themselves as heterosexual, and 47.8% as virgins (i.e., had not engaged in vaginal intercourse).

A religiosity score was created based on responses to three questions: "How religious are you," "How often do you attend religious services," and "How often do you pray." Response options for each question ranged from "not at all"/"never" at 0 to "very"/"very regularly" at 4. Responses were summed across the items ( $\alpha=0.89$ ), producing a total religiosity score that ranged from 0 to 12 ( $M=5.95$ ,  $SD=3.49$ ). Higher scores indicated higher levels of religiosity.

### Measures

*Media exposure* Our assessment of exposure levels focused on participants' exposure to the following three media formats that are popular among young men and are likely to feature traditional notions of masculinity: primetime comedies and dramas, music videos, and popular men's magazines. To assess viewing of primetime comedies and dramas, participants were provided with a list of 35 top-rated primetime, scripted programs, and were asked to indicate the frequency with which they had viewed each program during the previous semester. Responses were indicated on a five-point scale anchored by "never/not this season" at 0 and "every week" at 4. Responses were converted to hours per month based on the length of the program (i.e., 30 versus 60 min) and the frequency with which it was viewed. Monthly sums were calculated from these data. Frequency of viewing music videos was assessed via five questions that examined the number of hours students watch music videos during the week (morning, afternoon, and evening), on Saturday, and on Sunday. Monthly totals were calculated from these data.

Finally, to assess levels of magazine reading, we provided a list of 24 popular monthly magazines and asked participants to indicate the number of issues (0–12) read in a typical year. Reading was defined as "browsing through and checking out at least a few articles." Factor analyses yielded several subscales, including a subscale of Men's Magazines that was included in our analyses. For this subscale, we summed across men's reading of the following four magazines: *GQ*, *Maxim*, *Men's Health*, and *Playboy*.

*Media involvement* Three measures were used to assess specific dimensions of men's cognitive involvement in their TV viewing. The first measure examined their intentional use of TV for learning about the world, a component of the Uses and Gratifications perspective (Rubin, 1994). Using a six-point continuum, respondents indicated their level of agreement with each of 22 viewing motives drawn from previous research (e.g., Carveth & Alexander, 1985; Ward, 2002). For this study, we included only the 11-item Learning Motives Subscale ( $\alpha=0.92$ ; e.g., "because it

helps me learn about myself and others”). A mean score was computed across the items, with higher scores indicating a stronger Learning Motive.

As a second measure of cognitive involvement, participants completed a *Perceived Realism on Television Scale* developed for this study, based on theoretical discussions of perceived realism (e.g., Potter, 1988), and on existing measures (e.g., Potter, 1986; Reeves, 1978). This measure contains 28 statements ( $\alpha=0.92$ ; e.g., “TV presents things as they really are in life”) that assess the extent to which participants believe that characters, portrayals, and storylines on TV resemble those in real life. Participants indicated their level of agreement/disagreement with each statement along a five-point continuum. A mean score was taken across the 28 items, such that higher scores indicated attributing greater realism to TV portrayals.

A third measure of cognitive involvement examined participants’ level of identification with popular media portrayals. A list was provided of ten popular male characters (e.g., Dawson on *Dawson’s Creek*) as determined by pilot testing. Participants rated the extent to which they identified with each character using a four-point scale anchored by “do not identify with at all” at 1 and “strongly identify” at 4. Mean evaluations of the characters served as the ID – Popular Male Characters score ( $\alpha=0.84$ ). Higher scores indicated stronger identification.

**Gender ideologies** Two measures were used to examine students’ endorsement of traditional gender ideologies. The first measure, the Attitudes Toward Women Scale for Adolescents (ATWSA; Galambos, Petersen, Richards, & Gitelson, 1985), assessed participants’ general attitudes about the roles and appropriate behaviors of women and men. Respondents rated their level of agreement with each of 12 statements using a four-point scale anchored by “strongly agree” and “strongly disagree.” Sample statements include “Swearing is worse for a girl than for a boy,” and “Boys are better leaders than girls.” Responses were averaged across the 12 items to yield a mean Gender Role Attitudes score for each participant, with higher scores reflecting more traditional attitudes ( $M=1.96$ ;  $SD=0.42$ ).

The alpha of 0.82 obtained for our sample is comparable to the alpha level of 0.78 reported by the authors for boys in grades 6 through 12.

Additionally, participants completed a comprehensive measure of Attitudes about Dating and Sexual Relationships that was an extension of a measure used in previous research (Ward, 2002; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). For this measure, participants used a six-point scale to indicate their level of agreement with each of 150 statements about the nature of sexual roles and relationships. The individual items were then subjected to reliability and factor analyses, resulting in 12 subscales. The following four subscales most reflective of traditional MI as it relates to women were selected for this study: *Women are Sexual Objects* (ten items;  $M=3.61$ ;  $SD=0.61$ ;  $\alpha=0.71$ ; e.g., “There is nothing wrong with men being primarily interested in a woman’s body”); *Centrality of Male Sex-Drive* (15 items;  $M=3.27$ ;  $SD=0.59$ ;  $\alpha=0.77$ ; e.g., “Men think about sex all the time”); *Traditional Female Gatekeeper Role* (22 items;  $M=2.98$ ;  $SD=0.55$ ;  $\alpha=0.84$ ; e.g., “Women should not initiate sexual contact but should wait for the man to make his move”); and *Battle of the Sexes* (13 items;  $M=3.70$ ;  $SD=0.52$ ;  $\alpha=0.67$ ; e.g., “Men love a challenge and often choose to pursue the seemingly unattainable woman”). A composite score reflecting *Masculinity Ideology* was later computed by summing students’ responses on these five variables ( $M=15.51$ ;  $SD=2.19$ ). As indicated in Table 1, the individual measures were highly correlated with each other and with the summed Masculinity Ideology score.

**Reproductive body attitudes** Examination of men’s attitudes toward women’s reproductive body functions focused on two dimensions: breastfeeding and childbirth. To assess their general attitudes toward breastfeeding, participants completed a breastfeeding survey developed for this study based on items adapted from existing surveys (Berger & Winter, 1980; Freed et al., 1992, 1993; Martens, 2001; Martens & Young, 1997; Pascoe & Berger, 1985). One set of eight questions focused on men’s comfort with a potential partner’s breastfeeding alone or in front of others.

**Table 1** Inter-correlations among masculinity ideology sub-components.

	MascyIdy	GendAtt	SexObject	BattleofSexes	MSexDrive	TradFem
MascyIdy	1.00					
GendAtt	0.70***	1.00				
SexObject	0.83***	0.45***	1.00			
BattleofSexes	0.80***	0.41***	0.60***	1.00		
MSexDrive	0.84***	0.45***	0.62***	0.65***	1.00	
TradFem	0.86***	0.66***	0.62***	0.58***	0.63***	1.00

$p<0.001$  for all correlations.

Following the prompt, “If my partner were breastfeeding our baby, I would feel comfortable if she were breastfeeding in...,” participants used a seven-point scale anchored by “totally uncomfortable” at 1 and “totally comfortable” at 7 to indicate their levels of comfort with various situations (e.g., “in public among close friends”). Mean scores were calculated across the eight items ( $\alpha=0.85$ ) to produce a *Breastfeeding – Support* score for each participant. Higher scores indicated greater support for a partner’s public breastfeeding.

A second set of questions assessed men’s negative attitudes toward breastfeeding. Using a five-point Likert-type scale, men indicated their level of agreement with each of five statements. Factor and reliability analyses produced the following two subscales from this measure: *Breastfeeding – Fuss/Interference* (two items,  $\alpha=0.62$ ; e.g., “I think breastfeeding causes people to have sex less often;” and “I think breastfeeding would come between me and my partner”); and *Breastfeeding – Private* (two items,  $\alpha=0.76$ ; e.g., “I think breastfeeding in public is inappropriate;” and “I am uncomfortable seeing women breastfeeding their children in public”). Means scores were taken across the two items in each subscale, with higher scores indicating stronger agreement with that notion.

To address the second dimension of men’s attitudes, a separate measure focused on their beliefs about childbirth. Using a five-point Likert-type scale, respondents indicated their level of agreement with each of 15 statements focusing on diverse perspectives toward childbirth. Reliability and factor analyses produced three coherent subscales, two of which were relevant for this study. One subscale (*Childbirth – Public*, four items,  $\alpha=0.67$ ) examined men’s support for public childbirth, with items such as, “If my partner were pregnant I would want to have my closest friends in the room during labor and delivery.” A second subscale (*Childbirth – Negative*, five items;  $\alpha=0.52$ ) focused on men’s perceptions of childbirth as negative, with items such as, “I think seeing childbirth would be disgusting.” Mean scores were created for each subscale, such that higher scores indicated greater levels of each construct.

The final measure assessed the degree to which men perceived the function of breasts to be primarily for sexual attraction or for lactation. Participants were asked to indicate their stance by placing an X along a 6-in. line anchored by the following markers: “The main purpose of breasts is to feed babies” on the left, and “The main purpose of breasts is to stimulate members of the opposite sex” on the right. The distance of each participant’s X-mark from the left anchor was later measured in millimeters to produce a *Breasts as Sexual* score for each participant. Higher scores indicated a belief that breasts are more for sexual attraction than for lactation.

## Procedure

All students enrolled in each of three large Psychology classes were invited to complete a survey as one of several extra credit options; 79% of the enrolled students opted to participate, and only the data from the men are examined here. Survey packets containing the instruments were distributed in class, and participants completed the measures on their own and returned them to class in a closed envelope the following week. Data for 74% of participants were collected during the winter and fall semesters of 2000; data for 26% of the sample were collected during March of 2002. Written consent was obtained from all participants.

## Results

### Descriptives and preliminary analyses

Descriptives of the variables representing media use and reproductive body attitudes are presented in Table 2. Overall, media use for this sample was quite variable. Music videos were among the most consumed genre, with viewers watching an average of 21.5 h per month. Men also reported reading an average of 9 issues of the four popular men’s magazines each year, and reading of *Maxim* dominated. Levels of cognitive involvement and viewer identification were quite moderate, typically falling toward the center of the scale ranges. Men’s level of comfort with

**Table 2** Descriptives of central variables.

Variable name	Mean	Std. Dev.	Range
<b>Media use</b>			
Primetime comedies and dramas/month	10.30	8.53	0.00–57.50
Music videos hours/month	21.50	31.03	0.00–220
Men’s magazines issues/year	9.38	8.74	0.00–40.00
Learning motive	2.80	0.90	1.00–5.09
Perceived realism	2.42	0.47	1.00–3.68
ID – Popular male characters	2.11	0.64	1.00–4.00
<b>Reproductive body attitudes</b>			
Childbirth – neg/dangerous	2.73	0.54	1.40–4.00
Childbirth – comfort with public	2.66	0.68	1.00–5.00
Breastfeeding – private	3.08	0.90	1.00–5.00
Breastfeeding – fuss/interference	2.13	0.71	1.00–5.00
Breastfeeding – support partner	4.75	1.14	1.00–7.00
Breasts as sexual (vs. lactation)	88.27	26.35	0.00–163.00

childbirth was moderate, on average, and participants tended to be relatively supportive of a potential partner's breastfeeding. At the same time, they were less supportive of public breastfeeding, and were slightly more likely, on average, to see breasts more for sexual attraction than for lactation.

Preliminary analyses examined demographic correlates of students' gender ideologies and reproductive body attitudes. A series of zero-order correlations was conducted between the masculinity ideology variable, the six reproductive body attitude variables, and the following demographic factors: age, ethnic group membership (with 0/1 dummy codes for Asian, Latino, and Black), religiosity, family structure (with a 0/1 dummy code for single-parent upbringing), mother's education level, father's education level, sexual orientation (with a 0/1 dummy code for self-identification as gay), and virginity status. Four variables emerged as relatively consistent correlates. First, higher levels of religiosity were associated with greater support of breast-feeding as private,  $r(646)=0.12$ ,  $p=0.002$ , and less support for a partner's public breastfeeding,  $r(638)=-0.14$ ,  $p<0.001$ . Second, in comparison to other men, men of Asian descent were more likely to see breastfeeding as an interference to marital relations,  $r(645)=0.13$ ,  $p=0.001$ , and to be less supportive of a partner's public breastfeeding,  $r(639)=-0.21$ ,  $p<0.001$ . Third, men who self-identified as gay offered less support of traditional MI,  $r(655)=-0.10$ ,  $p=0.012$ , and perceived breasts as less sexual,  $r(636)=-0.16$ ,  $p<0.001$ . Finally, men who were virgins were less supportive of breastfeeding as private,  $r(643)=-0.09$ ,  $p=0.022$ , more supportive of a partner's public breastfeeding,  $r(635)=0.14$ ,  $p<0.001$ , and perceived breasts as more sexual,  $r(631)=0.09$ ,  $p=0.024$ . These four variables served as controls in later analyses.

### Testing the Main Research Questions

The first path of our mediated model (A→B) links frequent or involved media use with greater support of traditional MI. To test these connections, we conducted a step-wise regression analysis in which the four demographic correlates named above were entered on the first step, and the six media use variables were entered simultaneously on the second step. Results summarized in Table 3 indicate several significant associations, all in the expected direction. More specifically, frequent reading of men's magazines, viewing television intently to learn about the world, and attributing greater realism to its portrayals were each associated with greater acceptance of traditional MI. Together, the media variables explained an additional 13.6% of the variance. With these analyses, the first path of the mediated model was supported.

**Table 3** Regression analyses testing associations between media use and traditional MI.

	Masculinity ideology
STEP 1: Demographics	
Asian heritage	0.02
Religiosity	-0.01
Homosexual identification	-0.09**
Virgin	-0.06
STEP 2: Media use	
Prime-time hours	-0.02
Music videos	0.06
Men's magazines	0.22***
Learning motive	0.10**
Perceived realism	0.18***
ID – Popular male characters	0.07*
Adjusted $R^2$ – Demographics	0.008
Adjusted $R^2$ – Final	0.144
$\Delta$ in adjusted $R^2$	+0.136
$F$ of change	16.963***
$F$ of final model	11.188***

Standardized coefficients (Beta) reported from final model.  
\* $p<0.075$ ; \*\* $p<0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p<0.001$ .

The second path of the model (B→C) argues that greater acceptance of traditional MI is associated with less support of breastfeeding and less positive perceptions of childbirth. To test these notions, we conducted a series of step-wise regression analyses in which the six reproductive body attitude variables served as dependent variables, the four demographic correlates were entered on the first step, and the MI variable was entered on the second step. Results presented in Table 4 provide considerable support for the argued connections. As expected, greater support of traditional MI was associated with more negative attitudes toward childbirth, greater perception that breastfeeding is private and interferes with marital relations, less support for a partner's public breastfeeding, and greater perceptions of breasts as sexual (instead of functional). For each of these equations, MI, alone, contributed from 2.3 to 10.3% of the variance in men's attitudes about women's reproductive body functions. The only connection that did not emerge was that MI was not a consistent correlate of men's views about public childbirth.

Although not a central hypothesis, we also tested whether specific dimensions of MI (e.g., the sexual objectification of women) are more predictive of men's attitudes here than are others. To examine this notion, we conducted a series of partial correlation analyses testing associations between each of the five aspects of MI and men's attitudes about breastfeeding and childbirth, controlling for the four demographic correlates. Results provided in Table 5 show that each dimension of MI is indeed a correlate of men's views toward breastfeeding and child-

**Table 4** Regression analyses testing associations between men's gender ideologies and their attitudes toward women's reproductive body functions.

	CBirth neg	CBirth public	BFeed fuss	BFeed private	BFeed support	Breasts sexual
STEP 1: Demographics						
Demo Adjusted $R^2$	0.015	0.007	0.011	0.024	0.062	0.029
STEP 2:						
Masculinity Ideology	0.37*	0.00	0.27*	0.15*	-0.18*	0.33*
Final Adjusted $R^2$	0.153	0.005	0.083	0.047	0.092	0.132
$\Delta$ in adjusted $R^2$	+0.038	-0.002	+0.072	+0.023	+0.030	+0.103
$F$ of change	103.72*	0.006	50.25*	15.13*	21.62*	75.47*
$F$ of final model	22.983*	1.630	12.51*	6.275*	13.75*	20.14*

Standardized coefficients (Beta) reported from final model.

\* $p < 0.001$ .

birth, with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.11 to 0.35. Overall, then, we see strong support for notions that endorsing traditional MI is linked with seeing breasts as sexual and with viewing childbirth and breastfeeding less positively. Our second path is supported.

The third path of the model addresses connections between media use and men's attitudes about breastfeeding and childbirth (A→C). To test these associations, we conducted a series of step-wise regression analyses in which the six reproductive body attitude variables served as dependent variables, the four demographic correlates were entered on the first step, and the six media use variables were entered on the second step. Results summarized in Table 6 indicated few significant connections between these key constructs. Attributing greater realism to media portrayals and watching TV intently to learn about the world were each associated with a stronger belief in breastfeeding as an interference to marital/sexual relations. Additionally, men who identified more strongly with popular male TV characters and who frequently read men's magazines saw breasts more as sexual than as functional.

Those who identified strongly with popular TV characters also perceived childbirth less negatively.

Because few significant connections emerged between media use and men's attitudes toward women's body functions, support for a mediated model was diminished. For such a model to exist, strong direct connections would need to appear between media use and the body attitude variables, and these connections would then be substantially diminished or eradicated once MI was accounted for. In our case, however, no such strong initial connections emerged. It appears, then, that the pathways are likely to be indirect, not mediated. To confirm these suspicions, we conducted one final series of step-wise regression analyses. Serving as the dependent variables were the following three reproductive attitude variables that had yielded significant correlations in the previous analysis: Childbirth–Negative, Breastfeeding–Fuss, and Breasts–Sexual. For each regression analysis, we entered the four demographic correlates on the first step, the seven media variables on the second step, and the Masculinity Ideology variable on the third step. Results are presented in Table 7.

**Table 5** Significant partial correlations between individual dimensions of the MI variable and men's attitudes toward women's reproductive body functions (controlling for ethnic background, religiosity, sexual orientation, and virginity status).

	Traditional gender attitudes	Women as sexual object	Battle of the sexes	Centrality of M sex drive	Traditional female role (gatekeeper)
CBirth – Public					
CBirth – Neg	0.29*	0.32*	0.29*	0.29*	0.35*
BFeed – Private	0.16*	0.14*			0.16*
BFeed – Fuss	0.27*	0.16*	0.15*	0.23*	0.31*
BFeed – Support	-0.20*	-0.12*	-0.12*	-0.11*	-0.22*
Breasts/Sexual	0.24*	0.32*	0.19*	0.28*	0.27*

\* $p < 0.005$ .



**Table 6** Regression analyses testing associations between media use and men’s attitudes about women’s reproductive body functions.

	CBirth Neg	CBirth Public	BFeed Fuss	BFeed Private	BFeed Support	Breasts Sexual
STEP 1: Demos						
Adjusted $R^2$	0.009	0.006	0.010	0.022	0.069	0.032
STEP 2: Media use						
Prime-time hours	-0.02	-0.01	-0.01	0.03	0.01	0.03
Music videos	0.03	0.05	-0.03	-0.04	-0.03	0.01
Men’s magazines	0.04	-0.05	0.00	0.03	-0.04	0.09**
Learning motive	0.09	0.08	0.11**	0.08	-0.09*	0.03
Perceived realism	0.05	0.10*	0.20****	-0.02	0.00	0.00
ID – Male characters	-0.08**	0.02	-0.07	-0.03	0.04	0.12***
Final adjusted $R^2$	0.024	0.023	0.077	0.020	0.072	0.061
$\Delta$ in adjusted $R^2$	+0.015	+0.017	+0.067	-0.002	+0.003	+0.029
$F$ of change	2.479**	2.748**	8.195****	0.868	1.391	3.017****
$F$ of final model	2.478***	2.402**	6.003****	1.754**	5.634****	3.768****

Standardized coefficients (Beta) reported from final model.  
 \* $p < 0.075$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

No evidence was found for a mediated model. Although MI did emerge as the strongest contributor in each regression equation, adding this variable did *not* eliminate contributions of media use, and of identification, in particular.

**Table 7** Regression analyses testing mediated connections between media use and men’s beliefs about childbirth and breastfeeding.

	CBirth Neg.	BFeed – Fuss	Breasts sexual
STEP 1: Demos –			
Adjusted $R^2$	0.009	0.009	0.025
STEP 2: Media use –			
Adjusted $R^2$	0.024	0.076	0.044
$\Delta$ in adjusted $R^2$	+0.015**	+0.067****	+0.019***
STEP 3: MI mediator, final model			
Asian heritage	0.04	0.07	-0.01
Religiosity	-0.06	-0.00	0.00
Homosexual identification	-0.06	0.02	-0.12***
Virgin	-0.01	-0.01	0.10**
Prime-time hours	-0.01	-0.00	0.03
Music videos	0.01	-0.05	-0.01
Men’s magazines	-0.04	-0.05	0.02
Learning motive	0.05	0.09*	-0.00
Perceived realism	-0.02	0.16***	-0.07
ID – Male characters	-0.11***	-0.09**	0.10**
Masculinity ideology	0.38****	0.23****	0.33****
Adjusted $R^2$	0.145	0.118	0.137
$\Delta$ in adjusted $R^2$ from Step 2	+0.121	+0.042	+0.095****
$F$ of change	85.535****	28.989****	63.294****
$F$ of final model	10.348****	8.261****	9.529****

Standardized coefficients (Beta) reported.  
 \* $p < 0.075$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Equally surprising was the nature of some of these associations. Two outcomes fell as expected, such that attributions of greater realism to media portrayals was associated with seeing breastfeeding as an interference, and identifying strongly with popular characters was associated with viewing breasts as mostly sexual parts. Two outcomes were unexpected, however, such that strong identification with popular characters was associated with perceiving childbirth less negatively and breastfeeding as less of an interference.

In summary, as expected, media use was strongly connected to men’s masculinity ideologies, which themselves were consistent correlates of men’s beliefs about breastfeeding and childbirth. However, few connections emerged between media use and these reproductive attitudes, and nearly all of these remained once MI was controlled. Therefore, evidence for a mediated model was not strong. Instead, men’s traditional gender ideologies emerged as a key mechanism linking their media use and their beliefs about women’s reproductive body functions.

**Discussion**

In the larger cultural context, masculinity ideology is a prominent force that contributes both to how men view themselves and to how they relate to the women in their lives. Our goal was to explore potential correlates of these beliefs, with an eye towards examining possible causes and consequences of specific dimensions of MI that encourage men to view women and their bodies as sexual objects. Proposing a mediated model, we tested claims that frequent and involved media use would be associated with greater support of traditional MI which in turn would be connected with less positive attitudes toward breast-

feeding and childbirth. Our results yielded strong support for these individual connections, demonstrating consistent and significant connections with gender ideologies. Although our correlational data do not permit us to draw causal inferences, they do paint a compelling set of relations worthy of further inquiry.

First, as expected, multiple dimensions of men's media use were related to their offering stronger support for traditional MI. The more frequently men read popular men's magazines, and the more actively they engaged TV content and characters, the more accepting they were of traditional gender ideologies constructing women as sexual objects and sexual gatekeepers, men as sexually driven, and dating as a battle of the sexes. Second, as expected, endorsing these traditional beliefs about gender was associated with expressing more negative views toward childbirth, less support for public breastfeeding (both in general and for a potential partner), and more concern that breastfeeding interferes with marital/sexual relations. These findings support the notion that traditional MI focuses on the sexual aspect of women's breasts and bodies, thereby making it more difficult for men to embrace the reproductive functions. Finally, our analyses indicate that direct connections between media use and men's beliefs about women's reproductive body functions are minimal, but that these two forces may affect each other indirectly through men's support of traditional MI. We therefore argue that media content is likely to have little direct effect on men's views about breastfeeding and childbirth, most likely because these actions are seldom featured in the media. However, by frequently reducing women to sexual objects, media content may make it difficult for men to see women any other way.

At the same time, however, we are mindful that these are *associations*, and that directions of causality remain unproven. Additional investigation is needed to fully explicate these relations and to address other limitations. For example, the men tested here were drawn from a relatively homogenous sample of young, predominantly White, middle-class, well-educated, non-fathers. Extension of these analyses to men of diverse age ranges, ethnic groups, and socioeconomic levels, and to men who have fathered children, is needed. It might be particularly insightful to follow men over time to investigate whether their attitudes toward women's reproductive body functions change once they have become parents. Our conclusions are also constrained by our limited assessment of media use. Further study is needed of the role of other media genres that are targeted specifically towards men and that represent women in very limited ways, such as popular video games (e.g., *Grand Theft Auto*), comic books, action/adventure movies, and internet pornography.

The relations demonstrated here have several important implications for women's lives, both in general and as mothers. Although women choose breastfeeding or bottle feeding for a variety of reasons, including work situation and family structure, of particular concern is the role of body objectification and the sexualization of the breasts. It appears that many women today are viewing their breasts centrally as sexual objects for the enjoyment of men. Dominant heterosexual discourse in American culture continues to reinforce the idea that the primary purpose of breasts is a heterosexual one. Women worry about their breast size, their breast shape, and, as they age, whether or not their breasts are sagging. This concern reflects a desire for their breasts to look good for men. Evidence supporting this view can be seen in statistics on breast augmentation surgery, which was the second most common cosmetic surgical procedure reported in 2005 by the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, with 364,610 surgeries performed (American Plastic Surgeons Quick Facts, 2005). However, these alterations also put a woman's ability to breastfeed at risk and may increase issues with the diagnosis of breast cancer. It appears as if today more than ever before women are choosing to risk the functionality of their breasts.

Is it likely that change will come anytime soon? Because sexually objectifying images in the media have been increasing, as noted earlier, and because women rely both on these cultural norms and on their partner's beliefs about breasts to make their feeding choices, it appears as if this situation is not likely to change anytime soon. What can be done? Dettwyler (1995) optimistically concluded that breastfeeding rates *can* be improved as our culture comes to recognize and accept the importance of breastfeeding for both the mother's and baby's health. She equated the lack of breastfeeding initiation with the once very high rates of cigarette smoking initiation, another serious health challenge our culture has faced. She points out how smoking attitudes have changed for the better and predicted the same for breastfeeding. What is particularly interesting about this parallel is that efforts were made to curb cigarette advertising in order to reduce the glamorization of cigarette smoking. In contrast, levels of advertising containing sexually objectifying images of women have moved in the opposite direction.

In the years since Dettwyler's (1995) paper, breastfeeding rates seem to have stabilized at 60% (Gartner et al., 2005) for all women. Although this figure is encouraging, it reflects any and all women who have initiated breastfeeding. A more accurate way to look at breastfeeding is whether it is sustained over time. Indeed, although many women are at least trying to initiate breastfeeding, most stop relatively quickly: rates at 6 months have fallen to a dismal 22% (Gartner et al., 2005). Dettwyler's prediction of

positive attitudinal changes regarding breastfeeding has not been realized.

It is our hope that the findings presented here will help expand current discussions concerning the impact of the media's sexualization of women. Up to this point, many of the concerns raised have focused on the effects on young girls or on high rates of eating disorders stemming from impossible beauty ideals. However, our data suggest that the media's rigid portrayals of women and of femininity also affect how men view and interact with women as partners and parents. Until there is a change in the media's sexual objectification of women's breasts and bodies, it is unlikely that these perceptions will change. Consequently, given men's influence on their female partners' choices, resulting breastfeeding rates will not likely change until this sexualization is reduced.

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