

# Thou shalt sport a banana in thy pocket: Gendered body size ideals in advertising and popular culture

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***Abstract.** The present article addresses the issue of how idealized accounts of penis size – a bodily feature that plays a crucial role in how masculinity is constructed today – gets produced and reproduced through advertising and popular culture. The analysis shows that there are plenty of normative accounts of a particular penis size, despite a lack of explicit representations in mainstream cultural outlets. These normative messages are so ubiquitous that men in Western consumer cultures are bombarded with the archaic imperative: thou shalt sport a banana in thy pocket. Discourse analysis is used to illustrate the different sets of interpretive repertoires available that circumvent the taboos surrounding penis size in subtle and roundabout ways in order to create a sense of an ideal that should be adhered to. These sets of discourses function to give an ambivalent message in which males are caught in a discursive cross-fire where they are potentially made to feel anxious about their anxiousness and embarrassed about their embarrassedness. **Key Words** ● advertising ● consumption ● gender ● idealized bodies ● masculinity ● popular culture*

## Introduction

Size does matter. In consumer research, studies of idealized bodies, as well as consumers' relationships to bodily norms and their own bodies, have looked at how consumers agonize and worry about not living up to certain body ideals – such as not being 'tight', 'toned', or 'shaped' enough – and hence having to lose weight, work out or undergo plastic surgery in order to conform to those ideals (Askegaard et al., 2002; Elliott and Elliott, 2005; Schouten, 1991). Previous consumer research has shown that the existence of body ideals, and the socialization that we should adhere to these ideals, leads to a deeply internalized duty to discipline and normalize one's

body (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). For a consumer, it is relatively easy to compare oneself to the bodily ideals discussed in previous studies; they are readily available on still and moving images in e.g. advertising, magazines, TV, and on the internet. What is missing from studies concerning male idealized bodies, however, is the body part that many times is alluded to when one says 'size does matter'; the body part that makes some men agonize and worry when someone tells them, even as a joke, that 'size does matter', and the body part that makes other men proud when this same comment is passed; the body part that might not be very frequently discussed openly but that is still always there: the penis.

The masculine subject has traditionally been privileged in consumer research, especially since – as Bristor and Fischer (1993) and Joy and Venkatesh (1994) have informed us – consumer research has typically used, without explicitly stating so, men as the norm when looking at various topics. Still, the particularities of the male body have been relatively sparsely studied. Stephens and Lorentzen (2007: 5) and MacMullan (2002) argue that male *bodies* have been subject to an act of double erasure. The bodily norms of white, heterosexual male bodies are first projected onto a generalized category of 'the body'; then this corporeality is displaced onto the bodies of cultural 'others', leaving (white, heterosexual) masculinity to occupy the place of reason, rationality and the disembodied mind. The last couple of years, a few studies have challenged this legacy and have brought the male body into the light by looking at the particularities of male idealized bodies (Elliott and Elliott, 2005; Frith and Gleeson, 2004; Hobza et al., 2007; Patterson and Elliott, 2002). While insightful, these studies still leave parts of the male body in the shadow, as they do not mention the archaic masculine symbol of the penis. This should probably be regarded more as a result of the issue being taboo, than as a reflection of it being unimportant. Both worrying about one's penis and talking about it are heavily stigmatized and therefore not likely to come up spontaneously in the type of interviews commonly conducted by consumer culture researchers. Given the cultural history of the penis and the importance placed on its characteristics in various socio-historical settings (Friedman, 2001) – not to mention the presence of accounts relating to the body part in advertising and popular culture, as will be illustrated in this study – the issue is still likely to be an important part of males' relationships with their bodies. So important, in fact, that one might even ask that if gender truly has become a 'pastiche of possibilities' and 'traditional notions of femininity and masculinity come across as antiquated and illusory' (Kacen, 2000: 345), why is it that so much attention is still placed on the archaic masculine symbol, the penis (cf. Monick, 1987)?

The norms of an appropriate penis size are much less visible in Western culture than the norms of e.g. slimness, fitness, and particular facial features. Explicit representations of penises are more or less taboo in mainstream Western culture (Stephens, 2007). While males appear as nude subjects in classical Western art, total male nudity has been a 'powerful taboo' over the last six centuries (Schroeder and Borgerson, 1998: 169). This convention has continued with the introduction of photography and since its popularization during the latter part of the 19th century, nude males have been much less frequently occurring than nude females.

It has been suggested that the male nude was regarded as more threatening, since ‘male physiology made the sexual component abundantly visible’ (Lucie-Smith, 2003: 43). Although there has been an increase in representations of the penis in the popular media – due to changes in censorship laws and increased public acceptance of male nudity – closer inspection reveals the extent to which these representations are continuous with a long tradition in which the specifics of the physical penis are obscured by a phallic ideal (Lehman, 2007; Stephens, 2007). The pictorial conventions of underwear ads, for example, typically show unspecific bulges rather than anatomical specifics, and many times shadows are put to creative use in order to simultaneously show and hide, what Schroeder and Borgerson call ‘phallic packaging’ (1998: 170; cf. Jobling, 2003: 153). Instead, the anatomical specifics are left to the realm of imagination. Consequently, for the particular body ideal in focus in this study, most men just might not have a very large repertoire of images to compare with. Instead they have to compare themselves to the phantasmagoric images they nurture, leading to the potentially ever-present fear of not sizing up (cf. Lehman, 1998). Because even though these ideals are not clearly outspoken, they are there, being cleverly shaped by discourse into appearing completely natural. Normative messages in media and popular culture are so ubiquitous that men in Western consumer cultures are bombarded with the archaic imperative: *thou shalt sport a banana in thy pocket*.

In this article I will illustrate how the norm of an appropriate penis size is socially and culturally constructed through processes of normalization taking place in various sociocultural institutions, most notably advertising and popular culture, with an emphasis on tabloid press and self-help resources. But it should be stressed that this is not just an empirical extension of studies of idealized masculine bodies that focuses on a body part not previously studied; then we could just as well have studied normative accounts of ear size or finger length. By looking at an area that is taboo, this study aims at increasing our understanding of the subtle and roundabout ways in which idealized body ideals can be shaped through advertising and popular cultural representations.

Furthermore, the study aims at looking at the gender political dimensions of these normalizing processes. It is oftentimes argued that the ubiquity of the penis is maintained by its cultural invisibility (Stephens, 2007). Most traditional men (and researchers) seem comfortable with the silence surrounding the penis. However, ‘silence about and invisibility of the penis contribute to phallic mystique. The penis is and will remain centered until such time as we turn the critical spotlight on it’ (Lehman, 1998: 124; cf. MacMullan, 2002: 3). As proposed by Lehman (1998), there is an important political purpose in subjecting the corporeal specificity of the male body to closer scrutiny. While this study does not look at the corporeal specificities but rather at the constructions of norms, it nevertheless serves a political purpose in that these constructions function to cement, make stable, and seemingly self-evident stereotypical white heterosexual norms about what it means to be a real man. These norms hence serve to reproduce a particular political system in which the categories of ‘men’ and ‘women’ are stable and unproblematic. This perspective is distinctly anti-queer and thus marginalizes the political endeavors of

those trying to cause gender trouble by challenging the taken-for-granted symbolic boundaries (cf. Butler, 1999/1990; Stoltenberg 2000/1989).

The article is organized in the following way: first is a section where the methodological procedures followed for this study are described. The second part consists of a review of the literature on gender in consumer research and marketing, with an emphasis on masculinity as well as a discussion of the importance of sex and gender from a post-structuralist perspective. This section is followed by a brief account of how penis size has been looked upon and depicted over the centuries, serving as a backdrop to emphasize the historical importance of the issue and to make visible that bodily ideals as well as representational conventions are culturally shaped and thus change over time and locations. The following part consists of empirical examples of how the idealization of a certain size is constructed in advertising and popular culture including self-help resources, tabloid press, and to a lesser degree, other media. This is the main body of the article, as the goal is to show the extension of the various ways in which the norms are created and recreated. These processes are typically not upfront; the processes of normalization take place either in roundabout and subtle ways or in overt ways that are not taken seriously, but their ubiquity and mundane character give them a taken-for-granted appearance. The concluding part consists of a section where the functions and effects of the available norms are discussed and where it is suggested that there is a tension between strong voices claiming that size matters and other strong voices holding on to an opposite standpoint. Furthermore, it is suggested that this tension might create a double anxiety among men. In the concluding section the gender political implications of the study are also elaborated.

## Methodological considerations

In order to illustrate how the norm of an appropriate penis size is socially and culturally constructed, the methodological procedures of discourse analysis have been employed (Elliott, 1996). Discourse is seen here as a system of statements that constructs an object, supports institutions, reproduces power relations and has ideological effects (Parker, 1990). Language is thus the site where the social world is constructed, replete with contradiction, paradox, and contest. In the field of marketing and consumer research, discourse analysis has been used in order to show how texts – such as guide books, advertising and material from consumer groups – offer ideal interpretive positions, and how authoritarian voices in society – i.e. the ones whose discourses get noticed and thus get reproduced – privilege and marginalize various modes of understanding (e.g. Caruana et al., 2008; Fischer, 2000; Thompson, 2004). In addition to discourse analysis, the interpretation of the pictorial material is inspired by visual analysis as presented by Schroeder (2002; Schroeder and Borgerson, 1998).

In conducting the analysis, I use a number of different types of texts where normative discourses of an appropriate size are produced: online and in print advertising, as well as in popular culture, with an emphasis on self-help resources

and the tabloid press, but also with material from TV shows. The sources are ones that consumers might both come into contact with without necessarily focusing on this particular topic – advertising, tabloid press and TV – and sources that are readily available should one actively search for information – self-help resources both in print and on the internet, as well as special interest internet pages with information about penile enlargement. These sources are neither coherent nor exhaustive. There are plenty of other potential sources, such as fiction and pornography, where normative accounts about the issue occur. The goal has not been to produce an exhaustive account of all the instances where normative accounts appear. Rather, the goal has been, as suggested by Elliott (1996: 66), to find variations in linguistics patterning. The material analyzed in this article should thus not be viewed as a sample trying to accurately represent a larger source of material. Rather, the material is typical, illuminating, and deemed noteworthy, important, and interesting (cf. Schroeder and Borgerson, 1998: 164; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004: 23).

The material has been collected over a three-year period. During this time, popular media has been browsed for occurrences of articles that in one way or the other deal with the topic of normalizing a certain type of body rather than another. The main part of the media analysis has consisted of articles published in the internet editions of tabloids in the UK and Sweden. Swedish tabloids largely mimic the style, as well as part of the content, of their UK and US counterparts and are, if anything, more restrictive in posting revealing pictures and stories of both male and female celebrities. While tabloids traditionally have had readers from mostly blue-collar backgrounds and a distinctly low-brow focus, this has broadened over the last couple of years due to the availability of the material online (Johansson, 2008). Also, spam emails with advertising for different augmentation pills and techniques have been collected, and the internet has been scanned for homepages catering to the same type of products. Advertisements for other products catering to men's insecurities about not sizing up have also been collected. Finally, self-help pages on the internet and self-help books have been analyzed. The material thus collected has been looked at in total, and analyzed in order to find prominent features of how the normalization takes place. After this initial analysis, there has been an iterative movement between the empirical examples and relevant theoretical accounts that deal with gender, masculinity, and idealized bodies. Finally, prominent examples from the empirical material have been chosen and are represented in this text.

As suggested by Elliott (1996), the analysis involved two closely-related phases of a search for patterns in the data, and the hypothesizing of functions and effects. The patterns found function as 'interpretive repertoires', i.e. recurrently used systems of meaning which potentially can be used by individuals in making sense of the world. In line with the argument put forth by Fischer (2000: 288), I am attempting to show 'the discourses that intentionally or otherwise have found their way into or been marginalized in these texts, in order to understand some of the implications for both consumer research and those who [are faced with these texts]'. There are, as will be shown in the findings section, different and contrasting

sets of interpretive repertoires suggesting the anatomic specificities required of a man. The functions and effects of these available interpretive repertoires, both for individual consumers and for consumer culture, are not available for direct study using this methodological approach. Rather, again as suggested by Elliott (1996), the functions will be hypothesized at the end of the article, where the political implications of these hegemonic approaches to gender ideologies are discussed.

## Gender and masculinity in consumer research

Research on gender and marketing for a long time dealt mainly with the degrees to which gender identity functioned to determine preferences for certain types of products, brands, types of advertising, service encounters, shopping behaviors, and leisure activities (see Palan, 2001; Patterson and Hogg, 2004 for overviews). Following an overall influence of feminist thought in the social sciences, critical ideas were introduced in the early 1990s; these exposed the ways in which the entire marketing field was infused with a taken-for-granted male logic privileging certain ways of understanding, typically described as masculine (Bristor and Fischer, 1993; Costa, 1994; Hirschman, 1993; Joy and Venkatesh, 1994; Stern, 1999; Stevens and Maclaran, 2007). Also, attention has been given to the degree to which men and women feel urged to comply with certain standards of idealized bodies or images (e.g. Askegaard et al., 2002; Bloch and Richins, 1992; Elliott and Elliott, 2005; Frith and Gleeson, 2004; Gulas and McKeage, 2000; Hobza et al., 2007; Martin and Gentry, 1997; Patterson and Elliott, 2002; Richins, 1991; Schouten, 1991; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). Recently, scholars influenced by developments in post-structuralist thinking have introduced more fundamental questions regarding the relationships between biological sex, gender, and gender identity (Aidan and Ross, 2006; Borgerson, 2005; Kacen, 2000; Schroeder and Borgerson, 2003, 2004).

### Masculinity and consumer culture

Recently, there has been an increased interest in issues relating to masculinity (Bordo, 1997, 1999; Mort, 1996; Stephens and Lorentzen, 2007; Stibbe, 2004; Tuana et al., 2002). More especially, the notion that true masculinity is an eternal quality that emanates from the particularities of the male body and psyche has been challenged (Butler, 1993, 1999/1990; Connell, 2005; Stoltenberg, 2000/1989). Instead, focus has been placed on how norms are constructed and how men are encouraged to comply with these norms. A majority of these studies within consumer research focus on body type and discuss how men prefer to be mesomorphic (i.e. of well proportioned, average build) or even hypermesomorphic ('muscleman'-type body characterized by well developed chest and arm muscles and wide shoulders tapering down to a narrow waist) as opposed to ectomorphic (thin) or endomorphic (fat) (Elliott and Elliott, 2005; Mishkind et al., 1986: 547). Other consumer researchers have focused more on the possessions side and have touched upon the

idea that certain consumer objects could hold phallic properties (e.g. Belk, 1988).

Holt and Thompson (2004; Thompson and Holt, 2004) have looked at ideals of masculinity by studying consumers that deal with the hardships of being a 'real man' in contemporary American consumer culture. They conclude that men, to grapple with the shifting ideals of masculinity in contemporary society, carve out a space for themselves as men-of-action heroes. Masculinity hence appears to be constructed mainly by what one *does*, not what one *has*. This is consistent with traditional representations of men in advertising that have typically been connected to men's role as breadwinners. This legacy was unchallenged up to the 1970s. During the 1980s, however, this slowly changed, as men started appearing without reference to family – shown alone and in close-up. Still, men were typically portrayed as dominant and as influential, in charge, as if they were creating a sense of identity by extending out from their body to control objects and other people (cf. Berger, 1998). In his classic study of gender in advertisements, Ervin Goffman (1979) found that women were typically represented as cradling or caressing an object but not grasping, holding or manipulating it in a utilitarian way. The same focus on men *doing* things rather than merely *being*, and thus being distinguished from stereotypical portrayals of women, can be discerned in much of the consumer research and marketing literature (Bristol and Fischer, 1993; Joy and Venkatesh, 1994; Schroeder and Borgerson, 1998). During the 1990s, men's role as homemakers/breadwinners in advertising was further de-emphasized, and contempt for stereotypically unpleasant male behaviors – such as uncleanliness and poor household skills – became a staple of advertising. This open ridicule of masculinity slowly paved the way for an increased eroticization of the male body in advertising (MacKinnon, 2003).

Within Consumer Culture Theory, there have also been a few studies looking at mediated messages of masculinity in advertising. Patterson and Elliott (2002) show how the increasing visualization of male bodies in advertising and the media makes the negotiation and renegotiation of male identities all the more possible, and suggest that the male gaze has been inverted. This position is questioned by Schroeder and Zwick (2004), who instead suggest an *expansion* of the male gaze and analyze the male body as a discursive 'effect'. Their analyses show how advertising images, drawing on visual conventions from classical art and photography, show how men can be represented as consumers, how the male body functions to represent consumer goals and in what ways ads articulate masculine desire via the male body. When we are faced with admirable bodies in visual representations, such as advertising, the subject being depicted is turned into an admired and admirable object (Gill et al., 2003; Mulvey, 1989). While female bodies have traditionally been portrayed in the nude without too many apologies, the nude, or partially nude, male body needs an excuse to be portrayed (Leppert, 1996; Lucie-Smith, 2003; Schroeder and Borgerson, 1998). Typically, the men depicted need to be engaged in some activity rather than just posing. In classical art, war scenes have been the most common excuse to portray eroticized male bodies in action (ripped clothing, bulging muscles, sweat) with neither the subject portrayed, nor the onlooker, having to feel uncomfortable. Today, especially in advertising, sports

seem to be the excuse of choice as there is apparently nothing peculiar about masses of half-naked, well-sculpted, sweaty bodies being seen on sports courts. Even one of the most iconic representations of a nude male body – August Rodin’s *The Thinker* – is conceptualized in such a way that we are not just looking at a nude man posing for us. We are looking at a nude man thinking! This man is a thinking subject, not a beautiful object to admire.

Beginning in the 1980s, and gaining in frequency during the 1990s, men were increasingly portrayed as ‘to-be-looked-at’ (Gill et al., 2003; Mulvey, 1989), without the protective shelter of humor, degradation, or ridicule. Nick Kamen’s classic ad for Levi’s 501 jeans, where he undresses in a 1950s launderette, aired for the first time in 1985 and marked a shift in representations of men in TV ads. In 1982, Calvin Klein posted a ‘tantalizing voyeuristic advertisement [on a] traffic-stopping billboard in New York’s Times Square’ (Jobling, 2003: 147); and about ten years later Calvin Klein took a new turn and introduced even more overtly sexual representation of males in a series of underwear ads running in, for example, the *New York Times*. The effect of the latter is described by Susan Bordo (1999):

It was the first time in my experience that I had encountered a commercial representation of a male body that seemed to deliberately invite me to linger over it. Let me make that stronger – that seemed to reach out to *me*, interrupting my mundane but peaceful Sunday morning, and provoke me into erotic consciousness, whether or not I wanted it.

Mort (1996) suggests that much of the new imagery of men is implicitly directed towards a homosocial audience, i.e. towards a community of heterosexual men, much like the inverted gaze suggested by Patterson and Elliott (2002). While women and homosexual males might indeed appreciate the imagery, the explicit purpose of the image to be pleasing to the eyes of a much broader audience, including heterosexual males, is typically obscured.

## Poststructuralist accounts on sex and gender

Lately, the more fundamental questions of the relationships between biological sex, gender, and gender identity have been introduced to marketing by scholars influenced by developments in post-structuralist thinking (Aidan and Ross, 2006; Borgerson, 2005; Kacen, 2000; Schroeder and Borgerson, 2003, 2004). The social categories of female and male are fundamental to the organization of society, and the designation of individuals to the two categories is made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria; whether you possess recognizable male or female genitalia (Butler, 1993; West and Zimmerman, 1987). The designation to these categories is so fundamental that it is typically the first social event that occurs in an infant’s life. The medical team takes a look and then exclaims, ‘it’s a girl’ or ‘it’s a boy’, all depending on the absence or presence of these biological features. Today, with modern sonogram technology, this designation many times happens even before birth. Butler (1993) theorizes that these body parts are not simply there from birth onwards, but that one’s sex is performatively constituted when one’s body is first categorized. In the words of Borgerson (2005: 68): ‘[t]he



subject takes form from language and gestures – produced with body positions, speech acts, reflective processes, and other performative behavior, including consumption and production itself – given, or normatively imposed, as limits that at the same time offer and foreclose.’ Therefore there is no unsexed subject that assumes a role of being a boy or a girl. The categories are always already there and the language that appears to be merely describing the subjects actually constitutes them. From this initial ‘girling’ of girls and ‘boying’ of boys, various authorities continuously reiterate, and have subjects act according to, these categories in ways that give a naturalized effect of the categories being stable and self-evident.

The designation does not only work in this way – i.e. biological criteria determine whether we see a person as male or female – but, by implication, the designation also works in the opposite direction. In most instances when we see someone that we categorize as ‘male’ – judging from the way they dress, their tone of voice, their name, etcetera – we also typically assume, at least in mainstream cultural settings, that this individual has male genitalia. After all, it is the subversion of this logic that makes gender bending and drag into such potentially powerful acts. As West and Zimmerman (1987) explain it is the *presumption* that essential criteria exist and would, or should, be there if looked for that provides the basis for sex categorization, rather than the biological criteria themselves. But what, more specifically, is it that we assume? Is the category of male genitalia distinct, coherent, and unproblematic? Male genitalia might appear to be an ‘innocent’ category; either you have it or you don’t. But given the anxiety, or should we say fixation, around the subject, it actually does not appear to be so innocent. At least, it appears that there are idealized images of what the prototypical penis should be like, and according to the number of questions pouring into self-help columns in papers and on the web, it appears that many men are not so sure if they really have what it takes to be comfortably placed in the category ‘male’.

There seem to be some official boundaries to what it takes to be comfortably placed in the category ‘male’, at least on the smaller end of the spectrum. The medical community introduces the category of ‘micropenises’ as an instance where it is decided that this, this is beyond what we can call normal (Lee et al., 1980; Wylie and Eardley, 2007). On the larger end of the spectrum there do not appear to exist similar definitions, and Stoltenberg (2000/1989) suggests that there are even normative voices suggesting that the more penis one has, the more man one is. At least, the idea that a certain growth in penis size is an important part of moving from boyhood into manhood is well engrained in Western culture over several thousand years (Friedman, 2001; Monick, 1987). Consequently, having a large one firmly places an individual in the male category, whereas having a small one, or perhaps even a micropenis, places a person somewhere in between. Being in between – and thus blurring, or perhaps standing outside of, the boundaries of the male and the female – is something that causes anxiety in our Western culture obsessed as we are with neatly ordered dichotomous categories (Borgerson and Rehn, 2004). While the main categorization between males and females takes place depending on the assumed absence or presence of visible male genitalia, certain normative discourses, as I will try to illustrate in this article, try to instill an additional division

between males and 'real men'. This division is not depending on the mere presence of male genitalia but rather on the phallic impression of the penis.

From a post-structural perspective, the norms of certain body features, such as an appropriate size, are social constructions situated in a field of interpersonal relationships, cultural institutions, class divisions, and other ordering principles of social life (cf. Kacen, 2000; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). It has been suggested that men today are being taught (or allowed) to gaze at other men either for pleasure or for anxiety-evoking contrast, and that changing representations of the male body make men increasingly aware of, and dissatisfied with, bodies that do not meet various cultural ideals (Elliott and Elliott, 2005; Frith and Gleeson, 2004; Gill et al., 2003; Hatoum and Belle, 2004; Kacen, 2000; Mort, 1996; Patterson and Elliott, 2002). While the penis is typically not the explicit focus of ads and other images in mainstream media, the attention directed at this body part in the media, some types of advertising, and self-help recourses will probe men to focus on this particular feature. Hirschman and Thompson (1997) show how background knowledge gathered from e.g. the media form an important interpretive framework for the decoding of ads. And while ads in mainstream media do not typically advertise products or services that have anything *directly* to do with penises, ads are many times processed for meaning rather than specific product information and the result might therefore be anxiety, regardless of the initial intent of the advertiser (Hirschman and Thompson, 1997). Furthermore, if a certain size is promoted as physically attractive, and there is repeated exposure to attractive models in advertising and other media outlets – e.g. fashion features as well as underwear, swimwear, and perfume advertisements – this influences consumers' perceptions of what constitutes an acceptable physical appearance (Bloch and Richins, 1992). Social comparison theory suggests that repeated exposure to such images can negatively affect feelings about the self, such as satisfaction with appearance (Gulas and McKeage, 2000; Hobza et al., 2007; Martin and Gentry, 1997; Richins, 1991).

While the bodily feature under investigation in this study is typically not out there on public display, there is still reason to believe that the imagined adherence to the size norms will be a significant part of consumers' self-confidence, especially since popular culture typically portrays men with small penises as pathetic, as illustrated by the abundance of small penis jokes available in Western culture (Lehman, 2006). As Kacen (2000: 351) notes, the recent success of Viagra reflects men's obsession with impotence, as well as not living up to an ideal standard of manhood more broadly, and can be taken as a further sign of men's increasing sense of vulnerability and inadequacy. While neither representations of penises in mainstream media and advertising, nor 'live' penises, are readily available on a large scale, there are still plenty of mainstream outlets where fodder for comparison is provided. Lehman (2007) critically examines the normative representation of the flaccid penis throughout photography, cinema, medical texts, and sexology books and contends that: 'It would seem that penises come in one shape, displaying much of their shaft, commonly referred to as a 'shower', or that when God created man (no sic), he (no sic) created fluffers' (Lehman, 2007: 112).

Lehman makes visible the implicit norms in both mainstream cultural out-

lets – such as the ones mentioned above – and in pornography, by studying the reactions to pictorial material posted on line that does not meet these norms. He concludes that representations of small penises are an assault on the controlled, orderly photographic and filmic history of sexual representation of the male body and suggests that our culture cannot bear small erections that presumably do not create the expected impressive phallic spectacle (Lehman, 2007: 114).

## **A legacy of largeness: The cultural history of size**

Western cultures have a long-standing fixation with the penis. Although it might not always have been a topic of explicit discussion and scrutiny, it has been very present in its absence. In this brief section I will give a background to some of the major movements with regard to the view of penile size over the centuries. This knowledge is important as it serves to reinforce that there is nothing natural about a societies' view of the particular bodily norms of a certain time and place. Already in ancient Greece, there was a representational preference for moderately sized penises, which reflects the Greek emphasis on sexual and corporeal self-control. Large penises were considered coarse and ugly and were banished to the domains of abstraction, of caricature, of satyrs, and of barbarians (Stephens, 2007). In contrast to this, Roman culture celebrated large phalli as a symbol of potency; it was 'the Roman power become flesh' (Friedman, 2001). In Christian cultures, ever since bishop Augustine of Hippo around AD 400, the penis has been looked upon as something that separates Man from holiness. The force of the penis was seen as a direct tie, if not to the devil, at least to thoughts and practices that are of a distinctly worldly character. This is where we see the antecedents of the Christian monks' vows of celibacy and the church's decretals about masturbation (Friedman, 2001). This can be contrasted with the view of the penis in many of the pre-Christian and pagan traditions, where it is viewed much more as a giver of life, as something holy. In Greek mythology, for example, Cronos separates his father Uranus (the sky) from his mother Gaia (the earth) by cutting of Uranus' genitalia and flinging them far out into the sea. From the detached penis, which eventually drifts ashore on Cyprus, springs the goddess of love, Aphrodite (Lorentzen, 2007: 82). Similar descriptions can be found in other ancient texts such as the Gilgamesh epos.

During the witch-hunting activities of the 15th to the early 18th century the Christian church's fixation with the penis became even more accentuated. According to popular belief at the time, witches had been taken by the Devil; the judges, during the trials, obsessed over details about the size and shape of the Devil's penis (Friedman, 2001). The insecurities among men over women being seduced by the Devil's superior organ was one of the reasons that the codpiece came into fashion. The codpiece was both an impressive display of size and of potency; of always being ready to perform. But it has also been hypothesized that many men during these times were so worried about the force of women over their penises, especially women that had been in contact with the Devil, that the codpiece also functioned as protection.

Insecurities over others, such as the Devil, having superior penises was again brought to the fore when the African continent was explored, and later colonized, by Europeans. The early explorers wrote ample descriptions of the size of the natives' penises, sometimes in awe and sometimes in disgust. As European scholars started to engage in comparative anatomy, these insecurities were laid to rest by drawing links between the Africans' larger sized penises and their supposedly lower intellectual capacity (Englund, 2003; Friedman, 2001). Even today, the dominant Caucasian Western culture's obsession with what is stereotypically portrayed as the 'Big Black Dick' (Schmitt, 2002) is a recurrent theme, e.g. appearing in literature by writers of both African and European decent (Lehman, 2006). Historian Englund (2003: 58) reports yet another way to deal with the insecurities of not sizing up when he talks about how a small sized penis was considered 'aristocratic' during the time of the French revolution. Also Bordo, in her analysis of the male body (1997), gives examples of how the cultural elite's insecurities of not sizing up have led them to repeatedly cast a large penis in relation to something 'missing in the other department'. An interesting note in relation to this is that the size of the human penis is a biological abnormality compared to other primates. Both Englund (2003) and Friedman (2001) discuss how an average human penis (if there is such a thing, see below) is about five times the size of that an average penis of a 200 kilo gorilla. That size should directly correlate with intelligence thus finds no scientific evidence, either among humans or in the animal kingdom.

## **Empirical illustrations of normalizing processes**

In the following section, I will illustrate how the norm of an appropriate penis size is socially and culturally constructed, through processes of normalization taking place in various sociocultural institutions. Since explicit visual representations of penises are taboo in mainstream Western popular culture, the normalizing processes take on different forms and play out in subtle and roundabout ways. Prominent examples that best represent the overall tendencies are presented here under three sections: Media and Popular Culture; Advertising; and Self-help Resources. Finally, there is a section that deals with the special case of representations of 'richly endowed' men and how this is handled. The empirical illustrations are examples of 'interpretive repertoires' that can be used by individuals in making sense of the world (Elliott, 1996). It is neither important whether the producers of these texts intended to formulate normative accounts of bodily ideals, nor is it important whether consumers in general will read the texts in the way they are articulated in this article. The texts are out there and the interpretations made in this article are suggested as plausible functions of the available discourses (cf. Fischer, 2000: 288; Schroeder and Borgerson, 1998; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004).

## Media and popular culture

While the norm of a particular size is typically not explicitly addressed in mainstream media, it is interesting to note that every supposed deviation from the norm is apparently found newsworthy. At least in the lowbrow media outlets, especially tabloids and gossip magazines, it seems like every chance is taken to publish reports, rumors, or statements about the anatomical specifics of various celebrities. By thus focusing on this area, the average reader is given the message that these are important issues to take into consideration. Also, given the perspective presented by Hirschman and Thompson (1997), it is likely that the focus on this particular body part in the media will sensitize consumers in their reading of advertising images where idealized bodies are shown. Below I will give a few examples of how the typical media discussion is orchestrated.

Swedish tabloid *Aftonbladet*, a paper that frequently reports gossip published in newspapers, tabloids, and magazines abroad, such as *The Sun* in the UK and *People* in the US, informs us that notorious adulterer Jude Law is not so well-equipped (Bjurman, 2005). They speculate that on-and-off girlfriend Sienna Miller definitely must have other, non-anatomical, reasons to return to Law after his affairs. An anonymous New York publicist is quoted saying ‘He [Law] is not exactly a Tommy Lee’, referring to the size of Mötley Crüe drummer Lee’s reportedly sizeable ‘member’, as if the size of Lee’s was a common fact; which, it should be noted, it more or less is in certain circles after the ‘home video’ of Lee and his ex-wife Pamela Anderson was stolen from their house and spread over the internet. In these outlets, discussions of penis size are held in this mundane, almost taken-for-granted manner and casual references to various celebrities’ anatomical specifics, and hence rumored adherence to certain norms, are made as if the topic was on par with other newsworthy items.

Another media event took place in the summer of 2005 when Rolling Stones’ guitarist Keith Richards told a reporter from *The Sun* that front man Mick Jagger was ‘under-equipped’ (Anonymous Reporter, 2005b). Commentators were quickly making the analysis that this was just Richards’ way of letting off steam to compensate for the fact that Jagger was knighted by the British queen (Toikkanen, 2005). In other terms Richards tried to offset Jagger’s relative gain in symbolic, and perhaps also social, capital by suggesting that he was not as richly endowed when it came to physical, and by implication masculine, capital. Richards has tried to ridicule Sir Jagger ever since he was knighted but had not quite succeeded. The last resort was to attack the *man* Jagger and try to make him less of a man. Richards, ever the gentleman, publicly apologized in *The Sun* a few days later by again repeating his message ‘[I told Mick] his c\*\*k’s on the end of his nose. And a very small one at that. Big Balls. Small c\*\*k’, and stating that he should, of course, not have said that in the first place (Hamilton and Maxwell, 2005).

Media thus seem more or less obsessed with size; and recently both traditional media and bloggers have debated British soccer player David Beckham’s private parts. The background is that Beckham was presented as the new front man of Emporio Armani’s line of men’s underwear. When the first pictures were released,

towards the end of 2007, rumors were instantly spread that Beckham was 'making good use of the leftover stuffing from Thanksgiving' (Just Jared, 2007). 'Is that John Darwin's canoe in your pants or are you just pleased to see us?' wondered *The Sun* in an editorial headlined 'Swollenballs'; and rivaling tabloid *Daily Star* discussed the important matter under the headline 'What the heck is in Beck's kecks?' (Pauley, 2007). Beckham's wife Victoria, initially of Spice Girl fame and now a global style icon, was quick to use her media connections to publicly announce that she was very happy with their sex life (although no one ever asked about that) and that everything in the pictures is purely authentic (Palomäki, 2007). The message that a sufficient penis size is an essential part of a satisfactory sex life (cf. Lehman, 2007; Stephens, 2007) is thus reproduced. Even an important topic like this has to give way to other news stories, and the size of Beck's private parts left the headlines after a few days. The silence was broken a couple of weeks later when new pictures from the same campaign were released. This time the topic was the curiously missing stuffing; Beckham all of a sudden, according to commentaries, looked normal (Anonymous Reporter, 2008).

While, as in the above-mentioned examples, it is rather common to mock others over their alleged shortcomings, some celebrities use the media in an entirely different self-centered way. Some, not surprisingly, use it to tell the world about themselves being 'well-equipped'. More interesting are the ones that go the other way. Infamous British rock star Pete Doherty commented on the break-up from supermodel Kate Moss by stating that it was not the drugs that broke the camel's back, it was his 'tiny dodger' (Julander, 2005). Similar accounts have come from actor Brad Pitt, claiming 'it's the size of a hamster's'; actor Colin Farrel, saying that 'it's five centimeters [2 inches] and hard as a rock'; and artist Enrique Iglesias, who states 'I can possibly have the smallest penis in the world' (Nordström, 2004). Iglesias has made quite an affair out of his smallness and is repeatedly telling the press that he would like to be the endorser of a maker of extra-small condoms (Anonymous Reporter, 2005a; Sundholm, 2007). Despite frequent requests for confirmation of Iglesias' anatomical particularities from his girlfriend, tennis player/model Anna Kournikova, she has remained silent on the matter.

## Advertising

Ever since the breakthrough advertising of Calvin Klein in the 1990s, men's bodies have frequently been shown in advertising as objects of desire (Bordo, 1999; Gill et al., 2003). A recent example is the underwear brand Frigo Underwear ([www.frigounderwear.se](http://www.frigounderwear.se)) that has one of their ads featuring a man lounging in a cane chair. He is wearing bright white underwear that stands in stark contrast to the grey shades of color used in the rest of the picture. The man's crotch is in focus of the picture and the rest of the picture becomes increasingly unfocused as one's eyes move away from that area of his body. The man is leaning backwards in the chair, still his abdominal muscles appear tense and flexed, as if he were about to get up from the chair. This is contrasted by the top part of the body that seems exceptionally relaxed and at ease. The man's mouth and eyes are half-open, he is gazing

lustily at something outside of the picture. These facial features, the half-open eyes and mouth, are a common visual convention in portraits of women as desirable objects (Leppert, 1996).

Even though there are *to-be-looked-at* ads featuring men, this is many times seen as too 'in your face'. Therefore, in many cases, the ad must feature something more, which excuses the presence of the scantily clad man. In the case of Frigo Underwear, the man in the picture is not just stretched out on the cane chair for our pleasure; he is indeed displaying a fantastic invention. The copy reads 'Frigo: A small step for man. A giant step for manhood.' Frigo Underwear is, apparently, the greatest invention in the underwear business since Jockey invented the Y-front in 1935. It is, according to Frigo Underwear's homepage, 'more alluring than the wonder-bra'. The very masculine traits of science, progression, invention, and technology function as a counterbalance to the picture of the lounging man. The tendency to offset the picture of the lounging man with a more goal-directed reasoning is also found in the statement of the company philosophy:

When God created man he wanted their genitals to hang loose. The genitals were supposed to stay cool in the gentle breeze, before, after and during the hunt for food. But then things begun to change [...] And then what happened to their precious genitals? I guess you know. Sweat broke out, it rubbed and hanged. But let us establish that we're living in a modern era and stay positive. The men who choose to wear Frigo today is also hunting. It's just the prey that is different.

First and foremost, we see here that the man-as-breadwinner ethos is restored; men are born, even created, to hunt for food. In today's environment, when that hunt might be less eventful, the predatory instincts of men have just been transferred to the hunt for a (female?) partner. The advertising for Frigo Underwear is playing with idea of some eternal masculine traits. Still, despite attempts to hide the invention of Frigo Underwear under the veil of 'restoring things to their natural state', the real benefit of the particular model is that it gives the wearer a more 'shapely package'. The inventor apparently

equipped his underwear with a sawn pocket in which the whole package was placed which made it easy to ventilate and regulate the body temperature: All parts were kept in place and 'voila' he had invented the first 'shape-up' for men.

We see here an excellent example of how the phallic spectacle is nurtured by an invention that obscures the anatomical specifics in favor of a sufficiently shaped-up bulge (Lehman, 2007).

So, despite attempts to cast the marketing of Frigo Underwear in a macho tone, the product is geared towards the insecurities of men. And not just any insecurity, but the most taboo of all insecurities: the insecurity of not being sufficiently well-equipped (Lehman, 2007). Having a small one is a cultural taboo, not just for the individual but for the male species. Not sizing up is always cast as an exception to the rule. In order for men to keep the mysticism of the male sexual organ intact, the general rule must be that penises are sizeable. So, even though the advertisement appeared to be showing a desirable male body on display for the gaze of others, it still exhibited elements of insecurity, albeit with a suggested remedy. While there

are many advertising campaigns both objectifying men and suggesting to men that they might not be living up to the beauty standards in society, the majority of ads still suggest that masculine domination is intact. Portraying the male mystique as in limbo, as not powerful enough, is, according to MacKinnon (2003), problematic for mankind.

If the advertising for Frigo described above only implicitly suggests that size is important, the penile enlargement industry is not so vague in its communication. Advertising for penile surgeries, pills, herbal treatments, psychic therapy sessions, or what not, all emphasize the importance of ‘carrying a big gun’ (LONGZ, 2006). One of the more persistent advertisers is Longz, the ‘Doctor recommended male enhance formula with 100% guaranteed results’. On their web page they present statistics that contrast sharply with those of the self-help recourses accounted for below. For example, they write ‘86% of women want their sexual partner to have a fuller, thicker manhood’. The advertising people at Longz are, however, very responsible citizens as they also pass along a word of caution: ‘Warning: Do not take Longz in the recommended daily amount for more than 6 months as your penis may become too large for most women.’ It seems like the penile enlargement industry is based on the same logic as the dieting industry. Most consumers probably have a feeling that the promises are too good to be true, but the potential gain is worth enough for the consumer to risk being fooled (Roos et al., 2002).

The penile enlargement industry is also one of the most persistent distributors of junk email or spam (Evet, 2008). The advertisers, knowing well that most consumers will spend only a minimum amount of time digesting their messages, typically cut right to the point with suggestive language, telling men to ‘Get your main love weapon bigger!’ or engaging in ‘Immense augmentation of your tool!’ The advertisers utilize the classic technique dispersed in most mainstream branding or advertising textbooks: if you want consumers to act on your marketing offer, make them insecure in their relationships with others and offer your product as the solution (e.g. Elliott and Percy, 2007). Consequently, they typically present the anxiety-invoking messages already in the subject, and if the receiver of the spam email actually reads the message text it gets even more to the point, as the following examples illustrate:

**Subject:** Guys with small dicks are pathetic!

**Message:** Isn’t it humiliating, when they call your dick a ‘1 inch wonder’? Don’t let them ridicule you anymore! Use VPXL to change your penis size for bigger one!

Give it a try and make them voice a more encouraging definition of your new one-eyed monster!

**Subject:** She’s so appealing ... What a pity you’ve got such a small dick!

**Message:** Are you sick of viewing hot films and tossing off, because you cannot find a lady, who would be contented with your small penis? Then our offer is definitely for you! Our MegaDick will let you enlarge your dick to the necessary size and pick up any hottie you wish! And believe us, she will enjoy sex with you like with no one in her life!

**Subject:** Does she have to wait forever to get some real sex?

**Message:** Did you always wanted to have an ordinary penis and average women? We don’t think so. So we are here with our offer: Mega is translated ‘great’. And this new development MegaDik



makes your phallus simply great! Buy it and be delighted with your new sexual experiences! You'll be so wondered ... MegaDik is your fortune!

Here we see how not sizing up is connected to weakness and ridicule (cf. Lehman, 2006) and suggested to be an explanation for shortcomings in social life; small penis – no women, average penis – average women, and great penis – great women or perhaps ‘any hottie you wish’? There is a culturally bolstered myth of how men should be ever ready to conquer new women, should the opportunity arise. Lorentzen (2007) has even suggested that such conquests build masculine capital (cf. Anderson, 2008). Since having sex in these instances is portrayed as something men do to women, not something two people do together, the penis has to be portrayed as an unstoppable force. When the new, enhanced (or even *mega*) penis is discussed, the advertisers resort to a phallic, and sometimes aggressive, language and talk about ‘the one-eyed monster’ that will ‘cause her eyebrows to raise.’ Clearly, the promise is that with your new ‘love gun’ you will scare the female species into submission and get the respect you deserve. The myth of the Phallos as something to be awed and respected is thus reinforced. Monick (1987) discusses phallic worship and cites Thomas Wright, who in 1866 wrote ‘one name of the male organ among Romans was fascinum ... hence [is] derived the words to fascinate and fascination’ (Monick, 1987: 26). Monick continues by saying that phallus as an object of fascination has to do with its capacity to charm, which is the root meaning of the Latin *fascio*. In the advertising of penile enlargement or potency products we clearly see that the dual nature of the penis is played upon (Bordo, 1999; Stephens, 2007). The flaccid penis, especially the involuntary flaccid penis, or the small erect penis, is portrayed as something private, at best, but usually as something shameful. The erect penis on the other hand is portrayed as a phallus worthy of admiration, fascination and it has, apparently, the capacity to charm.

### Self-help resources

One of the most common questions asked by boys and men turning to self-help resources is whether they are sufficiently ‘well-equipped’ (coolnurse.com, 2005; Heed, 2006; netdoctor.co.uk, 2005; Paley, 1999; The Sun Online, 2004). Sufficient, that is, in relation to a real or imagined sexual partner.<sup>1</sup> The compulsory answer, it seems, from the authorities running the self-help resources, is that size has nothing at all to do with the ability to sexually satisfy another person. In *The Metrosexual Guide to Style* (Flocker, 2003) the author writes:

#### The Long and Short of It

Of course, the most common source of sexual anxiety among men is penis size [...] However, penile length is hardly the only measure of how satisfying a lover you can be. While you may be obsessed with your own member, chances are your lover is taking the whole package into consideration. (Flocker, 2003: 138)

In the instances where a man is writing to the self-help experts and explaining that his present partner is dissatisfied, the patent answer is to say that ‘no, this does not have anything to do with size, it is just a matter of largely endowed men being

more self-confident, and confidence is what makes a man sexy'. In this way, focus is directed from the anatomic specifics to the psychological realm that is, supposedly, easier to treat.

In a few instances, an expert is conjured up that will say the unspeakable: that some women do indeed prefer larger ones. Without exception, this is then commented on by other experts saying that women do not prefer larger ones, they just think they do (e.g. Sundsten, 2005; Toikkanen, 2005). Instead, other aspects – such as technique, presence, creativity, and curiosity – are stressed as more important (Lindblom, 2006). One of the few exceptions where someone is willing to openly talk about their own and other's fascination for 'well-hung' men is Susan Bordo, who spares no detail in pressing this point in *The Male Body* (1999). But the self-help experts seem anxious over what such potentially problematic standpoints should do to all the insecure men out there. They therefore go to great lengths to put men's minds at ease:

The average female is amused at the sheer folly of men in being so obsessed with their penile measurements. So if you're a woman, the one thing you need to bear in mind about this ludicrous male preoccupation is this: when in bed with a man, never belittle his penis (even as a joke) or say anything to indicate that you think it's small – the poor chap may take you seriously, and if he does, he'll be deeply hurt. (netdoctor.co.uk, 2005)

By thus addressing women, as well as men, they are simultaneously trying to say that this is a sensitive topic, but it need not be that way, since size has absolutely nothing to do with a man's capability as lover.

Women's potential preference for certain penises over others seems to be a taboo in contemporary Western cultures. The idea that size does not matter is a myth in Barthes' sense (1973). Regardless of whether it is true or not, the insignificance of size is made to *appear* like the natural state of things; this state of affairs is actively naturalized by media and self-help books, and those straying away from this myth are considered pathological. Studying anthropological accounts of body modification puts this natural order of things into question. It appears that other cultures are much more open about women having preferences for men with certain penile characteristics. Rowanchilde (1996) gives ample examples of cultures where penile modifications – such as inserting marbles or gold, silver and bronze bells along the shaft, or piercing rods or pins through the glans (pp. 192–6) – are common, since women will not consider marrying a man who is not sufficiently modified. They claim such unmodified men do not have the capacity to please them sexually. Also, accounts of non-traditional body modifications in Western cultures (Myers, 1992) suggest that one prime motivation is that some women simply prefer modified penises. Bordo (2002) reminds us that no one who has grown up in a human society ever has purely physical sex. Preferences in mainstream contemporary Western culture as well as the historical and subcultural examples are shaped socio-historically. The more exotic examples are shown here to illustrate that in certain cultures preferring certain penises is *de rigeur* and in contemporary Western culture even talking about preferences is taboo. There hence seem to be both historical and contemporary suggestions that put the apparent natural state of the 'anything goes' maxim, so strongly supported in media and self-help

resources, into question. Bordo summarizes this discussion concisely when she writes: ‘Does size matter? Absolutely, yes. But the matter of size is as “mental” as it is “material” – never just a question of nerve endings but always a collaboration with the imagination, and therefore with culture’ (Bordo, 2002: 35).

Since many men are still anxious, the self-help experts usually refer in one way or another to ‘the locker room syndrome’, i.e. the tendency for men to compare themselves to the live or pictorial images they encounter (Wylie and Eardley, 2007). A survey of 100 patients conducted by the doctor who pioneered a type of surgical procedure which elongates the penis by one to two inches in the flaccid state – but does not elongate it in an erect state, instead it angles downwards – revealed that the primary rationale for penis elongation surgery was self-image, or ‘locker room phobia’ (Rowanchilde, 1996). In these instances the flaccid penis stands in a symbolic relationship with the erect penis. It is the signifier referring to the signified. When the signifier is thus surgically enhanced, by implication, the signified – i.e. the erect penis, or more specifically the mental image of the erect penis: the phallus – is also assumed to be more impressive.<sup>2</sup> Locker room comparisons are ill-advised, according to self-help site [netdoctor.co.uk](http://netdoctor.co.uk) (2005):

The trouble is that every man sees his own phallus in a foreshortened view – the angle at which he looks down on it inevitably makes it seem shorter than it is. Of course, when he glances at another man’s organ in a changing room, there’s no such foreshortening effect, so very often it’ll look as though the other guy is slightly better endowed than him. A lifetime of comparison of this sort (and virtually every male does a quick mental check on each naked man he comes across) can very easily make a man feel a bit inadequate.

If the male reader should still feel inadequate, it is standard to also point out that there is no correlation between the flaccid state and the erect state, despite the symbolic relationship between the two. The writers in these self-help forums thus seem well sensitized to the idea that men are making constant comparisons to idealized images and are anxious not to give men any chance of feeling inferior. They therefore make an effort to convince the readers that comparison is futile. An example is that the inevitable question of an average measurement is many times answered in a shady manner. ‘Everything is relative. Normal is also a measure that should be questioned’ writes the self-help expert in tabloid *Aftonbladet* (Lindblom, 2006). At [coolnurse.com](http://coolnurse.com) they are particular about pointing out that the results of the surveys about penis size that they are publishing come from self-reports (e.g. *The Definitive Penis Size Survey*, 2005) and that these tend to be slightly exaggerated. A case in point is that most studies show that size peaks at age 17. This has nothing to do with anatomy or a peak in virility but is purely (according to the experts) an effect of young men stretching their exaggerations mostly at this age ([coolnurse.com](http://coolnurse.com), 2005). We know little about how much exaggeration goes on in other age groups, but having a trained expert doing the measurement seems somewhat tricky to orchestrate. Another topic that seems to make the self-help expert anxious is that of size and race. Some studies, such as the classic Kinsey study, have shown a difference in size between Africans, Asians, and Caucasians (*Human Physiology*, 2005). Still, many self-help resources are very reluctant to even touch the subject and refer, once again, to the impossibility of calculating an average

when it comes to penis size, and consequently any comparison of that kind is not viable (netdoctor.co.uk, 2005). Even though politically correct, self-help resources shy away from the idea of size and race; there is a strong mythology surrounding the issue. This mythology, in its mainstream American version, is summarized by Lehman (2006: 227) in the following way:

African Americans with their allegedly big penises are hypersexual, Asian Americans with their allegedly small penises are undersexed, and whites by some happy coincidence occupy the invisible norm – they seem to have just the right amount whereby blacks have too much and Asians not enough.

We see here that the privileged position of white males is upheld through the reproduction of the idea that their (imagined) standard is the norm and that deviations are verging on the pathological.

If all attempts at reassuring males that size does not matter fail, there are a few self-help books that focus on what to do about it. The men behind the TV show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Allen et al., 2004) explain how to groom for maximum effect:

Advanced Manscaping: The Hair Down There

Problem pubes. It happens. You can control it [...] So – and I know this is touchy territory – if guys have freakishly long fluffy man bush, then they should just apply a little manscaping. Clean it up. [...] a lot of guys would do well for themselves if they trimmed. First of all, shorter hair makes everything around it look bigger (you know what I'm talking about). (Allen et al., 2004: 103)

So, even though the main argument is that size does not matter, there is still room for improvement. Similar arguments are also given for losing weight, as that also will give an onlooker the idea that there is more below the belt (coolnurse.com, 2005).

### Too big? Too bad!

If the above-mentioned self-help resources are quick to point out that an increase in size is not the solution to any problems, others take it a step further and point to the potential problems associated with having a large penis. In *The Metrosexual Guide to Style* (Flocker, 2003), the author reassuringly writes that 'In fact, being on the larger end of the scale can often present greater problems of discomfort and awkwardness' and continues, clearly directed to the moderately endowed: 'So relax and take the focus off of yourself by concentrating on your partner's pleasure' (2003: 138). The politically correct journalists also give sufficient space to men telling about their problems of having a disproportionately sized organ. An example is Jonah Falcon who, according to himself, measures 34 cm (13.5 inches) in an erect state (Börjesson, 2006). Poor Falcon is given plenty of space to tell his sad tale of having first been reduced to only a penis and second that he just scares potential partners away. The journalist stresses the point that readers should be thankful for not having been so richly endowed. Also, self-help books directed at young men exploring their sexuality spare no effort in downplaying the importance of size (Forsberg, 2004):

Of course size matters. Large TVs are more pleasant than small ones, large apartments are more spacious than small, and small dogs are oftentimes more hot-tempered than large dogs. With the dick, things are different. There is really no particular reason to carry around a monster sausage. Even smaller models can perform miracles [...] There are girls who prefer large dicks, just like there are girls that prefer small. But I don't think any girl is so fond of the large models that she can't appreciate the small. There is, however, an overwhelming risk of problems associated with the really, really well hung guys. Naturally, a biggie can hurt!

The sensitive topic of whether women are able to have preferences for certain penises over others is here again brought to the fore (cf. Bordo, 2002). While the author is bold enough to suggest that there indeed might be 'girls who prefer large dicks', he puts the emphasis on the fact that size only *really* matters on the large end of the spectrum.

Popular culture also plays this role of stressing the problems with being too large. An example is the popular TV show *Sex and the City*, where a couple of early episodes feature one of the characters, the seemingly insatiable Samantha, dating a man with an exceptionally small penis. The women were debating back and forth whether a nice personality could make up for such a shortcoming. Of course the guy was dumped after a while; that is the plot of the TV show. Later on in the series, however, this imbalance had to be corrected. What would the poor, insecure male viewers be thinking after having seen the women frankly discussing the petite man? Consequently, a couple of episodes had to be included later on, which included a man with an exceptionally large organ. Of course, the same character, Samantha, laid eyes on this man and started pursuing him. After the initial fascination followed a series of bedside complications, and it was concluded that there is a limit, and that standard size is best after all. What a relief for all the male viewers who had lived in despair for several seasons since the earlier episodes!

## Discussion

In their article about the inversion of the male gaze in contemporary consumer culture, Patterson and Elliott (2002) end by calling for more studies looking at representations of male bodies and stating that 'we need to understand just what it means to be a man in contemporary society' (2002: 242). Schroeder and Zwick (2004) answer this call and advance the knowledge of how men are represented as consumers by analyzing ads that articulate masculine desire via the male body. The discourse analysis of the texts from advertising and popular culture, including mainly tabloid press and self-help resources, conducted in the present article further extends this knowledge by focusing on a bodily feature that, as I have argued throughout the article, plays a crucial role in how masculinity is constructed today. The analysis shows that there are plenty of normative accounts of particular penis size, despite a lack of explicit representations in mainstream cultural outlets. There are different sets of interpretive repertoires (Elliott, 1996) available that circumvent the taboos surrounding penis size in subtle and roundabout ways in order to create a sense of an ideal that should be adhered to. The interpretive repertoires

span from one side that draws attention to the importance of size and reproduces messages about an appropriately sized penis being a key characteristic of a 'real man', and another side reproducing messages that size does not, or at least should not, matter.

The advertising examples from the penile enlargement industry leave little doubt: size matters and the bigger the better. But also more mainstream outlets, such as tabloid press, TV shows, and advertisements for underwear, send out strong, albeit implicit, normative accounts that being richly endowed is something valued and that having a small penis is a source of ridicule (cf. Lehman, 2006). In the media, the topic of normative size is typically not addressed directly, but the fact that every little rumor draws massive attention points toward the cultural salience of the topic. Shilling (1993) suggests that within particular social fields, certain bodily attributes are ascribed value and there is a link between adherence to such norms and status; compliance with the norms gives physical capital. In popular culture, the only ones that break with the legacy of largeness are global sex symbols, such as Brad Pitt and Enrique Iglesias, who can apparently afford to joke about not sizing up. One plausible explanation is that they offset this self-disclosed shortage of physical capital with an abundance of 'masculine capital' (cf. Anderson, 2008; Lorentzen, 2007) acquired by dating highly desirable women and/or having had plenty of sexual partners. Under those circumstances, the self-belittlement might even add to their appeal, as this humbleness might be read as a sign of strong confidence.

The other set of interpretive repertoires consists of messages about penis size having little importance. Here we have self-help resources – ranging from journalists answering questions in the media, to medical personnel, or at least persons posing as such, to writers of self-help books – forcefully arguing that the only source of concern about penis size is that worrying is a waste of time. We thus have a situation where there are contrasting sets of interpretive repertoires from which consumers, both male and female, can make sense of the world. These sets of discourses might function to give an ambivalent message in which the poor males are caught in a discursive crossfire where they are potentially made to feel anxious about their anxiousness and embarrassed about their embarrassment.

On a very basic level, we can contend that an appropriately sized penis (read: always bigger) is typically constructed as a trait of physical attractiveness. From previous research we know that physical attractiveness is positively related to social power, self-esteem and the receipt of positive responses from others (cf. Bloch and Richins, 1992). Bloch and Richins (1992) discuss how consumers might compensate for flaws in physical attributes through consumption. In contrast to their account, the market solutions offered to offset the physical particularities discussed in this article have hitherto not been very successful. Traditional phallic consumption, i.e. consumption to compensate for shortcomings in the anatomical area, has not been dealt with here. Other, more direct, consumption alternatives for males searching consumption solutions seem to be uncomfortably placed in the middle of the two contrasting sets of interpretive repertoires. One case in point is that the companies that have tried to launch push-up underwear for men to the

mainstream market have until now been unsuccessful. It seems like the ridicule of being insecure about one's size, and thus trying to compensate using push-up clothing, outweighs the potential shame of not being as large as one imagines one has to be (Sundsten, 2006). The company Frigo Underwear, whose advertisement was discussed earlier, approaches the same issue in a slightly different way, where the 'shape-up' effect is portrayed as an unintended but positive side effect of other, more functional, product attributes. Especially, the company emphasized the link to a primitive, and apparently 'natural', man whose genitals 'hang loose [...] in the gentle breeze', in order to give the user a sense of returning to a basic masculinity rather than worrying about size. The future market success of this, or related, products will have to tell us whether their attempts at navigating the potential discursive pitfalls have been successful.

The abundance of normative discourses that give males the impression that they need to add some 'extra stuffing' in their underwear in order to come across as 'real men' can be read against Butler's suggestion that all displays of gender are a form of parody (Butler, 1999/1990). In this view, what we usually think of as parody displays of gender, i.e. drag, is only the most explicit version, where the active constructedness of gender is laid bare and brought to the surface. From this perspective, however, worrying about size can be viewed as a form of sad parody in which males are not aware of the joke being played on them. The joke being that they are, without knowing so, contributing to our culture's aversion to small penises that do not create the expected phallic spectacle (cf. Lehman, 2007).

There is nothing subversive in and of itself in scrutinizing and exposing the subtle and roundabout ways in which processes of normalization take place for the taboo subject of penis size. However, this might be an important first step in opening up the floor for plurality. If, as argued by Stephens (2007), the ubiquity of the penis is maintained by its cultural invisibility, merely addressing the subject is a step in the right direction. Also, by showing the discursive repertoires available in the construction of the norms, the 'critical spotlight' (Lehman, 1998: 124) is turned towards the area which might serve to further take away some of the phallic mystique. By showing how these normative accounts function to cement and make stable the seemingly self-evident stereotypical white, heterosexual norms about what it means to be a 'real man', we can also see how these norms serve to reproduce a particular political system in which the traditional gender categories are stable and unproblematic. The exposure of how the phallic spectacle is being upheld through the available normative discourses function to 'break the signifying chain' between the penis and the phallus (Butler, 1993: 88). Continued silence, on the other hand, instead limits the different potential ways of being, and reproduces a system where one should neatly place oneself in a category, where one should not cause trouble (Butler, 1999/1990).

## Concluding comments

If we are to take seriously the proposition that an understanding of idealized male bodies is important (e.g. Elliott and Elliott, 2005; Frith and Gleeson, 2004; Hatoum and Belle, 2004; Kacen, 2000; Mort, 1996; Patterson and Elliott, 2002; Stibbe, 2004), the penis probably needs to be taken into consideration. In the future, it would be interesting to see research that more directly focuses on the lived experience of men's relationships with the particular body part under investigation in this study. Verbal accounts of how men feel they are measuring up to some ideal, as well as accounts concerning how they relate to the interpretive repertoires discussed in this study, would be interesting data for future studies. For example, the distinction between men being at one with their apparatus and thus expressing that 'I *am* big' can be contrasted to the more distant view that 'I *have* a small one', which, in essence, is a discussion about embodiment. Openly talking about these issues is, as I have previously pointed out, taboo and is a rather sensitive topic; it is likely that such an interview situation could be more than a little awkward.

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## Notes

- 1 In all these instances, the ones answering the questions are assuming that a partner is always female.
- 2 Butler (Butler, 1999/1990) theorizes a disconnection of the symbolic relationship between the penis and the phallus and suggests that the phallus should be appropriated so that it can refer to any body part, belonging to a male or a female.

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