



ARTICLE

How Do Men Grab the Phallus?

Gender tourism in everyday consumption

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Abstract. A number of influential gender theorists contend that men suffer from a pandemic crisis of masculinity in their work and family roles that they seek to assuage through the compensatory consumption of phallic symbols. We critique this conventional view through a cultural analysis of the consumption practices of a group of men who fit the stuck-in-the-middle socio-economic profile commonly associated with the crisis of masculinity. We first discuss the ideological structure of phallic masculinity. Then, in our analysis, we find that our men's everyday consumption practices construct a specific socio-cultural articulation of phallic masculinity whereby its internal paradoxes are leveraged as a means to produce desirable experiences and self-identifications. We further show how men adapt feminine practices as a revitalizing retreat, which we conceptualize as a form of gender tourism.

Key words

discourse analysis • gender practices • identity projects • ideology • masculinity

American men have been searching for their lost manhood since the middle of the nineteenth century. Plagued by the chronic anxiety that their masculinity is constantly being tested, American men have raided the cultural treasure chest for symbolic objects that might restore this lost manhood.

Michael Kimmel (1994: 7)

KIMMEL'S ASSERTION ABOUT THE perpetually anxious nature of masculinity and American men's reliance upon symbolic props has become axiomatic in the men's studies literature. Consumer culture provides a plethora of powerful masculine icons that men can vicariously consume (Edwards, 1997; Hirschman, 2000; Horrocks, 1994; Kimmel, 1996; Nixon, 1996; Patterson and Elliott, 2002). This view has become part of the popular understanding of men and their toys (Faludi, 1999).

Branding works in synergy with these mass media representations, using advertising to load products such as beer and automobiles with these objectified meanings of real manhood (Strate, 1992). But the crisis-of-masculinity literature rejects the thesis that men successfully incorporate symbols into their lives through consumption (e.g., McCracken, 1988a; Miller, 2001). Instead, the thesis suggests that the subjugated and disempowered conditions of men's lives perpetually generate new experiences of not measuring up and, hence, necessitate the ceaseless consumption of new symbolic props (Bordo, 1999).

Although the theoretical verdict seems to be in, the conclusion is usually inferred rather than studied. Many textual studies extrapolate from hypermasculinized leisure pursuits, entertainment media, and branding strategies to draw conclusions about how men must use these products. Little attention has been directed at how masculinity actually gets produced in everyday life, through consumption and leisure. Similarly, studies of the most masculinized consumption practices – such as body building (Fussell, 1993; Jeffords, 1994), playing biker outlaw on weekend retreats with fellow Harley riders (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), or participating in fantasy retreats enacting premodern manhood figures (Belk and Costa, 1998) – assume that men are compensating for deep-seated anxieties and frustrations emanating from their work-a-day lives. This assumption is treated as a self-evident explanatory principle. After all, what else would these men be doing other than compensating for perceived masculine shortcomings?

In this article, we develop a theoretical alternative to this received view through an analysis of men's everyday consumption practices. While the

crisis-of-masculinity thesis contains an undeniable germ of cultural insight, we propose that it fundamentally misconstrues the relationship between consumption, consumer culture, and men's masculine identity projects. In building this case, we first analyze the ideological construction of phallic masculinity, using as an example the popular cultural representations of professional athletes as quintessential phallic icons. Next, we turn attention to how men enact these phallic ideals through their consumer lifestyles and leisure pursuits.

WHAT IS THE PHALLUS?

The men's studies literature suggests that the so-called crisis of masculinity is a unique cultural product of industrialization, bureaucratization of work, increasing competition in the workforce from women, destabilizing of traditional family hierarchies and communal networks, and finally men's increasing dependence on consumerism as a means to cultivate feelings of self-worth. In other words, the crisis of masculinity is a predominantly 20th century phenomenon now bleeding into the new millennium and exacerbated by post-industrial conditions: corporate downsizing, the institutionalization of temp work and other erosions of the social contract that once promised economic security for men who worked hard and followed the rules (Faludi, 1999; Messner, 1997).

A different and more expansive historical take on the nature of these cultural anxieties over the state of manhood, however, is offered by Solomon-Godeau's (1997) *Male Trouble*. In her analysis of Western artistic representations from the 17th century forward, Solomon-Godeau demonstrates that cultural conceptions of masculinity have been marked by recurrent crises over the state of manhood. Uncertainty about what it means to be a man, how one should be a man, and what defines true manhood seem to be part and parcel of the Western cultural heritage. While the societal articulation of 'male trouble' may change and its ideals of authentic manhood may shift, masculinity-in-crisis may be an enduring cultural frame through which prevailing socio-economic conditions (and their implications for manhood) are understood. Accordingly, we argue that this crisis metanarrative is intrinsic to the patriarchal construction of masculinity and that the conventional notion of men using phallic symbols needs to be understood in this broader historical and ideological context.

While the terms 'phallus' and 'phallic masculinity' have origins in psychoanalytic theory (Lacan, 1977), they have become central to many poststructural, deconstructive analyses of masculinity (Butler, 1993; Connell, 1995; Savran, 1998; Silverman, 1992). In this poststructural formulation, the

biological phallus (i.e., penis) and the symbolic phallus are semiotically related but culturally non-equivalent. As a biological marker of maleness, the penis serves as a metonym for patriarchal privilege. However, the cultural construction of phallic masculinity cannot be reduced to this iconic relationship between the biological and the symbolic (Butler, 1993).

Poststructural theorists leverage Lacan's (1977) notion of the symbolic order to highlight the fundamentally paradoxical and anxiety-laden nature of phallic power. It is dependent upon hierarchical relationships and a cultural system that privileges certain kinds of masculine identity positions and corresponding status markers. Yet, men can only acquire patriarchal standing and power by subjugating themselves to a symbolic order not of their own making (a reconfiguration of Marx's idea of alienation in even more encompassing terms). Men who aspire to patriarchal status must also accept a subordinate role to those above them in a social hierarchy. Even the small cadre of elite men who seem to be 'on top' can never rest secure because their patriarchal standing is, by definition, perpetually under siege and haunted by the threat that a more potent competitor may eventually dislodge them from their lofty phallic perches. Further complicating matters, patriarchal identities are never geared to just one singular, monolithic hierarchy. A man who has high standing in an economic hierarchy may feel completely dominated and overmatched in other settings which privilege aesthetic sensibilities, intellectual prowess, athletic skill, or youthful, physical attractiveness. While the dynamics of phallic hierarchies may shift across contexts, phallic masculinity is characterized by a continual quest for dominance and control.

So what is the phallus? Simply put, it is a mythic ideal of complete and uncontested patriarchal authority. According to Lacan (1977), the ultimate phallic figure is the Christian God: a male figure who *created* the grand cosmological hierarchy and who forever sits at its apex, in a state of unchallengeable and unassailable omnipotence (also see Lerner, 1986). Drawing from Lacan, Kaja Silverman (1992) defines the phallus as a mystified ideal of omnipotent power whose possession would confer a state of absolute and incontestable dominance in the patriarchal hierarchy. This ephemeral and elusive ideal can be symbolized in specific material artifacts (and, yes, anatomical parts) but most fundamentally it represents a masculine identity project – a way of doing masculinity. This identity project may well incorporate the use of phallic symbols: fast cars, big homes, a muscular hard body, or trophy brides. Rather than signifying a desire to compensate for failures to measure up to a lost ideal of authentic, autonomous masculinity, as crisis theorists like Kimmel (1994) argue, the meanings of these phallic symbols

derive from their tactical uses in specific relations of power and competitions for hierarchical statuses. A point not be overlooked, however, is that the identity project of phallic masculinity does not strive to merely possess and display symbolic markers of phallic power, which can easily be reduced to flaccid cultural clichés. Rather, the regnant goal is to fully personify and embody the ideal of phallus. To grab the phallus is to have the power to set the terms and rules of patriarchal competition in a manner where the phallic male will reign supreme.

This phallic ideal of being on top (and ineluctably so) on one's own terms forever remains outside the grasp of men and, hence, presents a series of psychic trade-offs that are often played out in everyday life. On the one side, this identity project can afford the little pleasures of competitive gamesmanship whereby men establish their dominance over other men in small but cumulatively consequential ways. Conversely, men must also deal with the nagging awareness that more skillful competitors await or they must confront the unpleasant experiences of actually being trumped. Under these patriarchal conditions, men's identity projects are steeped in a tacit awareness that they can never possess the phallus. In more sociological terms, they can never fully win at the patriarchal status game since the game never ends. Victories are always transient and fleeting, new competitions (and potent competitors) await in perpetuity, and the competitive game is always set by authorities and structures outside of one's control.

Phallic men in the sporting imaginary

It ain't bragging if it's true, yes sir, yes sir, it ain't bragging if it's true. Muhammad Ali said that back when he was a young man, back when he was Cassius Clay, before he fought too many fights, left his brain inside the ring. Sometimes I wish I was Tiger Woods, Tiger Woods, Tiger Woods.

Dan Bern [1999], 'Tiger Woods,' Kababa Music

If there is a cultural bastion of phallic masculinity, it is the world of professional sports. Sports and sports media are often characterized as patriarchal training grounds where boys and men are socialized in masculine ideals of toughness, competitiveness, killer instincts, an indefatigable work ethic, and the hierarchical dynamics of win-lose outcomes (Fischer and Gainer, 1994; Thornton, 1993). The hagiography that surrounds professional male athletes powerfully illustrates the contemporary ideological construction of phallic masculinity. And it is hard to find a better representation of phallic masculinity than Michael Jordan.

Jordan burst onto the scene with a flamboyant style and a rebel's penchant for flaunting the NBA's staid sartorial conventions. Over time (and with Nike embellishing the image), his high-top black shoes and street-cred long shorts became standard issue uniforms. Beyond Jordan's talent and charisma, he displayed a fierce drive to win. The sycophantic sports media never missed a chance to hail his leadership skills, commitment to excellence, and unflagging determination. At his career pinnacle, Jordan appeared to be bigger than the game and even bigger than his many corporate benefactors. The media construction of Jordan as the high flying Überman of professional basketball canonized the most potent phallic ideal of the 1990s. Be like Mike indeed.¹

When Jordan finally did retire, the media infatuation with anointing his heir reflected a tacit awareness of the phallic void left in his wake. Much media effort has gone into making Tiger Woods (once again armed by the power of Nike's marketing machine) into the next Universal Product Champion. Like Jordan, Woods also seemed to flaunt convention and authority by being a brash, young, multi-ethnic crashing the haughty white country club world of professional golf. Tigermania now hinges on the phallic spectacle of total domination and the power to seemingly rewrite the rules of the game. While not being overly macho in the fashion of many other sport male heroes (in likely deference to the genteel sensibilities of professional golf), Tiger does brandish one of the most chiseled, V-shaped physiques in the game and recently married a supermodel. His comparatively buff body, which has inspired a new breed of nautilus-enhanced golfer (such as Tiger wannabes David Duval and Sergio Garcia), contributes to his phallic mythos. Tiger is heralded for his competitive drive, self-discipline, arduous work-out routines, intense goal focus, and indefatigable work ethic. The sports media reinforces this phallic status at every possible turn, his many victories spectacularized and his losses often made into the real story of the tournament. Like Jordan, Tiger's phallus casts a long shadow, even in defeat.

In recent years, Tiger's image has begun to lose some of its tumescent luster, owing to the mortal tolls of competition and aging. Though only 28 at the time of this article, Tiger has already undergone major knee surgery and has been struggling with a chronic back problem. In the midst of a long drought, the sporting press is now seriously pondering whether Tiger's dominating days have past. Most damning of all, the media reports that Tiger no longer strikes fear in the hearts of his competitors. Tiger has been tamed and the phallus moves on.

Beginning in 2003, the high-school phenom and soon to be NBA

hype(r)-star, LeBron James, became the sporting media's phallic male *de rigueur*, complete with his own \$90 million endorsement contract (with Jordan's sugar daddy Nike) and requisite \$150 basketball shoe. In a semiotically audacious move, LeBron began his professional career playing point guard: a supporting role that is usually subordinate to a team's high scoring superstar. Seeking to leverage the odd idea that a pro basketball team's (and perhaps the league's) best player would devote his formidable offensive talents to helping others score (and grab the glory), Nike ran a series of 'the chosen one' advertisements that extolled LeBron's mystical power to heal the blind and the lame (a not too veiled allegorical reference to his offensively-challenged team the Cleveland Cavaliers).

While this ad campaign made an admirable effort to move LeBron out of the long shadow cast by Jordan, the cultural conventions of phallic masculinity were not so easily rewritten. By the midpoint of LeBron's rookie season, he was playing shooting guard and small forward positions (just like Mike), piling up gaudy scoring stats, and Nike advertisements were promoting his high-flying displays of slam-dunking phallic prowess. Perhaps realizing that Christ is an ambivalent phallic figure (encoding softer meanings of self-sacrifice, charity, vulnerability, humility, and kindness), Nike also dropped 'the chosen one' moniker in favor of the more decidedly domineering and in-your-face branding catch-phrase 'King James.'

Every niche of male sport fandom has its phallic heroes. In America's fastest growing spectator sport, stock car racing, the NASCAR circuit's most revered and canonized figure is the late, great Dale Earnhardt. Known as the 'intimidator' for his aggressive and seemingly reckless driving style and for always being garbed in threatening black, Earnhardt embodied an in-your-face defiance of the safety-first driving conventions adopted by other racers. Far from being a model of good sportsmanship, Earnhardt's legend venerates his win-at-all-costs mentality and the trademark tough-guy scowl he displayed toward his competitors. Dale Earnhardt's ruthless competitiveness earned him the universal respect of the entire racing community (Van Dyck, 2001). Media requiems attribute this solemn respect to Earnhardt's unimpeachable integrity, his vaunted grit (he was renowned for winning races even while plagued by serious injuries), his pivotal role in pushing stock-car racing to new heights of excitement and popularity, and most of all his unparalleled driving skill.

These sports-cultural constructions of phallic masculinity inevitably mask the dependency upon the structures of the entertainment industries and the power wielded by corporate image-makers. Phallic icons never challenge prevailing power structures that help to sustain their patriarchal

status; Michael Jordan never criticized Nike (and its patriarch Phil Knight) for sweatshop labor practices; Tiger Woods remains silent on the men-only policies of Augusta National Golf Club (home to the prestigious Masters' tournament). Earnhardt never challenged the undercurrents of racism, sexism, homophobia, and nostalgia for the Southern confederacy at work in stock-car racing culture.

As a general principle, phallic sports heroes only affront the inconsequential, performative rules and conventions of the athletic field (and now media press conference and PR appearances). Talented male athletes who use the cultural spotlight for purposes of contesting dominant power structures face ostracization rather than idolization. As a case in point, American sprinters and Olympic medalists Tommy Smith and John Carlos used the world stage of the 1968 Olympiad to protest racial inequity and they never made it back from their subsequent popular culture exile. Through this action, Smith and Carlos became marked men who effectively forfeited their popular culture claim to phallic adulation. More generally, when professional athletes collectively challenge sport's patrician class – team owners – by going on strike, the sports media is quick to assail these 'spoiled and selfish' players for letting down the fans: a double-barrel blast from these gatekeepers of the sports establishment. And pity the fool who would dare speak out against homophobia in the sporting world.

While celebrating phallic ideals, the mass-mediated sports world recurrently reveals the paradoxes and contingencies that eventually undermine phallic identifications. Consider the annual rite of passage where an aging superstar athlete passes the proverbial torch to a more potent, youthful competitor (and the now cliché image of aged once great male athletes, stoic warriors all, crying into the camera when they announce their retirement and hence renouncing their temporary grip on the phallus). This spectacularized media ritual is a cultural reminder that one's time at the top of the patriarchal hierarchy is relatively brief and that the culture industries always stand ready to anoint a new and improved phallic model waiting in the wings.

The Machiavellian nature of the phallic order, and the sheer disposability of the phallic icons it generates, are further revealed by stories of champion prize fighters who are mismanaged and exploited by their management (and the boxing system as a whole) and who leave the ring financially and physically broken. No athlete better embodies the image of phallic masculinity than the potent champion boxer and none has more mythic resonance in their inevitable fall from the phallic pantheon. This myth of the plundered pugilist and other such stories of fallen and/or

disgraced ex-superstar athletes contain these patriarchal contradictions, representing them as special tragic cases. However, these tales also reveal that phallic males are dependent upon a socio-economic system not of their own making, and ultimately that makes *them* in every sense of the word.

A dialectical turn

If we were to follow the rhetorical conventions of the men's studies literature, this section would discuss how these phallic markers fail to buttress men's identities. We would proclaim that these unattainable phallic ideals pose fundamental, crisis-inducing contradictions for men. Mired in this naturalized and oppressive gender ideology, men's efforts to live up to these phallic ideals are bound to fail, forcing them into an endless series of symbolic compensations, self-denials, and psychic conundrums. Such an interpretation would also invoke a view of ideology as a repressive force that subjugates men through coercion, idolatry, and false desires.

Taking a cue from Foucault's (1984) writings on discourse and power, we focus instead on how discourses that produce phallic identifications *work* through consumption. Though our participants' consumption stories do at times express feelings of ambivalence, status insecurity, and concerns over 'losing control' (as well as many more positive emotions), these specific experiences do not seem to culminate in the overarching sense of identity crisis described by the men's studies literature. Rather than producing an overt crisis, these discursive structures of phallic masculinity become resources for identity construction with which men imbue everyday consumption experiences with heightened and often pleasurable feelings of moral significance.

PROCEDURES

We collected consumption stories from men who inhabit a socio-economic position that is posited to be particularly prone to the 'crisis of masculinity.' In brief, these are men who are ostensibly 'stuck-in-the-middle' of the post-industrial class structure (Clatterbaugh, 1997; Faludi, 1999; Messner, 1997; Schwalbe, 1995). Unlike men occupying marginalized or working-class positions, this class has been socialized to expect that by 'following the rules' of the middle class – get a college education, work hard, strive to be the 'best' – they would be able to garner a respected social position. However, in the contemporary global economy, a rapidly expanding share of economic rewards is allocated to a highly educated, well-credentialed, and well-connected elite professional class (Sassen, 1991). Under these conditions, middle-class men's socio-economic expectations are more likely to be frustrated or significantly

dampened rather than fulfilled. Finally, such men are likely to be heterosexual (or to publicly present themselves as such), which in the cultural construction of hegemonic masculinity stands as a key condition for expecting full-fledged patriarchal privilege (see Connell, 1995; Messner, 1997).

Our participants largely fit this 'stuck-in-the-middle' socio-demographic profile (see Table 1). They were recruited from a Midwestern city of 250,000 and a small eastern city of 60,000. All are of European-Caucasian descent. Most have college degrees from public universities (BA, BS); three have associate degrees from junior colleges (AA); one left a junior college program before finishing his degree in order to pursue a musical career in Christian rock music; one other was a first-generation college grad who attended a private college on an athletic scholarship. Our participants are employed in mid-level administrative, technical, professional, or sales positions or run small businesses; one is a high school teacher. All present themselves as 'straight,' though we did not directly probe into matters of sexual preferences.

Interviews were conducted at each participant's home. All were semi-structured, long interviews (McCracken, 1988b) lasting about 90 minutes to two hours, yielding wide ranging conversations. Interviews began with

Table 1: List of participants

Pseudonym	Age	Education	Occupation
Andy	32	BS	teacher
Tom	27	BS	runs family construction business
Robert	52	BA, DDS	dentist
Frank	28	BS	accountant
Karl	31	AA	clerical work at HMO
Willie	55	AA	technician
Mark	33	BS	salesman
Carl	44	BS	meteorologist
Cliff	37	student	worked on family farm, now pursuing a BS degree in engineering
Jeff	35	AA	telemarketing manager
Bill	46	BA	manages office chain mortgage company
Alex	36	BS	real estate agent
Calvin	28	AA	Christian rock band member
Ralph	39	BS	government administrator

Note: All participants are of European-Caucasian descent and live in or near small American cities. Almost all designate themselves as conservatives, several as extremely conservative. Many are religious and several designate themselves as 'born-again Christians.' With one exception, all educational degrees were earned at public institutions and universities.

'grand tour questions' that elicited information regarding each participant's background, occupational pursuits, and family circumstances. The dialogue then covered each participant's experiences, views, and preferences across a range of consumption domains – housing and interior decor, special possessions, dining and food, clothing, mass media consumption (i.e., television, movies, and music), exercise routines, and leisure activities and hobbies. All interviews were man-to-man affairs. We began our preliminary interpretations using these data. Following standard qualitative procedures, we added more interviews to achieve redundancy in our interpretive categories, to provide richer and more varied data, and to look for boundary conditions to our emerging interpretations.

DIALECTICS OF EVERYDAY MASCULINE CONSUMPTION

Consuming competitive achievement

Masculinity is not something given to you, something you are born with, it is something you gain and you gain it by winning small battles with honor.

Norman Mailer (quoted in Morgan, 1992: 203)

In the United States, manhood has long been constructed through the rugged individualism of 'the self-made man' who draws upon self-reliance, diligence, and hard work to battle his way to the top of the competitive heap (Hearn, 1992; Kimmel, 1996). This particularly industrious formulation of phallic masculinity is intertwined with the Protestant work ethic: a moral-ethical model that inculcates self-abnegation and delayed gratification, respect for authority, and self-discipline and a devout belief that competitive hierarchies are inherently valuable and indeed indispensable to the social order (Lakoff, 1996). What we will term the discourse of competitive achievement renders manhood as an uncertain and arduous accomplishment that must be 'proven,' and 'earned' (Gilmore, 1990; Savran, 1998) through masculine rites of passage, and whose rigorous challenges must be endured with stoic determination (Pleck, 1982; Strate, 1992).

Achieving in the workplace is central to our participants' identity projects. And their consumption usually complements this work-focused pursuit, rather than compensates for a lack. Our interviews suggest that these middle-class men use the discourse of competitive achievement to imbue their professional lives with symbolic significance, regardless of how allegedly emasculated middle-class work has become.

Our participants frequently use sports – particularly the most successful athletes and championship teams – as a metaphor for the ethos of

competitive achievement (Messner, 1992; Thornton, 1993). Through sport, these men gain a compelling and identity-affirming mirror from which to understand their own professional achievements. Spectator sports discourse, especially as propagated through sports reporting, idolizes patriarchal values of 'killer instincts,' unflinching stoicism in the face of danger and pain, and heroic accomplishments (Thornton, 1993). However, this aggressive version of the competitive achievement discourse had only a limited resonance for our participants. Instead, they champion its moral dimensions, emphasizing hard work, teamwork, and humility:

Ralph: I think the players who come to Green Bay are here for one thing; they're here to work hard and to win. You don't see these guys popping up on TV shows. They come to Green Bay with a conscious thought they are here for a Superbowl Ring and they're here to work out and it shows. And I think they're more involved in the community. Someone who is in a bigger city, there's so many more distractions. So I think, in Green Bay, they assume the role of the average person. And I think . . . that stuff about the Dallas [the Dallas Cowboys football team] being America's team. Well, bullshit! That's some catch line that got started from a marketing person somewhere. Dallas is nothing compared to Green Bay. Green Bay is what football is all about. These are guys that don't carry briefcases into the stadium. They carry lunch pails. I think that a lot of people like that. The person outside the state that likes the [Green Bay] Packers recognizes that even more than we do.

For Ralph, a self-described devout and lifelong fan, 'The Pack' embodies the ethos of competitive achievement, regardless of wins and losses. In contrast, the Dallas Cowboys are vilified as pampered, spoiled, trouble-making athletes who perhaps have more talent but do not have the gritty, blue-collar determination to work indefatigably and quietly toward a championship. Implicit in this comparison is the idea that money and marketing corrupt the moral integrity of sport. Elsewhere, Ralph proudly recounts how several highly coveted Packer players declined more lucrative offers to remain part of this 'special' team and community. For Ralph, these players' ostensible refusal of the market system – hence avoiding the transformation into greedy, selfish, 'brief-case carrying' businessmen – and their loyalty to the fans – thereby expressing the chivalrous values of a noble warrior – enable them to stand as a particularly compelling phallic ideal.

Our informants also use mass entertainment to find pleasures in the discourse of competitive achievement. Techno-thriller novels and action-adventure films present orderly, mythical worlds that affirm the ethos of competitive achievement, smoothing over contradictions and ambiguities

that might otherwise undermine the patriarchal order. Their plotlines predictably recount the heroic actions of a near omnipotent protagonist who vanquishes villainous competitor(s) through fantastic displays of skill, cunning, and physical mastery. Many of our participants are enthusiasts of techno-thriller novels, written by authors such as Tom Clancy, Michael Crichton, and John Grisham. They explain their preferences in terms of the genre's fast-paced, action-intensive quality and its 'realism' or plausibility in terms of its technical details and portrayal of geo-political intrigue. Accordingly, they read techno-thrillers as blurring the line between fiction and documentary reporting and, hence, emphasize the expertise favorite authors gained through extensive background research on the inner workings of the military-industrial complex.

Cliff: Part of what was interesting to me was his [the author Tom Clancy] military intelligence that he intertwines with the characters. You have to wonder if it [a military technology] existed and how he knew about it. There was one situation that really made me think. It had to do with the space-shuttle tests of star wars. He had that in his book but in a much expanded version than what was in the news. So you have to wonder how much of the book was fiction and how much wasn't.

While our participants' emic rationales emphasize the informational value of the techno-thriller, their excited retellings of these books reveal that they are actually consuming the moral universe of competitive achievement. Our participants are equally adamant in their disdain for feminine expressive culture, such as romance novels, soap operas, and daytime talk shows, complaining that 'nothing' ever happens and that they are a waste of time with no pragmatic benefit. Whereas the action-adventure-thriller genres reproduce competitive achievement in an idealized and unambiguous fashion, feminine texts such as romances draw attention to its ambiguities and points of instability (see Radway, 1991). It's not surprising that our informants are so scornful of woman's entertainment, since these texts implicitly call for introspective rumination on the nature of being a man.

Creating symbolic boundaries

The eternal quest for achievement finds its negative expression in our participants' active avoidance and reframing of activities in which they feel likely to be judged as inferior or inadequate. In the following excerpt, Mark recounts shopping at an upscale bookstore that catered to a cultured clientele:

Mark: I'm not a big reader. I don't read anything unless it is a newspaper or a book that tells me how to do something. I wouldn't have gone in there on my own, you know [*he had been given a gift certificate*]. It caters to the coffee-shop crowd, you know the artsy-fartsy types that like to sit around and talk about stuff and think they look cool doing it. I'd rather go and do stuff than sit around and talk about it. And, if I want something to drink or to hang out with my friends, I am more of a bar type person. But anyway, I just didn't like the way the place looked. Everything is so artsy and like intellectual looking, so dark and brooding, kind of like the customers I saw there. It's like everybody is having deep thoughts, you know really thinking about important stuff. Even the store looks like that. Like it is lost in heavy thought. You don't want to bother anybody or say something that might make you look stupid. It is almost as if they are looking down at you, 'like how could you say such a stupid thing?' Not that anybody has ever said that to me but it is just a feeling you get when you walk in there. I mean I can see how a certain type of person, you know serious reader types, might like it but not people like me. Anyway, I'm too Republican to go in there.

The bookstore's customers, apparently cultural elites, made Mark feel insecure. Mark managed this insecurity by aligning the masculine hierarchies he cares about along dimensions other than cultural ones. Defensively but proudly he proclaims that he doesn't read except to get information. He is a pragmatic man-of-action, befitting his occupation in corporate sales; a man who competes on business success rather than on recondite knowledge. His preference for bars over bookstores underlines this distinction, as does his political swipe. Mark frames the encounter to reinforce the phallic competitions in which he feels capable, and renders self-comparisons to these more intellectual 'competitors' less invidious.

Our participants often constructed restrictive symbolic boundaries around the contexts and circumstances in which the quest for hierarchical status is undertaken. In so doing, they are able to insulate themselves from the ever-present threat of defeat by a better, more skilled rival. Through concessions, rationalizations, caveats, and qualified comparisons, they avoid becoming mired in an absolute and, therefore, unwinnable competition. These bounded fields allow for relative and more forgiving standards of comparison to evaluate personal achievement. While trying to win is more central to this moral code than the victory itself, the discourse of competitive achievement also demands that a competent patriarch has sufficient skill to be a formidable competitor. By focusing their psychic energies on these

localized competitions, these men can experience being strong competitors, even while cognizant that their skills might well be inadequate outside of these boundaries. Even within bounded local competitions, our participants carefully edited the competition so that they were 'fairly' aligned against realistic competitors:

Andy: I like being the strongest person in the gym. When I switch gyms and see somebody that can do more than I can do, I use that as motivation to try to surpass that. So it's just like setting a goal for myself. I like setting goals and moving on to the next goal. That is how you end up being the person you want to be. Weight lifting has an ego component to it and a lot of guys want to be macho and, you know, and act like they own the gym. I just ignore them and do my own thing. If you want to act like the macho man, that's fine. I'm just there to accomplish my goals. And really that serves as some kind of motivation for me. . . . Like I see these guys who are bench pressing 400 or 500 pounds and doing reps at that. I used to think that I could never do something like that because they are certainly using substances that I refuse to use. Then I said one of these days, I'm going to go out and do that without having to use drugs. That motivated me. Like this one guy, he was a competitive power lifter working out in the gym and he told me that he did use steroids and he was the only guy in the gym stronger than me.

Andy's desire to always be the strongest person in the gym exemplifies his quest for competitive achievement. He expresses the ideal of self-mastery by working toward his self-directed goals (and hence he is seemingly oblivious to the 'macho men'). Yet, his goal is to attain a dominant status in a competitive hierarchy and accordingly he keeps a close eye on what the 'macho-men' happen to be lifting. While striving to lift as much as those who use performance-enhancing drugs, Andy also uses this illicit aspect of the weight-lifting consumption world to construct an identity-buttressing boundary whereby stronger lifters can be dismissed as relevant competitors (or an identity threat) because they have violated the tacit moral code that governs legitimate modes of competitive achievement.

Taking revitalizing retreats

Our participants' consumer lives are dominated by the discourse of competitive achievement and its canonization of the self-made man. Yet, this discourse also harbors a dystopian mirror image: a Hobbesian world of unabated destructive, cut-throat competition where the survival rule of 'every man for himself' can lead to burn-out and isolation. When seeking

to redress this ominous side of phallic masculinity, American culture has often invoked a countervailing 'kinder, gentler' masculinity situated in a bucolic world of cooperation, fraternal bonds, and responsible citizenship serving a collective good.

This quest for revitalization often entails men retreating into a world of nature – a culturally feminized domain – where they can be spiritually, emotionally, and physically reborn. The mountain man retreats described by Belk and Costa (1998), the much caricatured, drum-beating nature retreats undertaken by mythopoetic men (Bliss, 1995; Bly, 1990; Diamond, 1994), and many other organized and often anti-consumerist retreats into nature enact the longstanding mythic solution to this dilemma of phallic masculinity. Men temporarily leave the hypercompetitive world of phallic identifications and become rejuvenated by their retreat into the organic, holistic, feminine world of nature.

Our participants enact a different version of revitalizing retreat. Rather than commit themselves to subcultural identities woven around overt sanctuaries, they use everyday consumption practices to create symbolic retreats where they temporarily escape the world of adult masculine responsibilities and pressures for achievement and, instead, indulge emotions and hedonic pleasures that are sanctioned against in masculine domains. Yet, even these escapist forms of hedonic consumption present a paradox. Against the backdrop of the discourse of competitive achievement and its moralistic asceticism, these hedonic consumption practices are experienced as transgressions that *should* be kept at bay. Our participants experience hedonic indulgence as a near irresistible force that constantly threatens to 'draw' or 'suck' them into 'unproductive' emotionally engaged practices. Several report being on occasion 'pulled' into feminine media, such as soap operas, and they invoke metaphors connoting a loss of control such as being temporarily mesmerized or 'getting hooked' into regularly watching a program.

We suggest that our participants experience this dialectical tension as a sense of taboo toward hedonic indulgences, which works to increase the desirability and anticipated pleasure of these experiences. This cycle of denial and infatuation reinforces their emotional investment in the hegemonic narrative of men's eternal struggle against temptation. Our participants' patriarchal identifications lead them to construct consumer pleasures in opposition to the masculine ideal of rational, ascetic morality. The construction of these hedonic retreats as moderately transgressive indulgences allows them to be experienced as acts of escape and, occasionally, even rebellion. Against the conventional argument that middle-class men

have been socialized to repress their inherent, 'essential' emotions, we suggest that this *cultural construction* of an emotionally inhibited masculine identity paradoxically produces heightened consumer pleasures.

For example, Ralph justifies his intense emotional connection to the Green Bay Packers and its players through parallels between his working-class family history and the working-class value system he associates with the Packers. He also attributes a specialness bordering on the sacred to not only the team but also its fans and the Packers' hallowed home field. In Lambeau field stadium, the fans, players, and coaches form a closely knit community that exudes a family-like atmosphere:

Ralph: I grew up in a blue-collar family, you know, working six days a week. I was indoctrinated with the Packers. On Sunday, my family would sit in the living room with our TV trays and watch the game. The first time I actually went to a game was in college. I got the tickets from my Grandpa Nick, who was a season ticket holder. He gave them to me and a friend. I went to the game and it was incredible. I remember walking into Lambeau and it was a great Fall day and the seats were great and all these people around us knew my Grandpa Nick. He'd been sitting in those seats for god knows how long and they all knew each other. People were like, 'you must be Nick's grandson. When you see Nick tell him this.' That was my first experience with the fans at the game. They are the most endearing people. The fans are what makes going to the game so great. I've got a buddy who has a house up there and a couple of times we've made a weekend out of it. Stay with him, go to the bars, then the game on Sunday. It's a good time. I love the Green Bay newspapers. There is all these great in-depth stories on the Packers. There's a front page story on the Packers just about everyday. So, I get the *Green Bay Press Gazette* because the papers here don't have these great stories on the Packers. The *Gazette* does all these cool stories on a whole bunch of players. If you pick up the nationally syndicated stories, they're always about Brett [Favre] or the team as a whole in a game but I like reading about the other players. But like I said, I was indoctrinated growing up as a fan. I'll always find a player to like and I'll follow the team even when the team is on the downslide. When the Packers invariably start losing, a lot of people will fall off – I hope not but that is what happens – but I'll always be a fan.

Ralph's emotional indulgence in fandom is further justified by his life-long commitment to the team. By contrasting his unflagging support to 'bandwagon' fans, whom he derides as 'cheesehead wearers,' Ralph assumes a dominant position in this tacit moral hierarchy and thereby enacts a claim

to hegemonic masculinity, though it is ostensibly of a communal rather than competitive nature. In the symbolic sanctuary of the true lifelong Packer fan, his consumption practices – such as avidly reading human interest profiles about different Packer players – can exhibit feminized qualities such as empathy, a desire for personalized rather than instrumental knowledge, and feelings of interpersonal connection (again see Radway, 1991).

In these revitalizing consumption retreats, our participants sometimes adopt a child-like state of dependency and freely indulge desires for immediate gratification. Whereas the strong, stoic father embodies the ideal of patriarchal authority, its countervailing image – the dependent and emotionally impulsive child – signifies a defiant flight from the patriarchal imperatives of competitive achievement. These excursions into hedonic gratifications often elicit a multitude of supporting rationalizations. Consider the following passage from Calvin, a born-again Christian who performs in a touring Christian rock band:

Calvin: We [the Band] go to IHOP after our shows. IHOP is big with us. It has definitely become a habit to go there. We make a point of finding the closest IHOP to every place we play. It takes us a few hours to come down after a show, we get really wound up playing and so going to IHOP at one in the morning is a good thing. Its fun to go there and talk to some of the people who came to see the show and get to know them better. The blueberry pancakes are the best. Definitely a staple food. If it's just at home, there is not much in the fridge or cabinet. So I pretty much eat cereal all the time. It never gets stale [laughs].

Interviewer: What kind of cereal do you typically eat?

Calvin: Froot Loops is my favorite cereal. I don't know why. I am a real kids' cereal eater. Whatever, Count Choccula, Trix, anything with sugar and marshmallows. Any new kind of kids' cereal I have to try, the cookie cereal what's that called, I forgot but its the chocolate-chip cookie cereal. I just really like those kinds of cereals and I really don't think about it. I just pick up the box when I am hungry and it satisfies my hunger. I guess I think that if I put real fruit, strawberries and bananas in my Froot Loops it's okay. Some people are really into the bran and 100 percent of 20 vitamins and minerals crap, whatever that Total commercial says. I have this funny idea that I can go out and run and offset the bad way I eat. But I just really like the sugar high before jumping on stage. I need a lot of calories anyway so I really eat a lot of junk. . . . I've been eating cereal forever. I can't remember ever not eating cereal in my life. Of course, I used to eat it in the morning

rather than the evening. Now it is like eat cereal for breakfast, eat it for lunch, eat it for dinner. If I'm sitting in front of the TV, I'll eat it right out of the box. I don't like chips or popcorn much, so I eat cereal for snacks too. Actually I go through phases. I'll eat shredded wheat for a few months and then I'll go back to Froot Loops. It depends. Actually, it depends on whether I have a girlfriend at that time who gets on my case about it. I just figure I don't smoke, drink, or do drugs. And I exercise a lot so I should be allowed to eat whatever cereal I want. You can't be perfect.

Calvin interprets sweet, high calorie, kid-like foods as a relatively innocuous indulgence that he should be 'allowed to eat' (by the implied maternal figure), particularly when compared to more toxic and dangerous addictions. Calvin's cereal eating enacts a form of infantilization through defiance of adult prescriptions for healthful eating or other conceptions of adult food tastes. The girlfriend who 'gets on his case' here plays the maternal role, admonishing him to eat better. Once free from this quasi-parental control, he quickly returns to his rebellious, childish, and hedonistic eating pattern.

Other participants also evince this type of hedonic retreat, though generally in a more subtle form. While they expressed an interest in food, all matters relating to culinary skill, menu planning, and knowledge of nutritional properties are understood as the province of wives. The wives' skills at preparing an interesting variety of meals while diligently monitoring ways to improve their diet earn nods of appreciation. Our participants' satisfaction with their passive relationship to food – exemplified by comments that 'I eat whatever is in the house' – further suggests that they realize psychic benefits from depending upon their wives in this child-like manner.

In the following passage, Robert reflects on his wife's ongoing effort to dress him appropriately. By retreating into the persona of a recalcitrant child (and donning juvenile garb) in need of maternal solicitude, Robert retreats from the serious, adult conventions of phallic masculinity:

Robert: It's a real, real, real chore for [wife] to get me clothes shopping. You know, if she does drag me out to buy a sport coat, I'll walk into the first place, look at one, grab it off the rack and walk out, you know. My object is to get in and out of the store in less than five minutes to buy a year's worth of clothing. I'll try a pair of pants and hurry up and put your little chalk marks on them and then give me one in each one of those colors and let's get out of here because I hate it.

Interviewer: So does she end up picking out your clothes?

Robert: Yes, she literally brings stuff home in a bag and when I'm . . . she knows to catch me when I'm undressing at night at 11:00 and as soon as I pull my blue jeans off she goes, 'Wait. Put these on.' 'Oh, I'm tired. I want to go to bed. I don't want to . . .' 'Just put the pants on and let me look at them.' So I'll quick take them out of the bag and try them on. She'll roll them up and pin them and then take them off and get them tailored or do it herself. When we go out at night invariably, you know, I'll put something on and walk out and she'll go, 'Oh, that pants and shirt, they don't go together. Pick this one,' you know. So when we're going to somebody's house or going someplace nice, to a wedding or something, I go upstairs and my clothes are laid out on the bed for me. There's a method to this.

Interviewer: If you had your druthers, what would you wear?

Robert: Blue jeans. No socks. And this is too fancy a shirt [a button down]. I don't want one with buttons. I just want a pull-over t-shirt with something printed on it, a race track design on the back or something.

Robert rejoices in the fact that he has abdicated control over his wardrobe to his wife. This persona of an impatient and contentious little boy who wants nothing to do with the adult world of formal clothes or clothes shopping is part and parcel of the juvenile persona he enacts in his avocations, but here taken to the extreme for dramatic effect. Yet, his childish stance toward matters of dress also maintains a tacit claim to patriarchal privilege: his wife now acts as his surrogate shopper and manager of his public appearance.

For one participant, escaping from the patriarchal system of competitive achievement takes the form of a dream of permanent separation rather than an enacted brief respite. Willie, a retired navy man and shop floor steward, has weathered a series of life crises: a divorce (although he had been remarried for six years) and a recent lay-off that left him with little hope of finding comparable employment. Whereas other participants suggested that the patriarchal status system had benefited them both socially and economically, Willie's narrative is marked by a distinct sense of martyrdom and a desire to exit the patriarchal status game that he could never quite seem to master. Willie's narrative is also marked by a fatalism touting the inevitability of misfortune and cautioning against setting goals or dreams too high. The one remaining 'realistic dream' that he allows himself is redolent with metaphors for escaping from the demoralizing effects of phallic masculinity:

Willie: Traveling in our trailer, no itinerary, no schedule. That's been my dream for years and years to drive down to a stop sign and flip a coin, heads I go right and tails I go left. I'm serious, no schedule, no itinerary. Go months at a time. We're talking currently, of course things change, I learned a long time ago to never say never. Our current dream is when she [wife] is retire-able is to sell this house and buy a mobile home. Not to tow but to actually like park it at an adult park or something where you don't have a lot of yard work but in the winter you could be there for three or four months and be comfortable, but then the first bud of spring comes out and you're gone, whether you spend a day in one place or whether you spend a month in one place. Again I've seen a lot of these things, I've told you that my wife and I have only been married six years and there's a lot of things that she's never seen and she really enjoys traveling, she's a good traveler, another reason that we're compatible. Going to a lot of these places are just like taking a kid to a candy store, that's her reaction to this stuff. It's really enjoyable.

Interviewer: What do you like about the trailer, RV kind of traveling?

Willie: If you decide to stop you can stop. There's just the freedom of being able to stay as much or as little as you want. The other thing is that campgrounds are generally more family oriented. I've gone away and accidentally left the trailer door open, not just unlocked but open, and come back and nothing will be disturbed whatsoever and I don't think you would do that in a hotel room. And you get up in the morning and your coffee pot is there, you don't have to wait until you're shaved and showered and get dressed and drive three blocks to Denny's to get your first cup of coffee. Eat what you want, when you want it and it's just do what you want to do when you want to do it. It's not being dictated by somebody else.

Willie dreams of living a nomadic existence free from social pressures, where his wife's interests perfectly mirror his desires. The trailer is a sanctuary from the rules, demands, and evaluations of society (i.e., the patriarchal order). He envisions an encapsulated world where he reigns as the uncontested patriarchal authority who expertly leads his ever receptive and appreciative wife on a *journey*: itself a powerful metaphor of patriarchal autonomy (Adler, 1989). Through this nomadic retreat, Willie aspires to perform as benevolent patriarch to an adoring, accepting, unquestioning audience of one, rather than having to prove his masculine mettle in the brutal, dog-eat-dog, judgmental world of patriarchal competition.

DISCUSSION

When we examine the consumption practices of American men close up, they have little in common with conventional models of men running away from institutional emasculation at work and in the home to pursue compensatory phallic consumption in leisure. Instead, we find that men align themselves with forms of competitive achievement at both work and play that provide sustenance to their quest for patriarchal identities. Men adapt phallic ideals to make them accessible in their everyday lives. They play off the contradictions inherent in phallic masculinity to serve their particular and varied identity projects, and they soften the rough edges of their phallic pursuits by incorporating feminine motifs. Rather than threatening masculine identity, the feminine becomes a resource that men use to facilitate their own phallic identity games.

Furthermore, our participants find little identity value in the mere possession of phallic symbols. Rather than owning objects, phallic identifications are constructed primarily through consumption practices. Through these patriarchal framings of their lifestyles, men orient their identities around a contingent, partial, and contextually shifting construction of the phallus. They claim masculine power by deftly manoeuvring around the limitations and forms of subordination that also interpenetrate their lives.

Finally, rather than run away from feminizing activities in pursuit of symbolic manhood, we find just the opposite. Our participants construct *revitalizing retreats*, symbolically bounded spaces where they can indulge pleasures that would otherwise be inconsistent with their dominant phallic identifications. They not only take pleasure in conventionally feminine entertainment. They also adopt child-like personas that allows them to abdicate control over aspects of their domestic lives to a nurturing other (generally their wives) and to enjoy being cared for, while relinquishing any strong sense of personal responsibility or need to achieve. Paradoxically, this selective refusal of men's responsibilities to indulge in the emotive and hedonic aspects of consumption enacts a different kind of claim to patriarchal status. Playing the 'little boy who refuses to grow up' reproduces the public-domestic gendered division of labor where men become the benefactors of their wives' domestic care.

Suzanne Moore (1988) coined the term *gender tourism* to conceptualize a kind of ideological 'travel' undertaken by high-status men. Through gender tourism, men 'visit' the world of femininity and 'play' with more feminized identity practices, free in the knowledge that their patriarchal privileges function as symbolic passports they can use at any time to return to their dominant masculine positions. We have adapted her formulation to describe

travel among a multiplicity of gendered practices whose meanings are uniquely contextualized across specific spaces and times. In our reformulation, gender tourism includes not only movements between masculinized and feminized consumption practices, but also among different kinds of masculinity: between practices evincing the competitive, stoic, model of patriarchal masculinity and others more exemplary of a 'softer,' communal, more emotional, more impetuous and, at times more child-like model of masculinity enacted in revitalizing retreats. Further, gender tourism is not just restricted to the identity projects of privileged males. Rather, it is a widely applied strategy through which men negotiate the cultural contradictions posed by the ideological construction of phallic masculinity.

Our participants did not seek permanent residency in these subordinated identities. Rather, they used these texts and consumption practices to find relief from the never-ending pursuit of phallic identification. Through these 'identity vacations,' they experience a sense of respite, rejuvenation, and pleasures of difference. The tourist/vacation metaphor is not quite perfect, because these breaks are recurrent or even fairly routine features of their everyday lives. However, it does capture the sense of movement, change in routine, and the spirit of play that pervade their stories. Also the vacation metaphor lives up to its American connotations: when men take a break in these symbolic sanctuaries, they worry that too much time out can easily lead to overindulgence, that they will become too soft to once again chase after the phallus.

Future directions

A man's got to know his limitations.

Clint Eastwood speaking as Dirty Harry in *Magnum Force*

Masculinity is a dynamic and fragmented cultural category constituted by multiplicities of masculinities and femininities (Connell, 1995). For this reason, we have situated our analysis and arguments within the cultural context of white, American, middle-class masculinity. We have not discussed other masculinities that arise through different intersections of class, race, nation, and sexual orientation. Our findings may not be transferable to other masculinities such as gay men (e.g., Kates, 2002; Penalzoa, 1996), men of color (Awkward, 1995; Dyson, 1996), men who are part of the urban underclass (Anderson, 1999; Nightingale, 1993), teenage males, and other masculinities.

While we endorse this word of empirical caution, we also believe that the phallic ideology we have mapped is likely to be relevant to these diverse

masculinities. Men around the world are inevitably exposed to the dominant phallic ideals of American middle-class masculinity, particularly owing to global diffusion of American culture via mass media. In exploring how subaltern men engage this discourse, it is important to avoid the common assumption that the normative response is to resist the dominant ideology. If this were so, ideology would not be doing its work in bringing diverse men together to identify with the values of powerful institutions. Rather, the challenge is to specify how men in other social positions, even dominated ones, rework and deploy phallic discourses to construct plausible and compelling masculine identities.

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Note

1. Jordan's public image, much like that of his phallic counterpart Tiger Woods, is largely devoid of any strong anti-establishment racial markers. As marketable icons of phallic masculinity, Jordan, Woods, and LeBron James can neither invoke discomfort among predominantly white middle-class consumer segments nor can they stand as reminders of the socio-economic discrimination and repression that has shaped the life experiences of so many African-American males. These smiling, product pitching, phallic bodies have their racial identities erased, or more pointedly, white washed (for further discussion see Dyson, 1996, 2002; hooks, 2003).

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