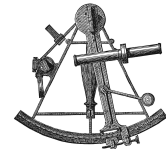


Metrosexuality: A Facade of Progressiveness Examined Through Men’s Media Interactions, Capitalism, and State Policies



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Abstract

This paper explores the emergence of the metrosexual man as a facade of progressiveness within the context of shifting masculinities. By examining the interplay of advertisements, media interactions, capitalism, and state policies, it reveals how metrosexuality reflects both subversive and hegemonic masculine ideals. Through a critical analysis of societal power dynamics, it becomes evident that while metrosexuality offers space for gender experimentation, it ultimately serves capitalist interests and perpetuates patriarchal norms. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives, the study underscores the complexity of contemporary masculinity and the need for meaningful engagement with feminism to challenge existing power structures and promote genuine gender equality.

Keywords: metrosexuality; masculinity; media; capitalism; state

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Introduction

Masculinities are socially constructed, historical, and influenced by social structures (Kimmel, 2005, p. 25). If one looks around, one can find masculinities performed in different styles. My father performs the masculinity he knows, my older brothers perform it another, and my friends do it in a completely different way. Some of these masculinities can be termed traditional masculinity, metrosexual masculinity, or transnational masculinity; depending on their characteristics. Connell wrote, 'Masculine power involves speaking against one's own interest as a man' (West, p. 15). Thus, the paper aims to investigate the metrosexual man as a facade of progressiveness. It is mapped by analysing the influence of three main components - the relationship between advertisements and men's media interactions with the beauty and skincare industry, capitalism, and the state.

The Shifting Landscape of Masculinities

It is important to understand that different masculinities are categorised hierarchically, forming the plurality of masculinities (Connell, 2005). Often, they overlap. Masculinity has traditionally been created through 'othering', not only of women but also of men, as highlighted by renowned scholars like Kimmel (Kimmel, 2005, p. 25). However, this plurality can be considered to denote the fragmentation of the gender arena (West, p. 15). Thus, as Butler advocated that performativity is central to gender, this performativity of masculinity is regularly monitored and categorised.

Today, you can find Harry Styles in vibrant skirts, the famous Bollywood icon Ranveer Singh on Vogue covers in the most iconic style, Ranbir Kapoor shirtless and commodified in movie posters of 'Animal', and the global icon David Beckham with his chiselled body in underwear ads. These sensual advertisements that were once confined to women have been and are rapidly moving towards men. This creates anxiety and panic for not only men who perform this type of masculinity but also for other men who are unable to adapt to this, causing what is popularly known as 'Masculinity in Crisis' (Olsson and Lauri, 2022, p. 239).

The Emergence of the New Man

The 'New Man' emerged in response to feminism, globalisation, capitalism, and neoliberalism (Conseur, 2004, p. 13). Connell was right when she said, 'We should not be surprised to find among the men of the rich countries a widespread awareness of change in gender arrangements' (West, p. 11). Therefore, in simple words, the 'New Man' refers to a man who rejects traditional masculinity in terms of domestic work, is well connected with his emotions, and can communicate the same (Olsson and Lauri, 2022, p. 242). Under this umbrella emerged what Mark Simpson called the 'Metrosexual Man'; a man who lives in an urban city with high disposable income (Mishra, 2017, p. 255).

The Metrosexual Man can be seen engaging in gyms, consuming health products like protein powders, being concerned about their appearance, and spending money on the latest fashion trends and perfumes. They learn about these trends from media like magazines and social media. However, there are boundaries even within the practices of metrosexuality. It is because heterosexuality is built through 'othering', which is the base of all power relations. Now, metrosexuals are crossing that boundary creating anxiety due to the possible loss of social power and position (Olsson and Lauri, 2022, p. 248). Therefore, 'abnormal' body capital had to be advertised and sold to the heteronormative men cleverly since "the body is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed" (Mishra, 2021, p. 291).

Exploring the Relationship between Advertisement and Men's Media Interactions with the Beauty and Skincare Industry

The best way to change social and cultural dynamics is through media, as 'images of gender in the media become texts on normative behaviour, one of the many cultural shards we use to construct notions of masculinity' (Conseur, 2004, p. 16). The intended change in dynamics could be witnessed through shows like 'Queer Eye for the Straight Guy', where the media monetised on factors like youthfulness, and fashion, thereby

including certain homosexual practices into the normative to enable the heterosexual man to maintain power (Miller, 2005, p. 114). As discussed earlier, metrosexuality also practises boundaries, and this can be explored through men's media interactions with the skincare and beauty industry.

For instance, an accepted and visible practice of metrosexuality is body building and apparel consumption, but skincare and make-up are confidential. Men are the invisible consumers of the skin care industry for two reasons - first, skincare relies on delayed gratification, and second, men never talk about it (Byrne and Milestone, 2022, p.162). This fear can be noticed and analysed through men's interactions on mainstream media like YouTube and Instagram. The study, 'I am Metro Not Gay' records the responses of many male beauty product consumers who feel comforted that they are not the 'only dude' or find themselves repeatedly ascertaining their heterosexuality (Hall, Gough, Seymour-Smith, 2012, p. 216). This similar pattern can be observed in skincare as they do not purchase the product themselves or rely on trusted confidential or complete anonymity on the internet to ask questions (Hall, Gough, Seymour-Smith, 2012, p. 160).

While analysing these trends in the above study, the most fascinating result was the strong resistance to femininity as a user confirms, 'the progression of skincare will become like something that doesn't have the feminization' (Hall, Gough, Seymour-Smith, 2012, p.157). The need to strip away femininity highlights the degraded position of women in society and men's aversion to being associated with it. As much as Butler's theory to destabilise gender and gender norms is convincing, one can not elude the frenzy and manic associated with this urgency to detach from femininity, which only mirrors the prominence of patriarchy and the oppressed position of women (West, p. 15). Paradoxically, these standards of beauty and body were created by patriarchy for women to limit and constrain their chances in occupations and are now affecting men. Men are being pushed into the panopticon of surveillance and become self-governing objects in this neo-liberal environment and made to not only compete with women on these beauty standards but to inhabit their world of disadvantages (Byrne and Milestone, 2022, p. 150-151).

The Role of Capitalism

Does men experimenting with gender fluidity and the desire to be the new or the inclusive man denote structural changes in society? The answer is no. As we know, masculinity is continually shaped by social institutions. The two most powerful institutions are - capitalism and the state. Experimenting with gender fluid activities or activities historically called feminine does not change the structure but merely 're-socializes men as consumers' (Hall, Gough, Seymour-Smith, 2012, p. 210). Metrosexuality thus solely becomes an instrument of capitalism.

Capitalists market 'soft masculinity' while retaining their hegemonic dominance, a phenomenon that merits particular attention. Capitalists monetised these new areas by advertising these masculinities as the most attractive. This monetisation necessitated a need for these advertisements because suddenly men did not know how to become men again (Conseur, 2004, p. 38). They needed guidelines to understand what masculinity is while repeating the practice of 'othering'. This new identity creation was one plagued with issues of self-esteem, and impression management (Byrne and Milestone, 2022, p. 159). Moreover, with an increasing number of magazines and advertisements aimed at men, one could notice the increased visibility of male models. This growing attention on the male body inverted the 'male gaze' not only for women but also for men (Byrne and Milestone, 2022, p. 148). This proves the lack of structural changes and indicates a mere shift in power dynamics. Thus, the Metrosexual Man and the New Man subvert masculinities and play beyond traditional stereotypes but are cautious to experiment within the boundaries of power (Olsson and Lauri, 2022, p. 238). The switch can be metaphorically captured as a move from the Hindu God Rama known for his qualities to Adonis, in Greek mythology, focused primarily on his visual features (Mishra, 2017, p. 259).

At this juncture, it is also essential to emphasise the victimhood practised by both men and governments. This brings us to the next most powerful institution - the state. The power invested in the state is a combination of the panopticon lens practised by the self-surveilling civilian and the biopower as elaborated by Foucault (O'Farrell, 2005, p. 105). Further

insight can be gained by referencing Sweden's policy promoting men's engagement in gender equality issues.

Examining the State's Role Using the Swedish Norm Critique Method

Norm critique refers to the Swedish method of questioning norms that constrain the abilities of individuals. However, the Swedish Policy, 'Men and Gender Equality', uses the narrative of vulnerability, victimhood, and emotional temporality, to create the neo-liberal man as the solution for gender equality. The policy refers to 'traditional masculinity' as an obstacle outside the man and calls for emotional competency and responsibility to solve the historic gender divide. This emotional maturity as 'boys learn to take responsibility for their mental health' (Olsson and Lauri, 2022, p. 243) becomes an emancipatory tool for patriarchy. This excessive accommodation and reference to health and mental well-being also connect itself to the therapeutic logic that fits the aggressive culture of capitalism as explained by the famous sociologist Illouz. All this contributes to the fantasy of the emotional or the New Man.

These narratives of the problems of patriarchy make men self-aware but not responsible for their actions. One of the reasons contributing to it is the simultaneous use of feminist and anti-feminist rhetoric to address and discuss the problems of patriarchy by policymakers. It enables them to raise and limit awareness to leave the heteronormative and patriarchal system unchecked. It allows men to retain their patriarchal dividend. So if we are still wondering why Metrosexuality does not challenge traditional or hegemonic masculinity, it is because it packages subversive and hegemonic versions of masculinity together; it is intertwined. (236-249).

Conclusion

Metrosexuality, with its vibrance, does provide the space to experiment and subvert hegemonic masculinity. It encompasses a positive space for men looking for more language for identity and expression without constantly proving their sexuality. By critically examining the intersections

of advertisements, men's media interactions, capitalism, and state policies, we can better understand the underlying power dynamics that shape masculine ideals. Gender transcendence as explained by Joseph Pleck captures the essence of such masculinities, i.e., the ability to adapt oneself to the characteristics of any gender to become more able and skilled (Conseur, 2004, p. 7,8,12). The way metrosexuality is advertised and sold to its audience can be drawn parallel to the methods used by politicians and other power-wielding agencies that advocate gender equality using regressive terms of gender theory. Both use different techniques with the same agenda of maintaining patriarchy and heteronormativity. Thus, to move beyond this display culture requires us to meaningfully engage with feminism by not only acknowledging the opportunities it offers but also by ensuring to not appropriate the institutional and theoretical territory mapped out by feminists for selfish needs lacking structural changes (West, p. 15).

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