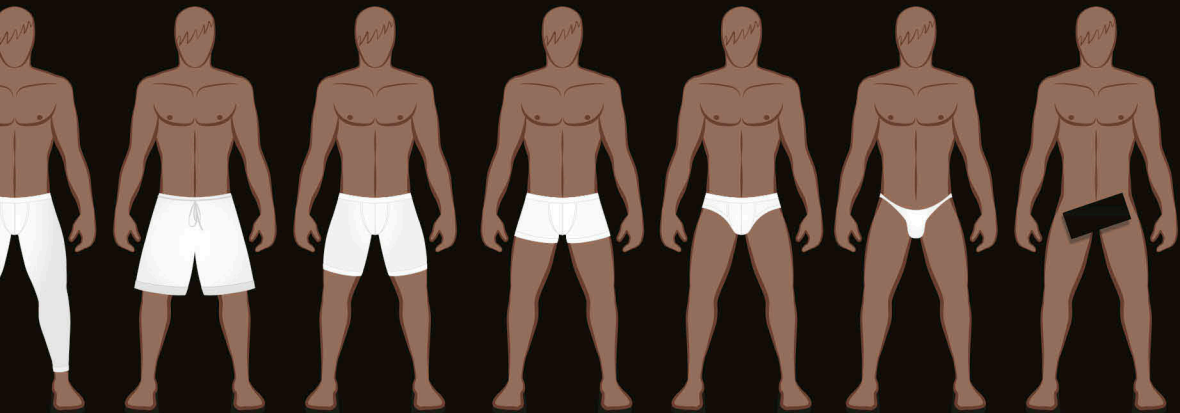


# Sexualised Masculinity

Men's Bodies in 21st Century Media Culture

John Mercer and Clarissa Smith



# SEXUALISED MASCULINITY

*Sexualised Masculinity: Men's Bodies in 21st Century Media Culture* explores evolving portrayals of masculinity in contemporary media, focusing on the increasing eroticisation of the male body.

This book examines how traditional and digital media – from films and television to social media platforms and fashion – have transformed the ways masculinity is represented and perceived. Through a wide array of case studies, it highlights how male bodies are now sites of erotic value, challenging long-standing norms and expectations. By exploring both global and local media, John Mercer and Clarissa Smith provide insights into the shifting landscape of gender and sexuality, offering a critical perspective on how masculinity is consumed, performed and commodified in today's world.

This book is essential for students and scholars in fields such as gender studies, media studies, cultural studies and social history, and is particularly relevant for those interested in understanding the intersections of masculinity, media and sexuality in the 21st century.

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**This book is dedicated to the memory of our fathers, Peter John Mercer (1948–2024) and Henry John Smith (1932–2021).**



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# INTRODUCTION

## Masculinity, Sex and Sexualisation

In July 2024, as we came to the end of preparation of the manuscript that would become this book, the British television show *Love Island* concluded its 11th season. We found ourselves noting, with some surprise, just how rapidly the landscape of popular culture can change. When we began working on the research that this book represents *Love Island* had launched its fourth season and, with a record viewership of over 4 million, the show became a pillar of ITV's weekly programming. By this point, the show is now a multichannel, multiplatform entertainment attracting legions of fans who follow it via social media networks as the show moved from languishing at the margins of mid-week reality TV to its current status as a mainstay of the popular schedules. The show's formula nonetheless remains a relatively simple one; a group of exceptionally attractive young men and women are brought to a luxurious villa in Majorca, spending long sun-drenched days in swimwear in order to 'couple up' and thereby find love by night. In almost every regard *Love Island*'s premise and its gender and sexual politics are entirely socially conservative. Contestants are ostensibly cast based on their good looks and a narrow definition of good looks at that. The show enforces heteronormative conventions on housemates and they, in turn, perform largely stereotypical models of behaviour. It is therefore easy for cultural commentators to dismiss *Love Island* (which is hardly unique in any case) as superficial and retrograde, however, amid this conservatism we think it's possible to diagnose a shifting cultural and sexual context that informs the research in this book. On one hand, the pervasiveness of gender binaries, stereotypical behaviours and attitudes they reproduce is evident. The ways masculinity and femininity (mutually exclusive categories out of necessity in this context) are constructed/constituted/enacted in the show often suggest that communication between men and women inevitably fails. Indeed, the discourses of *Love Island* suggest that this is not just inevitable but

## 2 Sexualised Masculinity

also entirely necessary as the binaristic model of gender that the show presents demands conflict, misunderstanding and failure of communication. The narrative here being that women try to decipher male actions symptomatically whereas by contrast the young men are either mystified or, more often, disinterested by the discussions of motive and implications that women engage in at length. This of course reproduces exhausted stereotypes of women as scheming gossips and men as unthinking dupes drawn into the machinations of the female contestants, driven by their libidos. Within this reactionary narrative though, the show seems to reveal a more surprising and unexpected aspect of young male homosocial bonding in the 21st century, illustrating cultural shifts in the ways young men are physically demonstrative and affectionate in single-sex settings, seemingly at ease with admiring each other's bodies. Indeed, while contestants of both sexes are routinely screened in states of undress it is undeniable that the primary, indeed the insistent focus of attention of the producers of *Love Island* is the presentation of the bodies of the male contestants as sexual spectacle. Whereas in the 21st century it has become progressively problematic to present female bodies as objects of sexual pleasure, by contrast male bodies seem if not freed of the associations of objectification (a vexed and politicised term), then still available as a focus of erotic investment.

Apart from its runaway popular success, *Love Island* is not in and of itself remarkable, instead it is illustrative of the mainstreaming of a mode of representation that has accelerated in recent times. This is a show that circulates within a context in which men's bodies and masculinity itself has become progressively sexualised (a term that we will ask some critical questions of) in that the male body has become a widely accessed site of sexual/erotic interest. Whilst the extent to which we can make the case that this is a new phenomenon is debatable, we will argue in this book that the wider social and cultural contexts that these representations are circulated and consumed in put masculinity and male privilege under interrogation like never before and that the signs and meanings of masculinity increasingly carry the burden of contested and contradictory readings, such that masculinity is saturated with meaning, and therefore warrants extended consideration and theorisation. Sexualisation remains as awkward and uncomfortable a term as it was when Feona Attwood wrote about it in her essay 'Sexed Up: Theorizing the Sexualization of Culture' in 2006. Whether in an academic context or in popular parlance, sexualisation refers to several, sometimes contradictory, concerns at the same time; sexual representation and the potential associated 'harms', the so-called pornography debate, gendered concerns around sexual objectification across media, the oppression of women in and through media representation, a rampant consumerism and the commercialisation of sex, sex reduced to a commodity, sex and sexuality positioned as a problem. This book doesn't (and can't) avoid how this network of meanings informs not just the title but the politics and context of our own objects of study, but our intention here is to reach beyond the

routine debates that the ‘sexualisation of culture’ engenders, by placing men’s bodies in the critical frame.

This is a book then about masculinity in the 21st century and how it is offered up as a site of sexual/erotic investment. We should note here the specific concern of this book is observing when, how and why masculinity is presented for its erotic value. Men’s bodies are a common feature of visual culture across an array of domains and make meaning in a range of contexts that are not overtly about sex and sexuality. The sporting body for example, even if it has the potential (as we will argue) to be ‘double coded’ doesn’t always and immediately speak of sex. Our focus in this book is those instances where the masculine body is represented, staged, performed and circulated for its sexual possibilities and values. This is also a book concerned with contemporary thought around the operations of masculine bodies across media cultures and we offer a range of orientations to think about the meanings of masculinity and its relationship to, drawing on the nomenclature of Zygmunt Baumann (2001), sex, sexuality and eroticism. It is our, admittedly ambitious, aim to move beyond existing paradigms and frameworks that are grounded in responses to or rejections of Raewyn Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity firmly grounded as it is in 20th century models of gender. Indeed, we will argue that the factionalism of Critical Masculinity Studies increasingly produces circular thinking that it is difficult to move beyond.<sup>1</sup> See for instance Rachel O’Neill’s forensic analysis of the emergence of inclusive masculinity studies, ‘Whither critical masculinity studies? Notes on inclusive masculinity theory, postfeminism, and sexual politics’ (2014) and Andrea Waling’s critique of the emphasis on categorical analysis in ‘Rethinking masculinity studies: Feminism, masculinity, and poststructural accounts of agency and emotional reflexivity’ (2018). The intention of this book is to acknowledge foundational studies in masculinity studies, film and cultural studies to then move beyond those approaches in ways that are useful for the analysis of contemporary (and ostensibly digital) culture in the 21st century.

This book asks critical questions about who is invested (and this term will be returned to throughout this book) in the construction of a sexualised masculinity and the perpetuation of this mode of presentation across popular culture. We situate our analysis in the centrality of the body to the values and operations of contemporary capitalism. This necessitates a reconsideration of masculinity and its value in institutionalised media culture (including journalism, marketing and advertising) and by extension consumer culture (the cosmetics, beauty, fitness and fashion industries in particular) and how these connect to social media within the broader context of a landscape where the status of the body, representation of the self as an ‘identity project’ (Gill, Henwood and McLean, 2005), privacy and intimacy have evolved in the digital age. This is a set of issues and debates that have dictated the structure of this book.

In the first chapter we explore the central place that journalistic practice has occupied in the construction of categorical models of masculinity in the 20th and

21st centuries and how the demands of journalism and associated promotional cultures relate to the emergence of a language to describe the linkages between masculinity and sex. Chapter 2 offers discussion of the masculine ideals of the male sex symbol of Hollywood cinema and the, now standard, gym-built body that we describe as the ‘Hollywood body’, which has become the expectation for a leading male across moving image media. In Chapter 3 we turn our attention to contemporary regimes of physical self-improvement, health and ‘wellbeing’. In particular we draw on the work of Ros Gill and Jamie Hakim regarding the body conceived as a ‘project’ linked to neoliberal logics of individualism and personal responsibility. Fashion and beauty industries are our focus in Chapter 4, examining the burgeoning market for male cosmetics. We see the sexualised masculine body as enmeshed in and emerging from this context and instrumentalised through processes theorised as ‘marketplace mythologies’.

In Chapter 5 we consider the ways ideas derived from queer theory and the broader context of queer culture have impacted on the ways masculinity is sexualised across an array of sources ranging from popular music to online sexual content. Chapter 6 investigates the ‘dad bod’ phenomenon, a prominent feature in the discourse surrounding modern masculinities and sexual identities, especially through its intersection with the concept of the DILF – Dad I’d Like to Fuck. Exploring the broader cultural shift from perceptions of ‘asexual old age’ to the ‘sexy senior’ to the ‘Daddy’ and his more fluid counterpart the ‘Zaddy’, this chapter highlights how media representations and societal attitudes have shifted towards ideas of ‘successful’ and ‘active’ ageing that emphasise continued productivity and challenge traditional narratives of ageing by promoting a consumeristic, anti-ageing culture. The relationship between ageing, sexuality and masculinity is explored, particularly how modern sexual medicine and changing societal norms have recalibrated expectations of lifelong sexual activity. In our final chapter we focus on social media platforms and cultures and think about questions of public and private bodies and what the phenomenon of ‘thirst trapping’ might tell us about contemporary attitudes to masculine sexuality. We consider the implications of algorithms in the construction of digital repositories of male bodies and how this relates to artificial intelligence’s constructions of sexualised masculinity.

### **Masculinity and the Somatic Society**

Of course, the academic discussion of male bodies in art and culture is not new in and of itself. In fact, one of the challenges that we have faced when researching and writing this book has emerged rather more from the heterogeneous and simultaneously rather prescribed ways the subject has previously been addressed across disciplines, in that although perspectives differ between and across fields a very clear set of orthodox readings has emerged in specific domains of knowledge. For instance, the body of research that seeks to uncover homoeroticism in art criticism or work in Film Studies about the spectacular

and by extension therefore hysterically overdetermined masculine body in Hollywood cinema understands representations of nude and/or eroticised masculinity ostensibly in terms of their mode of address to an assumed male viewer. Whilst this work is undoubtedly productive it does seem to have defined the ambit of a field of study and delimited rather than opened up debate about the meanings of the masculine body as presented in these ways.

In addition to these established interpretive scholarly frames there is the less easily defined but no less pervasive sense, familiar to anyone who is involved in the research of sexual imagery and culture, that the interrogation of this material is an *a priori* risky endeavour and by extension, variously prurient, unnecessary, even suspect. That in fact the nature of a beautiful male body presented for our consumption is banally self-evident in terms of meaning and significance; that there isn't, in essence, anything meaningful to say on the subject that hasn't already been said. However, we argue that men's sexualised bodies are not the frivolous subject that they might initially seem to the sceptical reader. Indeed, as Graeme Turner argued rather prophetically over 25 years ago, our research is grounded in the belief that we live in a somatic society defined as:

a social system in which the body, as simultaneously constraint and resistance, is the principal field of political and cultural activity. The body is the dominant means by which the tensions and crises of society are thematized; the body provides the stuff of our ideological reflections on the nature of our unpredictable time. We live in a world which is out of joint.

(1992: 12)

Turner's proposal of a somatic society is the theoretical basis for the arguments and analysis that we offer in this book. Turner is not the only scholar to argue that the body is the fundamental site for the distribution and exchange of value in contemporary culture. Twenty-one years after these remarks, Paul Preciado in rather dense and rhetorical fashion similarly asserts and extends this argument to make the case that technology and sex/gender/sexuality are enmeshed and increasingly internalised and embodied through technologies for 'improvement' and modification:

The somato-political context of the body's technopolitical production seems dominated by a series of new technologies of the body (biotechnology, surgery, endocrinology, genetic engineering, etc.) and representation (photography, cinema, television, internet, video games, etc.) that infiltrate and penetrate daily life like never before.

(2013: 7778)

In an earlier essay, Preciado made the case that in the 21st century gender (and gender is elaborated in the essay to include sexuality) has become the primary

site through which subjectivity is constructed such that it calls into question the determinism of Connell's model of hegemonic masculinity. Preciado makes the case for an 'ecology' of gender and in this book we identify an ecology of masculinity in particular:

Twenty-first century gender functions as an abstract device of technical subjectivation: it is glued, it is cut, it is displaceable, it is named, it is imitated, it is swallowed, it is injected, it is grafted, it is digitalized, it is copied, it is designed, it is bought, it is sold [...] Gender (femininity/masculinity) is not a concept, it is not an ideology, and it is not simply a performance: it is a techno-political ecology. The certainty of being a man or a woman is a somatic-political fiction that functions as an operational program of subjectivity through which sensorial perceptions are produced that take the form of affections, desires, actions, beliefs, identities. One of the defining results of this technology of gender is the production of an interior knowledge about oneself, of a sense of the sexual 'I' that appears to one's consciousness as emotional evidence of reality. 'I am man', 'I am woman', 'I am heterosexual', 'I am homosexual' are some of the formulations that condense specific knowledges about oneself, acting as hard bio-political and symbolic nuclei around which it is possible to attach a set of practices and discourses.

*(2008: 111112)*

Inspired by Preciado then, we argue that masculinity becomes a site through which we can investigate these actions. The body, and in this case the masculine body, is at the nexus of a set of social, cultural and political tensions. One of the purposes of this book as laid out in the remainder of this Introduction is to identify a set of themes and concerns that have become the orthodox frames through which masculinities as they are enacted/performed/represented/played out across popular culture tend to be interpreted. Our intention here is not to merely describe and in so doing reproduce these orthodox framings of contemporary masculinity but instead to situate our conceptualisation of masculinity in relation to (and sometimes in opposition to) what have become pervasive and to a greater or lesser degree commonsense rationalisations. These framings include the oft cited discourse surrounding a so-called 'crisis in masculinity', an extension of this framed as a discourse of an impaired or precarious masculinity, both of which posit masculinity as a site of anxiety and dilemma that might be contrasted with notions of a stoic, monolithic or a hegemonic masculinity. These framings exist alongside discourses emerging in film and media studies of masculinity as spectacle, and more recently as a site of desire. We then move on to the conceptual frameworks that we use to make sense of sexualised masculinity that include queer theory, theories of assemblage and embodiment, debates around sexualisation and the development of our own theorisation of a contemporary saturated masculinity. Our ambition, using Ken Plummer's language, is to 'trouble' the orthodox, the familiar and

the perennial framings of modern masculinity and to offer a contextual architecture for a consideration of the ways in which masculinity is sexualised across popular media culture. This raises some questions including what ‘types’ of masculinity are being sexualised and what types are excluded from these processes of sexualisation and what potentially new meanings sexualisation has for the formation and operation of masculinity in the 21st century.

For the sake of clarity, we refer in this book to masculinity as a set of socially and culturally constructed practices, we discuss the rhetoric and discourses that frame the ways masculinities are staged, performed and enacted across popular culture and inevitably explore the connections that are made between masculinity, men and the male. In research of this kind precision of language is important and politically charged. We acknowledge, for instance, Jeff Hearn’s note of caution about nomenclature in this specific context:

Though bodies are diverse, and with many different meanings, talk of the male body can easily suggest a male (bodily) essence. This can in turn imply some kind of ‘deep (bodily) masculinity’ that supposedly only men can know, and that is men’s or males’ special property. On the other hand, there is another usage or meaning of ‘male’: something that speaks to the specific social, political and embodied bounded experience of men, the boundaries, bodies, skin, fluids, leaks and all, all embodied, material, all social and cultural. Though this makes some more sense, I remain cautious of the word ‘male’ as it can so easily be misused out of context. This is partly why I often prefer to use the term, ‘men’, rather than ‘male’. Bodies, male bodies, can be seen in many ways: as sexed, (sex-)gendered, or gender-sexed, or simply as ‘gex’. This last approach refers to post-constructionist material-discursive theorizing, which does not assume to proceed from sex to gender.

(2012: 307)

Hearn’s preference in his own work is for the use of the term ‘men’ rather than ‘male’, and our focus and attention is on masculinity as it is represented and enacted in a multitude of ways across media culture and we acknowledge that this is not necessarily confined to a performance that resides solely in a man’s sexed body, even if and when this is the primary object of our study. Consequently, we have carefully and consciously chosen to discuss bodies that are socially and culturally constructed, coded and represented as masculine even as we problematise masculinity and argue for its heterogeneity. To use Michael Schwalbe’s formulation, ‘males in the guise of men’ are our object of study (2014: 54). We position masculinities through the sexualised body as objects of enquiry in film, media and cultural studies and attempt to connect our objects explicitly to some of the debates that take place more widely in the aligned fields of men’s studies and critical masculinity studies in a connection that all too often remains

at best implicit and is often underexplored. We aim to do this work in order to present some of the issues at stake for masculinity and the male body as objects of study and to offer a framework for analysis and critical engagement. We do this by expanding the range of secondary literature that defines (and sometimes curtails) the field of masculinity studies. Notwithstanding some of our own reservations about the nature of critical masculinity studies (CMS) we have tried to bring CMS into dialogue with film, media and cultural studies and extend our field of view into contemporary philosophy and engagements with theories of the digital, the body and contemporary intimacies.

A route into achieving that objective is taking inspiration from theorists belonging to the New Materialist tradition, to conceptualise masculinity as an ‘assemblage’ constructed out of a ‘web of forces, intensities and encounters’ (Braidotti, 2006: 41). We should acknowledge that Braidotti and her contemporaries may well take issue with both our methods and objects of study in their rejection of what they describe as a ‘representational way of thinking which is inadequate given the schizoid and intrinsically non-linear structure of advanced capitalism’ (2006: 40). What we freely take from New Materialism, as described by Joseph Campana in ‘Distribution, Assemblage, Capacity: New Keywords for Masculinity?’, is the idea that ‘masculinity is shared across bodies. The individual self or the individual body is not necessarily a standard, or even useful, unit of measure of masculinity’ (2015: 692). Furthermore:

Masculinity inheres in the connections between disparate and sometimes seemingly arbitrary actors and objects. Imagine, then, masculinity not as essence or identity, social construction or performative iteration, but as connectivity.

*(Campana, 2015: 694)*

We cautiously (and deliberately selectively) take on board Campana’s comments here, however, we prefer to regard masculinity as an assemblage that encompasses *through* networks of meaning, socially constructed enactments and performances of gender and sexuality rather than a framework for supplanting or rejecting these concepts.

This is a book about how masculinity is constructed as a site of sexual investment in popular culture and therefore our object of study is simultaneously the products/artifacts of popular culture, their circulation and their reception. Our method of analysis is a combination of close and cross textual analysis supported by contextual and paratextual analysis. We have needed to think carefully about our case studies and sampling methods for more than one reason. While we write this book as two middle-aged, white British researchers located and embedded within the specifics of that popular cultural landscape which necessarily impacts on many of the choices that we make here in the presentation of examples, we are also conscious that the images that we engage with circulate through international

networks and make meaning beyond the significances that they have for a British, Anglophone readership. We use many examples derived from what we are describing heuristically as ‘traditional’ media (meaning the professionalised, institutionalised media industries as they have become established over the course of the 20th century) often because of their pervasive reach, for their ease of access for readers and for their longevity in terms of accessibility and visibility. Our readers, for example, will be able to access advertising campaigns online that we discuss in the following chapters many years after this book’s publication. Nonetheless we are conscious that the very notion of ‘traditional media’ cannot be easily or even meaningfully disentangled from the networks of cultural production and meaning making that for instance social media provides. Sexualised masculinity, the subject of this book, is a cultural phenomenon that, as we discuss in subsequent chapters, is frequently enacted/generated and transacted through social media platforms. All manner of digital content therefore provides an invaluable and seemingly limitless resource for the researcher in this area though issues around the ephemeral nature of the object of study are ones that any scholar needs to be alive to. Our research therefore makes a case for and locates sexualised masculinity within a dynamic media ecology<sup>2</sup> rather than exclusive recourse to a now increasingly arbitrary distinction between categories such as ‘mainstream’ or ‘traditional’ media on one hand and the anachronistic nomenclature of ‘new media’ or ‘digital media’ on the other. It is for us axiomatic, though important nonetheless, to reassert that in 21st century popular culture digital culture ostensibly *is* culture. The cultural materials that we draw on as objects of study are from the worlds of advertising, popular entertainment, cinema, television, social media and include what is euphemistically described as ‘adult content’. While we have both written at length about porn in the past this is not a book *about* porn but one where sexual representation is discussed routinely. This is a book that frames genres such as porn as part of a media ecology where distinctions between non-sexual and adult entertainment might not have entirely collapsed but are nonetheless progressively porous.

### **The Field of Masculinities: Manhood and Habitus**

It has become something of an orthodoxy in books on masculinities to rehearse Raewyn Connell’s foundational theory of hegemonic masculinity (1995) and the debate, revisions and critiques of the concept that have taken place ever since. We do not propose revisiting Connell in this book when so much has been written and so many useful summaries and commentaries already exist, notably, Connell and Messerschmidt’s essay ‘Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept’ (2005) and James Messerschmidt’s detailed contextual study *Hegemonic Masculinity: Formulation, Reformulation and Amplification* (2018).<sup>3</sup> While Connell’s influence on the field of gender studies cannot be questioned, our intended goal is to move beyond the impasse that hegemonic masculinity easily becomes for gender scholars.

For our purposes a key development in thinking that has emerged alongside and as a result of Connell's work is the conceptualisation of *masculinities* as plural.<sup>4</sup> Though here also we should note the criticisms of scholars such as Andrea Waling's recent interventions concerning the categorical nature of much work in critical masculinity studies (2018). Waling observes particular shortcomings in the field of men and masculinities studies (MMS) that we are attentive to in this book and that we will return to in later chapters, in particular that:

In a Western, social environment in which there is a broadening awareness about gender roles, systemic inequalities, and sexual politics, it is prudent to reconsider how MMS understands and theorizes masculinity as something to which men are victims of, or possess in a set of masculinity categories or tropes [...] More specifically, I am interested in how our ways of producing categories of masculinity have determined our theorizing of them, resulting in a lack of critical discussion regarding men's agentic and emotionally reflective engagement with masculinity. [...] I set out to achieve two things. First, to provide a summary concerning how academics have come to theorize the phenomenon of masculinity, and how such theorizations have led to a categorization of men's experiences to a plethora of fixed and fluid 'types' of masculinities.

(2018: 3)

We are also inspired by Schrock and Schwalbe's work on 'manhood acts' (2009: 280–281) and what they describe as the 'dramaturgical task' that enacting masculinity entails. The idea of the 'manhood act' deserves some attention in the context of this book not least because the notion of manhood, far from retreating into obscurity since the millennium, has gained traction online through any number of self-help and men's groups. The very term 'manhood' of course carries a set of loaded connotations, perhaps summoning into the reader's imagination the consciousness raising of the so-called 'Men's movement' of the 1980s and particularly the US variant known as the Mythopoetic Men's Movement, a subject of much ridicule in subsequent years (see Kimmel and Kaufman, 1994). While members of the Mythopoetic Men's Movement routinely claimed to be scrupulously apolitical and non-intellectual, in their retreats into the wilderness to connect with their 'authentic' masculine selves their sources of inspiration were often to be found in scholarship, especially the Jungian concept of the archetype. The archetypes that this group identified were to contemporary audiences often risible. As Michael Kimmel notes:

The movement has certainly come in for its share of ridicule and derision. Countless magazine articles, newspaper stories, and even several TV sitcoms have portrayed the movement as nothing more than a bunch of white, upper middle-class professionals chanting and dancing around bonfires,

imitating Native American rituals, and bonding. Recently, feminist women have indicated their suspicions that this men's movement is patriarchy with a New Age face, a critique that is explicitly political.

(Kimmel and Kaufman, 1994: 260)

There is nonetheless value to be extracted from the writing about and critiques of this particular movement specifically the idea that 'manhood' is gained through ritual and performance or, as Michael Schwalbe (2014) describes it, the 'manhood act'. As Douglas Schrock and Michael Schwalbe argue in 'Men, Masculinity and Manhood Acts', males prove their manhood through performing/enacting their masculinity:

For an individual male to enjoy the benefits that derive from membership in the dominant gender group, he must present himself to others as a particular kind of social being: a man. This is, as Goffman (1977) and West & Zimmerman (1987) remind us, a dramaturgical task. To be credited as a man, what an individual male must do, in other words, is put on a convincing manhood act (Schwalbe 2005). This requires mastering a set of conventional signifying practices through which the identity 'man' is established and upheld in interaction.

(2009: 279)

This idea, akin though not equivalent to Judith Butler's arguments in *Gender Trouble* (1990) (by way of Joan Riviere and the foundational essay 'Womanliness as Masquerade', 1929), is core to this book as we are thinking about the ways contemporary enactments of masculinity in and through culture have mutated in recent years. Indeed, we contend that, as a consequence of a range of social, economic and cultural factors, the paradigm of what constitutes a 'manhood act' has become expanded.

In addition, the work of Pierre Bourdieu has experienced something of a renaissance in terms of thinking about the social and cultural operations of masculinity in a context where the term 'masculinity' is itself increasingly contested territory beyond the confines of academe. For instance, Miklos Hadas, in a published conference paper entitled 'Masculinity as *Habitus*? Some Theoretical/Methodological Remarks', notes the heterogeneity of debate around masculinity in order to propose a model grounded in the work of Bourdieu:

The concept of masculinity often implies different connotations that have nothing whatsoever to do with each other to such an extent that one would even question whether they cultivate the same area of scholarship [...] Masculinity might simultaneously be defined as(1) a set of roles [...] (2) a kind of identity [...] (3) a Foucault-inspired discourse [...] (4) an umbrella

term designating structurally conditioned social relations, places, practices and effects of these practices.

(2011: 219)

Trish Gorely, Rachel Holroyd and David Kirk, in 'Muscularity, the Habitus And the Social Construction of Gender: Towards a Gender-relevant Physical Education', describe the significance of habitus for the study of masculinity thus:

For Bourdieu the body is a site of social memory, and his concept of habitus defines the process by which the social is written into the corporeal (McNay, 1999). Habitus itself involves the individual 'culturally learning, refining, recognizing, recalling and evoking dispositions to act' (Jarvie & Maguire, 1994, p. 186) that are relevant to the practices of their particular field. Through this process the individual becomes 'endowed with the habitus' (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 72), which is sedimented in routine, everyday actions to the extent that it becomes second nature. Although not overtly observable, habitus is manifested through the development of tastes, 'dispositions and schemes of perception and appreciation' that help structure, but not determine, choices and lifestyles (Laberge, 1995, p. 136). Each habitus then is an individualised embodiment of a particular social environment, although individuals occupying similar positions within a field are likely to be endowed with a similar habitus.

(2003: 441)

These two ideas, masculinity as it is enacted through signifying practices and masculinity as habitus, so social convention and performance and imitation will be core ideas to how we think about masculinity in this book as a social and cultural construction that inevitably in the post-industrial, capitalist West is tethered to exploitation and oppression.

### **The Perennial Crisis of Masculinity and Contemporary Modalities of Crisis**

In a book such as this, just as it is almost inconceivable that hegemonic masculinity would not be mentioned, so it is axiomatic that we must engage with the oft cited crisis in/of masculinity. In Chapter 3 we will discuss the ways this term, emerging from popular journalism, has been deployed to frame discussion about sexualised and objectified men's bodies in more detail. In this introductory chapter we want to situate masculinity in relation to ideas of crisis, anxiety and instability. The first thing to say here is that masculinity has frequently if not always been seen as a field (to borrow from Bourdieu again) that is almost always in crisis. Indeed, this is a framework for thinking about masculinity that is extraordinarily pervasive and persistent. As Ruth Mazo Karras notes in her study of masculinity in medieval Europe:

Many studies of men focus on ‘crises of masculinity.’ Scholars tend to identify the period of their own focus as the important turning point to the period of crisis and resolution, of revolutionary change. The crisis of masculinity may be like the rise of the middle class, something that seems to happen at all historical periods. Indeed, the literature gives the impression that masculinity is an extremely vulnerable state, much more fragile than femininity, always threatened by an encroachment by women or anything remotely connected with the feminine. Whenever social and economic change affects the family, especially when women gain more power, masculinity goes into crisis.

(2003: 8)

In this way masculinity rather than stoic, stable, monolithic has often been constructed both through scholarship and through popular debate in Manichean terms; imperilled by the corrosive forces of social change and the perennial threat of an encroaching and pervasive femininity, masculinity as melodrama in essence. There are a set of specific social and cultural conditions that frame and construct the contemporary crisis of masculinity and the iterations of masculinity that emerge from it that act as contexts through which we can understand the materials that we investigate in this book. Most immediate of these are the particularities of the social and economic conditions that are described as neoliberalism, the construction of neoliberal subjectivity and the concomitant cultures of individualism, autonomy, precarity and the entrepreneurial self.<sup>5</sup> Ros Gill for instance (2003, 2023; Gill and Kanai, 2020) has connected the rise of ‘body culture’ and issues around male body image to neoliberalism. More recently Jamie Hakim (2019) has discussed the ways male celebrities, including those involved in reality media, create cultural and economic value out of their sexualised bodies as a direct result of a cultural context of neoliberalism. This is a topic that we return to on more than one occasion in this book, not least because we want to argue that cultural analysis must continually assert and be predicated on the understanding that social and political determinations impact on the construction and the articulation of genders, including masculinities. This means, for example, in this book’s case, it is as important to understand the manifestations of masculinity in times of crisis as it has been for critical and popular discourse to argue that there is a crisis of masculinity in the first place.<sup>6</sup>

A final and important context for the contemporary crisis of masculinity lies in the relatively recent debates around so called ‘toxic masculinity’ connected to the rise of a seeming plethora of far right and extremist online groups marshalled under the umbrella of the ‘manosphere’ (Marwick and Caplan, 2018, Van Valkenburgh, 2021 and Ging, 2019) and the activist responses to male sexual violence, abuse and assault through the #metoo movement. As Terry Kupers (2005: 714) notes in an oft cited essay on the subject, ‘Toxic masculinity is the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster

domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence.’ The term, as other scholars have noted, is a vexed one (see Kimmel and Wade, 2018) and its ambiguity enables parties with competing investments to both reject or assert the a priori assumptions on which it seems to be based. It is also a term that has gained purchase outside of the field of sociology and social psychology (where it is often disavowed) and has been adopted more widely in popular culture. As one of the projects of this book is to investigate the two-way traffic between academe, the media and popular consciousness in the coinage and deployment of neologisms around masculinity, this is a topic that we will pay particular attention to in later chapters.

### **Masculinity and Sexualisation in Film, Media and Cultural Studies**

This book, and the research that it represents, sits at the intersection of several fields of study as we have already suggested. We consider our primary contribution lies in bringing developments in the very broadly cast domain of gender studies into the study of masculinities in media culture. Our argument being here that media culture is a fundamental site in the construction, distribution and meaning-making work of masculinities.

There is already a significant body of literature across media and cultural studies that explores the social and cultural construction of masculinities that begins in the 1970s and reached a critical mass during the early 1990s.<sup>7</sup> Scholars in film studies in particular have paid attention to the male body as it is represented in cinema and provided two interrelated frameworks for making sense of it that have remained surprisingly persistent. In the first instance there is a body of work that argues that the male body, presented as ‘spectacle’ to borrow from Steve Neale’s essay ‘Masculinity as Spectacle’ (1983) and extended by Yvonne Tasker (1993) and Steve Cohan (1997) is reflective of a given social and political context, is compensatory and therefore can be read symptomatically. For instance, and much more recently, Robert Rushing’s *Descended from Hercules* discusses the so called ‘Peplum’ movies (also known as sword and sandals movies) as a device to explore the extent to which the muscular male body in the cinema of the 1950s and 1960s is inevitably linked to biopolitics:

The peplum amounts to a century-long cinematic biopolitical intervention that offers the spectator an imagined form of the ideal male body, overflowing with health, muscular energy, and natural vitality, one that appears as a defense against menacing forms of alterity on the outside, including not only illness and degeneracy but also sexual and racial difference. Biopolitics refers to a wide variety of phenomena but is centrally concerned with how the state monitors, disciplines, and regulates the biological life of its subjects.

(2016: 3)

Second, there is a body of literature, Peter Lehman's *Running Scared* (1993) being the case study example, that focusses more specifically on moments where men's bodies appears to have the potential to be read in sexual terms and the extent to which the possible threat of a male body that can be read homorotically must be disavowed, resulting in a series of rhetorical twists and turns that mainstream cinematic representation takes to mitigate against this potential. This is a literature and a set of debates that we return to in Chapter 2 and our discussion of the 'Hollywood body'.

### **Sexualisation and Sexualised Masculinity and the War On Sex**

A book about sexualised masculinity must, as we have already noted and will revisit in the next chapter, inevitably engage with the vexed debate around the purported sexualisation of culture which in turn becomes another vector of crisis that contemporary masculinity can be situated in relation to. There is a wealth of literature that approaches the subject from a range of perspectives (Attwood, 2006, Smith, 2007, Smith and Attwood, 2011, Gill, 2012). Notwithstanding these important critical interventions, as an issue of debate in the popular consciousness, in policy circles and in a critical mass of feminist scholarship, sexualisation is almost always regarded as an urgent and ongoing concern for feminists, about women's experience of living in a patriarchal and misogynist society and how this is enacted through problematic representations of femininity that are circulated in the media. Indeed, as Ros Gill notes, the media are at the heart of the debates around sexualisation at a range of levels.

Media coverage of these discussions of 'sexualisation' has been extensive, with media best thought of in multiple terms as a key site of sexualisation, a key site of concerns about sexualisation, and, furthermore, a key site of concerns about concerns about 'sexualisation'.

(2012: 484)

This is a turbulent and febrile set of debates in which women (and specifically girls) are often situated as at risk while men are cast as either beneficiaries or, at the very least, uncritical and unthinking cultural dupes. This is a line of argument that, as we have noted elsewhere (Paasonen, Attwood, McKee, Mercer and Smith, 2020), conflates sex, sexualisation and sexism which flattens out nuance and complexity and, to a greater or lesser degree, relegates these conversations to the redundant dead-end of denouncing the media, (especially social media in recent times) as inherently and systematically misogynist. Some work exists that considers boys and men in more complicated terms of course. Sarah Bragg for example makes an interesting case for what the concerns might be in *Children, Sexuality and Sexualization* (2015). Similarly, Maria Garner, in an opinion piece in *Gender and Education* entitled 'The Missing Link: The

Sexualisation of Culture and Men’, raises an important question which she unfortunately seems unable to answer:

How do we avoid collapsing all cultural modes and references to sex into one miserable sac of harmful sexism? [...] I think that is the trick with the dicey business of naming what is sexist and what is not – you know it when you see it, but sometimes, and these times especially, it is harder to spot.  
(2012: 330)<sup>8</sup>

Sexualisation is here linked to a generalised ‘panic’ around sex and in particular concerns about new ways of thinking about and experiencing sex and sexuality facilitated through digital means. Our book is located within a landscape where sex, sexuality, genders and identities are being routinely questioned and we argue that there is need for a concomitant revision and reconceptualisation of masculinities in and across media cultures. The heterogeneity of contemporary masculinities needs to be foregrounded in academic debate across disciplines and our intention is to make this case. Leticia Sabsay (2016: 7) diagnoses this moment in the introduction to *The Political Imaginary of Sexual Freedom*:

Just as the current gender positionalities available today are not the same as those that were available in the past, the cartography of desire in relation to object choice shifts as well. What I mean by this is not just that we have ‘more categories available.’ I mean that the logic of distribution of what is socially considered masculine and feminine has shifted in ways that have radically transformed the dynamic relations between identification and desire as well.

We see this as especially important (and timely) in a context in which, as the title of David Halperin and Trevor Hoppe’s (2017) collection informs us, there is a ‘war on sex’ taking place with the introduction of legislation across Western democracies, such as the British *Online Safety Act* of 2023 that in part at least aims to curtail access to sexually explicit material by summoning the spectre of the amorphous and ill-defined threat of ‘harm’. It is in such contexts, where commonsensical and populist understandings of cultural objects and their ‘effects’ carry such traction that we strongly feel that academic research that pays close and critical attention to the circulation of sexual imagery and ideas in context is as politically necessary as it is culturally significant.

### **Saturated Masculinity in a Somatic Society**

We argue in this book then that contemporary masculinity constitutes a gender identity that has, as we have suggested elsewhere (Mercer, 2017), become ‘saturated’ with sometimes conflicted and contradictory meanings. Sexualised

masculinity is one element of this condition that we describe as saturated masculinity and is situated in a wider ecology of neoliberal masculinity in a somatic society. This network of ideas acts as the conceptual framework throughout this book, and we will apply them in the reading of a range of materials across media cultures.

We believe that masculinity as an assemblage so closely (albeit often tenuously) tethered to certainties, to axioms and dichotomies during the 19th and 20th centuries now operates in social, political, cultural and discursive contexts of ambivalence, uncertainty and heterogeneity in the 21st century. It is perhaps inevitable then that the contemporary condition of masculinity in the 21st century is even more brittle and fractured than it was during the 20th century even as the conditions for this saturated masculinity were established towards the end of the century. It may well also be, as we will observe in later chapters, that masculinity is so repeatedly experienced or described in terms of crisis because it is a gender identity that unravels as soon as it carries the burden of more than one meaning; white male privilege and disenfranchised, abject black masculinity at once, hypertrophic and hypersexual masculinity at the same time as objectified and pacified male ‘sex objects’. In ‘Masculinity as Cruel Optimism’, Jonathan Allan, drawing on the work of Lauren Berlant, describes the febrile conditions under which masculinity becomes saturated with meaning:

Any claim to masculinity is, I argue, always already a cruel optimism. It is cruel precisely because we believe and we continue to believe that it is attainable even though we continually fail at masculinity. Masculinity becomes a kind of ‘collectively invested form of life’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 11) wherein, we imagine, that masculinity can exist and be realized as part of ‘the good life’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 11). [...] Instead of seeing these masculinities as aesthetic conventions, I want to suggest that we are witness to a shifting performance of masculinity that thrives on failure, and yet maintains a continued desire to succeed at masculinity. While ‘the blueprint has faded’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 11), we are witness to a range of new forms of thinking about masculinity, we recognize new and renewed narratives about crisis.

(2018: 181)

This then is the condition of a contemporary, sexualised, saturated masculinity in a neoliberal digital moment. Destabilised and decoupled from the linkages that have provided some level of certainty in past times; decoupled from axiomatic links to biology or physiognomy and decoupled from relations to conditions of power and inequality. Contemporary, saturated masculinity, while shared across bodies is nonetheless individualised and personalised, linked to categorical notions of the self and expressions and performances of the self. This is masculinity in a somatic society that is essentially an atomised, commercialised model linked to self-improvement/actualisation (Widdows, 2018)

and control of the self through consumption; the sexualised masculine body as an ‘identity project’ (Gill, Henwood and McLean, 2005), as we will discuss in Chapter 3.

### Notes On Our Approach

The structure of the book is such that we inevitably present parallel and overlapping themes and debates; sometimes our focus is social history, sometimes grounded in theoretical or popular debates and sometimes our focus is on a specific genre or domain of cultural production. This means that the themes that this book explores, as they are expressed in chapters, intersect and overlap just as the materials that are investigated circulate in a world of overlap, overlay, interchange and dialogue. Consequently, we have designed chapters that are intended to offer multiple vectors through which to access sexualised masculinity across media cultures, ranging from particular media or forms of cultural production to prevalent tropes, debates or anxieties. Our argument that masculinity is saturated with meaning in the 21st century and that sexualised masculinity is to be found across the media landscape means that the self-consciously ‘aphoristic’ overlaying of themes and ideas that we have used seems appropriate and apposite to us and we hope that readers will find it so. The order that the chapters are presented in then is chosen as much for expedience as anything else as each chapter layers to a greater or lesser degree over another one. As a result, the chapters can (indeed should) be read in any order that the reader chooses, which only reflects the way in which most scholars will approach this book in any case.

Just as the content structure of this book is an aim to emulate the multi-layered nature of the materials that we are discussing, so we have attempted to deploy research methods that capture, even embrace the sense of overwhelm precipitated by contemporary digital media culture. While our object of study is, in the end, digital media content, these materials have an origin in analogue media forms so out of necessity we move between digital media and so-called legacy media sources. We note that for the majority of media and cultural studies scholars in the 21st century the route to retrieving and uncovering the media of the past is through digital means: archives, online libraries and repositories and video sharing platforms. While this is not a work of digital humanities, as our methods are firmly embedded in the traditions of cultural studies, it is research that makes use of the affordances and resources that are available in the digital realm. Accordingly, our methodology is one that is informed by (and emerging from) contemporary digital media practice and in particular emulating the experience of navigating and inhabiting the digital sphere; so a methodology that is motivated by sampling, curating and aggregating a diversity of heterogeneous cultural sources.

Moving through digital spaces as a researcher of sex and sexuality entails acting with due care and paying attention to appropriate ethical frameworks

and best practice. The research that underpins this book has at points raised ethical considerations especially as it touches on the vexed and complicated issue of privacy in the digital sphere as we explore in some detail in Chapter 7. Throughout the book and in Chapters 3, 4, 6 and 7 specifically, we discuss social media platforms, particularly Instagram, as spaces where images of men's sexualised bodies are produced, circulated and proliferate; ranging from images of celebrities to sports figures, male models, social media influencers and members of the general public. This critical mass of masculine physicality and the 'democratisation' or levelling out of images where the famous and the unknown occupy the same space and are consumed in the same contexts as thirst trap images is especially interesting to us but does involve some careful thought on the part of researchers. We do not believe that we would be behaving with integrity by using this vast resource without care and attention to the individual social media user. This extends beyond the extent to which a platform like Instagram can be regarded as public or questions of consent; it is for us at least more about an ethics and duty of care for social media users who place images of their bodies in the 'public' domain and when and how we can use them as part of our research. This is especially acute when, as we will discuss in Chapter 7, there is now a slippage in the definitions of public and private which could make it easy to assume that images on a public platform are fair game for a researcher to use as they wish. Readers will note that in the final chapter one of the two authors of this book has used their own semi-naked body to experience the affects of thirst trap culture and to generate 'enhanced' AI versions of themselves. We consider the complex feelings of anxiety and anticipation that circulating images of the self in this domain generates and this has in turn informed our commitment to an ethics of care around how, when and which social media sources we will cite as examples. None of this is easy and the ethics of social media research continue to evolve so our choices are motivated by a desire to behave responsibly and with care. In this context then we only draw attention to the social media activities of individuals who are clearly presenting themselves as having (or wanting to have) a public profile.<sup>9</sup> We also want to acknowledge that this is a book in which Western, ostensibly European, standards of physical beauty and sexual desirability and overwhelmingly white bodies dominate. The research here charts the routes through which these ideas of sexiness have become international and transnational in their scope, reach and influence. We note that while these racialised (and often racist) beauty standards are pervasive, they are not universal and they are marked not just by race, but also class, sexuality, money and power. We have intentionally extended the scope of our sample beyond Anglophone and Eurocentric case studies where we can, to consider the extent to which these standards are (or are not) international and universalising. We have been especially interested to look for instances when Eurocentric beauty standards are destabilised, undermined or reappropriated. It has been especially important to us to ensure though that this extending beyond 'obvious' (for us) or familiar examples is not

a tokenistic gesturing towards inclusivity but is instead meaningful and useful. Our readers will have to decide if we have succeeded or not, but this was at least our intention.

Finally, we acknowledge our positionality as researchers and authors as our lived (and perceived) privilege, however loosely defined, inevitably informs the work that we present here and its reception. This is a book written by a middle-aged, white, gay man from the English midlands, of working-class origin and a middle-aged, white, heterosexual woman, also of working-class origin from the northeast of England. We both have a politics firmly located in the left, our research belongs in the academic tradition of British Cultural Studies and is informed by and contributes to feminist and queer theory to a greater or lesser degree. This specific intersection of identity markers frames our understanding of the materials that we have subjected to critical attention and the tools and frameworks we bring to bear in their analysis. We are conscious that they may also invalidate our observations in some quarters at this specific juncture. We are keenly aware that we write this book in the vituperative and divisive context of the so-called ‘culture wars’ around sexual politics and a concomitant if specious and vacuous ‘war on woke’. We acknowledge and accept that this means that our research may provoke as many people as it inspires, and so be it. This book is written, nonetheless, for those scholars and researchers who might find it useful beyond a political context that curtails debate.

## Notes

- 1 See for instance Rachel O’Neill’s forensic analysis of the emergence of inclusive masculinity studies, ‘Whither critical masculinity studies? Notes on inclusive masculinity theory, postfeminism, and sexual politics’ (2014) and Andrea Waling’s critique of the emphasis on categorical analysis in ‘Rethinking masculinity studies: Feminism, masculinity, and poststructural accounts of agency and emotional reflexivity’ (2018).
- 2 In using this term we are aligning ourselves with a largely European tradition of scholarship, most notably the work of Matthew Fuller (2005) rather than Marshall McLuhan’s (1964) earlier use of the term.
- 3 Connell’s own commentary on the genesis of the concept of hegemonic masculinity provided on her personal website is in fact a customarily lucid and informative contextualisation of her work in the area. [http://www.raewynconnell.net/p/masculinities\\_20.html](http://www.raewynconnell.net/p/masculinities_20.html)
- 4 Including but not limited to: Komarovsky (1976, 2004), Pleck and Pleck (1980), Pleck (1983), Cockburn (1983, 1985), Weeks (1991, 1985), Brod (1987), Brod and Kaufman (1994), Kimmell (1987, 1995), Kimmell et al. (2004, 2013), Messner (1995, 1997) and Hearn (1987), as well as the work of Messerschmidt (1993, 1997, 2000), Buchbinder (1990, 1998, 2012), Seidler (1989, 1997, 2006), Anderson (2009, 2012), Anderson and McCormack (2014), and others.
- 5 See Turken, Nafstad, Blakar and Roen (2015) ‘Making sense of neoliberal subjectivity: A discourse analysis of media language on self-development’.
- 6 The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 has inevitably provided a further context in which to consider the ongoing crisis of masculinity as we will illustrate in later chapters.
- 7 See Joan Mellen (1978), Spoto (1978), Cohan and Hark (1993), Cohan (1997), Penley and Willis (1993), Nixon (1996), Tasker (1993), Holmlund (2002), Kirkham and Thumin (1995).

- 8 Whilst Issues Around Sexuality and Sexism May Be a Blind Spot for Some Feminist Scholars This Is Not the Case for Many Male Audiences It Seems: [Http:Www.Mintel.Com/Press-Centre/Social-and-Lifestyle/Over-One-Quarter-of-Males-Agree-That-Men-Are-Sexualised-in-Adverts-Just-As-Much-As-Women](http://www.Mintel.Com/Press-Centre/Social-and-Lifestyle/Over-One-Quarter-of-Males-Agree-That-Men-Are-Sexualised-in-Adverts-Just-As-Much-As-Women)
- 9 For a detailed discussion of the ethical context for social media research see: Warfield, K., Hoholuk, J., Vincent, B. and Camargo, A. D. (2019). Pics, dicks, tits, and tats: Negotiating ethics working with images of bodies in social media research. *New Media & Society*, 21(9), 2068–2086. Taylor, N., Valencia-García, L. D., Vandenberg, A., Stinnett, A. and Allen, A. (2023). Ethics and images in social media research. *First Monday*, 28(4). Henderson, M., Johnson, N. F. and Auld, G. (2013). Silences of ethical practice: dilemmas for researchers using social media. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 19(6), 546–560.

# 1

## SEX TALK

### Vocabularies of Sex and Models and Patterns of Masculinity

It is an axiom that language is fundamental to meaning making, so the words used to identify cultural phenomena and gendered practices demand attention that they too often do not receive. In this chapter we attend to the 20th and 21st century mechanisms of nomenclature through which masculinity has been categorised, defined and described across popular culture. Models and patterns of masculinity have become ever more various in the digital age, increasingly as connected to questions of sex and sexuality as they are to gendered roles and identities. Since at least the late 1950s, popular journalism has played a significant role in the practices of defining ‘new’ models of contemporary masculinity (with a specific interest in discovering novelty). These journalistic categorisations of masculinity and the language used to frame masculinity as a sexual object have entered both the popular imagination and the social sciences and cultural studies. We suggest that, far from acting merely as a commentariat, it is the mass media, entertainment industries and primarily journalistic practice that have framed debate and shaped the landscape in which the male body has become routinely an object and site of erotic investment. Popular media have also given shape to anxieties about the condition of masculinity in the modern age which have progressively become more overtly connected to and ‘about’ sex and sexuality during the 21st century.

This book is about sexualised masculinities, and the ways masculine bodies have become objects of sexual interest. There is considerable investment in the idea that this is new – that men’s bodies have not been regarded as sexual because it is women’s bodies that can only carry the burden of sexuality. The binary division of the sexes meaning that it is impossible that both could express equal desirability. Yet, in fact, that impossibility is not so clear as some theorists might claim. One theme woven throughout discussions of sexualised imagery up until the mid to late 1990s was that heterosexuality is inevitably

premised on an imbalance of attraction and desire – women are variously desirable (ranging from hot to not), men are attracted to that desirability, but they are not themselves desirable. Even homosexuality was subjected to forms of desexualisation, while men obviously find each other attractive in real life, across popular culture overt homosexual desirability was sidelined, sublimated through stealth rather than open acknowledgement of a sexualised masculinity.

From the 1980s, commentators began to highlight changes in the ways men's bodies were represented, placing those movements within the commercial spheres of advertising where men's bodies were increasingly deployed to drive forms of purchase (Nixon, 1996; Mort, 1996; Moore, 1988; MacKinnon, 1997). While some commentators noted these changing vocabularies were perhaps linked to forms of sexual liberation – the acknowledgement of a homoerotic gaze and a developing 'female gaze' (Leroy, 1994: 300; Moore, 1988) – in the main, commercial imperatives were understood as the force driving changing representations. Sean Nixon (1996: 125) described a 'regime of "new man" imagery' as 'a specific set of visual codings of masculinity deployed in targeting new male consumers'. While Mort (1996: 15) suggested the 'hybrid character' of the New Man probably reached the mainstream with the launch of the launderette advertisement for Levi's in 1985.<sup>1</sup>

These new 'visual codings of masculinity' (Nixon, 1996: 125) were not just confined to advertising. Magazines such as the cult British music, fashion and popular culture publication *The Face* attempted a 'deliberate strategy of disruption' (Mort, 1996: 73), speaking to fashionable male consumers through concepts of 'style' which drew on gay visual codings, such that:

The cultures of sexual dissidence left their mark on more normalising images of men during the period ... consumer culture involved an elaborate series of negotiations between homosocial and heterosocial accounts of the male self.

(1996: 71)

Certainly, consumer markets were undergoing significant change during the 1980s and 1990s, high-spending teenage markets seemed in decline and other key sectors had reached stalemate: and the style press appeared to tap into a volatile but lucrative market. Alongside the development of imagery intended to fuel consumer purchasing, television and film also began to exploit the potentials of their sexy 'hunks' (for example, the furor surrounding Brad Pitt that we will note in the next chapter) and entertainments based purely on the spectacle of the male body such as male stripper groups like *The Chippendales*<sup>2</sup> and their local variants. These entertainments mobilised the figure of the body-conscious new man and added an overtly sexual appeal to women audiences. The sexy male body aimed squarely and unambiguously at women was in the ascendant. It is important to note these different levels of appeal in commercial forms – the idea of style spoke directly to those groups of mostly young people wanting to

project themselves as fashionably cool (we turn to ideas of self-representation later in this book), a quite different market segment from the ‘new man’ who might appeal to both male and female consumers aspiring to the ‘lifestyle’ he appeared to promise. That, in turn, differed from those forms of media which encouraged and constructed an overtly sexual gaze. This is not to say that imagery could not be stylish, aspirational *and* sexy but our interest here is on the development of specifically sexual representations of the male body, the kinds of imagery in which those bodies became sexual objects.

Arguments about the sexualisation of culture have become an increasingly prominent feature of public debate (APA Task Force, 2007; Attwood, 2006) and with it the popularity for attention catching neologisms, as we have seen ‘the rise of raunch culture’ (Levy, 2005), ‘striptease culture’ (McNair, 2002), ‘porno chic’ (McRobbie, 2004; Rush and La Nauze, 2006), and the ‘amazing, expanding, pornosphere’ (McNair, 2013). The discourse on sexualisation is particularly focused on representations and their impacts on girls and women while boys and men have tended to be framed as the dubious beneficiaries of these cultural developments. Such accounts, which focus on men’s predatory behaviours towards women, their interests in porn or sexy babes ensuring that they become ever more divorced from properly empathetic or communal ways of thinking about sex and sexuality, contribute to a singular view of masculinity as voraciously carnal while also working to narrow understandings of men’s relations to their own sexual bodies.

However, some scholars have recognised that sexualisation has had other impacts on men (Bordo, 1999; Pope et al., 2000; Rohlinger, 2002). For example, Rohlinger suggests that ‘the erotic male is increasingly becoming the depiction that dominates mainstream conceptions of masculinity’ (2002: 70). Pope et al. note the ‘skyrocketing’ number of undressed men in advertisements (2000: 56) while Susan Bordo observed that TV and cinema were indulging in the ‘blatant sexual fetishization—even idolatry—of the male organ’ back in 1999 (Bordo, 1999: 30). It is easy to point to a variety of cultural artefacts featuring the sexualised male, but this is not the same as understanding how and why current representations have developed particular visual vocabularies of sexy maleness. For many writers, this has been a question of economics – a version of ‘sex sells’. Others have suggested that the popular media offer ‘equal opportunity objectification’ (Taylor and Sharkey, 2003). Indeed, some writers, such as Eliana Dockterman in *Time Magazine* for example, have suggested that representations have gone beyond equal opportunities to establish a new regime of representation termed “man-jectification” in which women can judge men’s bodies openly – the way their male counterparts have long done for women’.<sup>3</sup>

So, what does it mean to say representations of men are increasingly sexualised? For Hatton and Trautner, the issue is that there is

asymmetry in nonsexualized and hypersexualized representations of men and women. In the 2000s, there were more than 10 times the number of

hypersexualized images of women than men, and there were more than 11 times the number of nonsexualized images of men than women.

(2011: 273)

And, drawing on Bordo, they argue that there is an imbalance in the meanings of sexualised images of male and female bodies – where men appear ‘confident’, women are ‘victims’ because ‘accumulation of sexualized attributes in these images leaves little room for observers to interpret them in any way other than as instruments of sexual pleasure and visual possession for a heterosexual male audience’ (2011: 273). This contrasts with Rohlinger’s (2002) exploration of the commodification of the male body in relation to the sexual revolution, which suggests that images of men lack specific context so that the male body becomes a canvas onto which meaning can be projected by any viewer – male or female, gay or straight (71). In other words, unlike the female body which is understood as sexualised in such ways that she always conforms to heterosexist expectations, the male body is more of a blank slate that allows a range of viewers to do as they please. These are elements we will be exploring in this book.

Our argument in this book is that the ways men’s bodies and masculinity have been presented have been subject to significant change in the past four decades, particularly with regard to erotic fantasies now highly visible as subject matter across media landscapes. Ideas about the sexual male body and what is appropriate ‘to show’ and ‘to know’ have also changed. Television, particularly the UK’s Channel 4 (C4) and American MTV and HBO, have played their part in the ‘extension of sexual consumerism’ (McNair, 2002: 87) with reality programming such as *Ex on the Beach* and *Geordie Shore* placing men’s bodies and sexual capital centre-stage. Sex and sexuality are a primary focus in dramas such as *Queer as Folk* (C4, 1999–2000); *Shameless* (C4, 2004–13); *Skins* (C4, 2007–13) (all of which have been shown and/or remade in the United States); *Sex Education* (Netflix 2019–); *It’s a Sin* (C4, 2020) and *Glee* (20th Century Fox TV, 2009–). Documentaries have also explored the problems of men’s positioning as sexual, for example (*Un*)*Glamorous: The Naked Truth About Male Models* (Dir. Pedro Andrade 2023), *Panorama: The Abercrombie Guys: The Dark Side of Cool* (BBC, TX: 02.10.2023) – seeking to highlight/police the threat of the newly sexualised male object becoming too feminised or too effeminate – particularly through ‘exploitation’; while others have examined ‘naughty’ practices especially those which can still be treated light-heartedly (*Dogging Tales*, C4, TX: 04.04.2013; *Fboy Island*, HBO) or taking a ‘nudge nudge, wink wink’ equal opportunities approach to the role of sex in modern dating in shows such as the notorious Channel 4 programme, *Naked Attraction*.

As we will discuss in subsequent chapters, practices of self-representation have become a part of everyday life as individuals create images of themselves using TikTok, Instagram, sexual social networking sites and spaces such as OnlyFans and distribute them more broadly via other ‘new’ media. In its dissolution of the distinctions between production and consumption some user-generated content

tends to render ‘old media’ incredibly old, even as some of the fundamentals of their visual vocabularies remain intact. It is not that what it means to be sexy, or rather to appear sexy, has been altered radically – there are clearly some bodies that are marked as sexy (though as we will note even this is not as monolithic as we might imagine) while others remain resolutely not sexy – but that the contexts of production and consumption have changed such that the old certainties about the gendered dynamics of bodily presentation no longer have the same purchase.

Visual technologies are absolutely embedded in everyday life in the 21st century. Across digital and ‘legacy’ media we are preoccupied with bodies, how they look, how they should look, how they can be improved, according different levels of value to generation, beauty, fitness, health, sex as each of these attributes can be represented. Such that our experiences of looking at others’ bodies are changing, and our own expectations of our bodies, of being bodies to be looked at, of presenting our bodies to be looked at are also changing. Alongside this our relationship to the idea of image capture has changed. It is no longer a matter of hoping to be caught looking good in a group photograph taken with a friend’s instamatic camera, knowing that the resulting images will take three or four weeks to return from development or of having to go to a professional for a better lit, more considered composition, that catches your best side. Photography is now instantaneous, the resulting image can be checked immediately after taking, discarded as unflattering or saved and manipulated immediately (or later) for posting online. The ubiquity of image manipulation means that no one needs to have a double chin or red-eye. How we present our bodies can be changed by simply using a filter. Participating online requires a great profile picture and, through social networking sites, bodies circulate for likes and comments. But if those digital techniques won’t work then there are a range of cosmetic procedures that don’t require a costly clinic appointment, and nevertheless body-enhancing treatments are widely available alongside all those forms of body work such as dieting, exercise, grooming and beautification that mean the body is increasingly malleable. As we suggest in later chapters, celebrity bodies and influencer bodies are distributed in a context where the issue of body image is a live debate. These kinds of practices indicate ‘a body-as-performance relationship’ (Waskul, 2004: 31) – a changed relationship from those examined in work following Berger. where bodily display is understood as objectification. Bodily display is increasingly associated with subjectivity as our lives become ever more mediated and understood through images. Traditional accounts of a strict gender binary, that men look and women are looked at, are no longer capable of understanding how seeing and being seen is significant in modern Western communities.

While visual imagery often dominates discussions of gender representation, linguistic framings of men offer a way into exploration of the complexities and contradictions inherent in constructions of masculinity. Laura Coffey-Glover’s book *Men in Women’s Worlds: Constructions of Masculinity in Women’s Magazines* (2019) is instructive here. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

to look at the words used in women's magazines to label men, Coffey-Glover focusses on the ways masculinity is framed linguistically in women's magazines, arguing that these publications are complicit in the perpetuation of sexism through binaristic discourse and the reification of dominant ideas of gender. Her argument that using words like 'lad' and 'bloke' carry associations and meanings that excuse or mitigate harmful male behaviours is persuasive but once again turns our focus back to the intractability of 'hegemonic masculinity', and veers away from other more liminal labellings of masculinities. As with other writers, Coffey-Glover references behaviours hitherto considered 'feminine' (in particular, care of appearance) but evokes them as a deviation which, paradoxically, only reaffirms hegemonic definitions of masculinity. In her analysis, gender remains intimately associated with sex, and men must under no circumstances be 'female'. Yet it is precisely the ways that men have been 'sexed' and discussed as sexy that are central to this book. The language and words used to describe and define male sex appeal are important as these linguistic stylings are no less freighted with meaning (and no less problematic of course) than the visual representations of sexualised masculinities.

Language both reflects and shapes societal perceptions of masculinity, making the analysis of linguistic framings a nuanced endeavour fraught with ambiguities and competing interpretations. Of course, certain words or phrases have been associated with masculinity, such as 'tough', 'strong', 'competitive', 'assertive', 'dominant' and 'powerful'. These words are often used to convey traditional, 'hegemonic' masculine traits. The linguistic landscape of masculinity is also characterised by cultural specificity, levels of semantic ambiguity and the constant evolution and reframing of meanings. Exploring European terms like the French 'mec' or the Spanish 'guapo' offers insights into how different cultures variously frame and conceptualise masculinity and attractiveness. Carrying their own cultural nuances and connotations, 'un mec' and 'guapo' are examples of the diverse ways masculinity is understood and valued across different linguistic and cultural contexts. Although 'guapo' has pejorative meanings, particularly in Latin America (he's a bully), in modern Spanish usage it translates to handsome or good-looking, a compliment that emphasises the importance of physical appearance within cultural norms of beauty and attractiveness. Similarly, the term 'un mec' is a colloquialism used to refer to a guy or a dude, a casual term applied to any man, but it is also increasingly used to suggest the desirability of a particular man 'un beau mec'. So 'un mec' does not necessarily carry connotations of physical attractiveness but does reflect cultural ideas about masculinity and social identity – using 'un mec' to label a man often indicates that he is both 'one of the guys' and that he is fuckable.

In Anglo-American English the term 'hunk' also comes with a range of associations, its etymological origin is perhaps in the Dutch word for a large piece of bread or meat, but its figurative usage for 'an attractive, strong man' dates back to the 1940s. Likely in jive talk (the jazz slang commonly used in the 1940s in Harlem, New York City) around 1945, but Australia also claims

earlier usage (1941) for describing an attractive man. Whoever first coined it, the term is still regularly used to describe Hollywood actors and as a counterpoint to the female description ‘curvy’ (Caldas-Coulthard and Moon 2010: 105). The term ‘beefcake’ also had a life as a description of attractive men but where hunk or hunky might still be used, beefcake (like its female counterpoint ‘cheesecake’) has fallen from common usage and has a retro association with the Hollywood of the 1950s. Similarly, the concept of the ‘himbo’ is notable. A portmanteau of ‘him’ and ‘bimbo’, the term gained traction in popular culture in the late 1980s, typically referring to a man who lacks intelligence, but possesses a kind-hearted or good-natured personality and, crucially, is handsome.<sup>4</sup> Although the himbo archetype subverts traditional gender stereotypes by emphasising kindness and empathy over traditional ‘masculine’ markers of success, the concept also relies on a specific set of physically attractive markers and reinforces the mutual exclusivity of good looks and intelligence. We don’t intend to argue over the usefulness of these labels, instead we highlight that the use of different terms to describe male attractiveness reflects ongoing social conversations about gender roles, identities and expectations. This makes it important to recognise how and why certain terms develop an energy and life of their own such that they shape our understandings of what it means to be male in the 21st century.

As perceptions of masculinity and male attractiveness shift, the language we use and the names we assign to particular instances of male sexiness are of paramount importance. Language reflects and shapes the cultural norms and values within society, influencing how individuals perceive themselves and others. Naming different expressions of male attractiveness not only conveys societal ideals but also contributes to the construction of gender identities and power dynamics. Therefore, analysing the language and naming conventions surrounding male sexiness provides insights into evolving cultural attitudes towards masculinity, body image and sexuality, and recognises the interplay between verbal and visual vocabularies, as both language and imagery have developed distinct yet interconnected narratives surrounding masculinity and sex appeal.

### **Trope 1: The Crisis of Masculinity**

The so-called ‘crisis of masculinity’, a term coined by political commentator Arthur Schlesinger in the late 1950s, has permeated cultural discourse for decades, shaping discussions about what it means to be a man, and the very concept of masculinity. The crisis narrative is not a new phenomenon, it has been deeply ingrained in Western discourse, with roots dating back to antiquity, manifesting in different forms and contexts. Sociologist Francis Depuis Deri’s analysis in the book *La Crise de la Masculinite: Autopsie d’un Mythe Tenace* (2018) – a title suggestive of the exhausted nature of this debate – highlights the enduring nature of this discourse, connecting it to reactionary thinking and the politics of the far right. While Judith Allen’s critical reading of histories of

masculinity that she describes, wasphishly, as ‘interminably in crisis’ (2002: 191) underscores the theme of fragility and defensiveness inherent in representations of manhood across various cultural and historical contexts:

The manhood portrayed, whether as archetypal image of cultural representation, medico-legal discourse, or character in international relations policy debates, is fragile, defensive, threatened, and at risk. Inherently unstable, masculinity is always in process, under negotiation, needing to be ‘shored up,’ reinforced, buttressed against its many enemies.

(2002: 199)

Contemporary discussions of the crisis of masculinity routinely looked to popular culture for inspiration and evidence of its effects, including sports, advertising and media representations. However, as evidenced by the analysis of Super Bowl commercials in Green and Van Oort’s (2013) “‘We Wear No Pants!’: Selling the Crisis of Masculinity in the 2010 Super Bowl Commercials’, the discourse surrounding the crisis is not simply reflective of objective social realities but rather a powerful discursive construction that shapes common understandings of masculinity while also cycling through different versions of crisis. Green and Van Oort find that the sense of crisis changes across Super Bowl commercials, exploring how advertising in 2010 highlights themes of discontent over traditional patriarchal status, body image insecurities, and economic uncertainty while the portrayal of men in 2009 commercials merely hinted at a crisis. In the more explicit ‘call to action’ adverts screened in 2010, their narratives reworked preexisting themes from earlier men’s movements while urging men to reject failing masculinity and embrace consumption as a means of asserting control. In sum then, Green and Van Oort observe that the male body illustrates ‘the crisis’:

The protruding midsections and flabby buttocks become signs for insecurity at multiple scales—the nation, the job, the family, and sexuality. The cult of hardness remains the underlying goal... tell[ing] aging, soft bodies to be ashamed of themselves, to hide their flaws and again any signs of happiness or excitement. These particular manifestations of the crisis are attributed to a separation from the body itself, a result of middle-class men being ‘increasingly defined as bearers of skill’ and ‘separated by an old class division from physical force’ (Connell 2005, 55). The separation from manual labor, combined with decreasing leisure time and increasingly unhealthy diets (Critser 2004), writes itself onto bodies that fall short of the traditional image of the powerful, dominant male.

(2013: 714)

While interrogating the complexities and contradictions inherent in representations of masculinity it is essential to pay due care, especially as crisis-inspired

analyses have been repeatedly critiqued for reifying the crisis narrative without addressing its underlying complexities and intersections with privilege and power dynamics. (e.g. Gill, Henwood and McLean, 2005). Rather than viewing the crisis of masculinity as a fixed and objective reality, we recognise it as a discursive construction that reflects and reinforces dominant norms and ideologies. It is hard to dispute that the late 20th century has witnessed significant upheavals in cultural norms and social expectations, not least surrounding notions of masculinity. In a period characterised by uncertainty and flux, traditional models of masculinity were challenged by broader socio-cultural shifts: the civil rights movement, the rise of feminism, and changing economic landscapes all contributed to a reevaluation of gender norms, social relations and modes of cultural expression which are still in progress.

At its core, the narrative of masculinity in crisis resonates with cultural anxieties stemming from rapid social, economic and cultural changes. The notion of masculinity under threat provides a lens through which individuals make sense of and cope with various uncertainties. Media outlets and personalities, eager to capture and retain audience attention in an increasingly competitive landscape, often capitalise on these anxieties by sensationalising narratives of masculinity in crisis. Whether through sensational headlines, provocative images or emotive storytelling, the crisis of masculinity narrative becomes a powerful tool for attracting viewership, generating clicks or selling products.

Moreover, the perpetuation of the crisis of masculinity narrative is shaped by political and ideological agendas. Media representations of masculinity are never neutral and, depending on the ideological orientation of the media outlet, the crisis of masculinity may be framed in diverse ways, either as a call to preserve traditional values or as a rallying cry for something new, perhaps rooted in conceptions of equality. These ideological agendas shape the content and tone of media discourse on 'crisis', constantly inviting us to interpret and respond to this narrative even in spaces which might not, at first glance, appear to have much to do with crisis per se. Indeed, the constant invocation of 'crisis' or oblique references to it, highlight a point made by Lauren Berlant: 'Today many formerly iconic citizens who used to feel undefensive and unfettered feel truly exposed and vulnerable. ... They sense that they now have *identities*, when it used to be just other people who had them' (1997: 2).

Tristan Tate, the brother of the notorious Andrew Tate, who like his brother uses his social media influencer status to promote misogynist views and his hypermasculine aesthetics, recently took to Twitter/X to boast about how he dresses like the iconic Hollywood actor Cary Grant while wondering if he should go for a more flamboyant wardrobe. However, his claim to dress like Grant was met with scepticism and criticism from Derek Guy, a prominent menswear enthusiast and blogger. Guy argued that while Tate may emulate Grant's sartorial choices superficially, he fails to grasp the essence of style, elegance and the importance of cut and design in a suit. According to Guy, Tate's obsession with appearing muscular and hypermasculine detracts from his ability to truly embody

the sophistication and refinement epitomised by Grant.<sup>5</sup> This exchange between Tate and Guy exemplifies the tension between contemporary image-making of traditional notions of masculinity, as represented by Tate's hypermasculine aesthetic, and the nuances of style and elegance emphasised by Guy. Does it really matter whether Tate dresses like Grant? Perhaps not, in the wider scheme of things and the Tate brothers imminent prosecutions for rape, human trafficking and accusations of tax evasion.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless the fact that Tate aspires to a particular brand of self-presentation associated with an earlier, glamorous, urbane, sophisticated Hollywood version of masculinity tells us something about the lag between his self-image and his reputation as a public figure and furthermore the extent to which the 'toxic masculinity' that the Tate brothers are the leading exponents of and their status in the so-called 'manosphere' is so reliant on retrograde masculine ideals from the 20th century.

Whatever the precise delineation of the 'crisis', at the individual level it is a narrative that resonates with those grappling with pressures related to success, power and emotional expression. In a society that often equates masculinity with attributes such as strength, dominance and stoicism, many men may well feel inadequate or insecure in meeting these expectations, and many commentators find lucrative possibilities in constantly highlighting where men might be falling short. Media representations that validate the experiences of insecurity can provide a sense of recognition and solidarity and such narratives intersect with other axes of identity, such as race, class, sexuality, generation and ability, such that there is a seemingly inexhaustible supply of evidence of 'crisis', especially where that may be compounded by systemic inequalities and social injustices. So of course, there are plenty of actors beyond simply the media sphere – politicians, cultural commentators and journalists who see political capital in referencing 'better' times, 'better' men and a 'better' world. In essence, the persistence of the crisis of masculinity narrative in media discourse reflects a complex interplay of cultural, commercial, political, psychological and intersectional factors in social and cultural contexts where the pace of 'change' (social, cultural, economic) seems out of step with the individual's ability to negotiate their place in the world.

## **Trope 2: The New Man**

Partly in response to that perceived crisis of masculinity, the concept of the 'new man' was greeted as a reconfiguration of traditional gender roles. Coined in the early 1980s, the new man represented a departure from conventional notions of masculinity, emphasising sensitivity, emotional intelligence and a rejection of rigid gender binaries. This new model of masculinity sought to navigate the complexities of changing social dynamics, embracing qualities traditionally associated with femininity while challenging patriarchal norms. While the crisis of masculinity often highlights the fragility and instability of traditional gender roles, the emergence of the new man represented a proactive

response to these challenges. Rather than succumbing to anxieties about perceived emasculation, proponents of the new man discourse embraced the opportunities for personal growth and self-expression afforded by changing social norms. By rejecting rigid binaries and embracing a more fluid and inclusive understanding of masculinity, the new man embodied a vision of gender identity that was regarded, superficially at least, as both progressive and empowering.

The term was reputedly coined in a *Washington Post* article in 1982 about Dustin Hoffman's performance in the film *Tootsie* and from the outset this 'New Man' came in for a range of criticisms.<sup>7</sup> His sensitive, emotionally expressive and nurturing abilities were claimed to contribute to the emasculation of men by undermining traditional ideals of strength, assertiveness and stoicism. Moreover, the devaluing of traditional masculinity had potential to marginalise men for whom physical prowess was their stock in trade, perpetuating hierarchies that devalued physical work. Critics also questioned the authenticity of the new man archetype, arguing that it represents a performative ideal rather than a genuine expression of male identity, requiring men to conform to societal expectations of emotional openness and vulnerability, even if it contradicts their true feelings or experiences. The new man ultimately reinforced gender stereotypes by essentialising certain qualities as inherently masculine or feminine. Instead of challenging traditional gender binaries, the new man narrative reinforces them.

While the term 'new man' is now pretty much retired and feels timelocked to a specific period in the 1980s, the idea of the new man (who forty years later is scarcely new) remains surprisingly resilient. In the 1980s, a concern with health and grooming aligned with an egalitarian politics were the dual markers of new man status, but in the 21st century personal self-care has become so normalised that it is no longer worthy of comment. For instance, in the Apple TV+ comedy series *Ted Lasso*, the titular character, played by Jason Sudeikis, defies stereotypes of the hypermasculine sports coach. Ted is empathetic, optimistic and genuinely caring about his players' well-being, focusing on building relationships and fostering teamwork rather than relying on aggression or dominance. Similarly, Jon Snow, played by Kit Harington in the HBO series *Game of Thrones*, embodies qualities of the new man archetype: compassionate, fair-minded and willing to challenge traditional power for the greater good, all while proving to be a skilled warrior and a leader. His emotional vulnerability and empathy towards others broke the mould of the stoic, unfeeling hero. And yet, there is almost always something missing from these new man figures – they are endearing, empathetic but not very sexy (Jon Snow may be an exception here). This lack of sex appeal is perhaps best embodied by Mark Corrigan (David Mitchell) in the British sitcom *Peep Show*. Mark is portrayed as intelligent, sensitive and socially awkward, often feeling insecure about his appearance and social status. His attempts to navigate relationships and assert himself in the workplace are frequently undermined by his neuroses and self-doubt,

leading to comedic misadventures. His awkward demeanour, tendency towards self-sabotage and inability to connect with others on a deeper level contribute to his struggles in the realm of romance and attraction. While he possesses qualities that challenge traditional gender norms, his lack of conventional sex appeal underscores the challenges and insecurities felt in trying to measure up to sexual attractiveness while also trying to be a ‘better’ man.

### **Trope 3: The New Lad**

The emergence of the ‘new lad’ figure in popular culture, particularly in the UK and the United States from the early 1990s onwards, marked a distinct shift in articulations of masculinity across various media platforms. This phenomenon found its roots in the rise of ‘lad mags’ during the mid-1990s which departed from the egalitarian ideals of a ‘new man’ who was aligned with views associated with feminist politics, instead embracing a ‘playful’, ironising and ultimately regressive version of an assertively heterosexual masculinity. Coined by journalist Sean O’Hagan in a 1993 article for *Arena*, the new lad represented a backlash against perceived emasculation, embracing homosociality, laddish humour and a rejection of political correctness – according to Imelda Whelehan (2000), a nostalgic revival of patriarchal norms or a backlash against progressive ideals, and embodied a complex negotiation of gender roles and societal shifts, reflecting a broader discourse on masculinity and its evolving representations in the modern era. Magazines such as *Loaded* and *FHM* celebrated hedonism and stereotypical masculine interests including drinking, football and sexual conquests, presenting a narrative of masculinity centred around homosocial bonding and predatory attitudes towards women who were presented as sexual objects. The ascendancy of the new lad figure was entangled with broader social and economic changes in post-industrial societies, including shifts in the labour market, technological advancements and evolving gender dynamics. While some scholars attribute the rise of the new lad to perceived threats to traditional masculinity, others see it as a deliberate rejection of the more sensitive and introspective new man archetype (Crewe, 2003). Characterised by a self-aware post-feminist style, ‘new laddism’ revelled in defiance against contemporary norms, adopting an ironic and detached demeanour that challenged notions of authenticity and societal expectations.

The media portrayal of the new lad as a brash and sexist figure revelling in macho irresponsibility perhaps concealed a more nuanced reality. The image suggested a carefree attitude, but sociological research revealed that many young men embodying this persona were actually grappling with deep insecurities of the sort described by the enduring crisis of masculinity discourse. The new laddism phenomenon arose alongside a contemporaneous version of feminism addressing a younger generation of women, represented by the rise of Girl Power movements epitomised by pop groups like the Spice Girls and All Saints. Angus Bancroft’s research (2019) suggests that laddish behaviour served

as a shield against the perceived challenges posed by feminism and that far from embodying the confident and self-assured archetype, the new lad was often a figure struggling to navigate societal shifts, ultimately revealing a sense of inadequacy and unease beneath the bravado. Hansen-Miller and Gill (2011) discuss a genre of films known as ‘lad flicks’ or ‘lad movies’ which emerged in the late 1990s centring on the experiences of young men navigating their way through life, particularly in North America and the UK, with masculinity itself being the central theme. Unlike traditional coming-of-age movies, lad flicks humorously explored their protagonists’ struggles with various definitions of manhood and their attempts to live up to these ideals. Hansen-Miller and Gill (2011) analyse two prominent examples, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005) and *Role Models* (2008), highlighting how these films challenge traditional notions of masculinity through irony and scopic pleasure while enunciating contemporary constructions of gender relations. Their discussion also touches on the representation of women within these films and critically examines narrative resolutions, suggesting that lad flicks negotiate conservative values but ultimately leave underlying issues of masculinity unresolved. The shift from ‘new laddism’ to a reluctant acceptance of domestication in these films reflects broader societal changes yet fails to address the fundamental problems associated with traditional masculine ideals. Bancroft contrasts a historical idea of ‘youthful exuberance’ with the contemporary manifestation of laddishness. While past generations may have engaged in similar behaviour, it was often viewed as a transient phase. However, Bancroft sees the new lad representing a broader societal trend transcending social classes, marked by a collective regression into immaturity and irresponsibility. This regression is symptomatic of broader issues within British society, including rising unemployment among men and a crisis in masculinity characterised by diminished self-esteem and social alienation. Far from being a victory for feminism, Bancroft argues that the retreat into laddish behaviour only served to perpetuate a cycle of narcissism and disengagement, ultimately hindering progress for both men and women alike. Paul Gascoigne, the iconic English footballer, epitomised the new lad persona, famously indulging in off-pitch antics including releasing an ostrich at Tottenham’s training ground (as recounted in David Armitage’s book *Gascoigne Gold*, 2016). Despite his undeniable talent, Gascoigne’s career was overshadowed by disciplinary issues and off-field controversies, including struggles with alcohol addiction that continue to affect him today. In recent documentaries, Gascoigne has been presented as a case study of the paradoxical blend of exaggerated masculinity and underlying insecurity that currently contextualises laddishness within broader societal trends of instant gratification and an evasion of responsibility.<sup>8</sup>

A 1996 Lynx deodorant ad offers a vibrant portrayal of the embodiment of the new lad persona. Accompanied by the energetic beat of ‘Boom Shack a Lak’ by Apache Indian, the ad features a geeky protagonist in a white towel, meticulously applying Lynx body spray. This spraying serves as a ritualistic

transformation, symbolising the power of the product to enhance masculinity. As the narrative unfolds, the protagonist, now exuding confidence, embarks on a series of exaggerated antics to impress a beautiful brunette, showcasing the care-free and flashy persona associated with the new lad archetype. The ad depicts Lynx as a catalyst for romantic success, with the woman captivated by the new lad's (David) newfound allure. In a humorous twist, Jennifer Aniston, who plays David's contented partner, interrupts what now appears to be a daydream with a lighthearted inquiry about whether he really has to go out tonight. Juxtaposing David's adventurous daydream and Jennifer's domestic contentment illustrates the tension between societal expectations and the allure of the new lad lifestyle but also suggests that David's reality is as good as his fantasy – thanks to Lynx. The ad offers a constructed mythology surrounding Lynx and its association with masculine ideals in the marketplace: this proprietary product will make a man irresistible to women (both the domesticated and the fantasy woman). But in a further twist, as the bedroom clock strikes 3 a.m., we see Jennifer alone in bed happily reading a book entitled *How to Keep Your Man*, confirming that women are easily and happily duped ... and that male sex appeal is about 'personality' even when that personality is repellent! This ad, part of the Lynx 'Dream Date' campaign was produced by advertising agency BBH who were tasked with saving Lynx from the ignomy of 'becoming the Brut of the 90s' (Brut as we will note in Chapter 4 had been an incredibly popular male toiletry brand in the 1970s until it became so ubiquitous that it was absolutely associated with unfashionable and ageing everymen). To retain Lynx's place as the leading body spray for young high-spending consumers, the agency rewrote the brand's philosophy,

It was clear that a new expression of seduction and masculinity was needed. We introduced a tongue-in-cheek humour to the advertising and a new, ironic expression of seduction. 'The Lynx Effect'. As youth culture accelerated, as it became more fluid and demanding, Lynx also had to evolve beyond its existing ad formula of just one theme campaign a year. 'The Lynx Effect' has been expressed in tv and print, in tactical ads and shorts, in events and promotions.<sup>9</sup>

We understand this advert and others of its ilk as a form of marketplace mythology (Thompson, 2004) – a mechanism through which the new lad permeated media and consumer culture. Rooted in neoliberal ideologies, marketplace myths connect masculinities to market forces, consumer choices and notions of individual agency. This nexus between masculinity and consumerism shaped contemporary iterations of the new lad, reinforcing ideals of masculinity and promoting products and behaviours that may often have served to perpetuate gender inequality. The evolution of the new lad into lad culture reflected some of the broader societal shifts towards more toxic expressions of masculinity which we explore in Trope 5. For now, we want to move on to the most significantly commercial of our tropes – the Metrosexual.

## Trope 4: Metrosexuality and Its Variants

As the new lad phenomenon illustrated the intersection of masculinity with marketplace mythology in the 1990s, the emergence of the metrosexual represents a further entanglement within market forces, epitomising the commodification of male grooming and lifestyle choices that had begun with the emergence of the new man in the 1980s. Metrosexuality emerged in the late 20th century as a cultural phenomenon characterised by men's increased engagement with grooming, fashion and personal aesthetics. Coined by journalist Mark Simpson, the term describes a new model of masculinity that yet again, purportedly, challenged traditional gender norms and embraced consumerist ideals of self-improvement and personal style. As Simpson described him in 2002:

The typical metrosexual is a young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis—because that's where all the best shops, clubs, gyms, and hairdressers are. He might be officially gay, straight or bisexual, but this is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference.<sup>10</sup>

Simpson's queer interventions in debates around masculinity were quickly assimilated into both scholarly practice and popular culture, shaping perceptions of masculinity, offering a more fluid and expansive understanding of gender identity and expression. Toby Miller suggested that men are now 'subjected to new forms of governance and commodification' (Miller, 2006: 106) and that the metrosexual constitutes 'a neoliberal subject who must govern himself as a new aesthete, generated from shifting relations of power and finance' (Miller, 2006: 112).<sup>11</sup>

### ***Variant 1: Lumbersexuality: The Sexualisation of Hipster Culture***

Building upon the metrosexual trend, lumbersexuality emerged as a short-lived (at least in media spaces) phenomenon that sexualised elements of so-called hipster culture. Writing for the online publication *Gear Junkie*, Tom Puzak observed

He looks like a man of the woods, but works at The Nerdery, programming for a healthy salary and benefits. His backpack carries a MacBook Air, but looks like it should carry a lumberjack's axe.

He is the Lumbersexual.<sup>12</sup>

Characterised by rugged aesthetics with a techno-savvy edge, lumbersexuals embodied an ideal rooted in nostalgia for traditional masculinity alongside a distinct, gender-normative taste regime. It was as much a marketing strategy as a grassroots move towards more authentic ways of being a man and it targeted

young, educated, urban white men, offering a fantasy of rugged but conspicuously sexualised masculinity. The sexual appeal of the lumbersexual lies in its portrayal of rugged, outdoorsy men who embody a fusion of urban sophistication and a masculinity connected to rural manual labour, the reassertion of traditional masculine virtues in a modern context. This transition, mixing elements of the metrosexual and the hipster, perhaps reflects a broader cultural shift where the marketplace responds to and shapes consumer identities. The products and narratives reconnecting men with a mythologised version of masculinity – the plaid shirts, beard products and outdoorsy aesthetics – provided a semiotic toolkit for men to navigate and construct their sexual and gender identities through consumption while also embracing traditionally male iconography. The sexualisation of this identity (the lumberjack already had deep roots in the American popular consciousness) was evident in the way products were presented – not just as functional items, but as symbols of virility and rugged attractiveness.<sup>13</sup>

‘Authenticity’ (and we place this term in quotation marks deliberately here) plays a crucial role in the sexualisation of the lumbersexual identity. In a culture where urban living and corporate culture are often associated with feminisation and passivity, the lumbersexual represents a reclamation at a stylistic level at least of Americanised masculine ideals of the individualism of the ‘outdoorsman’ that can be traced back to Thoreau. The aesthetic of rugged individualism, with its emphasis on beards, work clothes and outdoor gear, is commodified and marketed as a counter-narrative to the perceived conformity of modern men. The appeal of rugged, capable men who combine physical toughness with a curated aesthetic (reflecting broader societal anxieties and desires about environmentalism, slow-living and more ‘authentic’ life values) reinforced the notion that true masculinity is not only about appearance but also about embodying a set of desirable, traditionally masculine traits.

The emergence of metrosexual and lumbersexual identities should be seen within the context of the increasing sexualisation of culture which created an environment where sexual expression and the commodification of bodies became central to cultural narratives. These cultural shifts have contributed to a new visibility and acceptability of male grooming and fashion, elements that are central to metrosexual identity, as we will note in Chapter 4. The lumbersexual trend can be seen as a response to or a variation within this same cultural milieu, emphasising a rugged yet stylised masculinity.

The use of men’s bodies in advertising that constructs and addresses the metrosexual/lumbersexual consumer aligns to some extent with Bordo’s (1999) observations of the fetishisation of the male body while also confirming Rohlinger’s (2002) suggestion that the male body serves as a canvas for varied meanings. For metrosexuals, this might involve a polished, urban look, while lumbersexuals project a more rugged, authentic masculinity. Clearly we need to be aware of the different takes on modern masculinity. Metrosexuality often confronts traditional masculinity by embracing what were once considered

feminine practices while lumbersexuality appears to reaffirm traditional masculinity but with an underlying awareness of style and appearance that aligns with broader trends of sexualisation. All of this illustrates how modern masculinity is negotiating its place within a sexualised culture. Men are both beneficiaries and participants in the commodification of bodies, complicating a simplistic and monolithic description of men as purely the predatory beneficiaries of a sexualised culture. The rise of social media and the opportunities for self-representation afforded by platforms like Instagram and TikTok has further complicated the landscape, as we will again note in later chapters. Men now engage in practices of image construction that involve careful curation of their appearances, aligning with the metrosexual emphasis on grooming and the lumbersexual embrace of stylised ruggedness. This shift signifies a ‘body-as-performance’ relationship (Waskul, 2004), where men, like women, now navigate the pressures of presenting an attractive, desirable body for public consumption.

### ***Variant 2: Spornosexuality: Austerity, Precarity and Overt Sexualisation***

The second variant of metrosexuality (discussed at length in Chapter 3), spornosexuality, represents something of a fusion of ‘manly ideals’, physical prowess, sexualised aesthetics and consumerist ideals all wrapped up as a response to austerity politics and the politics of precarity. The spornosexual embodies a heightened emphasis on physical perfection and performance, reflective of broader anxieties around economic insecurity, and the pursuit of status and validation through the body. Mark Simpson was also responsible for this term – writing in 2014 he described the spornosexual as a man ‘who is influenced in his appearance by the stars of sport and pornography’<sup>14</sup> and for whom ‘their own bodies (more than clobber and product) have become the ultimate accessories, fashioning them at the gym into a hot commodity – one that they share and compare in an online marketplace’. Writing in *Esquire* in 2014, journalist Ellie Pithers was very concerned about the seeming ‘equity’ of the sexes seeing spornosexuality as:

A disturbingly sexualized vision of masculinity .... The greased up, inflatable footballer-cum-gigolo is just a male version of the angel-winged Victoria’s Secret model. The rock-hard abs of the cast of *Geordie Shore* are as painstakingly crafted as Miley Cyrus’s waistline. The ‘Victory V’ of abdominal muscles on a male torso is as fetishized a body part as a skinny, stiletto-clad ankle on a woman.<sup>15</sup>

Pithers went on to opine that ‘subjecting men and women to this kind of body fetishisation and self-loathing can only end in horror and turmoil not seen since Dante’s inferno. It goes without saying that pumping weights for an hour a day doesn’t make you a “real man”’.

In an ‘economy of visibility’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 3), however, being a ‘real man’ has perhaps not been the only goal for some time. In the contemporary hyperconnected world, visibility is, of course, very valuable currency. Social media platforms, advertising and entertainment industries operate through visibility, leveraging it to promote products, ideas and lifestyles. Spornosexuality is an ostensibly online phenomenon, hence visibility plays a crucial role in perpetuating its norms and ideals. In his 2014 article, Simpson critiqued the disdain of traditionalists and hipsters towards the spornosexuals whose undeniable allure and self-assurance so frightened commentators. He argued that the transformation of masculinity towards hypersexuality and self-objectification is not a crisis but a liberation from past constraints. This new generation embraces their bodies as objects of desire, disrupting traditional masculine norms and provoking envy and confusion among those who cling to outdated ideals of masculinity.

Simpson’s (2014) analysis reveals the hypocrisy and underlying sexual confusion in the critique of spornosexuals and their hyper-sexualised presentation. By ridiculing the nostalgic longing for a bygone masculinity and the derogatory labelling of metro/spornosexual men as ‘sad young douchebags’, Simpson highlights a deeper cultural anxiety about changing gender roles. The spornosexuals’ enthusiastic pursuit of physical perfection and visibility represents a broader shift in societal values, where the male body is celebrated for its aesthetic and sensual qualities rather than merely its utility. Simpson ultimately celebrates this shift as a form of progress, emphasising the empowerment and desirability of modern men.

This should not be dismissed as merely a spat between various popular columnists, Simpson’s depiction of the spornosexual reflects a broader societal shift where economic and social changes necessitate new forms of masculine expression. Academic Jamie Hakim, whose work we will engage with repeatedly in this book, has suggested that

the rise of this new digitally mediated body practice amongst young, white, middle class, cis-gendered men is evidence of shifts in late modern hierarchies of power ... [and] ... is an embodied and mediated response to shifts in power that are taking place during the austerity moment.

*(2018: 233)*

In an age of austerity and precarity, the male body transitions from a tool of labour to an object of aesthetic value and sexual desirability. This transformation underscores the interplay between economic conditions, cultural norms and individual identity formation, illustrating how masculinity is continuously renegotiated in response to evolving social and economic landscapes. Austerity measures and economic instability have reshaped the labour market (Doogan, 2015; Theodoropoulou, 2018; McDowell, Bonner-Thompson and Harris, 2022), creating precarious employment conditions as traditional male-dominated industries, like manufacturing and construction, have declined, reducing

opportunities for men to assert masculinity through physically demanding and stable jobs. As economic roles and opportunities have changed, so too do the means of status and identity, and the body has become a crucial site for demonstrating personal worth. As we argue in Chapter 3, the emphasis on the aestheticisation of the male body – manifested in fitness regimes, body modification and meticulous grooming – reflects a shift where men derive social capital not from their utility in the labour market, but from their physical appearance and sexual desirability; of course, aligning with broader cultural trends where visual media and consumer culture valorise appearance and personal branding.

This is not altogether new, at least the processes of reconstructing what it means to be a man is not new, as Joanne Begiato's historical exploration in *Manliness in Britain, 1760–1900* (2020) reveals how the intricate interplay between physicality, morality and emotional resonance constructed new notions of manliness across social classes in the long 19th century. Begiato argues that 'manliness' was not merely a middle-class ideal but a cultural construct that resonated deeply with the working class as well. Drawing on a diverse array of primary sources, including visual and material culture, Begiato demonstrates how manly virtues were depicted and disseminated through media such as temperance journals and artistic representations. Her analysis shows that the effective propagation of manly ideals, 'heroic, strong, tender men, who are clean-living and appropriately emotionally expressive' (Begiato, 2020: 211), relied heavily on eliciting admiration and desire, thus meshing the physical and moral aspects of masculinity. These ideals were not just aspirational but were actively integrated into working-class identities, suggesting a shared cultural investment in the valorisation of the male body and its associated virtues which as we can see are surprisingly reminiscent of those of the so-called 'new man' almost 100 years later.

This historical context connects almost seamlessly with the contemporary turn towards aesthetic value and sexual desirability in men, as highlighted by Simpson and others. Both periods highlight a shift from utility-based masculinity to one where the body itself, as we would expect in a somatic society, becomes the primary site of masculine identity. In Begiato's period, the ideal worker's physique symbolised moral virtues and social respectability, much like the spornosexual's sculpted body today symbolises desirability and self-worth. Begiato points to these connections herself in her suggestion that contemporary fascination with the 'bulging bicep' is 'a descendent of the workers' arm of the nineteenth century, decoupled from class and labour' (2020: 206). The shift reflects broader socio-economic changes, where traditional roles and opportunities for asserting masculinity have diminished, leading men to seek validation and status through physical appearance. Both analyses underscore a continuity in the emotional and social dimensions of manliness, demonstrating how admiration, desire and the visual representation of the male body remain central to the construction of masculine identity across time.

In this book we note the extent to which contemporary popular culture not just reinforces but valorises the importance of appearance. Where economic success is increasingly elusive, visual appeal and sexual attractiveness become alternative markers of success and self-worth, not only as a response to economic precarity but also resulting from the commodification of the self in the digital age. In a consumer-driven economy, men are encouraged to invest in their appearance through fashion, fitness and grooming products, navigating economic uncertainty by enhancing one's marketability, not just in terms of employment but in the social and sexual marketplace. The spornosexual's body, therefore, becomes a site of both consumption and production, embodying the dual roles of the consumer and the commodified. Mostly, existing research is quite worried about what this all means for men's well-being and self-esteem but investing in one's body can also be seen as a form of psychological resilience against the backdrop of economic and social precarity. By taking control of their physical appearance, men assert agency in a world where other forms of control are limited. This bodily investment can be seen as offering a tangible way to achieve a sense of accomplishment and self-worth, providing a buffer against the insecurities and instabilities of contemporary life. Nevertheless, the spornosexual reflects a broader societal shift where economic and social changes necessitate new forms of masculine expression. In an age of austerity and precarity, the male body transitions from a tool of labour to an object of aesthetic value and sexual desirability, as this book will evidence repeatedly. This transformation underscores the interplay between economic conditions, cultural norms and individual identity formation, illustrating how masculinity is saturated with meaning and continuously renegotiated in response to evolving social and economic landscapes.

## Trope 5: Toxic Masculinity

### *Incels*

If, as we are arguing, the transformation from what might be described as utility-based to aesthetic-based masculinities has impacted men's self-perception and societal roles, there is no doubt that many men may feel excluded from these prevailing ideals of sexualised masculinity. Popular media and academic/activist commentary have labelled defensive responses to the pressures of the sexual and visual economies of social media as forms of 'toxic masculinity' – a concept which first emerged from within the men's movements of the early 1990s. Social Psychologist Frank Pittman, in his book *Man Enough: Fathers, Sons, and the Search for Masculinity* (1993), posited that toxic masculinity had probable cause in absent fathers, and other cultural failures impacting boys. Similarly, the Mythopoetic Men's Movement (MMM) explored the negative aspects of masculinity, attributing them to the emasculation of men in contemporary Western culture. Shepherd Bliss, a key figure in MMM, coined the

term ‘toxic masculinity’ to describe harmful, hypermasculine behaviour, contrasting it with ‘deep masculinity’ – more cooperative and positive forms of manhood (Harrington, 2022). Bliss emphasised reclaiming masculinity through spiritual and emotional exploration, fostering healthier male behaviours and relationships. In the intervening years, toxic masculinity has been the subject of numerous academic articles, edited collections and monographs and this interest has escalated in recent years due in no small part to social media practices.<sup>16</sup>

There is one aspect of toxic masculinity that we would like to focus a little more on here, precisely because its contemporary formations dovetail with our discussions in this book. Incels, or involuntary celibates, have received significant attention both in academia and popular media due to their association with extreme misogyny and violence against women (Ging, 2019; Jaki et al., 2019; Marwick and Caplan, 2018; Nagle, 2017). Often portrayed as one of the Internet’s most dangerous subcultures for their expressions of deep-seated hatred towards women (Beauchamp, 2019), the term ‘Incel’ describes individuals who desire romantic/sexual relationships but are unable to form them (Ging, 2019). Although the Incel community is relatively new, the concept of involuntary celibacy is not, with similar phenomena like ‘loveshyness’ identified by psychologist Brian Gilmartin in the 1980s (Gilmartin, 1987).

The origins of the ‘Incel community’ have been traced back to the late 1990s and the creation of *Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project*, a forum intended as a safe space for people unable to achieve sexual relationships (Taylor, 2018) open to men and women across various racial and sexual identities (Donnelly et al., 2001). However, by the mid-2000s, the discourse (and spaces) shifted to focus primarily on (white) men who felt subordinated within the ‘global masculine hierarchy’ (Daly and Reed, 2022: 15). The Incel community meets across multiple platforms, and it has become a part of the larger ‘Manosphere’, which encompasses groups like the Men’s Rights Movement, Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) and Pick Up Artists (PUA) (Ash, 2019; Ging, 2019).

The Manosphere, which emerged partly as a backlash against second-wave feminism, articulates an ‘aggrieved manhood’ (Ging, 2019), to claim that feminist movements have led to the marginalisation and victimisation of men (Nagle, 2017). The ideology of ‘RedPill’, which suggests that society inherently favours women over men, is central to understanding Incel and Manosphere beliefs (Ging, 2019; Lindsay, 2020; van Valkenburgh, 2021). Some Incels take this further with the ‘BlackPill’ ideology, which argues that society is ‘lookist’ and that men who do not meet certain physical criteria will inevitably fail in their romantic and sexual pursuits (Ging, 2019; Lindsay, 2020). This deterministic view frames women and socially dominant men as ‘oppressors’, selectively choosing partners based on looks.

Sociologist Eva Illouz characterises Incels as the most extreme manifestation of the transformation of sexuality under ‘scopic capitalism’, where value is derived from the spectacularisation of bodies and sexuality (Illouz, 2019: 224). In this context, those lacking ‘sexual capital’ experience significant self-

devaluation (225). Efforts to improve one's sexual capital include 'looksmaxxing', as we will discuss in Chapter 4, processes which, as Simon Osborne describes in an article of 2024, will bring the prized 'impossibly chiselled jaws, pouty lips and cheekbones as high as the Egyptian pyramids, along with "hunter" eyes (those angled slightly downwards towards the nose – a positive canthal tilt)'.<sup>17</sup> More than just an 'extreme cosmetic craze' to increase 'sexual market value' (Osborne, 2024), discussions around Incels often frame their plight within a political context of distributive justice, with some commentators suggesting solutions like the redistribution of sex (Douthat, 2018) or socially enforced monogamy (Peterson, 2019). These perspectives highlight the perceived winners and losers created by the sexual revolution, where traditional social hierarchies have been replaced by new ones favouring the attractive and socially adept. The phenomenon of Incels, therefore, can be seen as a reaction to the emphasis on sexual attractiveness we are focused on here and beyond that, as the latest manifestation of 'masculinity in crisis'. As Jilly Boyce Kay has recently argued:

The seething *ressentiment* of the incel can be understood as a much broader structure of feeling, whereby white men's anger and humiliation at being 'left behind' increasingly operate as a propulsive affective force in contemporary politics and culture. The suffering, sexual exclusion and 'left behindness' of white men is increasingly centred within the purview of politics; whether it provokes sympathy or horror, the figure of the incel appears in contemporary culture as an emblem of the injustices of the zeitgeist, about which *something must be done*.

(2022: 29)

### ***Fuckboys***

Feelings of insecurity and competition among men lead to heightened concerns over personal appearance as a form of capital, but against this backdrop, the figure of the 'fuckboy' also emerges as a distinct yet related phenomenon. Now characterised by a manipulative approach to relationships, fuckboy is a term that originated in African-American vernacular English gaining mainstream popularity through hip-hop music in the early 2000s. Initially referring to a man who was a bit crazy, sometimes deceitful or fake, the term evolved in broader culture to describe a specific type of manipulative and emotionally exploitative man in the context of dating and relationships.

A fuckboy prioritises short-term sexual conquests over emotional connections, harbouring disrespect for women, despite being dependent on them for validation and sexual gratification. He engages in selfish and inconsiderate behaviour, often lying and manipulating to get what he wants while putting minimal effort into relationships. Fuckboys are notorious for their flakiness, poor communication and inability to commit, leading women on only to disregard their feelings. The concept of the fuckboy was explored and, to some

extent, satirised in HBO's *Fboy Island*, showcasing the behaviours (and consequences) associated with fuckboys in a reality TV format. The show received mixed reviews, with some critics appreciating its self-awareness and humour, while others criticised its superficial treatment of relationship dynamics and its sometimes problematic portrayals of both men and women.<sup>18</sup>

Overall, the mediated construction of the fuckboy phenomenon reflects broader issues in contemporary dating culture, where emotional manipulation and the pursuit of casual sex are routinely framed as overshadowing what are often framed as 'pre-digital' or 'extra-digital' conditions of genuine connection and respect. The fuckboy's actions seem to reflect a strategic, albeit problematic, adaptation to the same cultural forces that drive looksmaxxing and the Incel ideology. And yet, its significance to our discussion lies elsewhere. In an especially acute article in *Jezebel Magazine* as far back as 2015, Kara Brown objects in the strongest terms to the ways the term fuckboy has been appropriated, whitewashed and, by her assessment, misused. Brown suggests that misuse exposes the practices of cultural erasure that she regards as endemic in 'bad trend pieces', written by white people and for a white readership. Brown's razor-sharp critique of the widespread cultural appropriation that is a routine feature of popular culture states

These people seem to believe that made-up words are meticulously documented somewhere with verified definitions that are known and accepted by all who use the word and a lack of said documentation means they are free to create their own.<sup>19</sup>

Brown is contradictory here of course, arguing that the cultural origins of the term fuckboy should not only be acknowledged and respected but implicitly remain sacrosanct, at the same time as noting that 'made-up words' (and surely words are 'made up') have mutable meaning. Notwithstanding the shaky internal logic at play here, Brown's argument is a salutary reminder that etymology has value for cultural research. In order to understand the tensions, complexities and contradictions inherent in language and in this case the language used to describe male sexual morals and standards, culturally locating neologisms is necessary. However, locating terrain in which language circulates is not the same exercise as trying to fix the cultural specific location of a word which is essentially a doomed enterprise in any case. Notwithstanding Brown's objections through the adoption (even the cultural appropriation) of a term, meanings evolve and accrete to that term that might stray far from its origin.

## **Conclusion: Interrogating Masculine Norms**

As we will discuss in following chapters, emphasis on male appearance and sexual attractiveness has created new forms of and labels for 'sexualised masculinity', which intersect with various cultural and economic factors. It is perhaps not terribly useful to outline these tropes as chronologies; they can and do

co-exist. Moreover, the differences are often quite subtle – in constructing these archetypes, characters or tropes, elements are borrowed, consolidated or embellished from previous tropes. Rather it is important to understand the kinds of stories each of these tropes tells, what they achieve and how, what purposes might they serve and for whom do they offer benefits?

The commodification of certain traits, behaviours and products associated with masculinity obviously offers advertisers opportunities to sell products. It also enables the shaping of cultural perceptions of what it means to be a man (which can include everything from ruggedness and physical strength to success and dominance, as well as empathy, etc etc). Increasingly, commercialised masculinity aligns with sexualised portrayals of men in media; without doubt some of these perpetuate quite narrow definitions of masculinity, where men are expected to embody both strength and sexuality, but there are others – as we go on to discuss – which trouble the definitions and open up broader possibilities for thinking about masculinities as complexly sexual. Consumer culture absolutely reinforces the idea that masculinity can be bought and displayed through material possessions, but in the digital age, where visibility often offers validation, it is no longer quite so necessary to conform solely to traditional societal expectations of masculinity.

The evolution from crisis masculinity through metrosexuality to sporno-sexuality and on to the Incel and the fuckboy reflects growing social obsessions with male physicality, where men are increasingly judged and valued based on their looks and sexual appeal. This shift is not just a superficial trend but is deeply entangled with broader socio-economic conditions such as precarity and austerity. Economic instability and austerity measures have exacerbated feelings of insecurity and competition among men, leading to heightened concerns over personal appearance as forms of capital. The practices involved, from body-building to cosmetic procedures, that become strategies for men to enhance their sexual desirability and social status illustrate how men navigate a landscape where physical attractiveness is a key determinant of success and self-worth. In the next chapter we will begin to identify the arenas in which ideals of sexualised masculinity are formed and distributed with our initial focus on the enduring influence of cinema in the shaping of the popular imagination.

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# 2

## HOLLYWOOD BODIES

### Matinee Idols to Sex Symbols

In a somatic society, bodies not only carry meaning and significance, they are the raw materials from which value is derived and meaning is constructed. This chapter focusses largely on the role of cinema in the production and circulation of ideals of male sexual desirability in part due to the development of the Hollywood star system and subsequently through the figure of the ‘sex symbol’. The chapter is also concerned with a male body that has become almost ubiquitous across the media landscape and has become what might be described as the industry standard or expectation in cinema and television. This is of course the athletic, muscular body that we return to repeatedly in this book as an exemplar of the increasingly international, cultural standard of male sexual desirability.

Our argument in this book is that not all male bodies are the same nor are they all equal. While we argue that masculinity in the 21st century is saturated with a range of meanings, this plethora (and contradiction) emerges out of a shifting cultural context in which masculinity has often been associated with (albeit illusory) fixity and certainties. We tend to disagree with the simplistic way that Raewyn Connell’s model of hegemonic masculinity has been applied so often in sociological research that might suggest that these bodies are self-evident in their hegemonic function to assert and reassert male power and dominance alone. Indeed, our argument is that while this idealised physical standard cannot ever be decoupled from conditions of power it is a body that has evolved during the course of the 20th and 21st centuries due to commercial as well as ideological imperatives.

Furthermore, we see that the sexualised male body fundamentally complicates theories of spectatorship in film studies and objectification across a range of fields of study, predicated on the axiom famously described by John Berger: ‘Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at’ (1972: 47).<sup>1</sup> In the first instance, we note that, in cinema, many

of the earliest performers celebrated on the basis of their appearance and their erotic appeal were (perhaps counterintuitively) men and therefore cinematic spectatorship and specifically the act of looking at these bodies cannot so easily be analysed as straightforwardly gendered in the manner that John Berger's or Laura Mulvey's later account suggests. Rather more, we note the argument proposed by Steve Neale, in the oft cited foundational essay, 'Masculinity as Spectacle', written partly in response to the growing literature making use of Mulvey's ideas, in which he argues that masculinity is represented as spectacle in Hollywood cinema in part at least to mitigate against the possibility of alternative, erotic readings. Neale notes that 'those looks are marked not by desire, but rather by fear, or hatred, or aggression [...] designed to minimise and [...] disavow any explicitly erotic look at the male body' (1983: 14). Neale himself observes, through the example of Rock Hudson, that this is only a partially successful endeavour but nonetheless concludes:

While mainstream cinema, in its assumption of a male norm, perspective and look, can constantly take women and the female image as its object of investigation, it has rarely investigated men and the male image in the same kind of way: women are a problem, a source of anxiety, of obsessive enquiry; men are not. [...] Masculinity, as an ideal, at least, is implicitly known. Femininity is, by contrast, a mystery.

*(1983: 15–16)*

Notwithstanding that Neale's essay was written over 40 years ago, it is difficult to imagine many other examples of representational and gender theory where such a categorical and commonsensical conclusion could have become such a pervasive orthodoxy.<sup>2</sup> Clearly this is not a framework that enables us to understand the eroticisation of masculinity in popular culture (or even Hollywood cinema for that matter) from a longitudinal perspective and so our objective is to problematise the male body in cinema. In this regard our analysis and observations align more closely with those of Steve Cohan (1997), who notes the dynamic and conflicted gender politics of 1950s Hollywood and how these are played out in and through the bodies of the male stars of that period. It is not our ambition, nor are we able, to provide a comprehensive historical account of the emergence of the male sex symbol and a physical ideal. Our intention instead here is to identify instances and individuals who mark epistemological shifts and evolutions in the ways masculinity is sexualised across popular culture with a specific focus on cinema in this chapter.

While we can observe dominant models of representing ideals of male sexiness in cinema and furthermore that cinema has been perhaps the major cultural phenomenon in the West during the 20th century in providing ideals of sexualised masculinity more generally, we are making the case, counter-intuitively, that for much of that century a heterogeneity of physicalities was presented to audiences for their erotic investment. Indeed, it was not until the

1980s and the 1990s that the standardisation and homogenisation of the idealised, youthful and athletic masculine body was to become fixed within representation and the popular consciousness. In this chapter then we note the shifts and changes in representations during the 20th century. We observe that, from around the mid 1980s and certainly by the 1990s, this heterogeneity was incrementally superseded by a standardisation and homogenisation of masculine bodies and looks that we call here the Hollywood body. It is striking that almost every male lead across contemporary film and television culture is now expected to possess this uniform physicality; an athletic build, sculpted abs and the ubiquitous 'six pack' and pecs. These features are the characteristics of the Hollywood body. We provide a compressed genealogy of the emergence of the nascent male sex symbol in this chapter, which is admittedly partial and selective, and note the centrality of the erotic appeal of the male star to the emergence of the star system. We then move on to note how the signification of the male sex symbol has evolved throughout the 20th and 21st centuries and has reached beyond Hollywood into a global context in which masculinity is now similarly eroticised.

### **Hollywood and the Cultural History of the Sexualised Male Body**

We have written elsewhere about the ambiguities of the male sex symbol. By focussing on Daniel Craig's signification in *Casino Royale* and the much commented on scene in which he emerges, like a modern-day male Venus from the surf, we have looked at the ways sexualised masculinity in popular culture, through the figure of the male sex symbol, must be resolved/explained in one way or another:

In all cases, this 'working out' is only ever partially achieved and it is in this ambiguous, semi-resolved nature that we can observe the enigmatic nature of the male sex symbol. There is, therefore, an obsessive attention paid to and investment in the male sex symbol's body; the male body as index of masculinity, as marker of virility and, more problematically, increasingly as site of desire. The male sex symbol in this respect is troubling because his appearance articulates a set of unresolved (or problematic) ideas about sexuality.

(Mercer, 2013: 89)

The sense that masculine sex appeal is 'troubling', and that male film actors whose status as stars is predicated on their desirability is likewise unsettling and disruptive, is a leitmotif in the history of the male sex symbol from the outset, as the history we chart here will note.

In the first instance it is not an insignificant point that many of the first film actors whose fame was associated with their erotic appeal and good looks were men rather than women. So even while the term 'sex symbol' brought into

existence by media reportage remains of indeterminant provenance and is customarily associated with female stars of 1950s Hollywood, notably Marilyn Monroe, many, if not all, of the first Hollywood sex symbols were in fact men.

### The Matinee Idol

In April 1924, *Photoplay Magazine* provides some clues as to an ongoing, contemporaneous debate around the romantic/sexual value of masculinity in an article entitled ‘What Kind of Men Attract Women Most?’ The answer to this conundrum is not at all clear. Indeed, the author, Adela Rogers St. Johns, is convinced that it is close to impossible to fathom the mysteries of the female psyche. However, the author is certain that the cinema is a critically important venue for women to explore their fantasies of romantic love and invest in ideals of masculinity. Rogers St. Johns observes that ‘Eighty per cent of attendance at motion pictures is feminine’ (1924, April: 110) and that by her estimation ‘beyond question, (Wallace) Reid and (Rudolph) Valentino stand as the two great matinee idols of this generation’ (110). While Valentino might be regarded as the axiom of the matinee idol, Reid, like many of his contemporaries, such as Francis X Bushman marketed as ‘the handsomest man in the world’,<sup>3</sup> has become an obscure figure, unfamiliar to contemporary readers. For instance, in June of the same year, a list of the ‘great lovers of the screen’ as nominated by female stars of the age was published in *Photoplay*. This list notably fails to make mention of Wallace Reid, who had died a year earlier, but Valentino is included alongside Ramon Novarro, John Barrymore and Conrad Nagel as well as names largely lost to time: Rob La Roque, Lew Cody, Monty Blue, Conway Tearle and Richard Dix amongst others (Terry, 1924, June: 29). However, in her article, Rogers St. Johns situates Reid and Valentino as the apotheosis of both male stardom and examples of a relatively heterogenous continuum of sexual desirability. Reid epitomised a trope that is still a familiar feature of American popular culture and one that we will observe was to prevail well into the 21st century. As Mark Lynn Anderson notes in *Twilight of the Idols*:

Reid typified a rugged, all-American virility that was a compelling version of psychological and physical health for young white men. Often reported to stand at 6’ 3½ and to weigh approximately 190 pounds, Reid was usually portrayed in the fan magazines as a happy and playful giant.

(2011: 16)

By marked contrast, Valentino, as we will subsequently note, summoned up an altogether more complicated and contradictory set of racialised fantasies that were routinely operationalised as ways to market the sexual appeal of male actors to audiences.

## Rudolph Valentino and his Contemporaries

A great deal has been written about Rudolph Valentino before and after his death in 1926 and it would be difficult to summarise in the limited space provided here. Indeed, with the possible exception of Charlie Chaplin, Valentino is probably the most discussed male star of pre-sound Hollywood. It is interesting to observe the extent to which Valentino's status as matinee idol/sex symbol and his signification as a star have become such a site of contestation and the extent to which this was the case even in his lifetime. In both popular and critical accounts, the ambiguities and uncertainties that the male sex symbol dramatises are brought to the surface. Interpreted en masse, this commentary provides a reconstruction of the actor as threatening, even devastating, in the affective power of his persona. In *Mythologies*, for instance, Roland Barthes perpetuates the myth that Valentino's face alone 'inspired suicides' (1972: 56).

It is without question that Valentino's stardom was intrinsically wrapped up in an obsessive interest in his body. Even in death, the public viewings of his embalmed body in 1926 were presented as a spectacle (albeit a lurid one) and provoked a range of hysterical responses.<sup>4</sup>

Once again Adela Rogers St. Johns, writing in *Photoplay*, offers us a contemporaneous perspective on Valentino's appeals that addresses in highly gendered terms the 'threat' that he was understood to present:

The lure of Valentino is wholly, entirely, obviously the lure of the flesh. Sex appeal is the one quality that raises him above dozens of other men exactly as clever dramatically and much better looking. He is passion, exquisitely personified.

The men of America have resented Rudolph's popularity. I have tried to find out why and have always received the same answer, from men of fair judgment and unbiased opinion. They resent it because they believe he appeals to the worst side of women because they claim his is the same attraction for women that a vampire has for men.

(1924: 110)

Almost 60 years later and in an entirely different social, cultural and critical context, Miriam Hansen arrives at an interestingly similar analysis:

In scores of publicity stills Valentino posed working out seminude, and in *Blood and Sand* and *Monsieur Beaucaire* he insisted on dressing scenes that would display individual parts of his body (note the close-up of his foot in *Blood and Sand*). Such exhibitionism, given the mechanisms of the apparatus, cannot escape fetishization: the male body, in its entire beauty, assumes the function of a phallic substitute. The more desperately Valentino himself emphasized attributes of physical prowess and virility, the

more perfectly he played the part of the male impersonator, brilliant counterpart to the female ‘female’ impersonators of the American screen such as Mae West or the vamps of his own films.

(1986: 25)

While we might take issue with several elements of Hansen’s argument here, informed as it is by an operationalising of apparatus theory, theories of spectatorship and psychoanalysis that we have contested elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> the performative nature of masculinity and sexual desirability (Hansen doesn’t cite Joan Riviere or the masquerade and yet still presages Butler’s theories of gender performativity in this essay) is of value to us.

In a later essay Gaylyn Studlar expands on Hansen’s analysis and notes not just Valentino’s popularity with female audiences but also the ways his star image exposes not just ambiguous attitudes to masculinity (she describes him as ‘epicene’) but equally the troubled racialised discourses that surrounded the star and were mobilised as part of his appeal to female audiences:

Certainly, he appeared to violate twentieth-century codes of American masculinity rooted in a Rooseveltian virility cult, and his popularity as a ‘Latin Lover’ also seemed to contradict the virulent xenophobia directed during the 1920s at immigrants from southern and eastern Europe.

(1993: 25)<sup>6</sup>

In the early years of Hollywood cinema in fact matinee idols were routinely marked out for attention on the basis of their ethnicity. While it would be far from accurate to suggest that this speaks of widespread liberal attitudes towards race, what it does point to is the extent to which racialised identities were mobilised by the film industry based on the appeal of their assumed exotic otherness and the mixture of thrill and threat that this summoned up. For instance, one of the most popular stars of the 1910s and into the 1920s was the Japanese actor, Sessue Hayakawa. Cast by Cecille B. De Mille as the predatory and seductive Mr Tori in *The Cheat* in 1915, he was to specialise in playing a vulpine seducer of naïve white women.<sup>7</sup>

Charles Ramirez Berg identifies the ‘Latin lover as the possessor of a primal sexuality that made him capable of making a sensuous but dangerous—and clearly non-WASP—brand of love’ (2002: 76). A further interesting case study is offered by the Mexican actor Ramon Novarro who was marketed as Valentino’s rival and after his death assumed the status of the major matinee idol of the age, his appeal lying in his athleticism and his body frequently on display.<sup>8</sup> Like Valentino, Novarro is described in press coverage, promotional materials and fan media as a ‘Latin lover’, his sex appeal prominently foregrounded as his ethnicity. As Daniel Pérez notes in *Rethinking Chicana/o and Latina/o Popular Culture*, ‘the Latin lover image is established by projecting a character as both foreign and erotic’ (2009: 43). His skimpy costumes in De Mille’s *Ben-Hur* (1925) reputedly created a sensation:

At times he is barechested and wears a small wrap around his waist, especially when he is forced into slavery and thrown into the galleys. In other scenes his chest, biceps, and muscular legs protrude from his Roman uniform. These revealing costumes played an important role in establishing Novarro as an erotic Other.

(43)

At the height of his stardom during the late 1920s and into the 1930s it was commonplace that Novarro's eroticised body was exploited in publicity materials. In his films it is striking the extent to which his body, in varying states of undress, is centre stage. For instance, in the South Seas fantasia, *The Pagan* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1929), Novarro is bare-chested for much of the film and the cinematic rhetoric, with extensive soft-focus close ups and high key lighting, emphasises his physical beauty. In *Daybreak* (Jacques Feyder, 1931), a scene in which he is undressed by his manservant and takes a bath is remarkable for the way his body is revealed as an exciting and erotic spectacle.

In a regular feature of *Picture Play Magazine*, 'What the Fans Think' in 1928,<sup>9</sup> two letters articulate the magnetic sexual appeal that Novarro was seen to possess and the extent to which racialised language is used to frame his attraction to audiences:

Novarro Perfect? Well, Nearly.

Quite a few times Ramon has spent his vacations in New York, but always as he would arrive I would be leaving for the other end of the earth. I had just about resigned myself to the cruel fate which denied me a glimpse of my favorite star, when the improbable happened—both in the same place at the same time!

Have you ever noticed that those whose paths have crossed that of Ramon Novarro always describe his raven locks, his olive complexion, his unassuming manner, the cut of his clothes. etcetera? But his voice, the keynote to his personality—they overlook that!

Some One Please Explain.

I wonder if any of the fans who read your excellent magazine can explain some-thing to me. Why is it that the foreign actors are so much more attractive than the homegrown ones. The thought occurred to me that the only movie actors in whom I am interested were born in other lands. They are, in the order named—Ramon Novarro, Ronald Colman, Victor Varconi, Clive Brook, and Gilbert Roland. In this list we have a Mexican, two Englishmen, a Hungarian and a Spaniard. It seems to me that the American actors are not good looking and can act only fairly well. Or, perhaps, the answer is that the gentlemen of the screen who are born in Podunk or New York are too much like the boy next door to be romantic.

(*March 1928*: 8–9)

## Body Culture and Beefcake: The Male Sex Symbol

While it is scarcely acknowledged, Novarro's sexualised physicality can be situated within the wider context of the emergence of cultures of health and fitness that were to develop significant traction during the depression years of the 1930s both in the United States and Europe.<sup>10</sup> In turn these factors resulted in a new generation of male Hollywood stars celebrated in embodied and sexualised terms because of their overt athleticism. There are examples such as Joel McCrae who in the years prior to the introduction of the restrictions of the production code starred in films such as King Vidor's *Bird of Paradise* (1932), which included scenes of nudity that were to become impossible just a year later. However, the most conspicuous examples of an emergent male body culture in Hollywood and the presentation of the star's body as erotic spectacle are provided by the athletes and later bodybuilders who found their way onto the screen and into the pages of fan magazines. The most prominent example of these was Johnny Weissmuller, a celebrated Olympic swimmer who was to become even more famous for playing the first onscreen incarnation of Tarzan in 1932. Weissmuller's remarkable success as an Olympian and his athletic physique were such that he was the first male celebrity used by BVD underwear as a swimwear model. Patricia Cunningham notes that the kinds of celebrity endorsement and corporate promotion strategies that are so commonplace today were well established in the 1920s and 1930s:

B.V.D.'s relationship with Johnny Weissmuller took an unexpected turn when MGM wanted him to play Tarzan in the movies. B.V.D. continued to have access to its greatest promotional tool, and it gained priceless access to Hollywood cachet. The arrangement that Alfred Flesh, Vice President of B.V.D., made with MGM allowed B.V.D. to place MGM film stars and featured players in its advertisements and the promotional materials for retailers. In 1933 the advertisements appeared in magazines such as *Life*, *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Movie Classic*, *Motion Picture*, *Photoplay*, and *Colliers*.

(2009: 46)

While filming *Tarzan the Ape Man* in 1932, Cecil Beaton photographed Weissmuller for a shoot that has endured in the highly (and perhaps atypically) erotic manner the star was represented. Recumbent in a loin cloth and framed by exotic foliage display, Weissmuller is offered to viewers as a passive figure observed unaware in a sybaritic pose that draws attention to his physical beauty. As Ryan Linkoff notes:

Those photographs laid bare (quite literally) the throbbing homoerotics of the Tarzan franchise and its leading star. Beaton used the erotic masculine appeal of Weissmuller to expose some of the libidinal qualities of the

Hollywood B movies with which the actor was most identified. In photographs such as this, Beaton cheekily engaged with American popular culture and its peculiarly 'over-sexed' quality.

(2012: 4–5)

Buster Crabbe, also an Olympic swimmer and contemporary of Weissmuller, was to similarly find fame as a film star during the early 1930s in films such as the aptly titled, *Search For Beauty* (dir. Eric Kenton, 1934) that fully exploited his athletic credentials with what were to become obligatory swimwear scenes in titles such as *We're Rich Again* (dir. William Seiter, 1934) and *She Has to Choose* (dir. Ralph Ceder, 1934). In an article in *Photoplay*, July 1933, the appeal that Crabbe and Weissmuller have for audiences is articulated in terms that connect their sexual attraction with a particularly American work ethic:

It isn't entirely magnificent muscular development, it isn't entirely their profiles, which makes Weissmuller and Crabbe outstanding as film heroes.

It is the poise, the grace of motion, the complete naturalness, which came from appearing before thousands of people in nothing but a six ounce silk racing suit and from forgetting everything but the determination to do a job – to win a race.

(38)

Indeed, Crabbe, who took over from Weissmuller in the role of Tarzan in subsequent films, was to become an axiom of active, athletic, white American manhood for generations of young people in the serialised films *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers* and by playing Billy the Kid in over 12 films well into the 1940s. The model that was established through Crabbe's celebrity of a handsome, athletic ideal of American masculinity, was to continue through the 1940s and to achieve its zenith in the 1950s. Moving away from the heterogenous models that early Hollywood offered up to audiences, handsome and conspicuously Caucasian young men presented simultaneously as role models and fantasy figures were to become a standard feature of 1950s Hollywood. Described disparagingly as 'beefcake', the supposedly superficial physical appeal that this generation of actors possessed tell us a great deal about the ways standards of physical beauty and sex appeal are contingent and can be mapped onto politics and culture more generally. Fan investment was key in the establishment of these performers as stars, as role models and figures of desire. For instance, Guy Madison was to establish a successful career as an actor in the mid 1940s and 1950s due to his adoring fanbase lobbying the studios. Samantha Barbas describes these tactics in *Movie Crazy*:

After Guy Madison appeared in a bit part in a Selznick film, fans across the nation formed clubs to boost the handsome young actor to stardom. Pressured by hundreds of letters, Selznick gave the young actor a more

prominent role in his next film. The president of one branch of the Guy Madison Fan Club revealed his tactics: 'I used to get my 25 odd members to write letters to Modern Screen magazine each month and Guy got so high that they had to feature him. After that everyone knew who he was and what he looked like and they started sending fan mail to Selznick and to other Magazines.'

(2001: 119)

Madison was the protégé of the talent agent Henry Willson who was subsequently to establish his own name (and notoriety) based on his particular aptitude for spotting handsome young men, who would then be cast based on their good looks and sex appeal. Providing these young men with new names, wardrobes *and* physiques, Willson's clients included Tab Hunter, Robert Wagner, Troy Donahue and Rory Calhoun. Willson's major discovery however was not to be Guy Madison but instead Roy Harold Scherer, better known as Rock Hudson, the so-called 'Baron of Beefcake' who was to define male sex appeal during the 1950s and well into the 1970s.<sup>11</sup>

Even while the provenance of the term remains uncertain, it is usually agreed that 'sex symbol' was first used as a noun during the mid 1950s to describe female actors such as Marilyn Monroe (Scheibel, 2013). However the term has been fairly routinely applied to men from at least the same period and significantly to male entertainers, actors, musicians and celebrities in ways that suggest that male sex appeal (often unlike its female counterpart) has been understood as both various and often difficult to pin down; it is not reducible to the beefcake phenomenon alone which denotes a specific iteration that was often regarded as inconsequential. Indeed, the male sex symbol ascription frequently seems to be an attempt to articulate something that is elusive (or is too challenging) to acknowledge head on.<sup>12</sup>

Marlon Brando's star image for instance was very firmly grounded in his sex appeal from the outset of his career and bolstered latterly by press rumours of his legendary and polymorphous sexual appetite.<sup>13</sup> However, during the early 1950s, as his status as a major star and celebrated exponent of method acting was being established, accounts of his popularity with female cinemagoers demonstrate the vexed relationship that critics had with him. As Murray Pomerance in *American Cinema of the 1950s* notes of the reception of Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire*:

In a film that challenges marriage and the enforcement of normative sexual behaviours, Brando's body is celebrated as an object of desire. If the film would not rein in the threat his image posed, the press would. Hedda Hopper's description of a party in which Brando's sex appeal is discussed by her female guests suggests that his body indeed produced as strong a response in women watching the film as Stanley's did on Stella, a response that, like a 'flash fire' was both dangerous and difficult to contain.

(2005: 63)

Just as the publicity machinery of Hollywood conspired to simultaneously construct and contain male sexual desirability in popular cinema, there are other conspicuous examples apart from the disruptive and relatively exceptional case of Brando where the threat (or promise) of male sexual desirability was regarded as too dangerous and consequently had to be managed more comprehensively. While Brando's unruly 'wild' reputation was to become part of his star image, Elvis Presley's entrée into Hollywood involved an assimilation and a very conspicuous attempt (only partially achieved) at desexualisation of his persona. The gyrating hips that had outraged commentators during a performance of 'Hound Dog' on *The Milton Berle Show* in 1956, leading to the apocryphal edict that in future he must only be filmed from the waist up, were to become merely a feature of his star image by the time he appeared in *Jail House Rock* or *Blue Hawaii*. Perhaps most striking is the case of Sidney Poitier, an actor as talented as Brando who also garnered a huge and devoted fan base, not only because of his acting ability but also because of his good looks. Poitier could easily have been promoted as a sex symbol and no doubt in the 2020s this would be a feature of his star image. However, in the racist context of late Hollywood this was not even remotely possible and, in fact, even while his popularity and his casting in major roles illustrate social change as a consequence of the civil rights movement in America, what is notable is the extent to which Poitier is scrupulously desexualised. This was an issue that drew attention even during the 1960s. In an article in the *New York Times* in 1967, the writer Clifford Mason identifies what he describes as the 'Sidney Poitier syndrome' and describes it as:

Sidney Poitier syndrome: a good guy in a totally white world, with no wife, no sweetheart, no woman to love or kiss, helping the white man solve the white man's problem.<sup>14</sup>

### The Search for the 'Sexiest Man Alive'

In 1972, *Cosmopolitan Magazine* ran what has been hyperbolically described as their 'first ever' male centrefold. The model in question was Burt Reynolds, whose star was in the ascendant with the imminent release of John Boorman's *Deliverance*. The standard account has it that Reynolds was persuaded by *Cosmopolitan* editor, Helen Gurley-Brown, to model as the feature would be a 'milestone in the sexual revolution'.<sup>15</sup> The shoot remains famous for the provocative image of a hirsute Reynolds lying on a bearskin rug, nonchalantly smoking a cigarillo while rather coyly concealing his genitals with his arm. The male star as centrefold was presented to a desiring (and presumed) female readership in all his corporeality and consequently constructed as sex object and sex symbol. Although Reynolds was reputed to have later regretted that he had been photographed in this way, noting that he was often regarded as a 'mere' sex object, this image was to define Reynolds' star image and appeal as a

Hollywood sex symbol throughout the 1970s and beyond. *Cosmopolitan* was at the vanguard of the industrial production of sexualised masculinity that was to continue through the 1970s and into the 1980s that involved both the presentation of male bodies for female consumption and the identification of Hollywood stars who were appreciated in part if not in whole on the basis of their sex appeal. In the wake of the success of *Cosmopolitan's* male nudes, *Playgirl Magazine* was launched in 1973 in no small part as a feminist riposte to the chauvinism of Hugh Hefner's *Playboy* enterprise. The magazine routinely used the Hollywood stars of the day as cover models thereby constructing an image of a certain 1970s chic predicated on the sexual allure of actors such as Ryan O'Neil, Sam Elliot, Nick Nolte and latterly, John Travolta. Even though the cover and interview space were routinely given over to major Hollywood and entertainment figures, these stars rarely went so far as to pose nude in the magazine. Nonetheless the first full male nude published in *Playgirl* was Lyle Waggoner, a star of the then successful *Carole Burnett Show* (Owens, 2014) and, somewhat incongruously, in 1979 and at the height of their popularity, the *Village People* appeared as partially clad centrefold models.<sup>16</sup> Despite having only modest distribution, by the end of the 1970s *Playgirl* had become part of the landscape of popular culture and the industrial production of a sexualised masculinity that was penetrating pop music and fashion advertising by the early 1980s.<sup>17</sup> During the 1980s then, the idea of a male sex symbol had become part of the popular culture landscape and that male actors might be presented as sex objects was relatively routine. For instance, marginal Hollywood actors associated with softcore exploitation or soap opera such as Jon-Erik Hexum, Miles O'Keeffe and Brent Huff were cast as 'hunks' in films such as the TV movie *Making of a Male Model* (1983, dir. Irving J. Moore), *Tarzan, The Ape Man* (1981, dir. John Derek) and *Gwendoline* (1984, dir. Just Jaeckin) (not to mention the numerous examples of instances where athletically built young men and bodybuilders were used for their decorative purposes).

By 1985, the idea of a male sex symbol and the concomitant notion of the 'hunk' had become so mainstreamed that *People Magazine* leveraged this pervasive discourse to start an annual campaign, 'The Sexiest Man Alive', in essence promoting male sexiness.<sup>18</sup> *People Magazine's* campaign continues to this day and remains a popular item for international media to comment on and a useful promotional tool. Furthermore, this annual event provides an archive that spans over 35 years that is particularly useful in the context of our research. It's especially interesting (and instructive) to note who gets chosen for this highly publicised and highly visible accolade given that the list, based on editorial decisions (and not a public vote for instance) is determined not by popular demand but instead who the editors of *People Magazine* are interested in marketing as sexy.<sup>19</sup> This is a list then that has a significant utilitarian value for a heterogenous constituency including publicists, agents, celebrity journalism and popular broadcasting, social media channels and commercial entities who have advertising and sponsorship arrangements with celebrities, in short

the industrial complex invested in sexualised masculinity for whom the male sex symbol is a potentially lucrative marketing category endorsed by *People Magazine's* annual campaign. Additionally, we want to suggest that the archive that this list constitutes reveals something about the waxing and waning influence of the Hollywood film industry in terms of shaping the popular cultural landscape from the 1980s onwards and the equally fluctuating status of popular television. Collectively, we see the list describing an American, mainstream, middle-brow sexual taste that points to the shifting nature of gendered and racialised politics in the United States over three decades. In essence then we are arguing that the *People* list of 'The Sexiest Man Alive' is constitutive of a normative standard of American male sexiness which in turn becomes an international standard by virtue of the reach of the list through global media platforms.

There is a paradoxical dimension to this observation that means it requires some qualification. One of the key tenets of this chapter is that ideas of what masculine 'sexiness' is, how it is manifested and distributed across media platforms, are disparate and contingent rather than as fixed and immutable as one might imagine. Indeed, one of the things that the *People Magazine* list draws into relief is the extent to which the constituents of male sex appeal, that is Hollywood celebrities, can often be ephemeral and locked into a specific moment in time or a cultural context. The actor Mel Gibson provides an instructive case study to illustrate this. We should note in the first instance that 'The Sexiest Man Alive' campaign was originally conceived as a device by *People* to promote a feature about Mel Gibson in the magazine. In 1985 Gibson's star was in the ascendant but he was not yet an actor who would have been regarded as a major Hollywood A lister. His reputation as a rising star was one very much based on his energetic performances, lithe physicality, blue eyes and sex appeal. Starting his career in Australian television, he was to come to the attention of an international audience in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the first instance through his starring role in *Mad Max* (1979), then as a young man with learning difficulties in *Tim* (1979) and in historical films such as *Gallipoli* (1981) and *The Bounty* (1984). In all of these earlier screen roles his dynamic performance style grounded in his physicality and his good looks attracted a lot of popular attention. Janet Maslin's (1981) review of *Gallipoli* in *The New York Times* observes the film's 'prettiness', which extends to the young cast and notes Gibson in particular as having 'wit, ingenuity and range',<sup>20</sup> and in a rather unfortunately worded and critical review in the same publication by Vincent Canby, also in 1981, he is described as 'open and sunny-natured and handsome enough to be a sex-object'.<sup>21</sup>

By 1985, Gibson was on the verge of Hollywood stardom, moving on from playing romantic lead roles, cast alongside established star name actresses, that capitalised on his physical beauty in their marketing as in *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982) with Sigourney Weaver, *The River* (1984) with Sissy Spacek and *Mrs Soffel* (1984) with Diane Keaton, to reprising his action hero role in *Mad Max: Beyond the Thunderdome* (1985) with Tina Turner as co-star. His

reputation as ‘The Sexiest Man Alive’ no doubt raised his stock as a bankable actor at this point in his career and paid dividends for the rest of the decade due to his casting in the successful *Lethal Weapon* trilogy. However, by the early 2000s, with scandalised accounts of drink and drug excesses and an arrest for drink driving, during which he was reported to make anti-Semitic comments, Gibson’s signification as a celebrity had become far removed from one likely to be included on any such list in future.<sup>22</sup> Whilst it is not true of all of the nominees on the *People Magazine* list (several of them have retained their status as sex symbols, indeed in some cases it has accrued with age), it is nonetheless the case that sexiness is temporally bounded (in a cultural, social and embodied sense) for many of the actors included in the list.

What then is to be learned from this archive? In the first instance the list has value in that it describes, an albeit highly mediated, conception of an American, middle-brow taste (and by taste we are referring here to aesthetics, cultural values and sexuality simultaneously). The ‘Sexiest Man Alive’ campaign constitutes a list over almost 40 years of celebrities (mostly, but not exclusively, actors) who have been promoted and are meant to be read as ‘sexy’. These are men whose celebrity status is ostensibly based on an idea of ‘sex appeal’ that is meant to be broad, even universal, in scope; in short, that as a population we share an understanding of what ‘sexy’ is supposed to be, even if we don’t subscribe to its tenets. Consequently, one of the functions of the list is to produce a normative sex appeal that is grounded in conventional handsomeness, symmetrical features, an athletic physique and a less well-defined idea of ‘charisma’. One inevitably wonders if the diversity, risk, even the danger, of figures such as Valentino or Brando would have enabled them to find their way onto the pages of *People Magazine*’s campaign were they still alive.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s and into the 2000s the list of nominees for the title of ‘Sexiest Man Alive’ resembles a collective journalistic mind mapping exercise drawing together all the ‘usual suspects’ in terms of American A list film stars and television personalities, for the most part, who have been promoted as sex symbols. The list then is of interest not in its surprises or idiosyncrasies (which are negligible) but in the legibility and commonsensical nature of who is included and of course who isn’t. For example, Sean Connery, who was nominated in 1989, when he was 59 and Harrison Ford who won the accolade in 1998 (by which time he was 56) are both actors whose status as sex symbols was located in their past careers by the time they gained their nominations. This simultaneously suggests that there is a version of masculinity tethered to notions of worldly experience and sophistication which ensures that sex appeal in some cases endures (as in Connery’s case) over decades, and we will return to this idea in Chapter 5. Indeed, it is interesting to note that many actors in their forties and fifties have been nominated and while a comparison with equivalent lists of female celebrities is beyond the scope of this study, it would be instructive to speculate on just how many women in their forties and fifties would dominate an equivalent list.<sup>24</sup>

An overview of the winners additionally indicates the temporally specific nature of both celebrity and male sex appeal. Just as some actors (Hollywood for the most part) have a sexual address to an audience that endures across a career there is also in some cases a zeitgeist to sexual desirability. We mean here that a celebrity can epitomise ideas about sex and sexuality in a specific cultural moment. The country singer Blake Shelton, the winner in 2017 could scarcely be regarded as an internationally recognised celebrity. Harry Hamlin (winner, 1986) and Mark Harmon (winner, 1987) were both popular actors and as well known for their good looks as for their roles in television police drama series. *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) for instance aired a comedy sketch in 1986 featuring Mark Harmon, poking fun at the competition at the same time as reinforcing the commonsensical nature of his victory; that the mainstream audience for SNL would understand him as ‘sexy’ was axiomatic.<sup>25</sup>

It is even more striking to consider questions of race and ethnicity in the context of a popular American annual media event that has so conspicuously reified white ideals of masculinity.<sup>26</sup> The *People Magazine* campaign had been running for 11 years, occupying a prominent position in the cultural landscape before Denzel Washington became the first black man to be awarded the accolade in 1996. While this suggests some early (albeit tokenistic) concession to a nascent diversity agenda, it was a short-lived moment as following Washington’s success, a consequence of his emergence as one of the leading male actors in Hollywood, there was to be a further 11-year wait until Dwayne Johnson’s (who is of Samoan heritage) award in 2016.<sup>27</sup> For a three-year period between 2018 and 2020, during which racial politics had become ever more divisive in the United States, Idris Elba, John Legend and Michael B. Johnson were the holders of the title. However, since then, the award holders have returned to what might be regarded as a predictable, middlebrow and white norm. The sense of a relatively heterogenous and mutable notion of masculine sex appeal that we can observe in the far less racially tolerant and diverse early years of the 20th century has by this point become altogether more standardised and normative. We want to emphasise here that over the years the ‘Sexiest Man Alive’ campaign has vividly illustrated the shifting nature of gendered and racialised politics in the United States and that imagining that sex and ‘sexiness’ are trivial matters in some way or are devoid of politics is indeed a mistake.

### **Brad Pitt and the Industry Standard Hollywood Body**

Since the early 1990s the name *Brad Pitt* has become popular cultural shorthand for the idea of a sexually desirable man and a point of comparison for the physical charms, or otherwise, of any man. He is notably one of only four men to be awarded the ‘Sexiest Man Alive’ award twice (Richard Gere, George Clooney and Johnny Depp being the others). The expression ‘he’s no Brad Pitt’ is now a commonplace and over 30 years after Pitt came to public prominence (and in his early sixties at this point) he remains an axiom of male beauty and

sexual desirability. Tall, blonde, blue eyed, with a lean athletic physique, Pitt epitomises a set of culturally specific ideals of American masculinity that are both valorised and condemned in equal measure. As the editors of the collection *Deconstructing Brad Pitt* note in their preface, Pitt is significant enough as star and icon of 1990s cultural values that he merits critical attention but the endeavour has to first respond to the prejudice that academic study of a figure like Pitt, and by extension any male actor whose popularity in part resides in his physical appeal, has often been regarded as suspect or frivolous and that this continues to be the case (in American academe at least):

Why think about (much less write) about Brad Pitt at all? Isn't he just a pretty boy, a propped up celebrity icon with passing interests in cool things [...] Or even worse, if we were to take him seriously, might Pitt be little more than indicative of the most galling aspects of American white male privilege, the entertainment industry, and/or advanced global capitalism?

(Schaberg and Bennett, 2014: xxi)

The case we are making here though is not an apologia for discussing Pitt or indeed any of the other actors discussed in this chapter. Instead, our concern is in the specific shift in the cultural and political status of the eroticised male actor's body and more specifically the type of body that becomes a normative standard from the 1990s onwards. Pitt embodies, indeed we would argue is at the vanguard of, this representational shift towards athletic male bodies offered to audiences for their erotic value.

It seems prescient that Pitt's early career involved routine casting based on his idealised boy-next-door charms. His first screen appearance was as an extra, listed as 'boy on the beach' in the 1987 film *Hunk* (dir. Lawrence Basso), a comic riff on the Faust legend in which a 'computer nerd' makes a pact with the devil in order to be transformed into a muscle-bound Adonis. The same year he was cast as Randy, the boyfriend of Charlie, daughter of Jenna (played by Priscilla Presley), in four episodes of the phenomenally successful soap opera *Dallas* between 1987 and 1988, again playing a character who was defined by his good looks. But it was three years later, when in 1991 he appeared in Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise*, that Pitt graduated from playing teenage heart throbs to epitomising a more adult, though still youthful sexuality. Onscreen for a mere seven minutes, it is not hyperbole to suggest that this performance transformed his fortunes and also created the idea of 'Brad Pitt' as a vector of sexual desirability for audiences and commentators alike. Pitt's appearance in *Thelma and Louise* was to create a furore with journalists hailing him as the new James Dean. Unsurprisingly, Levi's were to capitalise on his nascent star image and comparisons to Dean, by casting him as the latest male model in their much publicised 501 campaigns the same year.<sup>28</sup> A feature in *Elle* magazine in 1991 entitled 'Brad Boy' attempts to describe his appeal:

A body like a Bruce Weber pin-up. A face like a good-natured James Dean. A smile that sweeps over you like a southern wind. The gods responsible for equipping Hollywood leading men have been more than kind to Brad Pitt. Even his name is perfect. Brad (Of course it's real. Would anybody choose it?). It's like Chuck or Chet. Abbreviated, straight from the hip. Full of mischievous, down-home charm.<sup>29</sup>

In a similar vein, a profile in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1992 describes him breathlessly:

Even as he sips a glass of ice water in his suite at the Mayfair Regent Hotel, Brad Pitt smolders. [...] And it's precisely that slow-burning sensuality, first glimpsed in his steamy appearance as the sexy hitchhiker in 1991's 'Thelma & Louise,' that has put him on top of Hollywood's list of hunky heartthrobs to watch.<sup>30</sup>

In *Thelma and Louise*, Pitt plays a young drifter offered up as a sex object. His significance in the narrative is located in the temptation, liberation and risk he represents through his youth and vitality, his physical beauty and his playful and abandoned sexuality. In a chapter entitled "What all the fuss is about": Making Brad Pitt in *Thelma & Louise*, Cynthia Fuchs argues that Pitt:

incarnates and represents a particular shift in thinking about masculinity, in 1991, as well as changing structures of sexualization and objectification, female agency and volition. While he was initially presented in *Thelma & Louise* as the ideal sexual object—youthful, attractive, self-conscious, and eager to please—J. D./Brad Pitt has gone on to signify a more complicated masculine celebrity, perpetually youthful (and so, somewhat unformed), elusive, and feminized.

(2007: 147)

Furthermore, Fuchs identifies:

[the] prevailing use of 'Brad Pitt,' body, type, and character. He is simultaneously hard (as in taut, youthful, and attractive) and soft (an object framed and identified by spectators), arrogant and vulnerable, ambitious and imperfect.

(2007: 157)

Fuchs is arguing here for the exceptionality of Pitt as star and celebrity based on the specifics of his star signification. In contrast we are making a quite different case by identifying the ways in which his emergence as a star in the early 1990s and in the context that Fuchs identifies above inaugurated an industrial shift in masculine representation across popular narrative media. In *Thelma*

and *Louise* Pitt's body is presented in close, voyeuristic and eroticised detail for us to enjoy, and in his subsequent films throughout the 1990s while he was rarely represented in such an overtly sexualised way it was to become a standard feature that he would be shirtless at some point or other in the narrative. Through the repetition of this mode of representation, his slim, athletic 'swimmer's' physique, and particularly his developed chest (his pecs), were to become part of his star signification subsequently providing a blueprint for a physicality that has become an industry standard for young male leads that we call here the Hollywood Body. Our contention is counter intuitive in that the relative heterogeneity of physicalities and looks associated with the idea of a sex symbol during the Classical Hollywood period and even during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, as discussed in this chapter, have been replaced with an encroaching homogeneity from the 1990s onwards with Pitt's success at the vanguard of this change. During this period and onwards, the pec becomes ubiquitous. Once the preserve of the strong man and the bodybuilder, a developed muscular chest has, to a large extent, become a minimum physical requirement for any young male actor who aspires to be a dramatic lead. Furthermore, these athletic bodies are frequently presented, not as exceptional, but as commonplace and everyday; a muscular physique as normal and a normative standard for audiences to compare themselves against. As Vanessa Thorpe opines in a feature piece on male bodies in film and television, 'whether a leading man is cast as a mathematician, a surgeon or a scientist, the likelihood is that, once the shirt comes off, he will be equipped with both a firm abdomen and bulbous biceps'.<sup>31</sup>

### The 'Marvel Body' and the 'Bollywood Body'

In the final section of this chapter, we want to focus on the contemporary evolution of the Hollywood body and its analogues across popular entertainment outside of the West, specifically in so called Bollywood cinema. In particular, we are paying attention to the representations of masculinity in 21st century superhero cinema associated with Marvel and DC and what is colloquially referred to as the 'Marvel body'; the hypertrophic muscular male body associated with the superhero physique. Muscular masculinity and the action cinema body has been written about extensively elsewhere, indeed, in Film Studies since the 1990s at least, action cinema is the genre through which consideration of the male body has most often been explored. Yvonne Tasker, Stephen Cohan, Peter Lehman and others have all argued that masculinity and the male body is ostensibly a site of anxiety, neurosis and uncertainty across cinema and specifically staged and enacted in action films. For example, in the foundational essay 'Masculinity as Spectacle' mentioned earlier in this chapter, Steve Neale argues that men's bodies can and are only ever presented exclusively as spectacle and to provoke feelings antithetical to desire in popular film for reasons that are entirely teleological:

In a heterosexual and patriarchal society, the male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of another male look: that look must be motivated and in some other way, its erotic component repressed.

(1983: 8)

Even while Neale's argument is far more nuanced and receptive to the constant examples of contradiction to this normative standard of representation than this quote suggests, his thesis, and the position adopted by subsequent scholars that the possibility of an erotic reading of the male body in cinema must be disavowed scarcely holds purchase in the 21st century. The numerous examples that we have provided from the very early history of Hollywood cinema onwards rather undermine this argument. We argue instead that while muscular, hypertrophic male bodies are indeed still presented as heroic spectacle especially in superhero cinema in the manner that Neale et al. describe, this is not the only (or even the dominant) discursive mode of address.

Similarly, Susan Jeffords, in *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (1994), argues that 1980s blockbuster cinema was dominated by 'hard body' representations of a monolithic masculinity (both physically and psychically) that reflected the strong man politics of the Reagan era and asserts hegemonic patriarchal values. This relatively facile argument, that the action cinema body speaks ostensibly to straight white men and that its meanings are largely reactionary and connected to right wing politics, is one that has endured. At one level it's a persuasive and relatively uncontentious argument; that representation in cinema reflects contemporaneous value systems and standards. It is an argument that is now widely accepted and leveraged in mainstream cultural discourse about the working of popular entertainment. For example, Dejan Jotanovic, in an article on the ubiquity of the hyper-muscular 'Marvel body', cites 'academic' expertise to argue that:

'Onscreen bodies have absolutely changed over time, especially superhero physiques,' says associate professor Natalia Mehlman Petrzela, US fitness and culture historian at The New School. 'The 1980s were a big turning point in the rise of this new, strapping and striated superhero physique.'

She cites *Rambo*, *Terminator* and *Rocky* as the blockbusters that helped mainstream the bodybuilder silhouette into cinema. 'Super-muscular male bodies had been featured in physique magazines for decades, but were very much connected with gay culture,' she says. Action stars like Arnie and Stallone carved a new mould for straight male masculinity, at a time when working out was starting to become an everyday fixture.<sup>32</sup>

Our concern is that this kind of argument is predicated on an unproblematically universalising conception of conditions of reception and understanding of who audiences for these representations are. The argument implies that straight male audiences are the only audience (or the only audience that matters at least) and

precludes the possibility of multiple readings of the muscular action hero. Indeed, following Film Studies orthodoxy during the 1980s and 1990s the industrial apparatus of cinema is weaponised to ensure that any alternative reading would be disavowed; that the bigger the muscles, the more hysterical the attempt to close down a desiring gaze. If that was ever really an accurate account of cinematic representation of the male body (which we doubt and as we have contested throughout this chapter) it's certainly not the case in the 21st century. Media content across the Marvel 'multiverse', ranging from comics to animation to cinematic releases, exploit the tensions around the hyperdeveloped, hypertrophic masculine body and their potential as sites of sexual excitement and erotic investment for a range of audiences, sometimes in rather complicated ways.

For instance, the online sport publication ESPN runs an annual feature called *The Body Issue* that includes glamour shots of celebrated sportspeople, both male and female, routinely in varying states of undress. One might safely suppose that heterosexual men comprise a majority if not the totality of the audience for this content. In 2015 *The Body Issue* included an additional feature, the *Marvel Super Heroes Addition* with new provocative, nude, illustrations of Marvel stock characters, with accompanying commentary from graphic artists about the reference points and inspirations for the physiques that they produce in their work. The artists acknowledge that the physiques they draw are more than hypertrophic or idealised; they are sexually provocative. Mike Deodato observes that 'drawing super heroes? Well they have to be perfect. They are like modern gods' while Alex Maleev notes that 'sex sells; perhaps that is why the executives haven't given Wolverine a beer gut'.<sup>33</sup>

Jason Momoa, a charismatic actor, whose popularity is in large part attributed to his 'rugged' good looks and his muscular body, plays what might be described as 'character action roles' that demand some degree of dramatic range as well as a muscular body. He was initially a teen actor in *Baywatch* but came to prominence in the first instance when he was cast in the remake of *Conan the Barbarian* in the eponymous role associated with Arnold Schwarzenegger and then as Khal Drogo in the phenomenon that was *Game of Thrones*. In 2018 he was cast in the DC film *Aquaman* (dir. James Wan, 2018) with a marketing campaign that capitalised on Momoa's muscularity and sex appeal. Media commentary abounds focussing in detail on his physicality, and particularly his muscles as a vital dimension of his sex appeal. In a feature in *Men's Health*, Philip Ellis remarks:

Jason Momoa's sex appeal is kind of impossible to deny. In an industry full of buff, bro-y actors, Momoa exudes a kind of charisma and charm that feels completely authentic.<sup>34</sup>

Elsewhere we are advised that Momoa's co-stars in the latest addition to the *Fast & Furious* franchise, *Fast X* (dir. Louis Leterrier, 2023) were so distracted

by how 'hot' he is that it was difficult to focus on their roles.<sup>35</sup> Momoa is additionally of interest in the extent to which his status as action star and sex symbol (both based on his muscular physicality) mean that he is subjected to a focus of attention that results in the kinds of interrogation, imputation of motive and body shaming that we might usually associate as directed exclusively at female actors. For instance, he has been criticised for 'over sexualising' his ethnic heritage as a native Hawaiian through appearing on television and social media wearing elements of national dress.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, changes in his body shape have been scrutinised,<sup>37</sup> and at its most extreme this has resulted in a media-confected furore surrounding social media photographs that were framed as evidence of his failure to maintain his perfected body.<sup>38</sup> The transformative nature of the acquisition of a hypertrophic body is not confined to discussions of Momoa alone. The narrative of physical transformation and an 'uncovered' or actualised sex appeal has become a common narrative trope in the commentary surrounding male actors who take on superhero roles. Consequently, media coverage focusses on the travails of Hugh Jackman in achieving an ever more muscular body for his role as Wolverine in the *X-Men* franchise and James McAvoy's or Tom Holland's transformation from lithe teen to athletically built leading man.<sup>39</sup> The same can be said of Chris Evans, Chris Hemsworth, even the character actor Paul Rudd. Indeed, it has become an axiom that the development of a 'Marvel body' goes hand in hand with the attribution of sex symbol status as evidenced by the physical transformation of *Masters of the Universe* star Chris Pratt, from comedy actor and 'dad bod' to a ripped and muscular object of desire.<sup>40</sup>

The masculine ideals and corporalities that Hollywood constructs are of course encountered by a global audience and are consequently transnational in both their reach and influence. While it would be too simple to suggest that Hollywood is the originator of the hypertrophic superhero body that is in turn exported and translated in non-Western contexts into regional variants it is hard to deny that across global media culture, eroticised, muscular, male bodies have risen in visibility and prominence. That these bodies make meaning in different ways in different cultural settings however should not be underestimated. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the popular Hindi cinema (Bollywood) and the rise in recent years of what can be described as the Bollywood Body, a physicality that merges elements of the action cinema hypertrophism of Hollywood cinema with the overt sexualisation of the male physique that the post 90s Hollywood body ushered in through a very specific cultural context. We see these as bodies that *are* spectacular in Steve Neale's terms and bodies that are meant to be read as spectacle but this is not an over-determined spectacle designed to compensate for or mitigate against the potential of a homoerotic reading even in the context of a rather more socially and culturally conservative form as Bollywood. We argue that the prospect of sex and encouraging a desiring gaze is encoded into these images that cater to a wide international audience. For example, the film *Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram-*

*Leela* (dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansani, 2013), which is a loose adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, features a dance sequence for the number *Tattad Tattad*, with the Bollywood star Ranveer Singh at its centre. The number has been recognised as a key moment in which a musical ‘item’ features a male performer as its focus and the extent to which Singh is presented unambiguously as a figure of desire. As Nairita Mukherjee notes in a 2020 review of the film and the impact of this specific sequence:

For a good 4–5 minutes, you are hooked, unable to take your eyes off that figure, and frankly you don’t want to. For in those 4–5 minutes, that dancer is your object of attraction, of attention, or simply the object. Except in the 2013-released *Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram-Leela* song *Tattad Tattad*, it was a man holding our attention [...] he flaunts his abs as much as he bathes in the gaze of his audience. He is enjoying it, showing off, and it is exhibitionism at its best. In all this, Ranveer holds his ground, he has one job – to entice and titillate – and he does it well.<sup>41</sup>

Given the, often rigid, gender roles and narrative constructions of Bollywood it’s perhaps surprising that relatively little has been written about masculinity and especially the masculine body in Indian cinema. As Sumita Chakravarty (1993) notes, popular Hindi cinema has routinely been organised around the actions of a heroic male protagonist and this has involved his body being revealed for the audience’s confirmation of his dynamism and strength. In *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947–1987* she connects ideas of gender and masculinity in particular to the shifting political dynamics of the Indian state. Similarly, Banerjea’s “‘Fight Club’: Aesthetics, Hybridisation and the Construction of Rogue Masculinities in *Sholay* and *Deewaar*” (2005) includes an analysis of the veteran actor Amithab Bachchan’s star image as a rebel, martial arts practitioner and the epitome of the specifically Indian trope of the ‘angry young man’ during the 1970s. Until recently this might have been regarded as the standard representational mode for the male lead in Bollywood films.

However, this monolithic and normative mode of representation is understood to be changing and in recent years the male body has been presented in Bollywood in ways that challenge, even disrupt, cultural norms around gender in the subcontinent and map onto the shifting representational dynamics of the sexualised male body in the West.<sup>42</sup> It is notable that these representational shifts, that are very apparent across Bollywood output, are regarded with more than a little ambivalence. Indeed, the rather dismissive tone of some of the scholarship on men’s bodies in Bollywood is very striking and sees these shifts as very explicitly connected to global capital, consumer culture and the corrosive impact of Hollywood cinema. Sudhanva Deshpande notes, for instance:

The joke about actor Salman Khan is that he is the only Gandhian star in India: he has vowed not to wear a shirt so long as the hungry millions in

India go shirtless. Indian heroes of the past did not have physiques like his. Actors like Dilip Kumar, Shammi Kapoor, or Rajesh Khanna never displayed their biceps. Even the angry young man persona of Amitabh Bachchan was not premised on a muscular physique.

(2005: 196)

And even more acutely that:

The new century has also brought forth Hrithik Roshan, with a physique so perfect, it seems somehow unreal and plastic. Welcome to the age of the consumable hero who does what the dancer-vamp Helen did earlier, he dances like a dream, and his body itself, rather than his persona, is the object of consumption, much to the delight of the advertising world. It is only fitting, then, that this new, consumable hero wears Gap shirts and Nike sneakers, and when he dances, it is in front of McDonald's outlets in white man's land, or Hollywood studios, or swanky trains, and has white girls, not Indian peasants, dancing with him.

(2005: 196)

Similarly in the article 'Unbecoming Men: The Masculinity Crisis of the Bollywood Hero' (2022), Sonal Jha notes that more complex iterations of masculinity in Indian cinema have become possible including the emergence of 'unheroic' male protagonists in the 2010s that challenge the heroic masculinity of earlier films alongside the emergence of male Bollywood stars that Jha connects to the rise of consumer culture and failing (or failed) neoliberalism in India:

The cultivation of the physical self is part of the creation of the neoliberal subject. As an extension of the overall entrepreneurial drive, the individual has a responsibility towards self-improvement. The improvement of life prospects is linked to the enhancement of one's outer self – this is the fantasy sold as part of consumer culture as well.

(2022: 285)

There are numerous examples of leading male stars who epitomise this new 'consumable hero' with a Bollywood body: the aforementioned Hrithik Roshan, Salman Khan, Shah Rukh Khan (SRK as he is known) as well as Tiger Shroff, Shahid Kapoor, Sidharth Malhotra and John Abraham who is an especially interesting case to consider.

John Abraham is by no means the only leading man to sport a hyper-muscular physique in contemporary Indian cinema, but he is notable inasmuch as his corporeality is so insistently foregrounded in discussions of his star image (not unlike Jason Momoa discussed earlier) both by media commentators and by the small number of scholars who have written about men's bodies in Bollywood. In the film *Desi Boyz* (dir. Rohit Dhawan, 2011) Abraham plays Nick/Nikhil, a young

Indian in London with his friend Jerry/Jignesh (Akshay Kumar). Caught in the midst of an economic downturn both turn to the sex industry, leveraging their bodies as escorts and strippers. The trope of the courtesan is a recurrent one in several classic Bollywood texts (most notably perhaps in the case of *Pakeezah*) but the male sex worker is an altogether more contemporary (and risky) theme situated within the context of the neoliberal demands of Western society and moral values. As Gehlawat (2012: 72) notes:

the men here are objectified for both the women in the film and for the implied viewer and, furthermore, frequently seem to acknowledge this directly, performing more often than not exclusively for the camera. While such a narrative is quite novel, one must ask whether the novelty of such blatant metrosexual masculinity is perhaps meant to detract from what arguably remains a patriarchal, neo-liberal and heterosexual social structure, in which the men, while objectified, are still desired by women for whom they perform, exploiting their own exploitation by deriving revenue from it and at least appearing to enjoy themselves at the same time.

It's also notable in media interviews the extent to which Abraham frames his success as dependent on his physicality and the dividend that affords him within a neoliberal somatic society at the same time as the costs (psychically and physically) of his fame.<sup>43</sup> In an interview for *Film Companion* he tell us that:

I'm tired when people only ask me about my body. Someone was watching the *Parmanu* trailer the other day and said 'Yaar, John ne shirt nahi utaara' ('Buddy, John didn't take his shirt off') I don't want to be apologetic about it. [...] When you come with certain genetics into the industry, use it! You're a marketing person, use your strengths to position yourself in the minds of the consumer. But also educate and them that I have grey cells too.<sup>44</sup>

In summary then, since the early 2000s, the incremental ubiquity of the idealised 'Marvel body', its presentation as both an aspiration and a site of desire and its reach beyond the confines of Hollywood action cinema, has become associated in media reportage with physical and psychic costs, especially for young men. The implications in the social world of an overinvestment and reification of a muscular, hypertrophic physique that is frequently described as 'unrealistic', 'unattainable', 'unachievable' has become associated, not just in the popular consciousness but in therapeutic practice, with psychological harm, including self-esteem issues to, at their most extreme, a form of body dysmorphia that is described as 'bigorexia'.<sup>45</sup> This inevitably leads us to consider the ways discourses of health and well-being are tied in to and articulated through the idealised and sexualised mediated male body. This is the subject of our next chapter.

## Notes

- 1 See also Paasonen, S., Attwood, F., McKee, A., Mercer, J. and Smith (2020). *Objectification: On the Difference between Sex and Sexism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- 2 See Mercer, J. (2013). 'The enigma of the male sex symbol', *Celebrity Studies*, 4(1), 81–91.
- 3 See Fleming, E. J. (2004). *The Fixers: Eddie Mannix, Howard Strickling and the MGM Publicity Machine*. McFarland; Petersen, A. (2014). *Scandals of Classic Hollywood: Sex, Deviance and Drama from the Golden Age of Hollywood*. London: Penguin; Menefee, D. W. (2007). *The First Male Stars*. BearManor Media.
- 4 Rudolph Valentino-Connections (n.d.). Rudolph Valentino: His body ravaged as he died, he received "giggles" in death. Available at <https://rudolphvalentinoconnections.wordpress.com/2021/09/07/rudolph-valentino-his-body-ravaged-as-he-died-he-received-giggles-in-death/>
- 5 See Paasonen et al. (2020). *Objectification: On the Difference between Sex and Sexism*.
- 6 See also Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh (2021). 'The whitening of an Italian (American) Sheik: Performing race and gender in Rudolph Valentino's Sheik films'. *Italian American Review*, 11(2), 97–114.
- 7 Daisuke Miyao's *Sessue Hayakawa: Silent Cinema and Transnational Stardom* (2007) provides a very nuanced and comprehensive study of the star's career and influence.
- 8 See Andre Soares, *Beyond Paradise: The Life of Ramon Novarro* (2010) and an essay that attends to Novarro's closeted sexuality, Ernesto Chávez (2011). 'Ramon is not one of these': Race and sexuality in the construction of silent film actor Ramón Novarro's star image', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 20(3), 520–544.
- 9 *Picture Play* magazine, March 1948. Available at <https://mediahistoryproject.org/reader.php?id=pictureplaymagaz28unse>
- 10 See Josep M. Armengol (2014). 'Gendering the Great Depression: Rethinking the male body in 1930s American culture and literature', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 23(1), 59–68; Joan Tumblety (2012). *Remaking the Male Body: Masculinity and the Uses of Physical Culture in Interwar and Vichy France*, Oxford University Press; and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (2010). *Managing the Body: Beauty, Health, and Fitness in Britain 1880–1939*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 11 See John Mercer (2014). *Rock Hudson*. London: BFI and Robert Hofler (2005). *The Man Who Invented Rock Hudson: The Pretty Boys and Dirty Deals of Henry Willson*. University of Minnesota Press.
- 12 See Steve Cohan's account of the popular furore surrounding William Holden's performance in *Picnic* (dir. Joshua Logan, 1955) in *Masked Men* (1997: 189–194).
- 13 There is a wealth of biographies of Brando's career and personal life that are more or less salacious. See for example Stefan Kanfer's *Somebody: The Reckless Life and Remarkable Career of Marlon Brando* (2011).
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  - 24 The youngest winner of the accolade was the 27-year-old Tom Cruise in 1990.
  - 25 Sexiest Man Alive – Saturday Night Live. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uT0B7doQ0XI>
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# 3

## ASPIRATIONAL BODIES

### Health, Fitness and the Body Project

This chapter explores ‘fitness’ as a frame through which we can observe the sexualised masculine body in media culture. Our focus here is on an array of discourses of health and fitness across a range of online media outlets. The masculine body that is produced through these discourses, goal driven, optimised and aspirational, illustrates the ways in which the value systems of a somatic society are played out in and through corporealities.

In early 2022 global news and current affairs outlets devoted many excited column inches to social media images of Jeff Bezos’ ‘new’ muscular physique, in turn coining a neologism. The ‘buff billionaire phenomenon’ as it has become known, posits that bodies themselves are the latest status symbols (or ‘flaunts’) for the super-rich.<sup>1</sup> *Business Insider* regales its readership with the revelation that ‘Jeff Bezos is ripped now: Here’s how the Amazon founder went from scrawny to brawny’.<sup>2</sup> In an article in a similar vein in the *New York Post* we are advised that the era of the ‘paunchy playboy’ is over. Indeed, according to a New York based trainer quoted in the feature: ‘Successful people are disciplined [...] Being in shape personifies discipline and dedication.’<sup>3</sup> Readers will no doubt observe the specific choice of language in this reportage. The fitness regimes of the super-rich do not, based on these accounts at least, produce lean and abstemious bodies designed for health and longevity but instead bodies that are ‘ripped’ and ‘buff’. The kind of language that is being used here to describe the kind of masculine bodies that are seen as having value is important, as we have already noted in earlier chapters. These are bodies that are both hypertrophic, symbolically and physically occupying an excess of space but also have value as recognisable currency in the sexual economy of the body that media coverage invests heavily in.

The revelatory images of Bezos’ ‘surprising’ physique started circulating in late 2021. Published across a wide array of online news outlets as paparazzi

style images, the photographs of Bezos and his partner Lauren Sanchez on a yacht in the Caribbean are demonstrably staged.<sup>4</sup> The couple are photographed with a bikini-clad Sanchez showering herself and assuming a glamour pose while the muscular, bare-chested Bezos watches on. The images are part of a larger image management strategy adopted by Bezos and his contemporaries which, in a somatic society, equates physical transformation with renewal, vitality and virility. Here the pointedly staged ‘impromptu’ photograph of the off-duty plutocrat is designed to reveal (and leverage) his body for a global media audience, contextualised through the inclusion of his bikini-clad girlfriend, providing a curiously prudish alibi for this potentially homoerotic spectacle. To add traction to this, the images were accompanied by a yet more posed version on Sanchez’s *Instagram* feed (also recirculated widely in the press) of Bezos emerging from the sea and climbing back onboard his superyacht, captioned with the comment, ‘Is it just me, or is it hot outside?’<sup>5</sup>

In these images Bezos is clearly a middle-aged man; he is bald, his face reveals his age, his body is not the body of a young man, but the muscular body of a gym-trained fitness fanatic. The photographs illustrate his broad shoulders, and biceps, his developed chest muscles and a relatively soft abdomen (he lacks the prized ‘six pack’). His body, situated in the luxurious *mise en scène* of a superyacht moored in the Caribbean, speaks of economic power, social prestige and physical strength and virility. Indeed, these are images of luxury and a corporeality that equates success and sexuality with muscles.<sup>6</sup>

This kind of media coverage, focussing on the lifestyles and bodies of the so-called global elites draws an equivalence between affluence/corporate success and muscularity/sexual desirability and thereby presents these ideas as aspirational. To have ambition and be aspirational are routinely regarded not just as virtues but as necessary characteristics within capitalist culture and the context of neoliberalism creates conditions in which these personal attributes are celebrated as indicators of personal success and sexual desirability. In short, aspiration is a precondition of both a sexually appealing masculinity and the processes of capitalism.<sup>7</sup> The corollary of this valorisation of ambition and aspiration is the encouragement of envy and dissatisfaction which are of course the fundamental psychic mechanisms through which the processes of consumerism are perpetuated. We are making the case that in a somatic society, ambition and aspiration are embodied in and through corporealities that make emotions and affective states visible and physical; the linkages made explicit between masculine embodiment and success in its broadest sense. The rest of this chapter will consider the discourses that connect and conflate, health (both physical and mental collapsed into the amorphous discourse of ‘well-being’), physical fitness, sporting prowess and sexual desirability, and how these ideas are enacted through masculine bodies and across media texts.

## Masculinity, Aspiration and Sex

The visual artist Matthew Barney premiered his latest video piece, *Secondary*, in 2023. The video and associated installation are inspired by the connections between gender, spectacular violence and American football. In the work, across five screens an ensemble of dancers, athletes and actors perform a choreography that draws from the vocabulary of football technique and dance movement. Barney is an artist whose work has consistently explored masculinity, the male body, sporting and competitive metaphors and *Secondary* is an art-work that makes these complicated relations powerfully explicit.<sup>8</sup> Writing about *Secondary* in *Art Review*, Ross Simonini reflects on his own gendered relationship to aspiration as a route to discussing the masculinist ambitions that Barney's work often evidences:

When I first became addicted to aspiration, I began to fear failure. This was especially true for making art. When I started aiming for *greatness*, I wanted a direct path to my goal and considered any deviation a mistake. This desire made for a painful process, but it's the game you play when you play with ambition; suffer in the face of this chaotic reality or find energy within the failure that is inevitably, relentlessly to come.<sup>9</sup>

Aspiration is discursively framed as a personal characteristic, often gendered as masculine, in the West. One might reasonably assert that in the social media age to be aspirational is a marker of a contemporary, socially progressive masculinity and it is therefore a useful lens through which this chapter can consider how the highly politicised discourses of masculine embodiment, physical fitness and the vexed domain of 'well-being' that are often used in the most commonsensical and pragmatic of ways connect masculinity, health and sexual desirability around personal goals and ambitions. In this context we can understand aspiration as an affective state that is connected to and emerges in response to neoliberalism and the concomitant processes of consumption. As Garth Stahl describes it:

The discourse of aspiration is a discourse of social change; the process of 'aspiring' (and performing aspirations) is a 'relational, felt, embodied process, replete with classed desires and fantasies, defences and aversions, feelings of fear, shame and guilt, excitement and desire' (Allen, 2013b).

(2014: 94)

Andrea Waling also discusses how the mythscape of masculinity is tethered to notions of aspiration. She notes that masculinity theorists, such as Richard Howson, have argued that Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity is better understood as 'describing what men "should" do and should be as opposed to describing their actual reality' (Waling, 2017: 4). Indeed, Howson goes further to argue that:

Hegemonic masculinity as ‘configurations of practice’ offers only part of the story. [...] It gives expression to men and women’s aspirations and thus will be shown to act as the ‘empty signifier’ of gender.

(2009: 23)

The term configurations of practice, which in turn finds its analogue in Schrock and Schwalbe’s ‘manhood acts’ (and for that matter in the term assemblage) is one that will become more and more resonant as this book unfolds. Masculinity is, according to our argument, constantly in a state of becoming which deviates from the argument of Connell and their followers. Furthermore, what we described in the Introduction as the ecology of masculinity is saturated with sometimes contradictory ideas of how masculinity is enacted. We are referring to the production of oneself as the desired masculine object and the technologies and cultures that have emerged to facilitate that; the implicit and explicit prevalent cultural discourse that asserts that to be physically ‘optimised’ is to be desirable and is indeed a necessary precondition of sexual desirability. We would suggest in passing here that to have acquired mental ‘wellness’ is likewise a marker of sexual desirability. The romantic troubled soul, the enigmatically sinister Maxim de Winter of Du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, the haughty and emotionally detached Mr Darcy of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*’s brooding Mr Rochester, even the saturnine Heathcliff figure is increasingly no longer a vector of sexiness in the 21st century.

### Body Work and the ‘Body Project’

The politico-social context that is routinely described as neoliberalism looms large over discussion here. Neoliberalism can be seen as a condition in which, in a somatic society, bodies are regarded as capital to be leveraged and investments to be maximised to yield their results. Ball and Olmedo usefully summarise neoliberalism in terms that emphasise its commonsensical (and therefore ideological) operations:

The apparatuses of neoliberalism are seductive, enthralling and overbearingly necessary. It is a ‘new’ moral system that subverts and re-orient us to its truths and ends. It makes us responsible for our performance and for the performance of others. We are burdened with the responsibility to perform, and if we do not we are in danger of being seen as irresponsible. [...] We are produced rather than oppressed, animated rather than constrained!

(2013: 88)

The media scholar Jamie Hakim has made significant interventions through his work focussed on the ways we can understand practices of online self-presentation and promotion in relation to both the conditions of neoliberalism and the concomitant cultures of economic precarity that young men experience.

Hakim's work was prescient in that as early as 2016 in the essay 'The Spornosexual: The Affective Contradictions of Male Body-Work in Neoliberal Digital Culture', he was making this case:

The rise of this new digitally mediated body practice amongst young, white, middle class, cis-gendered men is evidence of shifts in late modern hierarchies of power that have recently been occurring in Britain. The rise in men going to the gym and sharing images of their worked out bodies began around 2008. This coincides with the intensification of neoliberalism that occurred in response to the 2008 economic crisis through the austerity measures that have been imposed in Britain and across Europe. [...] this is no coincidence. There is a correlation between the rise of this practice and the intensification of neoliberalism through measures of so-called austerity. (2016: 3)

Hakim's highly persuasive thesis places 'fit' (and sexualised) male bodies in a social and cultural context through a mode of conjunctural analysis that maps closely onto the textual, paratextual and contextual methods used in this book. His argument is that neoliberalism and precarity create conditions in which young men have limited avenues through which to make use of their physicality in the context of new labour markets. He notes however that masculinity retains symbolic, sexualised value (through the use of social media in particular) and those who 'invest' in their bodies and leverage them in the digital economics of sexual desire can yield benefits.<sup>10</sup> In the same essay Hakim elaborates by providing a theoretical frame through which we can analyse individuals who conform to the neologism 'spornosexual', coined by Mark Simpson (discussed in Chapter 1). Hakim identifies what he calls 'spornosexual capital' (2016: 6) to make his case. He notes that while the sexualised, sporty body that his respondents invest in cultivating seems a rational, even pragmatic move, bringing them sexual and social success, it is also a diminishing investment that needs to be constantly maintained. In essence, the cycle of precarity and uncertainty that has resulted in these practices ironically continues for those who invest in their perfected physiques. This is an idea that we will return to through a slightly different lens later in this chapter.

Hakim identifies his own object of study as white, middle-class young men, though in practice the picture is not so straightforward as it is far from only middle-class men who invest in spornosexual capital. Indeed, we would observe that there is a significant class dimension directly connected to these neoliberal strategies of self-presentation and representation. Questions of class always loom large in a British context and are increasingly complicated in the 21st century and intersect with regionality and ethnicity in any case. Nevertheless it is demonstrable that for young men from a working-class background or for those who signal themselves as having a working-class identity, these athletic and sexualised bodies are leveraged as a route to achieving not just economic

but also cultural capital in Bourdieu's terms (see Shilling, 1991 and Kukkonen, 2021). Evidence for this is provided in Hakim's later book *Work That Body: Male Bodies in Digital Culture* (2019). Hakim notes that reality TV is a prime object of study for considering neoliberalism, its effects on the landscape of broadcasting and the ways its participants, often though not exclusively working class, have learned (out of necessity) to use their sexualised bodies as collateral. In the 2014 article in *The Telegraph*, in which Mark Simpson first coined the neologism 'spornosexual', Dan Osborne, a cast member of the reality show *The Only Way Is Essex* (colloquially better known as *TOWIE*) was singled out as the embodiment of spornosexuality.<sup>11</sup> Tall, blonde, conventionally handsome with a sporty, muscular physique, Osborne provides a blueprint for a legion of equivalently good-looking, impeccably groomed, athletically built young men that reality shows such as *TOWIE* and subsequently *Love Island* have propelled into the public gaze for almost a decade.<sup>12</sup> Osborne's career trajectory is instructive of the contemporary mechanics of celebrity culture in which a neoliberal investment in an athletic physique becomes a route to the economic and cultural rewards of celebrity status. Achieving popularity as a cast member on *TOWIE*, he was subsequently cast in the popular TV celebrity diving competition *Splash!* in 2014, going on to have a short stint as a visiting performer with the male striptease group *Dream Boys* in the same year, and in 2018 became a contestant on *Celebrity Big Brother*. In the 2020s the spornosexual has spread his legs far beyond the world of reality TV and has become a masculine type that is implicated in and commented on across media cultures. Osborne's Instagram feed for example curates his public image as a family man, sports and fitness fanatic and, importantly, as an entrepreneur.<sup>13</sup>

The examples we are offering here are all derived from British reality TV formats though it is easy to replace each of them with examples from any other territory where reality TV has become a dominant form. A very compressed list of examples includes *Temptation Island* in the United States, *Married at First Sight* in Australia, *Uomini e Donne* in Italy and its Spanish equivalent *Mujeres y Hombres y Viceversa* which coined the term 'tronista' to describe an Iberian variant of the spornosexual (and popular figure of fun in Spain).<sup>14</sup> Our specific interest in the spornosexual cultural phenomenon lies however in the ways in which 'aspiration' and the aspirational in a neoliberal context are encoded in the bodies of these young men and their strategies for self-promotion and public image management. Hakim has argued for instance that theories of representation and self-presentation alone are limiting lenses through which to make sense of the personalities under discussion here and the images that they circulate. We agree as our research in this book and elsewhere has tended to focus on the context, discourses and affects that surround these images of perfected male bodies as much as the manifest content of an isolated image. As Alison Hearn observes in a prescient essay:

Our forms of self-production are deeply conditioned by our economic and social context; dominant modalities of 'self' are both summoned into being and illustrated in our cultural discourses and institutions. The ways we come to internalize or embody these versions of 'selfhood' are always contested and in flux.

(2010: 424)

## Sports Bodies

In July 2023, in what might almost have been a riposte to Bezos' spectacular 'body reveal', *Facebook* founder and *Meta* CEO Mark Zuckerberg posted photographs of himself on Instagram, bare-chested, posing with UFC athletes Alex Volkanovski and Israel Adesanya. Entirely unlike the *mise en scène* of leisure, luxury and conspicuous consumption that surrounds the Bezos 'impromptu' shoot, Zuckerberg's body is firmly situated in a gym location, his physique is tight, sculpted and demonstrably framed as a sporting body. This unexpected exhibitionism was connected to a rather unedifying social media feud between Zuckerberg and Elon Musk. In an act of what has now become characteristic caprice, Musk had challenged Zuckerberg to a cage fight in advance of the launch of *Threads* (*Meta*'s challenge to *Twitter/X*). The surprise twist in this example of confected social media controversy is that Zuckerberg not only accepted Musk's challenge but then went to work on developing his physique and posted the results for his followers and the curiosity of the world's media. To date, the much-hyped MMA cage fight between the two billionaire moguls has not materialised, but the images of Zuckerberg's 'ripped' physique were circulated across global platforms to much comment.<sup>15</sup>

What this albeit crass, though extensively reported, social media 'event' points to is the extent to which sporting prowess and the gendering of physical strength as a masculine attribute are often connected in cultural discourse, metaphorically, to business acumen and success. Furthermore, given that sport has historically been positioned insistently and largely unproblematically as the domain of men and masculinity and as a sanctioned cultural space in which men can invest in (and admire) the bodies of other men, sport is inevitably tied up in ideas about sexuality and sexualisation of the male form. Notwithstanding the significant cultural shifts in the status of women's sports in recent times it is still a sad reality that as Martha Wörsching described in 1999, sport prevails as 'a privileged domain of masculine popular culture' (1999: 177). More specifically, in the context of this chapter, sport routinely provides a set of cultural metaphors that often speak in explicitly gendered terms about how contemporary capitalist societies are ordered and function and how success is achieved within them. Indeed, neoliberal and capitalist discourse is replete with sporting metaphors; most obviously those around competing, fighting and winning. There is a sizeable literature on the relations between sport, capitalism and gender. For example, Ann E. Cudd observes the extent to which neoliberal discourses of individualism

and entrepreneurialism (though she doesn't use this specific nomenclature in her own essay) is marshalled in the sporting metaphor:

Competition in sports tends to breed a psychology of intensity and self perfection bordering on narcissism and egotism. Thus, the often quoted Vince Lombardi statement that 'winning isn't everything; it's the only thing.' But if it is the only thing that matters, then morality or decency, to say nothing of beauty, does not matter. Maximizing participation and contributing to education do not matter, either. In such an atmosphere, it makes sense to try to get away with breaking or hedging the rules whenever it gives an advantage.

(2007: 58)

It is also notable that these cultural metaphors equating the language of sport with ideas of aspiration and success have become embedded in public discourses in ways that make them seem axiomatic. So much so that one can observe that the commonsensical logic of the sporting metaphor on occasion seems to inform research questions in the social sciences in problematic and unquestioning ways. For instance, in an article published in *Behavioural Psychology* in 2019 based on research that was extensively covered in the print media before and after the publication of the essay, researchers determined based on responses to photographs of elite athletes from members of 'the opposite sex' that top male athletes are more physically 'attractive' than those who are less successful. In truth it's hard to know where to begin with dismantling the mountain of assumptions that research of this kind tends to take for granted. What it points to though, and why it matters in the context of this chapter, is the extent to which an association between sport, success, masculinity and sexual appeal is a powerful and pervasive cultural construction.<sup>16</sup>

As we have already noted in the previous chapter, through reference to film stars of the 1930s in particular, men's bodies have often been a site of erotic investment in relatively complex ways. While the arena of sport and the sportsman on the one hand provides a potential evidence base for Connell's hegemonic masculinity, this would be to misunderstand and misinterpret the complex discursive framings that surround sport. In *Sportsex* (2001) Toby Miller takes issue again with Connell's foundational theory as essentially universalising but notes nonetheless that:

Connell himself argues that male identity is complex and polyvalent, with no singular set of qualities consistently marked as masculine. Masculinity and men's bodies (symbolically conceived as unitary) are contested sites, fraught with contradictions.

(2001: 49)

The homosociality of sport as a practice, the cultures of sport and sport spectatorship seem ripe for conversion to homoeroticism as far as Miller is concerned:

[T]he very homosocial world of men's sports touches on the erotic – 'the paradoxical play of masculinity' whereby 'a satisfying sports competition is much the same as a satisfying homosexual, that is paradoxical, fuck.' It amounts to a meeting of coeval power displaced from the site of the overtly carnal.

(2001: 53)

In the passage cited above, Miller is drawing on the work of Brian Pronger whose book *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality and the Meaning of Sex* (1990), as well as the later *Body Fascism: Salvation and the Technology of Physical Fitness* (2002), was fundamental in making this argument.<sup>17</sup> What this line of argument can tend to disregard of course, in part at least because it is often written prior to the advent of Web 2.0 and the emergence of social media and the mainstreaming of digital media more generally, is that women are also engaged in sport as participants and audiences and that women can also engage in spectatorial relations that are about seeing male sportsmen, athletic men's bodies and masculinity as sites of erotic interest.<sup>18</sup>

There are any number of online list posts, colloquially known in journalism as 'listicles' aimed at an assumed female readership, that present a panoply of male athletes based not on their sporting credentials, or even necessarily their handsome faces (which rather undermines the logic of the article published in *Behavioural Ecology* mentioned above), but instead on their sex appeal located ostensibly in their sculpted and muscular bodies. For example, the US-based online magazine *All Women's Talk* provides a list of 'the hottest male athletes' based on the commonsensical rationale that:

Sportsmen have hot bodies. Add a handsome face and you have swoon-worthy package. There are some sportsmen who are so hot the ground they walk, run and play on veritably sizzles.<sup>19</sup>

The disparate list of swimmers, football players, even pro wrestlers, is accompanied, in most cases, by shirtless 'glamour' shots of the respective athletes, drawing attention to their physiques, disregarding sporting mise en scène altogether that might frame and contextualise their undressed states in many cases. So French footballer Olivier Giroud and NFL star Eric Decker are pictured in wet swim shorts at the beach and cricketer Mitchell Johnson, tennis player Rafael Nadal and BMX star Will Grant all pose, gratuitously in their underwear.<sup>20</sup> There are several things to note from this and the many comparable listicles that populate the web. In the first instance the neoliberal logic of the listicle format has become fundamental to the ways online media outlets gain traction. Ideas of competition of the most arbitrary sort are embedded into the 'league table' structure of the listicle format. Second, that youth and a pretty narrow version of an athletic physique are the requirements to be considered 'hot'. It's also important to acknowledge that the way that sporting men's bodies presented as instances for sexual pleasure

are nuanced differently. The body of the gymnast, the swimmer or the track athlete is not the same as the footballer's body, either in terms of morphology in many cases but also in terms of their discursive framing and the ideological work that their bodies 'do'. Added to this, as we noted in the previous chapter, body standards and ideals change, in some cases profoundly, over time. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s the Manchester United winger, George Best was routinely celebrated, contemporaneously, as much for his physical beauty as for his universally recognised skills as a player. By contemporary standards Best's 'ordinary' body, neither muscular nor sculpted, would scarcely mark him out as aesthetically exceptional. Indeed, there would perhaps be an expectation that he would undergo a physical transformation of the sort described later on in this chapter in order to achieve success both as a sportsman and as a celebrity, in the 21st century. An instructive example here is provided by the French footballer and manager of the French national team, Zinedine Zidane. Like Best before him, Zidane was held up during the early 2000s as both a charismatic football player and for his striking good looks and stylish dress sense and therefore as a sex symbol. In an article from 2002 in *The Scottish Herald*, Melanie Reid provides a breathless account of Zidane's charms, advising readers that:

Women couldn't stop talking about how sexy he was. Beckham might be pretty, but Zidane, it was generally agreed, had the kind of charisma which makes you go weak at the knees, and his flawed looks, his ordinariness only added to his sex appeal. 'He makes the rest of the players look like catalogue men,' sniffed one discerning convert.<sup>21</sup>

Even during his subsequent career as a manager (mostly in Spain) this aura of a sexy charisma has framed his public reception; listed as one of Spain's sexiest football managers and hired as the face of Spanish high street fashion chain *Mango Man* in 2014.<sup>22</sup> As an indicator of the shifting representational strategies during the 2020s, Zidane's son Luca who is also a professional footballer in Spain is often photographed at the beach or on the deck of a yacht showing off a muscular, gym-trained body of the sort that has now become *de rigueur* for footballers. Indeed, rather than presenting his ideal body as exceptional, it becomes increasingly the case that the developed pecs and washboard abs that Luca Zidane reveals on social media are 'normal' in the world of professional sports. In recent times the perception that a footballer may need to create a physique that conforms to prevailing standards of fitness (and hotness) has become ever more acute as social media and commercial endorsement deals often demand the tantalising reveal of an idealised and aspirational body that evidences physical prowess and 'success'. For instance, the body of the Egyptian player, Mo Salah, Liverpool's star right winger, striking initially almost entirely because of his unruly and unkempt curly hair, has been a fixation of many commentators since his 'transformation' in 2019. Josh Fordham for *Talk Sport* opines that, 'Mohamed Salah has gone from skinny Chelsea winger to ripped

Liverpool striker and Premier League Golden Boot winner in amazing body transformation'.<sup>23</sup> The equation between sporting success, celebrity status and the development of a muscular physique could scarcely be more explicit and this kind of coverage is typical of the tenor of media comment on Salah. As we noted in Chapter 1, the news media and journalistic practice in particular play a fundamental role in the construction of an idealised and sexualised type of masculine body, positing fitness and 'hotness' as coterminous conditions and as goals for readers and connecting them to sporting, financial and sexual success.<sup>24</sup>

Two figures loom large over proceedings in any discussion of footballers marketed as sex symbols in the 21st century, and certainly footballers whose public image conflates ideas of aspiration, success, sexual desirability: namely, David Beckham and Cristiano Ronaldo. Beckham and Ronaldo have been active agents in the construction of their 'brands' as much based on sex appeal as their sporting prowess. In this way we can see each, to use Foucault's formulation in his lectures on biopolitics and neoliberalism, as 'entrepreneur of himself' (2004: 226). David Beckham, in particular, has been unusually ripe for analysis as a cultural vector of ideas around contemporary masculinity, celebrity culture and brand management. The neologism 'metrosexuality' that we discussed in Chapter 1 is so closely connected to Beckham's public image he is sometimes, mistakenly, attributed as its origin. From the 1990s onwards he has certainly been at the heart of debates around new ideas of how contemporary masculinity is transacted and how male beauty can be a site of pleasure for heterosexual men as much as women or gay men. A digital video portrait by Sam Taylor Wood of the sleeping Beckham was exhibited in the National Portrait Gallery in the UK in 2004 and created a sensation. When he was nominated *People Magazine's* 30th 'Sexiest Man Alive' in 2015 his, now international, status as the paradigmatically beautiful man was assured. Beckham retired from professional football in 2013 but remains involved in football in a business capacity and is as much associated with his endorsement deals with sportswear brands and his own fragrance and optical lines. In this regard Beckham is often regarded, supported by the acumen of his wife, ex-popstar and fashion designer Victoria Beckham, as a case study of a sporting personality who has constructed a Beckham 'brand' in order to sustain a long-term career.<sup>25</sup>

Ronaldo, who continues a career as a professional footballer, has also leveraged his much remarked upon good looks as a means to secure endorsement deals. His personal brand remains tethered to the idea that his physical beauty defines his celebrity persona in ways that Beckham's shift away from sport/celebrity to business and philanthropy means that he is perhaps less insistently defined by this. Another related example is offered here by the Spanish player Sergio Ramos who illustrates the career trajectory of an internationally recognised footballer that connects the discourse of bodily transformation as a body project (that has framed reportage of figures like Mo Salah) to the development of a personal brand. A *Talk Sport* feature once again, as in the case of Salah, emphasises a miraculous transformation; that Ramos is now 'shredded', that

this corporeal development inducts him into sporting aristocracy; he is described as having ‘a ripped physique like Ronaldo’. The article goes on to remind the presumed male readership that Ramos’ physique is defiantly aspirational through numerous images of the bare-chested and heavily tattooed footballer working out and by posing the question, ‘So how exactly did he manage to transform from a scrawny right-back to the ripped defender who takes no prisoners today?’ The answer is presented surprisingly as a restricted diet and perfunctory exercise plan, with a *sotto voce* mention that he is under the constant supervision of Real Madrid’s team of physiotherapists.<sup>26</sup> An article in the Spanish online news outlet, *El Confidencial*, describes the new Ramos in the most hyperbolic terms, suggesting his cultural significance:

The physical change of the footballer is unquestionable. In addition to rhinoplasty, a consequence of a headbutt on the field of play that broke his nose, hair has been another of the great allies in his aesthetic evolution. The long hair that would give him the name of Camas’ Tarzan, the ‘Top Gun’ cut, shaved, bleached, with a quiff. ... Not to mention the beard designs and lengths. Sergio Ramos has been to male beauty trends what Beckham once was to metrosexuals, a fashion-initiating icon.<sup>27</sup>

In the same feature Ramos’ personal trainer speaks admiringly about his development informing us that he is ‘a gym machine’. This gym-trained, fashion-styled, optimised Sergio Ramos, reflective of a new, entrepreneurial, model of Spanish masculinity has not just been compared to Beckham and Ronaldo in the Spanish and international sporting press; his commercial ambitions similarly connect his own physical transformation (from ‘skinny’ kid into an object of admiration, aspiration and desire) with the development of himself as a brand through the opening of a luxurious gym in Madrid’s Moncloa district and through involvement in horse breeding.<sup>28</sup>

We should not fail to note that even though there may be a degree of diversity in the list of ‘sexy’ athletes that listicles of the sort mentioned above promote, whiteness as an ideal is disproportionately represented. As the research elsewhere in this book repeatedly draws to the fore, even in those cultural spaces where black bodies and non-white physicalities are so visible (sport) it remains the case that it is white men and white bodies that are routinely presented as a default barometer of sex appeal, desirability, perfection. Consequently, within a wider media culture which continues to continue to bracket and marginalise global majority bodies and identities, there is significant and particular interest in understanding how non-white sporting masculinities are presented as sites of potential erotic investment.

French footballer Thierry Henry, famed in the 1990s and early 2000s for his good looks and sense of style, is an especially intriguing example. Born in the Parisian ‘banlieue’ to parents of Caribbean heritage, Henry became brand ambassador for the Renault *Clio* in the early 2000s featuring in an advertising

campaign designed to encourage men rather than women to purchase this specific vehicle.<sup>29</sup> For an extended period, Renault had built their marketing presence on playing with cultural stereotypes of France and ‘Frenchness’ and in this campaign Henry was presented as the epitome of gallic *savoir faire*. The slogan of the campaign ‘Va Va Voom’ subsequently became a catchphrase as associated with him as it was with Renault’s car marketing.

Lean, handsome, charismatic and inordinately gifted, he draws adoration from a fan base that is restricted to neither men nor sports fans. He is one of those rare individuals whose wealth and success no one begrudges. Indeed, his life appears so closely to resemble a capitalist fantasy that a Renault car commercial made a capitalist fantasy out of his life.<sup>30</sup>

In Henry’s case, sporting prowess combined with charm and good looks transcended ethnic origin in order for him to become an axiom of French culture in a pre-Black Lives Matter and perhaps differently inflected political context in comparison with the 2020s.

Football is an interesting site for observing how health, wealth and sexual appeal are established as aspirational ideals in a somatic society and furthermore that these ideals of masculinity have an international reach, yet football is by no means the only sport in which a so-called ‘beautiful game’ and beautiful bodies are equated. For example, a listicle styled feature in the Indian edition of the men’s fashion and lifestyle magazine *GQ* presents a relatively heterogeneous (and significantly ethnically diverse) roster of sports stars who are described as ‘the most stylish sportsmen in the world’. The list, inevitably given its readership, foregrounds the Indian cricketer Virat Kohli, but also cites the African American basketball player LeBron James, the Brazilian footballer Neymar, and UK Formula 1 driver Lewis Hamilton alongside white athletes such as MMA fighter Connor McGregor and tennis player Roger Federer.<sup>31</sup> Virat Kohli is an instructive case study here again in regard to the ways his public image has been transformed in recent years and the extent to which this evolution of image management is played out in and through his body. His initial public image was that of a clean-cut, clean-living cricketer, married to a successful actress. When in 2019 he posted a picture of himself topless at the beach on Twitter/X, rather than being praised for his physique he was relentlessly mocked and the image became a popular meme.<sup>32</sup> However, only a year later and partly in response to fan interest in his body he was reported in an albeit ambivalent piece by *Cricket Times* to be ‘flaunting his abs’.<sup>33</sup> In 2023 the cricket star went further still by adding underwear to his range of endorsements through an advertising campaign with the Indian brand *One8*, built around his sculpted physique after many years of protesting that he would never appear in underwear for advertising purposes. Kohli is also listed alongside K.L. Rahul, Manish Pandey and Hardik Pandya in an article that overtly situates cricketers as sex objects with ‘jaw dropping abs’ and ‘ripped physiques’.<sup>34</sup>

An illustration of the changing aesthetic standards that professional cricket lays bare as a sport is provided (certainly for British readers at least) by Ian Botham whose popularity as a sporting personality during the 1980s was in part grounded in his appeal to ‘the ladies’ as a nascent sex symbol. In an article in *The Guardian*, Botham’s one time agent recounts, in the most extraordinarily nationalistic terms, the apparently irrefutable appeal of his client, known colloquially as ‘Beefy’:

[B]elieve me, he was a sex symbol. I saw one woman have an orgasm just from looking at him. His thighs were as big as my chest. He was like a throwback to the heroes of Agincourt and Crecy. I’ve got a photo here of him now and I defy any woman to look at it and not want to jump into bed with him.<sup>35</sup>

We have not seen the photo that the article claimed to provide irrefutable proof of Botham’s overwhelming sexual magnetism so can neither confirm nor deny that this is the case. However we can confidently state that Ian Botham’s physique and his demeanour, even regarded contemporaneously, are so far removed from contemporary standards of sex appeal that he is in many regards a defining example of the extent to which the very idea of a ‘sexy’ sportsman, (certainly a sexy cricketer) has changed a great deal in the intervening 30 years. The sexiness that figures like Botham purportedly possessed in spades was expressed through a display of masculinity and in particular ‘manliness’ through demeanour and behaviour; a sexiness that was ostensibly performed and performative rather than reducible to a physique. Whatever sense we might make of lurid accounts of Ian Botham’s magnetic sex appeal, rumoured sexual exploits and address to desiring female observers it seems highly unlikely in the 2020s that a sportsman with his ‘average’ looks and ‘dadbod’ physicality would attract much attention without a great deal of media management to contextualise his appeal.

What a figure like Ian Botham does point to (like George Best before him) is the extent to which a sportsman hailed as a sex symbol can traverse outside of the field of sport and into the landscape of popular culture more generally. This transition to celebrity status is once again in the contemporary landscape more often than not facilitated through an athletic physique presented for a mainstream audience’s consumption. Popular television competition formats such as *Strictly Come Dancing* (*Dancing With The Stars* in other territories) and *Dancing on Ice* for example have, through the medium of dance, routinely provided opportunities for sportsmen to not only offer up the spectacle of their physiques but also exhibit a bodily expressivity and erotic charge that sport might hint at but scrupulously never delivers. For instance the Welsh Rugby Union Player, Gavin Henson, the English cricketer Mark Ramprakash and the British athlete Greg Rutherford were all to use the surprise ‘reveal’ of their sculpted torsos to attract a fan following and to remain contestants on the British TV show

*Strictly Come Dancing*. In a similar vein the Scottish rugby player Thom Evans on *Strictly Come Dancing* and his brother Max Evans on *Dancing on Ice* were to exploit their muscular bodies both during their appearances on their respective TV shows and subsequently through photo shoots for the popular press and magazines such as *Attitude* targeted at gay readers.<sup>36</sup>

In 2010 the Evans brothers were also photographed nude for the *Dieux du Stade* calendar. Since 2001, the calendar has been a popular and much imitated success for the Parisian rugby team, *Stade Francais* and part of a marketing strategy built around corralling the interests of female and gay male sports fans in the beautiful bodies of the team's players. Each year the calendar, playing on the idea of 'gods' of sport written into the title, features black and white, overtly homoerotic photographs of an array of rugby players assuming neo-classical poses in the nude. In many ways the calendar and its associated 'making of' DVDs were prescient, illustrative of a shift in popular consciousness (and certainly marketing strategy) in which male bodies, dressed or undressed, could be seen as instances for mainstream pleasure and consumption and the gradual erosion of the divide between heterosexual and gay interest in the male body as a site of erotic interest to which we return in the next chapter and again in Chapter 6.

In the 2020s of course it is not just mainstream 'legacy' media outlets that are venues where sportsmen's bodies become sites of erotic spectacle and interest. The affordances offered by social media platforms are such that sportsmen are located in a contemporary context in which brand building (à la Beckham and Ronaldo) is an important function for the maintenance of a career as a personality and through commercial sponsorships. Social media platforms, bypassing many of the gatekeeping practices of legacy PR and media practice, enable the creation and easy distribution of sexually titillating images, so called 'thirst traps' that we will discuss in subsequent chapters. They also provide conditions in which sexualised discourses of masculinity proliferate and become commonplace features of a popular (online) conversation. The very things that might have been immanent, hovering in the ether of cultural discourse, for instance, that the lithe and sculpted physiques and the aesthetic aspects of performance and display central to the discipline of Olympic diving, or gymnastics, or swimming could be understood as 'hot' can now be articulated and shared widely. This is in part because social media provides a platform on which those conversations can take place and second because divers, gymnasts, swimmers and rugby players can leverage their perceived sexual desirability for symbolic and commercial gain in a somatic society. Media coverage that, in a decreasingly scandalised fashion reports the stories of Team GB Olympic divers and rugby league players opening *OnlyFans* accounts to share sexually provocative content via a social media site often associated with commercial sex work indicates the extent to which those very things that were until recently entirely excluded from mainstream conversation are now very much in the public domain.<sup>37</sup> While the putative sex appeal of an athlete might previously have

been acknowledged, it may have been regarded as either frivolous or prurient and of a relatively limited value. In the 2020s, as we have already seen and as we will emphasise in the final section of this chapter, hotness and success are seen across media and popular discourse as corollaries.

### **What Does Success Look Like? Fitness Culture, Self-help and Wellness**

In 2017, the so-called GigaChad became the basis for one of the most pervasive Internet memes of the late 2010s. Emerging from a set of images, initially shared on Instagram and then adopted and circulated through networks associated with the manosphere and Incel culture specifically, a media storm was to brew around the identity (and authenticity) of the GigaChad.<sup>38</sup> An article by Ian Ward about Ron De Santis' homophobic politics published on the *Politico* website describes both the meme and its context:

This meme, depicting a chiseled bodybuilder with a massive chin and a manicured beard, is a staple of discourse in the manosphere. Often referred to as 'GigaChad,' the name borrows from the popular internet slang word 'chad,' which is used to refer to a stereotypical alpha male. The origin of the meme is shrouded in mystery—it's rumored to have been taken from a series of photoshopped images of bodybuilders taken by a Russian photographer—but it first made its way online in 2017, when a version of the image was posted to the popular message board 4chan. The post introducing the meme defined GigaChad as, 'The perfect human specimen destined to lead us against the reptilians'—a nod to a fringe conspiracy theory that posits that the world is run by humanoid reptiles. Since its introduction, though, the meme has come to symbolize an ideal male form that, according to certain strains of thinking on the right, is being wiped out by the alleged feminization of American culture and media. Consider it the manosphere's statue of David.<sup>39</sup>

The GigaChad meme points to the many paradoxes and ambiguities that lie at the heart of the Incel discourse; a potent, and often self-consciously ironic, mix of envy, contempt, self-pity and admiration for the social and cultural constructions of normative masculinity that Incels claim to scorn. The GigaChad is in essence the Incel 'ubermensch', the hyperreal and hyperrealised version of the supremely aspirational male. His body is chiselled as if he were carved from marble. His sculptural facial features are paired with a body that is so hypertrophic, so 'shredded' that it seems impossible. The widespread understanding remains that the GigaChad is a digital composite rather than a 'real' person and this perception continues in a digital, post-truth context even though it has subsequently transpired that he is a bona fide Russian bodybuilder.<sup>40</sup> It is of critical importance to be mindful of the distortion and false consciousness of

the Incel worldview, nevertheless the figure of the GigaChad points, albeit in exaggerated terms, to an aspect of the pervasive health and fitness discourse and crucially its connections to sexual desirability that is resonant when thinking about attitudes towards the fit masculine body and its connection to sexual ‘success’ in the digital sphere. In short, for Incels, the GigaChad *is* social and sexual success embodied and simultaneously a potent avatar for its unattainability and unrealistic nature; to paraphrase Lauren Berlant (2011), the cruel optimism of the perfected body.

In the final section of this chapter we focus on some of the digital avenues through which the aspirational athletic masculine bodies discussed earlier become a frame through which men in the current moment are encouraged to think of optimising their own bodies and sexual appeal in the context of a somatic society. The ‘fit’ body then is about establishing an aspirational ideal we are arguing, through ostensibly neoliberal discourses concerned with maximising and regulating the body and the cruel optimism of an ideal body that is forever out of reach.

*Men’s Health* magazine is perhaps the legacy media title that is most singularly associated with fitness culture and the connected discourses that we have discussed so far, and therefore a particularly useful case study. The magazine maintains a strong print presence with international editions in 35 countries and has developed an online presence that contributes to Hearst magazine’s claims that it is the world’s largest men’s magazine brand with a projected total audience of 39 million viewers in 2024.<sup>41</sup>

First published in 1986 during the emergence of so-called 1980s fitness culture and as one of the longest standing publications of its kind it’s not surprising that *Men’s Health* has been regarded by researchers from a range of fields of study as a particularly fruitful site for the discussion of a range of issues to do with men’s mental and physical well-being. The consensus is that, as a publication, *Men’s Health* matters due to a profile and visibility that means it has been at the vanguard of agenda setting around the mainstreaming of fitness and gym-based physical training. Paul Crawshaw for example, in an essay on male health, the management of well-being and the ‘entrepreneurial citizen’, notes the extent to which the UK edition of *Men’s Health* proselytises the rationalities of a neoliberal consumer culture, as well as promoting implicitly the values of what we see as the somatic society:

In the text of *MH*, health broadens out to encompass both the physical and social body. Concerns include maintaining well-being and the avoidance of disease, the construction of the body as a signifier of success and masculine identity and as a source of ‘capital’ in interpersonal interaction. [...] Such discourses, it is argued, work to construct a ‘healthy male citizen’ under the directives of neo-liberal, risk-oriented cultures which promote individualised responsibility for the management of health and well-being.

(2007: 1607)

Susan Alexander sees *Men's Health* as evidence of the postmodern condition in which masculinity is 'branded':

In a stockcar-racing magazine, the products one consumes to display one's masculinity [...] would be different from those in *Men's Health*, but consumption remains at the foundation of the emerging masculinity of the postmodern society. Even Brannon's 'real men' must today demonstrate their manliness through consumption of the right products.

(2003: 552)

Arran Stibbe (2004) sees the magazine as having a masculinist discourse of power that they connect to Connell's hegemonic masculinity. Stefan Lawrence takes this critique yet further by making the important case that the white male body is insistently foregrounded as an ideal and that black masculinities are framed in markedly different ways that emphasise stereotypical and racist ideas about black male aggression. Lawrence notes that consequently the racialised body is doing different ideological work:

Far from male athletic bodies in *Men's Health* existing as neutral, objective, colour-blind, and/or meritocratic representations of the human form, they are admitted, manipulated and celebrated in a manner that serves the interests of white male supremacist discourses [...] future sociological explorations of *Men's Health*, and men's magazines more broadly, must confront racialised processes of representation and examine more thoroughly how dominant discourses of white masculinities inform idealised media representations of male bodies.

(2016: 794–795)

The question of race runs like a thread throughout each of the chapters of this book as of course this is work that returns repeatedly to the mechanisms through which white male bodies and a specific version of whiteness is established as simultaneously an aspirational ideal and rather paradoxically as the default norm. Susan Alexander describes this drawing on McCracken as concerned with an ideal 'future self' (2003: 541) linked to regimes of self-regulation. In 'The Strength to Diet: If It Fits Your Macros Dieting as Masculine Body Work', Warren Jensen, drawing on Foucauldian concepts of disciplinarity and self-regulation, notes:

Men look at other men's bodies as a barometer of what 'successfully' masculine embodiment looks like while marketing their own bodies as worthy exemplars. Men show [...] admiration for the bodies of other men by highlighting the willpower necessary to achieve their physiques. This tension highlights the precarity men experience in negotiating their dieting performance, illuminating the gendered strategies involved as men distance

themselves from the ‘feminine’ domain of aesthetics while participating in dieting practices oriented towards bodily transformation.

(2023: 13)

Our argument in this book differs from Jensen’s research findings, which suggests that respondents claim to not be interested in appearance per se and are instead concerned about their physiques for reasons connected to health and wellness. While this is no doubt the case in the kinds of personal accounts research respondents might provide, we would argue that the discourses that are marshalled by online platforms and media publications like *Men’s Health* and the wider social media sphere are expressly concerned with the cultivation of an athletic physique explicitly as a form of physical beauty connected to the embodiment of ‘success’ in sexualised terms.

We should be mindful however that the kinds of representations that *Men’s Health* trades in are not static entities and that they shift and evolve with changing social and cultural mores. Previously, as we have seen, the cover images of *Men’s Health* have been used by scholars in a range of fields as case study material to illustrate what prevailing standards of masculine ‘fitness’ looks like in its racialised, class-based and ostensibly heterosexual dimensions. The template format for the cover of *Men’s Health* since the 1980s has tended to be a black and white, high-contrast image of a bare-chested, muscular, white man who is established as an exemplar. However, in the late teens and 2020s a more diverse range of representation has manifested itself on the covers of both the US and UK versions of the magazine and the *Men’s Health* website. What is especially notable is that the cover model, frequently a celebrity rather than an idealised ‘everyman’, has often remained clothed.<sup>42</sup> This tends to indicate a relatively new Anglophone sensitivity about the forms of racialisation, sexualisation and the celebration of unrealistic body standards that the magazine has been routinely associated with. However, even if timely questions of representation may inform the editorial decision-making in the Anglophone print and online formats of the magazine, this is much less evident in its international editions. Sampling the most recent editions of the Argentinian, Dutch, German and Spanish imprints shows that topless male models still reign supreme as the default cover image. Exceptions to this rule, perhaps as a consequence of social conservatism, are provided by the Russian and the now defunct Polish editions but these are exceptions rather than the rule. The Chinese, Japanese and Korean editions of the magazine all reproduce an image of an immaculately groomed Asian masculinity possessed of a zero fat and ‘shredded’ physique with developed pecs and the customary ‘washboard’ abs. The Indian edition is similarly repetitive in both rhetoric and the representational strategies deployed, though in this case it is a mesomorphic physique that speaks of physical as well as athletic strength that is established as the ideal. This is achieved using celebrity cover models from the worlds of sport or cinema such as the Bollywood star John Abraham (previously discussed in Chapter 2) who was the cover model for March 2015, attracting some satirical attention for having interviewed

himself.<sup>43</sup> The actor Siddharth Malhotra is distinguished by being the only person to have appeared on the cover of *Men's Health* twice in India and is another example of a narrative of physical transformation translated into personal success through the development of a muscular physique observed earlier in our discussion of sporting stars such as Virat Kohli.<sup>44</sup> *Men's Health* South Africa is striking in that it alternates between black and white cover models, seemingly as a concession to the divided politics of the nation but the body type that is reproduced is strikingly consistent. In an early essay on *Men's Health*, Federico Boni discusses this representational consistency noting:

The interchangeability of the different issues of the magazine brings to mind a sort of 'globalization of the male body' (Connell, 2000), where the global media represent a single model of masculinity [...] the men's magazine formats are global in concept and local in production, but the local translation of the global masculinity which is represented and regulated by these magazines is almost an 'imagined masculinity', just like the imagined national community it refers to. The copycat masculinity that *Men's Health* provides to its readers is framed by such frames as the encouragement of self-surveillance of bodily health and appearance and the incentive of lifestyle benefits, within the primary framework of a globalized male body with its boundaries and its rituals of inclusion and exclusion, its anxieties of the flesh, its fears of invasion, contamination and loss of (bodily) identity.

(2002: 476)

Although Boni's essay was written over 20 years ago, the ideas of an imagined and a 'copycat' masculinity are exceptionally useful and relevant frames for thinking about the sexualised male body in the digital era. Once more we return to the cruel optimism that the athletic, sculpted body represents in a somatic society. This form of embodiment offers dreams of social and sexual success that few can ever achieve. Furthermore of course (and for older readers this will be even more resonant), to use another neoliberal metaphor, bodies are the diminishing assets that we noted through reference to Jamie Hakim's work, are not just part of a perpetual cycle of precarity but further, eviscerated by age, ill-health and mortality.

## Influencers!

As we have repeatedly noted, Mark Simpson has been an important and acute commentator on the changing perspective of the eroticised male body across media culture and has recently discussed the so called 'pro-sporno', which he describes as:

Self-objectifying and self-monetising shredded young men whose aesthetically impressive, under-dressed bodies arouse fascination, envy, and desire on social media, helping convert others to the sexy cult.<sup>45</sup>

It's not necessarily clear that there is a major distinction between the category of spornosexual (also Simpson's coinage) and this newer category of pro-sporno. For example, the extent to which the personalities of *The Only Way Is Essex* or the contestants on *Love Island* for that matter are not entering into a professional domain and are therefore 'pro' spornos is not clear. What is important for the purpose of this book however is Simpson's identification of a class of social media influencers who leverage their muscular physicality for its sexual appeal and as a marker of success; what Simpson wittily refers to as the 'topless workout business'.<sup>46</sup> However, it is tempting to suggest that all social media fitness influencers are doing the same job of work and that their messaging is largely identical. This would be to misrepresent an array of discursive registers and modes of address that are deployed to speak to an equally heterogeneous audience. The distinctive feature of social media that differentiates it from a legacy media outlet like *Men's Health* of course is that platforms provide broadly unrestricted access and limitless avenues for a plurality of voices and acts of, what Jean Burgess has described as, 'vernacular creativity' (2006). YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, even the 'adult' platform OnlyFans are all venues through which men with muscular and idealised bodies offer the pleasures of spectatorship and promote the promise of admittance to a world of success, personal growth, fulfilment and an elevated idealised lifestyle that can be gained via the development of a muscular physique. The rhetoric of these social media posts and the presentational and performative registers of influencers range from the quasi-aggressively motivational to jocular humour, to the glamorous and aspirational and the gratuitously sexual thirst trap material that we will return to in our final chapter.

Many fitness influencers focus on producing content concerned with promoting the pragmatic logic of a body that is legibly fit, which in turn equates with success and the achievement of 'life goals' that involve developing sexual desirability. In such instances, discourses are drawn from the lexicon of sport; competition and 'gains'; that to achieve a specific body type is to win; while failing to achieve your goals is not just to lose but to be, emphatically, a loser. This is a particularly gendered mode of motivational address, not about encouragement and enablement but instead, sometimes expressed in aggressive terms about mental and physical toughness, persistence, stoicism and 'resilience', a term freighted with significance in the contemporary moment of precarity, discussed previously. Instagram posts produced by the British personal trainer and influencer Ben Shepherd illustrate this register with great clarity.<sup>47</sup> In a video post in October 2023 Shepherd addresses his audience bare chested, allowing us to take in his muscular physique. He challenges his followers:

Do you want to look like me? Then you need to live like me!<sup>48</sup>

The assumption here is that it is patently obvious that we would want to 'look like him' although that seems rather undercut by the paradoxical message

concerned with the work of developing a muscular physique while cultivating realistic expectations. Living like Ben involves going to bed at 9 p.m. and rising at 5 a.m., maintaining a restricted diet and high-intensity workouts five days a week. He advises us that ‘nothing can get in the way of this’ and that you must ‘prioritise your health and fitness journey over everything else’. In posts in November 2023, he emphasises that a clarity of focus and single mindedness of purpose is key to developing a muscular body: ‘If you don’t program yourself, life will program you’.<sup>49</sup> This message is made blunter still:

Fools party, kings celebrate. You wanna drink? You Wanna Party? Then go fucking achieve something first and give yourself a reason to celebrate!<sup>50</sup>

Ben Shepherd clearly tacitly acknowledges that his followers both admire and enjoy his body and shares posts that cater to this, but many of the most popular (and followed) of fitness influencers, often associated with bodybuilding rather than fitness alone, go to great lengths to disavow any intimation that they are seeking to attract a desiring gaze. For instance, the British influencer Matt Morsia creates content that often features competition between himself and his brother Ben. Morsia’s content across YouTube, Instagram and TikTok adopts a familiar ‘reality’ format, drawing viewers into the lifestyle of the brothers built around the gym, fitness training and a jocular, masculinist, humour, often self-deprecating in tone but immediately recognisable to UK followers as what’s known by proponents and fans alike as ‘banter’.<sup>51</sup> In a similar, though altogether more hyperbolic vein, the American bodybuilder and influencer Max Taylor has one of the largest global audiences for his content with over 9 million followers on TikTok alone. Taylor presents as a putative muscle ‘geek’ and his social media presence is based around a particular form of humour that connects to so called ‘bro culture’. His persona as a comedian, a gamer, a geek, an idiosyncratic dresser and also as ‘natty’, which in this context means a bodybuilder who gains muscle without the use of anabolic steroids or growth hormones, is consistently connected to a common shared narrative of personal growth through physical transformation; from the skinny kid to the ‘ripped’ ideal.<sup>52</sup> These then are influencers in the ‘topless workout business’ who are not overtly selling the idea of sex or presenting themselves as sexy. Indeed, their address to viewers is about physical change and the focus that this demands; the ‘labour’ that the perfected body demands.

By contrast, David Laid, a celebrity influencer in the same stratospheric league as Max Taylor, presents himself for a diversity of audiences with a similar diversity of interests in his physique and is therefore far more in line with Mark Simpson’s notion of the ‘pro-sporno’. Laid’s boyish good looks and exceptionally defined and ‘cut’ physique mean that he is routinely held up as an exemplar of aesthetic perfection among bodybuilding devotees. His narrative is, like many others in this domain, also constructed around the personal and physical transformation that he has achieved. Like Taylor he was a skinny

youth who aspired to the (albeit remote) hope of achieving a perfected body, naturally, through commitment to a training regime. Significantly in Laid's case we are advised that Internet tutorials were his inspiration and the source of his gains. In essence Laid's embodiment is ostensibly presented as proof of concept that the output of influencers is effective.<sup>53</sup>

His Instagram page presents polished 'glamour' shots sometimes homoerotic in tone. *Muscle and Fitness* magazine features articles excitedly reporting his 'most shredded' posts and the sportswear brand Gymshark (associated with bodybuilding) has appointed him as a creative director, no doubt keenly aware of his male model looks and heterogenous sex appeal.<sup>54</sup> Laid acknowledges that his conventional good looks mean that he is subject to a desiring gaze and acknowledges as much. For instance, in a YouTube video that uses what has become a standard celebrity format, he reads 'thirst tweets' from admirers. The comments, that he responds to with intelligence and good humour regardless of their contents, include: 'David fucking Laid you sexy piece of shit', 'I would fuck David Laid FR (for real)', 'David Laid is so cool bro if anyone deserves to look like that at least the MF isn't a cock' and 'If your girl follows David Laid then just go ahead and cry yourself to sleep King'.<sup>55</sup>

High-profile and successful influencers such as Laid, Taylor and the Morsia brothers are part of an extensive social media ecology that includes an array of, mostly, young men who leverage their bodies for attention (and revenue) including a sizeable number whose mode of address is perhaps more overtly rather than covertly sexualised. This can range from influencers such as the British personal trainer Rowan Row who situates fitness training programmes within what might be understood as metrosexual lifestyle practices that include fashion, grooming and the advantages of a life in a major city.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, the American fitness influencer Sam Cushing offers both 'motivational' fitness and grooming support situated in what is presented as an 'ideal' gay male lifestyle context including a network of equally photogenic friends and a routine of beach workouts and extensive international travel.<sup>57</sup> Finally, there is a category of influencers such as Aston King and 'Lovely Martin' who specialise in YouTube Yoga 'tutorials' in their underwear that are very clearly meant to be enjoyed for their voyeuristic rather than pedagogic benefits and who use their mainstream social media profile to drive traffic towards the adult content they make available on OnlyFans.<sup>58</sup>

While there is a heterogeneity in the style of content that is produced and distributed by male fitness influencers (and we provide a limited and highly selective range of examples here), where there is a great deal of unanimity is at the level of the intended outcome. The desired result of this endeavour, and mental and physical commitment, is the production of an idealised and importantly a *photogenic* body. Indeed, we think it is of crucial significance that the result must be a body that can be photographed and that the bearer can use as currency in the sexual economy of social media that we will discuss in the final chapter.

That the online world is a difficult, potentially toxic space and that young men experience body dysmorphia and mental health challenges that can be exacerbated (and of course also alleviated in many cases) by social media has become a widely accepted and orthodox view. We note that there is an animated and often vituperative debate among fitness influencers about some of the dishonest or misleading practices that can accompany what for some is a lucrative enterprise.<sup>59</sup> These debates take place in a context in which the fitness industry and influencers can be understood to serve the interests of consumer capitalism. According to a report authored by Carlisle, Henderson and Hanlon:

People are obliged to ‘sell’ themselves in various social markets in order to have intimate relationships, social standing, jobs and careers (Bauman, 2007). The material and symbolic resources through which people in affluent societies produce and sustain their identities increasingly take the form of consumer goods and activities (Lury, 2003), a trend now showing global dimensions.

(2009: 1558)

To add traction to this thesis there is a proliferating corpus of social science effects studies that take social media as their object of study to argue that there is a teleological link between social media practices, muscularity and body dysmorphia in men.<sup>60</sup> This is research that, like work on porn ‘addiction’ and associated moral panics, is predicated on the assumption that media platforms exist not as part of networks of meaning and ecologies of gender but tend to be regarded as operating in isolation and are by definition therefore likely to cause harm.

By contrast we tend to see the materials that are the subject of this chapter and this book as symptoms and not causes of a somatic society. We are especially interested in the contradictions inherent in a social media landscape in which ‘unrealistic’ body ideals are venerated and celebrated as unique and simultaneously seen as ‘aspirational’ and achievable through the labour and individualism of neoliberalism. As we explore in subsequent chapters, platforms such as Instagram or TikTok are not merely alienating and dystopian venues in which ideal and ‘unrealistic’ bodies wait to harm the psyches of vulnerable young men. Social media spaces, and Instagram in particular, represent an unprecedented archive of male bodies and representations of masculinity which have profound ontological significance. Mindful of this we would point out here that terms such as ‘unrealistic bodies’ need to be investigated due to their ambiguities, their elasticity and of course because we don’t have a clear sense of what a ‘realistic’ body is in order to truly know what an ‘unrealistic’ one is. Furthermore, as we discuss in Chapter 7, new developments in digital technology call into question fundamental notions of ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ in any case.

What we have learned in this chapter then is that a legibly sexy body, that is a photogenic body that works in two rather than three dimensions, is an aspirational ideal in an attention economy and a somatic society. This is a motif that we will return to throughout this book. Optimised and aspirational,

yes, but the nature and shape of the sexualised male is not necessarily as uniform nor as hegemonic as the evidence of this chapter alone might suggest. To make this case, in our next chapter we will observe the shifting aesthetics and values of sexualised masculinity in the fashion and beauty industries.

## Notes

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# 4

## THE FASHION AND BEAUTY BODY

It is instructive to note that no less an august organ of the media than the *Wall Street Journal* has become preoccupied with masculine sex appeal in recent years.<sup>1</sup> In an article entitled ‘Could You Be Dressing Sexier?’ Jamie Waters (2023) charts what he regards as the stormy waters that men are required to navigate when dressing with this in mind, noting that ‘For many men, aspiring to “sexy” is deeply uncool, reeking of cheesiness and sleaze.’ Nonetheless Waters’ article acknowledges that, in the first instance, male sex appeal matters, even if some men struggle to achieve it and that (specifically in the context of corporate America in this case) men recognise their bodies as sexual collateral and want to use the tools of consumer culture to be regarded as sexy by other people:

‘Do men want to look sexy? I think so, yes,’ said Fredric Cibelli, a principal at a big New York consulting firm. ‘I do.’ [...] Derek Vick’s spin on sexy skews more ‘Butch Cassidy’ machismo. The 30-year-old, who owns a marketing agency in Hattiesburg, Miss., hits the town in Wranglers and a Henley tee, its sleeves cuffed to show his CrossFit-toned guns. Chunky-heel cowboy boots, which bump his height from 5-foot-10 to about 6-foot, complete the look. ‘When I go out, I want to turn heads,’ he said.<sup>2</sup>

Waters’ article is hardly presenting information that is new per se. For instance, Barbara Stern, in an essay in *Sex in Advertising*, draws attention to a survey conducted in the mid- 1990s:

Men were asked about how they would like to see themselves—that is, what their ideal self-image is. They answered that they would like to be sexy, good-looking, and attractive to women. Action qualities such as

assertiveness and decisiveness were ranked lower than appearance. One explanation is that the manly-man ideal has been influenced by responses to diminished differences from women on dimensions such as occupation, lifestyle, and cognitive traits (Kimmel, 1987). The current ‘muscular backlash’ represents a wish to preserve the ineradicable, biologically driven physical differences. According to ‘polarization’ theory, male and female ideals are physical and symbolic opposing extremes. Although depiction of the extremes may vary from culture to culture, the dualistic opposition remains a constant.

(2003: 23)

It’s important to remind ourselves that Stern’s essay is over 20 years old and makes use of a survey that was almost 10 years old when she was writing (and is now 30 years old). Consequently, we would contest the utility and applicability of the idea of a ‘dualistic opposition’ and its eternal nature in the contemporary moment. Indeed, the case that this book makes is for the mutability of masculinity and that its relationship to other genders is far more fluid than Stern’s account suggests. What is of value here then is the more quotidian, though perhaps counterintuitive observation (based on commonsensical understandings of a general male disinterest in their appearances) that, derived from empirical research, there is evidence that men generally *do* place value in their appearances and their sex appeal. As Maurice Patterson and Richard Elliott note, bodies, including men’s bodies, are the material from which identities are constructed:

Identities are composites of multiple and sometimes contradictory subjectivities that materialize as a result of specific discourses. [...] our bodies act as tableaux upon which we inscribe many symbols and to which we attach many meanings.

(2002: 231)

In our somatic society, sex and sexuality are commodified and desire motivated by images of bodies: beautiful, muscular, athletic, perfected bodies are mobilised to engage audiences in the processes of consumption. As Mike Featherstone noted as early as 1991:

The perception of the body within consumer culture is dominated by the existence of a vast array of visual images. Indeed, the inner logic of consumer culture depends upon the cultivation of an insatiable appetite to consume images.

(Featherstone et al., 1991: 178)

To add traction to this argument, Bryan Turner makes the links between capitalism, consumer culture and the sexualised (male) body in *The Body and Society*:

Capitalism no longer requires hegemony in sexual and personal domains, and this is precisely why cultural pluralism is characteristic of late capitalist societies. What capitalism does achieve is the commodification of fantasies and pleasures. There has been a rationalization of desire through the supermarket, advertising magazines, credit facilities and mass consumption. [...] The relationship between needs and consumption is far more complex than the hegemonic argument suggests.

(2008: 30)

The aims of this book include thinking about the relations between sex, sexuality, sexualisation and masculinity and to place contemporary cultural expressions of masculinity in a broader historical context. Additionally, our intention is to situate constructions of masculinity and the eroticised male body within the discourses of contemporary capitalism and consumer culture. In this endeavour, in this chapter, in particular, we continue work mentioned in Chapter 1, much of it published in the mid-1990s, notably by Sean Nixon in *Hard Looks: Masculinities, Spectatorship and Contemporary Consumption* (1996) and by Frank Mort in *Cultures of Consumption: Commerce, Masculinities and Social Space* (1996) at the point at which men's bodies had become avatars of contemporary consumer culture. Our argument is that this process has escalated and that in the 21st century men's bodies and masculinity have progressively become assimilated through the processes of late capitalism as signifiers of sex and sexuality in ways that are analogous to those that critical practice has routinely associated with femininity and women's bodies. In a somatic society then masculinity and femininity are equally sites for the staging of the erotic.

This book has focussed on the cultural institutions invested in the production and circulation of sexualised masculinity; so far, we have been attentive to journalistic practice, the film industry, sport and 'wellness'; we now turn to fashion and the beauty industry. All these institutions relate and connect to each other as part of the ecology of masculinity discussed in our Introduction, so we are not suggesting any kind of linear relationship between them. Indeed, we see each of these cultural organs as industries operating in an ecosystem that produces overlapping and mutually supporting discourses; vectors of meaning and meaning making and distribution producing what Barbara Klinger in an entirely different context referred to as 'networks of meaning' (1994). As a consequence, as we noted in the Introduction, the structure of this book is designed, largely heuristically, for the presentation of overlapping vectors of ideas and it is quite possible to read the book in whatever order the reader chooses. With more than a nod to Deleuze and Guattari (1980), understanding the networks of meaning that produce sexualised masculinity in this essentially rhizomatic framework is an objective of this research.

## The Fashion Body

Our fundamental argument is that bodies are not fixed entities and furthermore that masculinity itself is neither a rigid nor a homogenous phenomenon. Fashion, and specifically what we describe here as the fashion body, is especially useful as an illustration of the shifting dynamics of masculinity during the course of the late 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century. Any consideration of the fashion and beauty industry inevitably demands that we consider the extent to which the male body, and especially the idealised and eroticised male body, has become part of the advertising mediascape. As Patterson and Elliott note:

In the last fifty years or so, advertising has steadily bombarded its audience with images of perfect bodies, against which they can compare their own. [...] consumers' bodies are the products of labour (body work) that necessitates consumption and the use of consumer goods, and simultaneously, through visualization, their bodies act as advertisements for such labour. Indeed, the visualization of bodies is crucial in their commodification because, by generating a desire to consume, it invigorates the process of production [...] Instead of reading these elements in straightforward terms as a product of the commercial logic that 'sex sells', they can be interpreted, more specifically, as a manifestation of the heightened emphasis on the visual in late twentieth-century society and, on a wider level, as an expression of the intensified levels of commodification generated by capitalism.

(2002: 234)

While one might easily take issue with the use of terms such as 'bombarded' and their evaluative connotations and the simplistic logic that this suggests, as we argued in the previous chapter, the processes of consumption and the labour inherent in the production of a 'perfect' body lie at the heart of the discourses of the fitness industry and gym cultures. In this chapter we will extend this argument via the nexus of fashion and 'grooming'.

Furthermore, we want to argue that it's a mistake, albeit a pretty commonplace one, to regard fashion and fashion marketing (our explicit focus here) as somehow frivolous or without political consequence. On the contrary, we argue that what fashion marketing illustrates as an object of study is the extent to which brand marketing strategies and their associated advertising campaigns have been keenly alive to the politics of gender and sexuality during the mid-20th century and onwards and in recent years belatedly attentive to the politics of race. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the contemporary diversity and inclusion agenda of the 2020s is perhaps most conspicuously responded to, in cultural terms, through the extent to which major corporations and commercial entities, from car manufacturers to financial services, invest in marketing

campaigns that speak to an assumed audience attuned to questions of race and sexuality in ways that a decade ago would have been seen as extraordinary. In this context the male body as a site of erotic spectacle has become mainstreamed, as we have repeatedly noted. As Joanne Entwistle describes:

a qualitative shift in representations of men [...] young, muscular, sexy, self-consciously narcissistic, and offered for the gaze of women and heterosexual men in the new men's magazines and fashion magazines. This trend is significant because it suggests that the aesthetic appreciation and display of the male body, for a long time associated with gay men and black men, has extended into mainstream commercial culture to include white, heterosexual men.

(2004: 57)

There is a truncation and simplification of Entwistle's argument (which is ostensibly concerned with identifying the absence of muscular male bodies as objects of desire in fashion magazines prior to the 1980s) that this chapter aims to complicate. Nonetheless that there has been an expansion of representations of eroticised male bodies, that these images have become 'mainstreamed' in terms of their visibility and their commonplace nature is hard to dispute. However, what constitutes a 'sexy' male body is far more heterogeneous than Entwistle's account suggests and as we have argued in previous chapters. Indeed, as we will see later, the athletic, muscular body that the health and fitness industries construct as the epitome of masculine sex appeal has been gradually replaced in fashion marketing with a far more slim and far less hypertrophic masculinity during the 2010s and 2020s.

### The Male Model as an Archetype

The online magazine *Socialite Life*, specialising in celebrity gossip and targeted at a largely gay readership, publishes a regular feature entitled 'Male Model Monday'. The format of this item is simple and clearly based on trawling Instagram for profiles of men with modelling careers. The men who tend to be included represent an international cohort of young, muscular, athletic and overwhelmingly white masculinity. Fashion seems to play little part in their presentations of themselves, unless of course we consider the modishness of their slim and ripped physiques, but it's clear that they are presented to readers as erotic spectacle: bare chested, in swimwear, a towel, underwear or even nude, it is their bodies as much as their handsome faces that we are encouraged to admire (and presumably desire).<sup>3</sup> We are suggesting that the dynamics of this incitement to look at and desire these bodies is discursively and qualitatively different from the often rather more complicated and ambiguous relations to the representations of sports and fitness figures discussed in Chapter 3 and is perhaps even an encouragement to see these men, as we will discuss in Chapter

5 through a non-heteronormative lens. These images of male models (largely glamour/portfolio photography) exist primarily to build social media traction and no doubt consequently to encourage bookings for specific models. They are therefore images that act as calling cards and advertisements for the physical beauty of the male models depicted. Male beauty is the commodity that is being promoted here, and as historian Paul Deslandes notes, we can ‘dissect the commodification of the beautiful man by examining the material artefacts generated by new technologies, including the photograph and the illustrated magazine’ (2010: 1197). We can of course look beyond magazine photography and need to do so to understand the place that the male model occupies in popular culture and his connection to shifting ideas around male beauty, sexual desirability and the male body in consumer culture. At the most quotidian level, the male fashion model’s job is to show a designer’s work off to its best advantage in order to sell clothes. However, what a fashion model is ‘for’ and what fashion models ‘do’ in terms of their status within popular culture are qualitatively different functions. As much as ‘selling’ fashion, models articulate lifestyles, ideals and aspirations: dreams and fantasies that are literally embodied in the corporeality of the male fashion model.

The contemporary examples offered here are illustrative of the ways that male beauty and the figure of the male model have become assimilated into the discourses of online media platforms. This is not to suggest that the male model has always been regarded as a relatively unproblematic exemplar of male physical ideals. In fact, until the 1980s and 1990s the figure of the male model was one freighted with anxieties bordering on hysteria. The cult TV movie, *Making of a Male Model* (dir. Irving J. Moore, 1983) stars Joan Collins as a modelling agent and Jon-Erik Hexum as Tyler Burnett, an implausibly handsome rancher from Nevada who is tempted into the fast-paced world of fashion modelling in New York. His success is achieved at a high personal cost in a story that presents the world of fashion as exploitative and emasculating. The narrative thrust of *Making of a Male Model* is in many regards entirely predictable soap opera material, produced by Aaron Spelling whose series *Dynasty* (starring Joan Collins) was an enormous success at the same time. Made at a point in the 1980s when the idea of high fashion was increasingly framed as of interest not just to a wealthy elite few but appealing to mass market desires and aspirations, what’s notable is that this kind of cautionary rags to riches tale more typically warns audiences of the perils that lie in wait for young women rather than men who make use of their beauty in order to achieve success as in the case for instance of *Valley of the Dolls* (dir. Mark Robson, 1967). With a nod towards John Schlesinger’s *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), Hexum’s character’s extraordinary good looks expose him to the risks of sexual exploitation and drug addiction and preclude the possibility of living as a ‘normal’ man. In the end Tyler gives up the dissolute life of the male model and returns to the Wild West, presumably to recover his compromised masculinity in a setting appropriate for a ‘real’ man. While *Making of a Male Model* cautions against the

emasculating dangers of an industry based on the objectification of men's bodies, by the turn of the 21st century *Zoolander* (dir. Ben Stiller, 2001) satirises the fashion industry and constructs a stereotypical idea of the male model as naïve, deluded and inherently silly. The dangers of the fashion industry have been reduced to satire in *Zoolander* but almost 20 years after *Making of a Male Model* the film's subtext that male modelling is a substitute for genuine achievement remains, and that in order to regain or recuperate one's masculinity a man must reject the frivolity and set the essential meaninglessness of fashion aside. This ambivalence around male modelling and its relations to the constructions of masculinity are a distinctive and enduring feature of mainstream representation that do not necessarily connect neatly to men's experience of a media landscape in which idealised men's bodies are used to promote consumerism. Joanne Entwistle notes in an essay from the early 2000s about male modelling that:

This apparent lack of activity, the assumed passivity of modeling, make it seem an inappropriate job for a man since a 'real' man is supposed to 'do' rather than 'appear' (Berger 1972). [...] Since the 1980s there has been an expansion in male modeling, brought about as a result of the opening up of the 'men's markets' in retail and grooming product [...] Men born in the late 1970s and early 1980s have grown up surrounded by images of men selling all kinds of commodities, as well as celebrities, such as British soccer player David Beckham and the pop star Robbie Williams, who both display a quite feminine interest in fashion, the body, and their appearance. It would seem, then, that the taboo that men should not be interested in fashion or in looking good has been eroded to some extent, at least for a younger generation of men.

(2004: 56)

It is reasonable to argue that in the 2020s the ideas that Entwistle points to here, while not entirely redundant, are located in an account of the shifting attitudes towards, variously, fashion, grooming, men's bodies and questions of gender and sexuality more generally in the early years of the new millennium. Consequently, it's logical to suggest that men born in the 1990s and early 2000s have grown up with images that are not constrained by the demands of mainstream and legacy media in the first instance. This cohort, the so-called 'digital natives' if we are to accept Prensky's (2001) coinage, are used to representations of masculinity that are diverse, that are more inclusive in relative terms, that question and perhaps even undermine gendered dichotomies. They are also used to eroticised men's bodies as part of the popular culture landscape.

Additionally, the standard historical account routinely reproduced in popular fashion journalism is one that describes male models as coming to prominence in their own right as vectors of masculine sex appeal during the 1980s alongside the emergence of the so-called 'new man' we discussed in Chapter 1. This

popular historicisation of the genealogy of the male model (and one of the most striking things that we have noted is that there is little to no scholarly literature on the subject) describes a context where the visibility of the male model escalates during the 1990s with figures like Markus Schenkenberg, Mark Vanderloo, Tony Ward and, by the early 2000s, with models such as David Gandy becoming fixtures of popular media culture.<sup>4</sup> It is also, we note, demonstrably the case that the representative function of the male fashion model as an exemplar is to reinforce cultural whiteness. This is not to say that black models are absent. The orthodox journalistic narrative usually includes the black model Tyson Beckford who became the 'face' of Ralph Lauren's *Polo* line in 1993. However, there is a much more persuasive account that points to the importance of black male models, indeed that the earliest examples of successful male models with a prominent public profile were in fact black, which seems to have been erased both from popular consciousness and from the scant scholarship in the area.

The actor Richard Roundtree, for example, was a successful male model with a career dating back to the early 1960s, long before he came to fame as the star of *Shaft* (dir. Gordon Parks, 1971) and became the very embodiment of male sex appeal and fashion style. We contend that the success of *Shaft*, as part of the emergence of so-called Blaxploitation Cinema in the early 1970s, consolidated Roundtree's status as a handsome man and a stylish dresser. His wardrobe as the eponymous John Shaft, polo neck knitwear, leather trenchcoat, black leather biker jackets and jeans, wide lapels and plaid tailoring, was to establish a fashion blueprint that dominated men's fashion during the early to mid-1970s. The association between black men's style and high fashion was such that by the mid-1970s black models were routinely cast by fashion designers for runway shows. Sterling St. Jacques for instance, who became a habitué of *Studio 54* in the late 1970s, walked the runway at the, now legendary, 'Grand Divertissement' at Versailles in 1973, regarded as a moment at which a group of black American fashion models transformed the aesthetic of the high fashion industry for the remainder of the decade.<sup>5</sup> He was a model for the French fashion house Givenchy and a runway model for Yves Saint Laurent in 1975 as well as modelling for Halston and Calvin Klein, in essence the house designers for the denizens of *Studio 54*. Favouring blue contact lenses that attracted the title of 'il nero dagli occhi blu' (the blue-eyed black man) in Italy where he had a short music career, St. Jacques' life story was clad in a raiment of glamour, rumours of affairs with men and women and a 'mysterious' disappearance from public view in the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> In 1977 *GQ*, a magazine often regarded as conservative in its editorial and casting policies, featured the Swiss model Urs Althaus as their first black male model and again in 1979 Renauld White was to become the first African American male model on the front cover of this most mainstream of fashion magazines.<sup>7</sup>

Although black models, both male and female, were featured in leading publications such as *Vogue* and *GQ* and fashion designers were routinely using black models in runway shows from the mid-1970s onwards, this is something

that has often been overlooked in the historicisation of fashion and certainly in mainstream narratives around the emergence of the male model. Instead, the story that is most often told about the evolution of male modelling is one that produces whiteness as both a cultural standard and as normative. Furthermore, a very specific, culturally and historically located whiteness becomes both standardised and idealised. Paradoxically then, in the mid- to late 1970s and into the early 1980s while figures like Sterling St. Jacques and Renauld White developed successful careers as models working at the highest level, at the same time, according to the standard journalistic account at least, an ideal of white American masculinity is formalised and epitomised by a generation of male models. Lean, athletic, square jawed, aquiline, blonde and ostensibly patrician in their physicality, models such as Jeff Aquilon and Bill Curry represent the epitome of this white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant aesthetic and were ubiquitous as the faces of major brands such as Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein and Burberry from the late 1970s and into the 1980s. This specific (and corporate) aesthetic was to be especially pervasive well into the 1990s. So pervasive in fact that it provided the conditions for the model John Pearson, cast alongside Naomi Campbell, Linda Evangelista, Tatjana Patitz, Christy Turlington and Cindy Crawford (collectively known as the ‘supermodels’ of the age) in David Fincher’s video for the George Michael song *Freedom! ’90*, to be described in numerous articles in the fashion press as the ‘first male supermodel’.<sup>8</sup>

If the term ‘male supermodel’ has any use value at all, it is one that could perhaps be applied to the British model David Gandy. In many respects Gandy is the axiom of the male model in the 21st century. His trajectory into the fashion business, discovered through a modelling competition on daytime television in the UK, maps onto the emergence of the reality TV phenomenon in the early 2000s. His contract with the modelling agency *Select Model Management* meant that he was cast in campaigns for an array of high street fashion outlets and it was not until he was picked up by the Italian high fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana in 2006 that he was to move towards the status of the ‘highest paid male supermodel’, according to *Forbes* magazine.<sup>9</sup> The legibility of Gandy’s physique and looks are key to his celebrity status as male ‘supermodel’ and in many ways he represents a regressive ideal of male physical beauty. Nonetheless he remains, over 20 years after the start of his career, a figure who is insistently presented as contemporary ‘beefcake’ across any number of fashion outlets.<sup>10</sup> Famed for his body as much as his face, it is customary for any feature in the fashion and popular press to use a topless shot of the model to indicate his appeal to viewers – we return to Gandy below in our discussion of fragrance advertising.

## **Black Lives Matter and the Changing Faces of Fashion Advertising**

The events of 2020 following the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer sparked mass protests across America and the rest of the Western World mobilised around the *Black Lives Matter* (BLM) movement. The consequences of the protests and the social, cultural and political shifts that they have

initiated are still unfolding as we author this book. One of the perhaps less anticipated changes in this movement for social justice is the extent to which corporate entities have embraced the diversity agenda in order to align their brands with a politics that connects to the perceived values of Generation Z. This manifests itself in multiple ways but one of them is the extent to which, across advertising (this is not a phenomenon that is confined to fashion advertising alone) in the aftermath of the BLM protests we can see a visibility of black and brown faces and bodies that is exponential. Whilst this was a trend in advertising that was already underway with large brands such as Dove and Gillette creating campaigns around body positivity for example, the extent to which these marketing strategies were deployed was clearly escalated.<sup>11</sup> This is not a phenomenon that has been universally welcomed of course. The critique of what has become known as ‘woke washing’ in which corporate entities identify a commercial advantage in parading superficial diversity credentials is routinely levelled at such companies.<sup>12</sup> Montez de Oca, Mason and Ahn describe this process:

Ignoring the inter-twinning of racial violence and capitalist exploitation (see Marable, 1983), capitalists have responded to the crisis as a problem in public relations and a marketing opportunity.

(2022: 1166)

This new cultural (and commercial) context has inevitable implications for the fashion business which is an institution after all predicated on selling ideas of the ‘new’ and the cutting edge. We argue that this manifests itself in a degree of diversification of the contemporary male fashion body which has become increasingly youthful, skinny and less muscular (we are of course describing relative degrees of diversification here) and in the promotion of black and brown models. Even the most mainstream of fashion companies including the fashion press have responded to this. For example, an article of 2023 in *Women’s Wear Daily* (WWD), perhaps one of the more conservative of fashion publications, provides a listicle of ‘top male models through the years’ that includes not just Tyson Beckford but also contemporary black models such as Alton Mason and Broderick Hunter and the Asian model Godfrey Gao alongside the more routine roster of Mark Vanderloo, David Gandy et al.<sup>13</sup> The South African online fashion magazine *Dossier* provides their own list of top male models for 2023 that reflects the zeitgeist rather more accurately than WWD’s altogether more conventional account. The list includes not just black models such as Alton Mason and Ottawa Kwami but also the Japanese model Kohei Tabatake, alongside youthful white models such as Lucky Blue Smith and the German model Leon Dame whose unconventional looks and striking runway performance style have created a social media furore.<sup>14</sup> One might speculate on the extent to which, in the sphere of fashion at least, the fetishisation of muscles and the athletically built body has been supplanted, for the time being, with a renewed fixation with youth and the youthful, quasi-adolescent body.

## Fashion and Sex

In 2016, *Vogue* reported on the news that the Italian fashion company Diesel, noted for their provocative advertising campaigns, had decided to promote their underwear line through a marketing strategy that involved placing ads on the online porn aggregator *Pornhub* as well as on the dating apps *Tinder* and *Grindr*.<sup>15</sup> This marketing innovation was met with some degree of breathless excitement (and no doubt titillation) at *Vogue* and, perhaps more significantly, indicates the extent to which porn consumption and the use of dating apps has become so normalised within popular culture (particularly youth culture) that this marketing plan was as much a pragmatic decision as it was one that was designed to generate media coverage. Fashion and sex are inextricably linked as the discourses of fashion: consumption reinvention, self-expression and realisation, an expression of one's sexuality, are about the mobilisation of desire so it's no surprise that marketers use sex to sell fashion.

It would be impossible to discuss the conjunction of fashion and sex without mention of the fashion and fragrance company Calvin Klein. In 1980, the brand launched a marketing campaign for Calvin Klein stretch jeans featuring the 15-year-old model Brooke Shields. The campaign, including print and TV spots photographed by Richard Avedon, attracted controversy for Shields' provocative poses and the now notorious line 'Do you know what comes between me and my Calvins? Nothing!'<sup>16</sup> The ads were swiftly banned on several TV networks in the United States but nonetheless the popular controversy that the campaign generated translated into sales and this subsequently became a strategy that the company used throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s with great success. In essence, ostensibly through the leadership of creative director for in-house advertising Sam Shahid during the mid-1980s, sex and sexuality were to be overtly foregrounded as central to the Calvin Klein brand identity.<sup>17</sup> This strategy was consolidated in 1982, when Calvin Klein made their entrée into the men's underwear market, through the launch of a conspicuously branded version of perhaps the most quotidian and utilitarian of all items of men's underwear, the Y-front. It would be inaccurate to suggest that men's underwear had not been aggressively marketed in the past or that the promise of sex had not been corralled in the promotion of these garments. As Paul Jobling notes in his study of the history of men's underwear advertising that as early as the late 1930s, Lyle and Scott were advertising Y-fronts with the slogan 'look good, feel good' (2003: 151). However, the Calvin Klein campaign that accompanied the 1982 launch and subsequent campaigns were to raise the stakes very significantly. Photographed by Bruce Weber, the campaign was based around a single image of the Olympian pole-vaulter, Tom Hintnaus, shot from a low angle against a turquoise blue sky to draw attention to his tanned, statuesque physicality and the metaphorical and literal 'pack shot' of the Y-fronts with their iconic Calvin Klein printed waistband.<sup>18</sup> The overt homoeroticism of this campaign was to create even more of a furore than the earlier stretch jeans

advertisements and it has become part of Calvin Klein's marketing myths that the billboard advertisements that were displayed in 25 bus shelters across New York were all stolen on the first night. Bruce Weber's aesthetic, critiqued for its overwhelming whiteness (Maynard, 1994), that self-consciously conflates Americana and homoerotic physique photography from the 1930s to the 1950s, established a blueprint house style and a blueprint physicality taken up by subsequent photographers, most notably Steven Meisel, that continued through the 1980s into the 1990s. The Calvin Klein Y-front with its distinctive branding was to develop its own status as an index of homoerotic desire. This was, in large part, aided by the ubiquity of this item of underwear in the imagery of gay porn from the mid 1980s onwards. The covers of gay magazines and the pack shots for the dominant video production companies such as Falcon, Jocks and Catalina routinely featured models sporting the same underwear that had created a mass media furore in the early 1980s.

By the late 1980s/early 1990s, Calvin Klein's marketing featured not just (by then) celebrity models such as Christy Turlington and Mark Vanderloo (the faces of the *Eternity* and *Eternity for Men* fragrances), Tony Ward (the body if not the face of the packaging for Calvin Klein underwear) and Kate Moss (used across an array of campaigns) but also celebrity entertainers. Notably the actor Mark Wahlberg, or the rapper Markie Mark as he was known at the time, was cast to reboot the underwear line for the 1990s.<sup>19</sup> The campaign, shot by Herb Ritts also featured Kate Moss. 'Also' is the operative word here as it was not the topless 17-year-old Moss but the built, muscled torso of Marky Mark that was to generate the majority of media attention and, it might be argued, that it was this very ad campaign that was responsible for bringing the topic of the 'six pack' into the mainstream of popular cultural discourse.<sup>20</sup> As Murray Healey noted during Wahlberg's early 1990s stardom:

Marky Mark is more famous for taking his clothes off in front of the camera than for being a rapper; his near-naked body is used to sell his records, underwear, magazines, his own industry and status as star.

(1994: 86)

The Calvin Klein underwear campaign of 2023, featuring a cast of emerging celebrities including the actors Jacob Elordi and Jeremy Allen White and the singer FKA Twigs, has once again generated controversy around the vexed topic of sexualisation in the media. As we can see from the examples provided here, the development of the Calvin Klein brand identity can be mapped onto debates around sex, sexuality and sexualisation as they have evolved from the early 1980s until the present moment. In particular, Calvin Klein's marketing has been at the vanguard of what can be described as the commodification of men's bodies and the eroticisation of the signs of masculinity. It is instructive to note how contemporary debates are played out around these campaigns and in particular the stark differences in the reception of the advertisements featuring

the actor Jeremy Allen White who struts through the back alleys of New York to then strip to his CK branded underwear revealing his sculpted torso in a TV spot for the underwear campaign. An article in the *New Yorker* describes the excitement and extensive media coverage this campaign generated, noting it harked back to the early 1990s Calvin Klein campaigns. As Jennifer Wilson describes it, ‘the actor looks like he is sculpted out of pheromones. The response the campaign received was hormonal’.<sup>21</sup>

By marked contrast the singer FKA Twigs was cast in the campaign to promote Calvin Klein’s fashion line that was subsequently banned by the British Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) over concerns that it was deemed to be representing the artist as a ‘stereotypical sex object’.<sup>22</sup> The ASA judgement created a controversy that was far larger in scale than the number of complaints that had resulted in the initial ban and included comment from FKA Twigs herself drawing attention to the double standards at play in the reception of her campaign and the one featuring Jeremy Allen White. There were additionally complaints that this double standard had a racialised component in that images of both Jeremy Allen White and Kendall Jenner (who are both white) were not subjected to the same attention as those of a young black woman. Following what was described by the ASA in a public statement as a judgement that was ‘widely criticised’ they decided to revise their decision, arriving at the conclusion that:

We have made clear that while we think the image of FKA Twigs was overtly sexual (though not sexually explicit), the ad presented her as confident and in control and, therefore, she had not been presented as a stereotypical sexual object.<sup>23</sup>

This incident reveals a landscape in which concerns around the sexualisation of women’s bodies are increasingly at the fore of the public conversation around sex and sexuality whereas men’s bodies presented as sexual spectacle seem somehow not just unproblematic but occasions for comment and appreciation. What this of course indicates is not just a curious double standard at play but that contemporary concerns around sexualisation remain a live debate connected to issues of gender, race and also class.

The American chain store Abercrombie & Fitch for example built an international brand during the 1990s and early 2000s, with Sam Shahid as creative lead for marketing (famed for his successes at Calvin Klein) selling mid-market fashion through lavish advertising campaigns shot by Bruce Weber promoting the fantasy of the sexy American ‘jock’ figure. The brand’s identity was rigorously policed and notoriously extended to a so-called ‘look policy’ for staff employed in their stores which, according to Kyla Walters, in the essay ‘Mall Models: How Abercrombie & Fitch Sexualizes its Retail Workers’, ‘uses retail workers as mall “models,” whose bodies perpetuate the brand’ (2016: 1). The look policy reinforced a set of ideas that contemporary consumers would understandably consider to be exclusionary (and racist).<sup>24</sup> Dwight McBride’s

scathing and acute critique of the politics of race that underpinned Abercrombie & Fitch's brand identity during the late 1990s and early 2000s argues that:

Abercrombie & Fitch has devised a very clear marketing and advertising strategy that celebrates whiteness—a particularly privileged and leisure-class whiteness—and makes use of it as a “lifestyle” that it commodifies to sell [...] clothing. [...] The danger of such a marketing scheme is that it depends upon the racist thinking of its consumer population in order to thrive.

(2005: 66)

Due to the controversies surrounding their employment practices, the sexualisation of their staff and several scandals surrounding Abercrombie & Fitch executives that resulted in legal action, the brand was to fall out of favour and has only recently regained traction in the market due in large part to a rebranding exercise organised around marketing messaging celebrating inclusivity.<sup>25</sup> This rebranding exercise has demonstrably involved not just a change in the ethnic diversity of the models that they use in their campaigns, or indeed the lengthy list of social causes they financially support, but also a very self-conscious ‘desexualising’ of their brand image. We might regard this as merely an example of the woke washing that we mentioned earlier in this chapter but it also, we think, speaks to the shifting dynamics in the conversation around sex and sexuality, especially in the United States and a return to a uneasiness or squeamishness around sex that manifests itself across mainstream commercial American culture.

### Smell Like a Man!

In 1979, Faberge launched a marketing campaign for *Denim* aftershave with the strapline ‘For men who don’t have to try too hard’. The campaign was tremendously successful and comprised print, television and cinema advertising. In the television ad spot (which British readers of a certain generation will recall clearly, due in no small part to its ubiquity) an anonymous (and exceptionally well-manicured) female unscrews a bottle of *Denim*, applies the lotion to her hands and then caresses the face, neck and then the chest of a denim-clad (also anonymous) male. When she attempts to go further by sliding her fingers inside his denim shirt, the hand of the male stops her advances. Accompanied by a growling, slowly percussive rock track and a masculine voice-over telling us that ‘When a woman puts *Denim* on a man he knows that the more she puts on the more life takes off. *Denim*: For men who don’t have to try too hard.’ The ad screams sex but the message it creates is an ambiguous one. It is clear that the advertisers are confident that *Denim* aftershave will excite the sexuality of women but are they claiming that it enables men to feel in control of their sexuality? Does the advert perhaps advise consumers that the fragrance enables a man to feel that he can assert his sexual privilege by resisting the temptations

of feminine wiles? Launched by Lever Brothers in 1976, a subsidiary of Faberge whose international success with *Brut* in 1968 and *Brut 33* in 1975 had identified a youth market for men's fragrance marketing around functional products like aftershave and spray deodorant, such was the ubiquity and overdetermined nature of the *Denim* campaign that it was often satirised in comedy sketch shows. Nonetheless that ad continued to be used as the leitmotif of the brand well into the 1980s.<sup>26</sup> It is not our claim here that this kind of mass market product exemplifies either a cutting edge in terms of marketing and branding or is about fashion per se. However ambiguous the *Denim* aftershave marketing message might now seem, what is clear is that here, as elsewhere, scent and sexuality are linked, and that contemporaneous discourses of gender and sexuality are routinely used by advertisers to sell fragrance.

The fragrance business is a major revenue stream for the cosmetics industry and especially those companies with licensing deals with fashion companies and celebrities. In the 21st century, conglomeration and concentration of ownership have become the norm. So for instance, the French conglomerate Louis Vuitton, Moët Hennessy (LVMH) own almost all the pillars of French perfumery (with the exception of Chanel) including Dior, Givenchy and Guerlain.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, major mass market cosmetics companies own a portfolio of often 'prestige' brands. For example, the cosmetics giant L'Oreal, under their 'Luxe division' owns YSL, Lancôme, Parfums Ralph Lauren, Cacharel, Mugler, Azzaro, Prada and Giorgio Armani Beauty.<sup>28</sup> The American company Estée Lauder owns Tom Ford, Le Labo, Jo Malone and Kilian Paris.

The fragrance industry, not unlike all other aspects of consumer culture, is as much about marketing as it is about the contents (the 'juice') in the bottles. It has become a cliché to comment on how much money goes into marketing and how little into fragrances that are often sold at a high retail price. An oft cited article from the *LA Times* in 1988 suggested that a \$150 bottle of perfume contained only \$1.50 of ingredients.<sup>29</sup> The margins on all cosmetics are large and marketing budgets are also high for all cosmetic products so this is not a situation that is unique to the fragrance industry per se. Indeed, the contemporary cosmetics and perfumery industry (as distinct from perfumery as an artisanal practice and tradition) emerges as a consequence of the expansion of the petrochemical industry and largely coincides with the emergence of the modern advertising and marketing industry (Briot, 2011). We think of fragrance marketing then as one of the best of all examples of how consumer culture works to sell ideas of gender and sexuality tethered to ideas of aspiration, luxury and self-actualisation (Stewart and Carey, 2019). The relationship between the fashion and fragrance industries, especially in the so-called 'prestige' or luxury segment of the market, is a complex interaction. Fragrance has traditionally been described in marketing literature as part of a 'brand extension' strategy for a luxury fashion company often achieved via licensing deals with cosmetics companies (Stankeviciute and Hoffmann, 2019). However in terms of widespread brand awareness and visibility in the 21st century it is

perhaps much more accurate to think of major luxury labels such as Dior, YSL, Givenchy or even Chanel as ostensibly fragrance and cosmetics brands who are also involved in fashion rather than the other way around, and this is especially the case when considering the male fragrance market. These are markets that are exceptionally lucrative. Evidence for this is provided by Bernard Arnault, the owner of LVMH who, according to *Forbes*, was the world's richest person in 2024 with a fortune of 233 billion dollars.<sup>30</sup>

As products and the marketing campaigns that surround them, fragrances are often gender coded in the most explicit of terms. Even as the 2020s see a growing shift in cosmetics and fragrance marketing towards gender neutral cosmetics and unisex fragrances, the campaigns for commercial 'masculine' releases still routinely link fragrance to sex and sexuality and to the masculine body as a site of simultaneous aspiration and desire. In many respects, the 1980s was the point at which this marketing strategy reached its zenith with the overt 'sex sells' strategies of Calvin Klein, most vividly realised in the case of the launch of *Obsession* in 1985 and *Obsession for Men* in 1986. With print adverts photographed by Bruce Weber and Herb Ritts with strong sexual overtones and TV ad spots directed by Richard Avedon that imitated the style of Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, *Obsession* and *Obsession for Men* were runaway commercial successes and defined the look of fragrance advertising for years to come.<sup>31</sup>

At perhaps its most hackneyed (even camp) of expressions, we can observe a version of this strategy in place in the advertising for the fragrance *Versace Eros*. Directed by fashion photographers Mert Alas and Marcus Piggot and featuring the model Brian Shimasky, the campaign which was launched in 2012 has remained unchanged. Shimasky, dressed in a satin boxing gown and swimming trunks in the distinctive clashing Neoclassical Versace print teamed with silver boxing boots, struts purposefully through a deserted Romanesque temple while a thunderstorm takes place. He arrives at an empty plinth and climbs onto it as if it were reserved for him as Versace's Adonis. To symbolically confirm this, the storm blows his gown away to reveal his 'statuesque' body while water droplets run sensuously over his face and chest. Shimasky/Adonis retrieves a bow and arrow from beneath the plinth, shoots an arrow into the clouds which magically clear to provide a halo around his perfect body which then phases into the pack shot for the fragrance.<sup>32</sup> The rather kitsch pseudo-classicism of this advert is a trope repeatedly used to promote men's fragrance. For instance, a 2012 advert for Dolce & Gabbana's *The One Sport*, set in a ruined amphitheatre in Tarragona, shot by Mariana Vivanco, presents the actor Adam Senn as simultaneously athlete and object of desire, fully aware of the desiring gaze of the viewer.<sup>33</sup>

The combination of sex, kitsch and more than a whisper of homoeroticism that we can see in Versace advertising is also a key feature of the branding for Jean Paul Gaultier's simultaneous campaigns for the feminine *Jean Paul Gaultier Classique* first launched in 1993 and the masculine *Le Male*, first launched in 1995. These longstanding Gaultier campaigns make full use of the

iconography of the hyper-feminine basque and homoerotic sailor 'drag' that are represented in the Schiapirelli inspired bottles for the two fragrances. Gaultier's fragrance and beauty advertisements produce an ironic, retro and campy self-conscious (and self-referential) version of the gender binary that presents both masculinity and femininity as performative and gestural. In Gaultier's branding universe we can see the production and circulation of what Craig Thompson has described as 'marketplace mythologies' (2004) that draw ironic attention to the constructedness of gender (basque-clad sirens and impossibly sexy and scrupulously groomed sailors) at the same time as reifying the sexual excitement of the very representations that the branding seems to satirise. The original campaigns were directed by Jean Baptiste Mondino, a fashion photographer, music video and commercials director who was especially fashionable in the mid-1980s and 1990s. Drawing, in the most postmodern terms, on an array of intertextual references situating Gaultier's own stylistic repertoire alongside the kitsch art photography of Pierre et Giles, the stylisation of Fassbinder's film *Querelle* (1981) and the cinema of Jeunet and Caro, the campaigns have been so successful in creating a brand identity for the Gaultier fragrance line that they provide the blueprint for all of the print and moving image advertisements that follow them. By way of illustration, the 2023 campaign for the launch of *Le Male Elixir* includes a promotional video set in the engine of a fantasy naval vessel populated by muscled, bare-chested sailors. The face of the campaign, Raphael Diogo, is observed through a porthole by two sailors engaged in the sweaty labour of the engine room. His sculpted and tattooed torso is positioned as the focus of their (and our) attention. At the end of the advert Diogo wipes the sweat from his body with his striped matelot t-shirt, which he throws at the camera (and implicitly his sailor colleagues and us) with a provocative expression.<sup>34</sup>

The examples provided so far make use of a rhetoric that is overtly homoerotic in terms of its mode of address. This is not altogether surprising in that Gaultier is openly gay and although Gianni Versace was not open about his sexuality, his stylistic vernacular from the early 1990s onwards was explicitly concerned with masculine erotics and the conspicuous display of muscular male bodies. Both brands have identities predicated on ideas of gender, especially masculinity, that are closely connected to sexuality. We can see this eroticisation of the signs of masculinity across fragrance marketing through modes of address that are perhaps discursively framed in more heteronormative terms. Nonetheless, these representations are still filled with sexual ambiguity and a certain tension, stemming from the unclear dynamics of who is looking at whom. The Italian fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana have, as we noted above, a longstanding relationship with the British model David Gandy. The 2010 campaign for *Light Blue* directed by Mario Testino (who has continued as the campaign photographer since) was shot in Capri and featured Gandy in white swimming trunks presented as the summation of the brand's vision of the ideal 'Italian' man: beautiful, sculptured and sculptural, a thing to be admired and desired. The style and campaign strategy have scarcely changed into the 2020s

and continue to be organised around spectacular ‘reveals’ of Gandy’s body and his overwhelming sex appeal.<sup>35</sup>

The association between the fashion and beauty industry and celebrities (both male and female) as ambassadors or as ‘faces’ of cosmetics brands extends back to at least the early days of Classical Hollywood (Selfe, 2020, Desser and Jowett, 2000). Cary Grant, for example, an axiom of debonair sophistication from the 1930s onwards is famously (if apocryphally) believed to have worn, variously, Caron’s *Pour un Homme*, Guerlain’s *Eau de Cologne Imperiale*, Knize Ten and *Acqua di Parma*. The prestige perfumery Creed claims to have developed *Green Irish Tweed* in 1985 specifically for Grant. This is a strategy that continues to yield commercial success. The fashion brand Christian Dior, which rebranded in 2018 as Dior (or more accurately still, DIOR), is owned by LVMH. In fact, the perfume division of Christian Dior has been owned by Moët & Chandon since 1968. As a brand, Christian Dior was early to realise the commercial opportunities of licensing their name and many readers of a certain age will remember Christian Dior hosiery, optical frames, ties as familiar if upmarket, aspirational products available in department stores. The Christian Dior marketing campaigns were scrupulously consistent in their referencing of the brand’s origin in ‘haute couture’ through the use of beautiful illustrations by the fashion artist René Gruau who was appointed as artistic director for advertising at Dior in 1947 (he was even asked to take over as designer at the house when Dior died in 1957) and whose images defined the Dior ‘look’ in advertising for almost 40 years. Gruau’s images located the Dior brand in artisanal skills and the realisation of fantasy. As his obituary in *Vanity Fair* in 2004 describes it, ‘the drawings of René Gruau have haunted urbane imaginations for the past eight decades’.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless Gruau’s images increasingly made Dior’s brand feel retrograde located in a heyday of the 1950s rather than a fashion brand concerned with the ‘new’. With the global media launch of the perfume *Poison* in 1985, the brand dispensed with Gruau’s illustrations in favour of a photographic campaign designed by Tyen, their director of make-up. *Poison* was to become a commercial success as the paradigmatic pungent, distinctive, 1980s feminine fragrance and permanently changed the Dior branding strategy from then on.

In recent years this strategy has been to reconnect Dior as a brand to the glamour of Hollywood stars in order to market its fragrance offer via spokesperson deals with popular actors: Eva Green for the launch of *Midnight Poison* in 2007, Jennifer Lawrence for *Joy*, Natalie Portman as the face of *Miss Dior* and the longstanding relationship with Charlize Theron for *J’Adore*. Dior is not an exclusively feminine perfume brand though. Christian Dior launched a men’s fragrance, *Eau Sauvage*, in 1966 at a point when several fragrance companies began to market luxury fragrance specifically targeted at men: Estée Lauder established the *Aramis* brand and fragrance in 1965 and the French epitome of ‘haute parfumerie’ Guerlain launched *Habit Rouge* the same year. *Eau Sauvage*, often regarded as the first fragrance to make full use of the aromachemical

hedione that amplifies floral and citrus notes in a formula, and famously favoured by Steve McQueen, was marketed well into the 1990s with a Gruau illustration of a handsome urbane (and naked) man in his bathroom applying the product in his bathroom mirror.<sup>37</sup> The advert tells consumers that *Eau Sauvage* is first and foremost a grooming product (rather than perfume) and one that is made for a sophisticated grown-up man. Versions of this illustration continued to be used for decades. In 1981 Dior launched *Jules* with another Gruau illustration of a perhaps younger man but still very much an adult, dressed in a bomber jacket with the product branding on the back. It was not really until the appointment of Hedi Slimane as creative director at the revived and resuscitated *Dior Homme*, that their branding targeting male consumers changed substantively. Slimane was attributed with transforming the fortunes of Dior's menswear from staid to extremely fashionable by addressing a younger consumer with lean, slim fitting and often monochrome modernist collections with late 1970s new wave and 1960s mod styling.

A fragrance, unsurprisingly called *Dior Homme*, was to follow to capitalise on the reborn menswear identity for the brand. In 2015 Dior launched the men's fragrance *Sauvage*. While nodding the Dior's heritage in masculine fragrance through its name, *Sauvage* has almost nothing to do with Dior's brand values as a high fashion company. Rather than associating the fragrance with Parisian haute couture or even Dior's now lucrative men's fashion line, instead the campaign for *Sauvage* draws together a set of peculiarly American tropes: the wilderness, Western Americana, elements of indigenous American iconography that coalesce around the star image and somewhat jaded sex appeal of the brand's ambassador and face Johnny Depp. The first campaign for *Sauvage* was directed by Jean-Baptiste Mondino and situated Depp, dressed in what might be described as rock and roll drag, tousled hair, eyeliner and accessorised with a guitar, in the American wilderness.<sup>38</sup> The marshalling of native American iconography in a campaign in 2015 tied to the term 'sauvage' (literally 'wild') was to cause some degree of controversy around the explicit cultural appropriation that Dior seemed engaged in, and Depp's own turbulent personal life was to create speculation that the brand would choose to sever their associations with him.<sup>39</sup> This was not to be and by 2022 *Sauvage* had become the biggest selling fragrance, regardless of gender, in the world.<sup>40</sup>

Given the significance (both in economic and cultural terms) of the fragrance industry, it is remarkable how little academic scholarship exists on the cultural values and reach of perfumery outside of business studies or marketing research with an empirical focus.<sup>41</sup> We are pointing here to a yet to be extensively explored field of consumer culture that encompasses technological change, shifts in social and cultural values, the relations between capitalism, consumption, gender and sexuality that would easily result in another book alone. In this chapter, we confine our focus to the marketing strategies for specific fragrances and the ways sexualised masculinity and men's bodies are leveraged to develop a brand identity around a fragrance and motivate sales. We make this

observation here because our argument in this section is that brand identity in fragrance marketing is so frequently tethered to competing ideas of masculinity as a site of desire. This competition extends between and across brands. For instance, *Bleu de Chanel*, a men's fragrance launched five years prior to *Sauvage*, provided a blueprint both in terms of fragrance and marketing for the success of the later Dior fragrance. It is commonly noted that *Bleu de Chanel* and *Sauvage* have a remarkably similar fragrance profile, and this is no accident as Dior's house perfumer François Demachy was reputedly tasked with developing Dior's response to the Chanel release.<sup>42</sup> This is not in any way a new development in the fragrance industry. Just as in the 1920s and 1930s, couturiers envied the success of *Chanel No.5* and diversified into perfumery by creating their own versions of the *No.5* recipe of abstract florals and a heavy use of the relatively new synthetic aldehydes (Lanvin's *Arpege* in 1927 and Patou's *Joy* in 1930 among many more examples) so *Bleu de Chanel* (2010) establishes a model for 21st century masculine perfumery built around extensive use of the aromachemicals, Ambroxan and Iso e super, which provide a very pervasive, woody, clean smelling 'texture' and are used across hundreds of mainstream cosmetics, from shampoo to body wash to air freshener because of their low price and tenacious quality. *Bleu de Chanel*, like the later *Sauvage*, was not a launch concerned with the creation of a distinctive or unusual fragrance, but instead one that was designed to attract the largest number of male consumers as possible.

Chanel, unquestionably the most famous name in both Parisian haute couture and in French perfumery, has been selling men's fragrance since the launch of *Chanel Pour Monsieur* in 1955. For many years, the house's marketing for its masculine offer illustrated a struggle to construct an idea of a 'Chanel man' since the brand was so overwhelmingly associated with feminine high fashion (Chanel unlike Dior has not diversified into menswear). This meant that campaigns for *Chanel Pour Monsieur* tended to construct an iconography of urbane, corporate, but somewhat anonymous masculine success. Fortunately, the austerity, precision and minimalism of the Chanel aesthetic ensured that in terms of marketing and packaging the masculine fragrance line could be integrated into the wider Chanel offer with little need for substantive change. The 'Chanel man' in their marketing for *Chanel Pour Monsieur* is an anonymous 'everyman', albeit presumably a wealthy bourgeois everyman. Launched in the same year as Sloan Wilson's novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), the first Chanel masculine fragrance seemed timely in its creation aimed at the affluent but discreet office worker of the postwar era. Similarly, in the campaigns for *Antaeus* (1981) and *Egoïste* (1990) Chanel constructs an anonymous, and thereby a paradigmatic, masculinity. The lavish marketing budget for the launch of *Bleu de Chanel* was such that no less a figure than Martin Scorsese was commissioned for the advertising campaign which starred the French actor Gaspard Ulliel. The adverts were something of a stylistic departure for Chanel. The launch campaign advert in 2010 casts Ulliel as an imagined celebrity who

recalls his complex love life during a press conference. His memories are flickering and intertextual in nature as Scorsese references Antonioni's *Blow Up* and Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* before Ulliel delivers the line "I'm not going to be the person I'm expected to be anymore." The final Ulliel campaign of 2018 situates the actor as an estranged and distracted businessman in a hyper modernist (and dystopian) metropolitan landscape of skyscrapers and plate-glass windows. He follows the ghostly Nur Hellman to a rooftop swimming pool in a vignette bathed in the same blue filter that had become the characteristic look of the previous ads for the fragrance. The campaign was relaunched in 2023 following Ulliel's accidental death and Chanel, taking a lead from Dior, decided to cast a Hollywood actor as the new brand ambassador: Timothée Chalamet. While Ulliel was a conventionally handsome, athletically built actor who embodied a set of cultural values around gallic masculinity, Chalamet is an altogether different proposition in terms of looks, physicality, star image and idiosyncratic (and androgynous) personal style. The promotional copy on the Chanel website makes this clear: 'For this BLEU DE CHANEL campaign, Timothée Chalamet embodies the man who is deeply himself. Willing to dive into the unknown in pursuit of a vision.'<sup>43</sup>

The advertising campaign that launches Chalamet as the new face of *Bleu de Chanel*, again directed by Scorsese, eschews the micro narratives that surround and situate the characters that Ulliel as an actor performed. In these new adverts the consumer's focus of attention is entirely on Chalamet's face as an object of fascinated and fascinating desire. Shot in slow motion, to a soundtrack of *Knights in White Satin*, his face in profile rotating to a sidelong glance through hooded eyelids and finally a head on close up, Chalamet's androgynous beauty is offered up for our close scrutiny using all the rhetorical techniques usually reserved for female models in Chanel's previous campaigns for *No.5*. Chalamet is presented as a sex symbol here but one who is not revealing his muscles for our admiring attention or drawing on masculinist tropes in the same manner as the Depp-fronted *Savage* campaigns. Indeed, that Chanel has recruited Chalamet in this high-profile ambassadorial role can be understood as a barometer of shifting sensibilities around masculinity and sexuality across the fashion, fragrance and grooming sectors.<sup>44</sup> In short, as we observed earlier in this chapter in our discussion of male fashion models, what it means to be a sexually desirable and fashionable man is neither static nor eternal. The fashion and beauty industries' investment in youth, youth culture, young bodies and the corollary of that, youth markets, are consistent and map onto each other, driven by the most pragmatic of commercial objectives: young consumers with disposal incomes are more likely to invest in products like personal fragrance. A report produced by the consumer behaviour consultants Circana claimed that in the United States the 13 to 26 age group were the most consistent and enthusiastic consumers of fragrance.<sup>45</sup>

As we have already noted, the hegemony of the athletic, muscular (and white) male body as an exemplar of masculine sexual appeal is frequently challenged and we can see this evolution in the representational shifts in campaigns for fragrances marketed by Rabanne.

Alongside Coureges and Cardin, Rabanne was a leading figure of 1960s avant garde fashion and successful enough, with a strong enough public profile, to launch a perfume, *Calandre*, in 1969. Paco Rabanne, like many of his 1960s contemporaries, struggled to maintain a consistent presence in high fashion in subsequent years. However, the Paco Rabanne brand endured, largely due to the global success of his men's fragrance, the ubiquitous – and for some, notorious – *Paco Rabanne Pour Homme* released in 1973. Rebranded as Rabanne (rather than Paco Rabanne) following the designer's death in 2023, the brand is owned by Puig, the Spanish fashion and cosmetics company that owns Carolina Herrera, Nina Ricci, Paco Rabanne, Jean Paul Gaultier, Penhaligon's, L'Artisan Parfumeur, Dries Van Noten and Byredo.<sup>46</sup> The brand has for many years produced marketing campaigns targeting a younger adult demographic often with the promise of sex surrounding its masculine offer.

This is particularly the case with the XS line. Launched originally with a masculine fragrance in 1993 (a feminine version, followed in 1994) with a suggestive title implying an association with the fragrance and extreme or excessive behaviours, the marketing for the fragrance has often been sexually provocative, sometimes connecting the fragrance to 'rock & roll' aesthetics. In 2017 a television advertising campaign for *Pure XS* (a so called 'flanker' of the original fragrance) received complaints and was subject to the adjudication of the UK's ASA, mentioned earlier. The ad, directed by the music video director Johan Renk, featured model Francisco Henriques undressing in a bathroom while being spied on by a group of equally attractive (and young) female models. The commercial is intentionally humorous and playful and Henriques, with his curly hair and smooth body reminiscent of Michelangelo's David, was described by *GQ Italia* in appropriately purple prose as 'a man who embodied both vice and virtue, both the romanticism of a Visconti hero and the sex appeal of an irresistible toy boy'.<sup>47</sup> As in previous commercials we have discussed, the campaign portrays the male model as a figure to be desired but the relationship between object and subject – who is looking at whom – is, once again, deliberately complicated, and ambiguous. This is reflected in the complaints generated by the advertisement. In this case the ASA investigation focussed on complaints on three grounds:

1. A number of the complainants, who believed ads (a), (b) and (c) were sexist and objectified the man depicted because he was seen as the subject of voyeurism, challenged whether the ads were offensive.
2. Some of the complainants, who believed that ads (a) and (b) were sexist because the women featured were depicted as powerless and weak and therefore reinforced stereotypes, challenged whether the ads were offensive.
3. Some of the complainants, one of whom saw ad (a) during *Gogglesprogs* on Channel 4, also challenged whether the ads were inappropriately scheduled to be shown when children might see it, due to the sexual nature of the ads.<sup>48</sup>

The ASA ruling, which caused some controversy was that the complaints should not be upheld. Cultural commentator Mark Simpson focussed on this case and the media commentary surrounding the double standards it highlighted, using it as an opportunity to discuss the nature of objectification in the digital age, arguing that:

What the ASA seems to be saying is that the male model was not objectified because it's not *bad* objectification. Good objectification, according to the circuitous reasoning behind what is anyway a loaded term, cannot be objectification – because objectification is necessarily *bad*. When in fact, objectification can be ... *wonderful*. Which is part of the reason why so many young men today work so hard to turn themselves into sexy *things*.<sup>49</sup>

The launch of *Invictus* in 2013 featured a campaign fronted by the Australian rugby player, Nick Youngquest with a commercial directed by Alexandre Cortes that drew inspiration from the digitised hyperreality of action cinema, particularly Zack Snyder's *300* (2006). An athlete and now a model, Youngquest epitomises Simpson's coinage of the term spornosexual: handsome, muscular, exhibiting extreme body confidence. The campaign comfortably aligned itself with Rabanne's branding strategy and reinforced the idea of the classically proportioned white man as a cultural (and sexual) ideal.<sup>50</sup> It is not insignificant then, that in 2022 and in line with industry-wide strives to produce more diverse marketing strategies, Paco Rabanne, on the verge of rebranding as Rabanne, hired the PR agency Fondamentale, to rebrand and relaunch *Invictus*. Youngquest was replaced as brand ambassador with the African American NBA athlete Jalen Green. The difference extends beyond a change of a brand ambassador to a striking de-emphasis of sexuality. The campaign eschewed stylised bombast and eroticised six packs in favour of 'gritty' verite filming and the personal testimony of Green's commitment to his sporting goals.<sup>51</sup>

## Makeup for Men

In 2019, the British public opinion pollsters *YouGov* published findings from an omnibus survey, designed to gather data on a range of subjects, that revealed a sizeable number of British men wear makeup. With the headline 'One in Twenty British Men Now Wear Makeup' and a strapline stating that 'more men use makeup to their boost confidence, hide blemishes, or accentuate their features than you may think', it is clear that readers were meant to be surprised by this information which supposedly challenges orthodox understandings of the highly gendered nature of cosmetics and that makeup is very firmly the domain of the feminine. The detail of the survey uncovers that the headline does not deliver on its promise when in fact according to the findings 1 in 50 men wear makeup weekly and only 1 per cent of men do so daily. There is a clear anxiety around makeup expressed by the respondents: one in 25 claims to

have worn makeup in the privacy of their home, and the same number to improve their appearance for social events. Nonetheless it is clear that makeup is regarded as a viable mechanism for self-improvement in the social media age.<sup>52</sup> The same year, fashion reporter Ahmed Zambarakji at *Vogue UK* asked, ‘Is 2019 The Year Men’s Make-Up Goes Mainstream?’ This was of course a rhetorical question as *Women’s Wear Daily* had already forecast the trend three years earlier. *Vogue Business* advises us that ‘everyone wants in on male beauty’ which had become the fastest growing beauty sector by 2021.<sup>53</sup> The concluding section of this chapter focusses then on the emergence of makeup designed and marketed at men to consider the broader cultural significances of cosmetics and men’s interaction with them.

In the book *Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal*, philosopher Heather Widdows interrogates contemporary (feminine) beauty standards and the requirement to aspire to perfection. Widdows argues that we can observe:

A relatively narrow range of acceptable appearance norms for the face and the body. It is not simply an expansion of Western ideals, but a global mean, [...] all women, and increasingly men, need surgical and nonsurgical technical fixes, if they are to be ‘perfect’, or just ‘good enough.’

(2018: 3)

She goes on to make the case that:

The range of what is acceptable is becoming narrower, increasingly homogenized, and globally aspired to. This narrowing of what is acceptable makes what is required to achieve minimal standards of acceptable appearance more demanding. Further, as the beauty ideal narrows, not conforming to such standards becomes less acceptable, and less possible in practice.

(2018: 20)

Widdows’ thesis of course maps directly onto the discourses of optimisation and aspiration that we discussed in Chapter 3 but with some significant differences. In particular, Widdows challenges the perspective that beauty practices are exclusively, even ostensibly, concerned with sexual desirability for women. She is insistent that ‘not all beautification is sexual, sexist, or about gender’ (Widdows, 2018: 14). Instead, she sees beauty as a feature of broader trends towards self-improvement and the autonomy of the self that Ros Gill has elsewhere described and we already noted, as the neoliberal ‘body project’ (Gill et al., 2005). As a moral philosopher, Widdows does not use the language of neoliberalism or the theories of objectification and spectatorship that are implicit in her argument. Instead, she makes the case for beauty as an ‘ethical ideal’. She notes:

the ‘to be looked at’ nature of the self, located in the body, but not just in the actual flawed body, but also in the transforming body, a body of potential and possibility, and the imagined body, full of promise. [...] This understanding of the self helps to explain both the power of the beauty ideal as an ethical ideal, and why, despite the costs and harms of beauty, we continue to embrace and celebrate the ideal.

(*Widdows, 2018: 3*)

We diverge from Widdows’ position to observe that masculine beauty is first and foremost about sex: an investment in good looks that will yield a return in the sexual economy both online and offline. Beauty and sexuality/sexualisation relate to each other but they are not coterminous, as Widdows herself notes. Consequently, sexualised masculinity across media cultures is about male beauty but it is also a conflation of other culturally coded ideas and ideals: virility, potency, physical fitness, success. Taken to extremes, we note the emergence on social media of the so called ‘looksmaxxing’ phenomenon. First identified as a trend on TikTok, and, as Sarah Held (2023) notes, a phenomenon connected to Incel culture, looksmaxxing is a practice where young men share photos and subject themselves to scathing group critique of their appearance, which then leads to advice on how to change their looks in order to become more sexually attractive. The practice begins with relatively innocuous ‘softmaxxing’ activities such as teeth whitening, and exercise designed to achieve a stronger jawline (known as ‘mewing’) to ‘hardmaxxing’ practices that include not just steroids but also extreme cosmetic surgeries. The goal of looksmaxxing is for young men to develop a physicality that is optimised, perfected and, according to reportage in *The Guardian*, to increase ones ‘sexual market value’.<sup>54</sup>

It seems self-evident that the cosmetics industry is involved in the production, circulation, and commodification of ideals of beauty which are closely connected to the goal of gaining or maximising sexual desirability. However, as Heather Widdows notes, the picture is more complex. While male investment in grooming and cosmetics is not new and is best understood as part of a long history of male fashion and adornment, the scale and diversity of the 21st century market for male cosmetics, including the emergence of makeup specifically for men, speaks to some significant social, attitudinal and cultural shifts. The Western fashion and cosmetics industries, alongside the fashion media, are involved in the construction of normative standards of beauty that then, in turn, become global standards. These normative beauty standards inevitably privilege Western and white beauty ideals, regardless of sex or gender, originating in largely European precedents and standards that have a social and cultural history investigated by a wide array of scholars. This includes the foundational interventions of bell hooks (1992) in the first instance, but also figures such as film theorist Richard Dyer’s in the book *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (1997) and the forensic historical analysis of Nell Irvin Painter in

*The History of White People* (2010). In the 21st century fashion and beauty industries, despite a newfound interest in diverse representation discussed earlier in this chapter, Western, white beauty standards continue to dominate. These standards are often deployed in ways that can be understood as hegemonic (in the true sense of that term), both for commercial and ideological reasons. However, as with many aspects of the industry, the reality is more complex than it might initially appear.

An instructive case study is offered by the *Boy de Chanel* range, launched with much hyperbole in 2018. The line consists of only three products: a foundation, a brow pencil and a lip balm that were, humorously if imprecisely, described by *Forbes Magazine* as ‘revolutionary’.<sup>55</sup> We should of course remember that the fashion industry is in the business of promoting novelty and Chanel are by no means the first prestige brand to make entrees into the world of male cosmetics. Notably Jean Paul Gaultier, working with Japanese cosmetics company Shiseido, launched a line of makeup for men in 2003 entitled ‘*Le Male*’ *Tout Beau Tout Propre*.<sup>56</sup> Gaultier’s makeup line was packaged and marketed ostensibly as a novelty gift product and did not gain a wide release or commercial success. It was however perhaps what might be described as a ‘proof of concept’ marketing exercise that subsequent brands such as Tom Ford and then Chanel were to imitate years later. Certainly, the range’s title ‘*Tout Beau Tout Propre*’ (very beautiful, very clean) indicates the messaging that *Boy de Chanel* conveys. *Boy de Chanel* had a limited initial launch in South Korea, in part no doubt because of the significant market for cosmetics used by both male and female consumers in that territory and because of the more recent international interest in (and market for) Korean cosmetics and beauty products. The Korean beauty aesthetic is understood as concerned with a poreless, ‘glass like’ complexion that all genders aspire to and aligns itself with Widows’ ideas about the drive for perfection.<sup>57</sup> The choice of a Korean launch suggests that the market for this range is not quite as rigidly or straightforwardly located in either the West or in Western ideals and notions of masculine beauty as it might at first seem. It is of note then that for the Korean launch, the face of *Boy de Chanel* was the popular actor Lee Dong Wook, instantly recognisable to Korean audiences, whose ephemic beauty attracts legions of female fans and has, in addition, been afforded industry recognition via the ‘Photogenic Award of the Year, 2018’ from the Korea Fashion Photographers Association. In the Korean advertising campaign, the star is the very image of studied (and studiously naturalistic) perfection. Notably the two, resolutely Caucasian, models chosen for the US launch of *Boy de Chanel*, Tim Schumacher and Matthew Bell, have looks that speak of both youth and a kind of ascetic, de-sexualised masculinity that is far removed from either macho posture or extravagant display and speaks of being, to borrow from the earlier Gaultier campaign, ‘very clean’. The desexualising of male makeup is not the only strategy that cosmetic companies use when marketing what are sometimes euphemistically described as ‘colour cosmetics’ to men. Indeed, Tom Ford’s

launch of a small male makeup line in 2013 used the same marketing strategies and aesthetics as their often assertively sexually provocative campaigns for fragrance.<sup>58</sup>

Regardless of the marketing messaging, it remains the case that makeup/colour cosmetics are framed as products that are almost unique in their emasculating potential. It is interesting to observe how brands, advertisers, journalists, and commentators struggle to ‘masculinise’ makeup – a product paradigmatically gendered as feminine and tethered to the tools of seduction that women control and exercise. For instance, an article in *GQ* goes to some length to assuage readers’ concerns that using makeup might in some way compromise a man’s masculinity or sexuality.<sup>59</sup> In a similar vein, *Men’s Health* – like *GQ*, a publication that promotes a relatively conservative vision of what masculinity is – provides handy ‘make-up tips’ for the anxious man. Journalist Mario Abad reminds us that men use make up because, ‘there has to be a problem first and then a solution, so they’re happy’.<sup>60</sup> This article encourages readers to think of makeup as ‘camouflage’ and this is an especially useful framing device: camouflage rather than adornment, to consider the, often anxious, discourses surrounding male makeup.

This is writ large in the marketing strategy of the British brand *Warpaint* that conducts an array of rhetorical twists to situate male cosmetics as a rational and healthy choice for men. The brand’s identity as conveyed through their website (the principal point of sale for their products) is organised around contemporary notions of well-being and empowerment and what we would describe as the ‘bloke alibi’: that makeup is a product that ‘real’ men use and is a therapeutic and pragmatic tool for achieving self-confidence. The brand’s ‘mission’ is described thus, ‘if you want a men’s brand that speaks to you, looks f\*\*king cool in your bathroom, and stands for something more than just products, we’ve got your back’.<sup>61</sup>

We observe that notwithstanding the squeamishness evident in some media accounts of the growth of male makeup in the mass market, unlike prestige brands like Chanel and Tom Ford, there is a trend to bypass the gender bifurcation of makeup altogether. Brands such as L’Oreal, Maybelline, Cover Girl and others are increasingly casting male alongside female models in major campaigns. Furthermore, in 2020, John Lewis, a traditionally middle-brow British retailer, became the first UK mainstream retail outlet to introduce a male beauty counter, a pop-up *Warpaint* concession no less, much to the astonishment of *The Independent* newspaper.<sup>62</sup> However, this development should not surprise us. The digital spaces such as Instagram and TikTok, where so many younger men spend their time, produce a demand for what we might call ‘digital faces’: even complexions, cosmetic dentistry, a polished appearance. To be successful (and to be sexy) today is to be well-groomed. We also note that the most vocal proponents of makeup for men are often the online influencers that *The Independent* describes as ‘from the LGBT+ community’, which leads us into our next chapter, where we explore the connections between queer masculinity and sexualisation.

## Notes

- 1 See also Zarrella, K. K. (2023, 23 June). Men's style: What's sexy, what's not? our poll results may surprise you. *The Wall Street Journal*. Available at [https://www.wsj.com/articles/mens-style-whats-sexy-whats-not-our-poll-results-may-surprise-you-d7ddf0a8?cx\\_testId=3&cx\\_testVariant=cx\\_170&cx\\_artPos=7&mod=WTRN#cxrecs\\_s](https://www.wsj.com/articles/mens-style-whats-sexy-whats-not-our-poll-results-may-surprise-you-d7ddf0a8?cx_testId=3&cx_testVariant=cx_170&cx_artPos=7&mod=WTRN#cxrecs_s)
- 2 Waters, J. (2023, 24 June). Could you be dressing sexier? *The Wall Street Journal*. Available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/can-men-dress-sexy-without-the-tinge-factor-yes-if-you-follow-these-rules-fabb1b5a?mod=e2fb&fbclid=IwAR28ZjE27Rc0sIGt3nsIF0ngRxpqg4MIgiwsHO-Sd4Nv7LIGAQCP79KdPD0>
- 3 Von Furstenberg, M. (2024, 22 January). Male model Monday: Emilio Alcaraz, Leo Cressant, Tommy Hackett and more. *Socialite Life*. Available at [https://socialitelife.com/male-model-monday-emilio-alcaraz-leo-cressant-tommy-hackett-and-more/?utm\\_content=bufferbdfa1&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=facebook.com&utm\\_campaign=buffer&fbclid=IwAR1VvW2LMlW2vkdBbl\\_ukmK99vY4IBbtSYkKcT-gM-KU7EZf\\_92EsNcN-o](https://socialitelife.com/male-model-monday-emilio-alcaraz-leo-cressant-tommy-hackett-and-more/?utm_content=bufferbdfa1&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer&fbclid=IwAR1VvW2LMlW2vkdBbl_ukmK99vY4IBbtSYkKcT-gM-KU7EZf_92EsNcN-o)
- 4 Examples include: <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20160212-the-male-model-how-did-we-get-to-zoolander>; <https://manofmany.com/fashion/most-famous-male-models-of-all-time>; <https://www.thetrendspotter.net/top-male-models/>; <https://vman.com/article/history-of-the-male-supermodel-2/>
- 5 See: Draper, Deborah Riley (2015). Versailles '73: American runway revolution. *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 37, 94–102.
- 6 What little information that is publicly available about St. Jacques has been derived from a small range of online sources of varying quality. This includes an article from the most unlikely of publications: the UK tabloid newspaper, the *Daily Mail*: Hammer, A. (2024, 13 January). The fascinating life of the first male supermodel. MailOnline. Available at <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-12951709/Sterling-St-Jacques-70s-supermodel.html>. See also: Manuel-Logan, R. (n.d.). Black History 101: Sterling St. Jacques was the world's first Black male supermodel. *50 Bold*. Available at <https://50bold.com/black-history-101-sterling-st-jacques-was-the-worlds-first-black-male-supermodel/>
- 7 Schweizer, S. (2010, 1 August). Urs Althaus: A model of success. *Swiss News*. Available at <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Urs+Althaus%3A+a+model+of+success.-a0235631509>; <https://app.blacklivingknowledge.com/renauld-white/>
- 8 A select example of this reportage is offered here: <https://www.vogue.com/article/john-pearson-male-supermodel-website-mrfeelgood-interview-naomi-campbell#:~:text=John%20Pearson%20is%20heralded%20as,set%20cheekbones%20and%20soft%20eyes>; <https://www.vogue.com/article/john-pearson-90s-male-supermodel-advice-for-new-generation-models>; <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/john-pearson-original-male-supermodel-yorkshire-born-and-bred-hxjzflrb7>; <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/luxury/mens-style/john-pearson-meet-worlds-first-male-supermodel/>; <https://nypost.com/2016/02/15/meet-the-worlds-first-male-supermodel/>; <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/fashion/article/john-pearson-mr-feel-good>; <https://people.com/style/first-male-supermodel-john-pearson-launches-a-digital-lifestyle-magazine/>
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# 5

## QUEER MALE BODIES

### Mainstream and Margins

In May 2024, the actor and singer Olly Alexander represented the UK at the Eurovision Song Contest in Malmö, Sweden with his self-penned entry *Dizzy*. As lead singer of the group *Years and Years*, BAFTA-nominated actor for his role in the AIDS drama *It's a Sin* and as LGBTQ+ advocate, Alexander is a prominent representative of contemporary queer visibility across the media. The song and its production, drawing heavily on references from 1980s and 1990s electronic pop in the mould of the Pet Shop Boys or Erasure, was unremarkable enough and this was reflected in the UK's placement in the final of the competition: 18th with no points awarded from the public vote. While the song was criticised for its conventionality, the same could not be said for the live staging of the number. Media outlets across Europe reported the details of the performance, which was described in the BBC's official press release: 'Olly Alexander's Eurovision performance transports viewers into a post-apocalyptic dystopian boxing gym locker room, aboard a spaceship hurtling toward Earth through a black hole in 1985!'<sup>1</sup> During the number's staged realisation of this disparate and idiosyncratic mixture of stylistic reference points, Alexander performed alongside a troupe of muscular male dancers in boxing shorts whose moves become progressively more provocative and erotic, seducing the singer as he performed. It was an elaborately staged and performed piece, remarkable for the way gay desire was leveraged so overtly.<sup>2</sup> Many readers will already be only too well-aware that the Eurovision Song Contest is variously (and humorously) described as the 'gay Olympics' (Baker, 2017) and the 'gay World Cup'<sup>3</sup> and in Germany as 'gay Christmas' (Rehberg, 2007). The contest is often regarded as a site of gay fandom and as a very public representation of inclusivity and diversity, especially for the LGBTQ community. This is not to suggest that queer desire is routinely represented. On the contrary, we argue that it is rare and that Olly Alexander's staging was atypical. The performance stood out for its

sexual overtones, which were relatively unusual compared with the extravagant excesses and campy melodrama more typical of Eurovision entries.

However, even though the live performance of *Dizzy* was deliberately provocative and was meant to be understood as homoerotic and therefore sexy, it is striking that none of the major organs of the British media (or indeed any European equivalents for that matter) made any significant comment on this aspect of the UK entry. In fact, one must resort to the far-right propaganda outlet *GB News* to find any expressions of distaste for the performance of simulated sexual desire on show. For any British readers of this book, it is easy to imagine the outraged reception a performance of this nature would have received just a few years ago. It is quite hard to imagine that it would have been approved by the UK's national selection panel in the first place and, even if it had been, it likely would have received multiple well-publicised complaints as not appropriate for family viewing. Instead, in the 21st century somatic society, Olly Alexander wrapped himself in the Union Jack and we saw gay male desire aligned with 'Brand UK'.<sup>4</sup> While avoiding hyperbole, it is clear that something has changed regarding the public visibility of gay male sexuality.

It might seem commonsensical to observe that queer desire and queer (in this case gay male) bodies are a part of mainstream popular culture rather than set apart from it in 2024. Examples that add traction to this statement abound. In the British media, for example, gay and lesbian coupledom is routinely presented in advertising campaigns as an everyday and 'ordinary' part of the landscape of a diverse, multicultural, Western nation state. Banks, building societies, utility companies, car manufacturers, insurers, fast food retailers all depict same-sex couples benefiting from their products and services in ways that would have been hard to imagine even a decade ago.<sup>5</sup> Television formats ranging from reality TV fare such as *Big Brother* and the BBC3 property *I Kissed a Boy* (2023) – marketed as the UK's first gay dating show<sup>6</sup> – and the sequel *I Kissed a Girl* (2024) and even family entertainment such as *Strictly Come Dancing* all feature queer people in their casts. Even the producers of the resolutely heterosexist *Love Island* have at least considered the possibility of a 'gay *Love Island*', claiming that it is only the logistics of the format that have prevented it to date.<sup>7</sup>

This chapter acknowledges that 21st century politics, particularly the evolution and shifts in popular perceptions of what is considered socially and culturally progressive or retrograde, impact how gender and sexuality are framed in the public domain and, in turn, how the category of sexiness is constructed. Far from being a frivolous concern, the meanings of sexy and how they are communicated and circulated across culture reveal a great deal about attitudes towards gender, sexuality and identity. As we have emphasised throughout this book, in a somatic society, bodies are the carriers of social and cultural meaning and value.

In 21st century digital media culture, images of bodies – for this book, male bodies – proliferate for any number of reasons, including, but not limited to, commercial motivations. This proliferation leads to representations of male

bodies possessing a plasticity that, as we have argued elsewhere, results in masculinity becoming saturated with sometimes contradictory meanings (Mercer and Attwood, 2017); contradiction being a common condition in the contemporary moment. Masculinity, presented to audiences for its overtly homoerotic value and thereby ‘queered’, is, we believe, evidence of this saturated masculinity. In this chapter, we will examine how aspects of queer sexuality are enacted through and inscribed onto men’s bodies across various texts and contexts. We will explore the unravelling and reconstruction of the sexualised male body when framed through a queer lens, considering the value of terms like ‘queer’ and their meanings in a contemporary context where binaristic divisions between gay/straight are already progressively porous and uncertain. The examples we use in this chapter are intentionally heterogenous. Our intention is to demonstrate how non-heterosexual, non-heterosexist and non-heteronormative presentations of male bodies and masculinity for their erotic value have become assimilated into popular discourse, popular culture and contemporary capitalism. At the same time, we acknowledge that while this assimilation of queerness into the mainstream has taken place, there remains evidence of a perhaps more radical queering of masculinity and maleness in more marginal spaces and niche genres. These illustrate the potential of the male body and masculinity as fertile sites for questioning normative standards and the politics that underpin them.

### Queer Eyes and Queer Ways of Seeing

In 2003, Bravo TV first aired the reality makeover programme *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. The show ran in its original format until 2007, and became a huge popular and commercial success, winning an Emmy for ‘Outstanding Reality Program’ in 2004 along the way. The format of the show was relatively straightforward; a team of five gay male ‘style experts’ (the Fab Five as they became known) are invited into the life of a hapless straight man to transform him into an ‘ideal’ of contemporary heteromascularity. By season three the show’s title was abbreviated to the now more familiar *Queer Eye*, used when the show was rebooted by Netflix in 2018 and to enable a wider creative brief for the Fab Five to make over participants of all genders and sexualities. From the outset the show, though popular, attracted mixed reviews, with some commentators celebrating the level of LGBTQ visibility that *Queer Eye* afforded while others expressed concerns about its unproblematic reproduction of stereotypes.<sup>8</sup> As James Keller summarises:

While most critics have appreciated the novelty of the Bravo series, a few have denounced its impolitic promotion of gay stereotypes. Tom Shales of the *Washington Post* complained that the program promotes a ‘patronizing mentality,’ and Linda Stasi of the *New York Post* suggests that the public is ‘afraid of gay men who act normal’. The Fab 5 [...] all work in professions

that are stereotypical of gay men. If only they would add a florist, a choreographer, and an elementary school teacher, they would have the entire set. The Fab 5 are also effete in their mannerisms, camp in their humour, and sarcastic in their criticisms. However, the stereotypes move in both directions. While the show implies that all gay men are decorators and hairstylists, it also suggests that all straight men are vulgar, slovenly, and uncultured.

(2004: 50)

*Queer Eye* is conceived as a popular entertainment, so we need to be mindful of its intentions in this regard, nonetheless it is hard to argue that it is anything other than inherently normative. As Benjamin Bateman notes, ‘the Fab Five are figured as facilitators of, but more importantly, outsiders to the spectacle of heterosexual romance and matrimony’ (2006: 10). Even in its subsequent 2018 reboot the show is premised on the idea that while gender and sexuality might not be entirely and rigidly binaristic (for example Fab Five hairstylist Jonathan Van Ness identifies as non-binary, even as he continues to use masculine pronouns<sup>9</sup>) then identities are at least very clearly demarcated. In the *Queer Eye* universe this means that there is a rift between being ‘queer’/gay and being straight. It is from this privileged position that the Fab Five can monitor the participants’ performances of their gender to facilitate them becoming better men, more often than not, and thereby to become more sexually attractive. This project of self-improvement is wrapped up in therapeutic discourses of well-being, actualisation, personal growth, individual responsibility where being ‘sexy’ is deemed important. Although the show has extended its ambit beyond straight men and become as much about life makeovers as it is about appearances, *Queer Eye* perpetuates trite maxims that reinforce the orthodoxy that attractiveness and sex appeal stem from self-confidence – the oft used cliché that what you feel on the inside shines through. Of course, anyone who has ever paid any attention to the lives of famous sex symbols who are often motivated by insecurity, self-loathing and doubt, will recognise that this is not borne out by evidence. Furthermore, gay men are positioned as arbiters of taste – a historical role that reinforces stereotypes – and are also, rather paradoxically, best placed as the custodians of the gold standards of male sex appeal because they instinctively (and professionally) ‘know’ about these things in ways that women and straight men do not. Readers of this book will undoubtedly be familiar with gay men who are neither innately stylish, nor especially sexy. One of the revelations of this book is that, at least in the context of social media, many men of all sexualities understand what sex appeal is without the need for the intercession of the Fab Five. All the same, the idea that underpins the show is clear: that gay men have a particular set of attributes that enable them to understand what ‘attractiveness’ or sex appeal looks like and how to achieve it; in short, that there is a queer way of viewing gender, particularly masculinity, that enables those subjected to it to perform their masculinities and sexualities ‘better’.

At this point it is important to be precise in our use of language. The term queer carries political and cultural baggage and as it has moved from the realm of political activism and the academy into popular parlance during the 1990s, its meaning, we believe, has evolved. As early as 2003 Jack Halberstam noted that:

It is usual in the study of gender and sexuality to use the term 'queer' to refer simply to 'sexual minorities.' [...] When we detach queerness from sexual identity in this way, we come closer to understanding Michel Foucault's comment in an interview that 'homosexuality threatens people as a way of life' rather than as a way of having sex.

In this chapter we aim to reinstate sexual identity, indeed sexuality and sexual representation, into a consideration of queerness. Halberstam is also critical that gender and sexuality research into queer cultures and practices (and we'd extend this very often to popular discourse) tend to 'concentrate almost exclusively upon the activities of white gay men'.<sup>10</sup> It is less easy for us to overcome this shortcoming, and we note that we are complicit in this chapter in the collapsing of 'queer' into a gay male (though not exclusively white) frame. This is not altogether surprising, given that this book explores how male bodies and masculinity are sexualised across media cultures. However, as readers will note later in the chapter, our aim is to complicate this view, and throughout the book we have been keenly attentive to issues of race and ethnicity. In the context of this chapter, the term queer refers to a positionality, performance, aesthetic or style, that disrupts or 'troubles' heteronormative standards of masculine behaviour, gender performance or sexuality. We also want to clarify that, as we have argued throughout this book, in the digital age the assumed immutability of masculinity and the teleological nature of heteronormativity are destabilised, uncertain and ambiguous. This book (and this chapter) advocates for a heterogenous and expansive conceptualisation of masculine sexualisation and sexiness fit for the 21st century. In this regard we take our lead from Alexander Doty who, in the introduction to *Making Thing Perfectly Queer*, calls for queerness as 'a quality related to any expression that can be marked as contra-, non-, or anti-straight' (1993: xv).

A key tenet of queer scholarship and activism is the adoption of queer reading strategies that involve looking and seeing the social and cultural world differently; that queering is the act of looking at the world through a non-(hetero) normative lens (Warner, 1991; Doty, 1993; Edelman, 1994). A body of research synthesising queer ways of looking with psychoanalytic (often Lacanian) models of film spectatorship often borrowed from Laura Mulvey has made a case for the disruptive queer gaze (McNealy, 2021; Pullen, 2016; Morse and Herold, 2021; Snider, 2008).<sup>11</sup> Seeing the world and seeing men's bodies through a queer (or specifically gay male) 'lens' is significant. However, we would argue that as this perspective has moved from the margins to the mainstream of popular culture – particularly within digital and social media contexts – the ways in

which it can be understood have also evolved. We recognise this is not a new observation. As early as 1995, Evans and Gamman argued that contemporary spectatorship should be understood as ‘multiple, contradictory, shifting, oscillating, inconsistent and fluid’ (1995: 54), terms we have also used throughout this book. Speaking specifically about queer modes of spectatorship in a specific cultural context they make these further points that still resonate 30 years later:

Today ideas about the interrelationship or intertextuality of visual images are generally accepted. Second, new generations of gays and lesbians have articulated their experiences differently from before, and what is being called ‘queer cinema’ and the ‘queer gaze’ has come into being as a consequence of that experience. But does the queer gaze always reconstitute the visual text as queer?

*(Evans and Gamman, 1995: 54)*

This act of seeing men’s bodies differently has had some profound implications although, once again, it is not new. As we have already noted, men’s bodies and images of sexualised masculinity circulate across popular culture. It has become commonplace to describe advertising images that exploit male sex appeal as ‘homoerotic’ for example. In this context the identification of homoeroticism is an observation based on a premise we can trace back to Berger and Mulvey in the 1970s that in a patriarchal society ‘men act’, ‘men look’ (Berger, 1972: 47) and men are the ‘bearer(s) of the look’ (Mulvey, 1975). The logic that follows this line is that the act of a man looking at another man’s body is, indeed can *only* be, about sexuality and desire and is a challenge to heterosexual, patriarchal order which therefore needs to be disavowed, contained or otherwise neutralised and made safe (Neale, 1983; Cohan, 1997; Lehman, 1993).<sup>12</sup> In short, that the act of looking is itself potentially always an act of sexualisation. The potentiality (or risk) of a queer or at least a gay male gaze is always there when men’s bodies are represented in cultural texts. In an article from 2007, written for the online journal *Bright Lights*, Nicholas de Villiers identifies not just what he calls a ‘homophobic gaze’ but also glancing, cruising and staring as specific modes of queer spectatorship.<sup>13</sup> As the research in this book illustrates, we can add, as a minimum, browsing, rating and liking to this list of spectatorial relations and we would extend this beyond a queer way of looking. However, we want to qualify this by suggesting that, in the 21st century, it is not credible to assume that the act of looking at the (homo)eroticised male body is inherently destabilising to patriarchal order, or indeed radical or culturally/politically progressive. Instead, we propose that a queer or gay male gaze might be conceived as an assimilated, pansexual gaze – apolitical and somatic. This gaze views sexualised/eroticized bodies as social, cultural and economic capital. Furthermore, this way of looking and seeing is always already deeply embedded in digital media culture. We will revisit this issue in our concluding chapter.

## Queerbaiting

In popular culture, appealing to non-heterosexual audiences, particularly gay male audiences, is hardly a new phenomenon. It is significant in that it illustrates both visibility and acceptance for minority groups while also acknowledging and identifying potentially lucrative market segments. Cultural historians and sociologists have written about the so-called ‘pink pound’ or ‘pink dollar’ phenomenon, which emerged during the late 1980s and early 1990s as businesses recognised gays as a ‘niche market’ (O’Barr, 2012) and began to actively market products and services towards gay (usually male) consumers. According to prevailing market mythologies, this group was described as affluent, ‘better educated, [...] more likely to occupy professional positions than their straight counterparts. Along with [...] no additional dependents’ (O’Barr, 2012: 12).<sup>14</sup> The practice, now colloquially known as ‘queerbaiting’, is primarily linked to the desire to maximise market share and therefore profit in the entertainment industry and beyond, although it should be noted that the term queerbaiting has evolved its meaning over time. As Woods and Hardman describe it in an essay in *Psychology and Sexuality*:

It was typically used to describe a storyline depicting two same sex characters who appeared to be developing a romantic relationship with one another [...] Despite the characters’ apparent interest, they would never establish a romantic relationship, much to the confusion of viewers. Queerbaiting was thus originally understood and coined by queer activists as an unrealised queer subtext or plot used to lure queer audiences.

(2021: 584)<sup>15</sup>

They note that the term has been extended and used to describe:

celebrities and those in the public eye are increasingly being accused of queerbaiting, as they make hints towards a queer identity but confirm that they are straight and cisgender [...] What appears to underpin the queerbaiting phenomenon is how queer visibility develops (Ng, 2017) and how consumers perceive the intentions behind such visibility.

(2021: 584)

It is this iteration of queerbaiting that concerns us here. Joseph Brennan has written at some length about the phenomenon, particularly taking issue with the former child star, actor and singer Nick Jonas whose physical transformation and penchant for posing for photographs in varying states of undress mark him as an exemplar of queerbaiting practice.<sup>16</sup>

Important for our purposes here is Jonas’s own admission of his intentionality in courting queer followings, which confirms his intention to

queerbait while concurrently reshaping the connotations of the term through his claim to have ‘pure’ intentions. Jonas demonstrates an awareness of such intentionality when speaking of his marketing and the construction of his adult image. On the subject of his transition from adolescence to adulthood in his career, Jonas explains, ‘The word “intentional” is dangerous, but it was about intentionally doing certain photo shoots and things that would give people a better idea of who I am today as opposed to their first introduction when I was 14.’ The word ‘intentional’ is dangerous for Jonas because intentionality is at the heart of queerbaiting: as a calculated attempt to profit off queer interest, rather than a more ‘pure’ reflection of who a celebrity truly is. The foregoing quote also presents a de-queering of his self-sexualization in which he acknowledges he intentionally chose ‘certain photo shoots,’ selfies, and screen roles. (2019: 128)

Brennan’s critique illustrates the popular (and sometimes quasi-scholarly) invective that is levelled at celebrities who acknowledge an assumed or implied queer audience or who choose to play with their sexuality and identity. These choices, and the demands of fandom, can create an uneasy relationship. Celebrities who resist conforming to or being pigeonholed into who they ‘truly’ are (a deeply problematic term if ever there was one, that we will return to shortly) often expose themselves to accusations of queerbaiting. For example, the British ‘boy band’ *Take That* strategically and self-consciously cultivated a gay male fan base at the start of their careers. Managed by Nigel Martin Smith, the impresario of Manchester’s gay scene, and produced by Ian Levine, the resident DJ at London’s largest gay club *Heaven* – who was also famed for popularising HiNrg as a pop genre – *Take That* toured UK gay clubs in the early 1990s before becoming a major success and incrementally distancing themselves from this aspect of their early careers.

The image constructed for the group was grounded in their good looks, athletic dancing and a mixture of playfulness and sexual provocation designed to appeal to gay male audiences just as much as the young female fanbase they went on to secure by the middle of the decade. In 1991, the undistinguished track ‘Do What You Like’ featured the band bare chested, dressed in studded leather biker jackets, performing provocative dance moves that meant that the video was banned on UK daytime TV. Neither the video nor the musical track warrant extended consideration, but they illustrate the sexualisation of the band that was deliberately ambiguously coded. One of the consequences of these early marketing strategies was that all members of the group were subject to speculation around their sexualities, with rumours periodically circulating as to their status as closeted gays for many years. Erstwhile member Robbie Williams, who went on to have a major career as a solo artist, was particularly singled out for relentless tabloid gossip about his ‘hidden’ sexuality. He eventually sued *The People* newspaper for printing stories of allegations about his

sex life that were found to be libellous.<sup>17</sup> Even after this legal clarification (and disavowal) of a queer identity, Williams was widely reported a decade later as claiming to be 49 per cent gay, ostensibly to generate media coverage. This, in turn, resulted in the same kind of queerbaiting accusations that Brennan levels at Jonas.<sup>18</sup>

There are many more recent examples of sexy singers, actors, reality show celebrities who have to a greater or lesser degree attracted (or courted) a queer/gay male audience with results that illustrate the, often vituperative, tenor of online debate around sexuality and identity. Triggered by physical beauty or a perceived excess of sex appeal, there is perhaps a stronger desire than ever in the social media age to 'know' a 'truth' about someone's sexuality – as something that can be somehow captured, categorised and fixed. This is especially ironic in a cultural moment where ambiguity, uncertainty and fluidity are characteristic of the zeitgeist.<sup>19</sup>

The flurry of widely publicised rumours surrounding singer and songwriter Shawn Mendes' sexuality from 2019 onwards is particularly notable, especially because these rumours have not been grounded in any of the manipulative queerbaiting provocations identified in the case of Robbie Williams or the conspicuous display of a sexualised physique observed with Nick Jonas. Mendes possesses physical beauty, but also a sensitivity and insecurity that are personality characteristics that have become central to the formation of his celebrity image, leading to speculation about his sexuality. In interviews, Mendes has revealed, touchingly, that this speculation has been a feature of his life growing up and has caused him anxiety.<sup>20</sup> An article for NBC News in the United States uses the term 'wishdar' to describe what might be seen as a queer 'claiming' of a celebrity based on their sex appeal, regardless of their publicised sexual identity.<sup>21</sup> It is important to note that desire (specifically sexual desire) is a significant motivator in fandom and that the queer 'claiming' of a celebrity based on their sex appeal is a powerful act which has undoubtedly enhanced rather than damaged the careers of many celebrities. The speculation around Mendes' sexual identity, combined with his physical beauty and rising capital as a performer, were almost certainly the ideal constellation of factors to warrant Calvin Klein casting him in their 'I SPEAK MY TRUTH IN #MYCALVINS' digital print campaigns in 2019, and, of course, did little to dispel, indeed exacerbated, online discussion of his sexuality. In a widely distributed and much discussed array of still images, the sensitive and reticent Mendes is depicted in a set of banal motel style settings, wearing nothing more than branded underwear in shots that are styled with a studiedly 'impromptu' aesthetic. In a strategic turn designed to leverage the speculation that had swirled around him, Mendes and his publicity and management teams have exploited his sexual allure and the ambiguity that is attached to it. In doing so, they have aligned him with a brand that has long capitalised on these, as we noted in Chapter 4.<sup>22</sup>

## Harry Styles and Bad Bunny

Since at least 1956 when, as noted in Chapter 2, Elvis Presley's gyrating hips on the *Milton Berle Show* caused a furore, pop music has been a particularly rich site for the staging and enactment of masculine sex appeal and an arena in which the contours of sexualised masculinity are described, expanded and subverted. For instance, if we think about the bodies of Mick Jagger or David Bowie, especially at the zenith of their respective fame in the 1960s and 1970s, both had a physicality that spoke of vulnerability, ambiguity and sexual possibility: masculine bodies and modes of presentation and performance that offered the promise of polymorphous desires; in short, a queerness, pre the advent of queer theory. Furthermore, pop music is in continuous dialogue with the world of fashion and in the contemporary moment it is clear to see the extent to which the parallel industries more than co-exist, in many cases there is a convergence. In this regard the singer and actor Harry Styles is an interesting example of a performer with a large, ostensibly female fan base, regarded as a sex symbol who has been identified as a barometer of the shifting landscape around gender and sexuality. Styles' career has been built in a cultural context where homophobic speculation, of the kind that performers such as Robbie Williams had to navigate (and also encouraged), is no longer freighted with the same risks of reputational damage and lost revenue. Added to which his public image is not grounded in the kind of vulnerable sensitivity that frames media commentary about Shawn Mendes.

Like Williams, Styles emerged as part of a manufactured pop band, the group *One Direction* formed to compete in the British TV talent show, *The X Factor*, in 2010. The group went on to become one of the most successful pop groups of all time. In 2015 Forbes reported that they were the fourth highest-earning celebrities in the world and that they had earned twice as much as the *Rolling Stones* that year.<sup>23</sup> From the outset Styles was a particular focus of fan investment, in large part due to the specifics of his studied style consciousness. In an interview in *GQ* magazine that gained some degree of notoriety when the writer received death threats from fans unhappy about the close questioning of the group, Jonathan Heaf describes Styles' appeal:

He is the band's libido: their inner mojo made physical – and with great hair. [...] He's the youngest member of the group – just as Robbie Williams was in Take That – and just like Williams, he seems to be the most willing to just go out and enjoy himself, minder or no minder, pop band or no pop band. He's their rock star. The cool kid.<sup>24</sup>

Styles was not just the sex symbol of the group, he was also largely indifferent to the speculation that surrounded his sexuality from relatively early on in his career.

In the same interview, Styles was asked about his tally of sexual encounters and about a rumoured relationship with then *Radio 1* DJ Nick Grimshaw. His

nonchalant reply, ‘Oh, really? I didn’t even know. We’re not dating, no. We’re just friends’, reveals the extent to which this kind of ‘rumour’ had, by the mid-teens, lost its incendiary (and career-damaging) power. In fact, we would argue that speculation about a male celebrity’s sexuality tends to enhance rather than diminish their sex appeal, as was the case with Shawn Mendes.

Since 2016, Styles has carved out a solo career for himself as singer/songwriter, and as an actor, which has involved cultivating a celebrity persona that extends his star power and differentiates him from his *One Direction* bandmates. His performative gestures, staging and stylistic references to elements of David Bowie’s glam rock era suggest that, in cultivating his public image as a solo act, Styles is welcoming a questioning of his masculinity and sexual identity, rather than resisting it à la Mendes. Furthermore, Styles’ new star image, curated by influential fashion stylist Harry Lambert,<sup>25</sup> is grounded not just in a sex appeal aimed at young female audiences but also in fashion and fashionability. Famed for wearing a Gucci dress for the cover of *Vogue* in 2020, styled by Camilla Nickerson, we would qualify the hyperbole that surrounded this *coup de theatre* by noting that what matters is the *way* Styles wore feminine fashion.<sup>26</sup> His well-known penchant for gender fluid dressing is styled in a way that emphasises a masculine physicality or iconography – the contrast of rough and smooth – which may not challenge gender norms as much as it initially appears. His status as celebrity and as sex symbol, then, is based on being a modern and fashionable man, something more than a ‘pretty face’. As Karaminas and Taylor, describing him as a ‘gender changeling’, note:

A cardinal example in recent times of the antigender category is Harry Styles, a musical performer, celebrity icon, and Gucci brand ambassador who deploys fashion to navigate the terrains of gender and sexuality in styling his image as a gender changeling. What is significant about Styles is the way that the ‘universal’ category of maleness is simply a nodal point for a series of slippages and repudiations. Maleness in the Styles persona is but an anchor point for registering the many ways that masculinities are questioned and revised. In very much the same vein that Madonna’s performances were acts of resistance against hegemonic forces of control, or how David Bowie and Lady Gaga became ciphers for gender and species ambiguity, Harry Styles has become a muse for the gender fluidity movement. Stylist Harry Lambert fashioned the former One Direction band member into a poster boy for Generation X and the millennials. By becoming a brand ambassador for the house of Gucci, Styles ushered in a monumental shift in menswear described as ‘gender-free’ fashion. Furthermore, Styles’ curated persona represents an intervention into masculinity at a time when traditional, binary understandings of gender are being challenged and superseded by nonbinary and fluid pronouns and descriptors.

(2022: 9)

While Styles' new persona and considerable commercial success as a major pop star have shifted the conversation from speculation about his sexuality to more overt criticisms that he is queerbaiting his audience, it is notable that this kind of critique is routinely refuted in media reportage. Many commentators lament the simplistic logics and sometimes implicit homophobia of such accusations.<sup>27</sup> In interviews, Styles has been studiously careful to ensure that he has not made any comment about his sexuality that might present him as adhering to a heteronormative binary.<sup>28</sup>

Regardless of Styles' considered (and perhaps stage-managed) attention to contemporary sensitivities around questions of sexuality, in an article as late as 2023 in the *New York Times*, about the queerbaiting phenomenon, he was discussed alongside Puerto Rican musician and 'King of Latin Trap' Benito Ocasio, known as Bad Bunny, who has also faced accusations of queerbaiting. The subhead for the article advises readers that, 'even as gender and masculinity are more fluid than ever, it can still rankle when male stars co-opt traditionally gay codes and signs'.<sup>29</sup> This reflects an ongoing debate about figures like Bad Bunny or Styles and whether their perceived 'flirting' with sexual difference, gender neutral styling and a queer identity reflects anything more than a set of image management and, therefore, commercial decisions by two of the most successful male recording artists of their age. At its most extreme and polarising, this perspective is reflected in a 2020 opinion piece from Andre Wheeler in the *Guardian* which argues that 'there is more capital to be gained from wearing the queer activism of the moment like a costume than actually living and embodying it'.<sup>30</sup>

Like Styles, Bad Bunny has been relatively equivocal about his sexual orientation in interviews, where the topic often arises. Like Styles, he has also become a fixture of gossip columns due to his romantic relationship with Kendall Jenner, his celebrity friends and his idiosyncratic fashion sense. Like Styles, he has also diversified his career by taking on acting roles in Hollywood action blockbusters such as *Bullet Train* (dir. David Leitch, 2022) and *Fast & Furious 9* (dir. Justin Lin, 2021). In *Cassandro* (dir. Roger Ross Williams, 2023) he was cast as a queer character and the love interest of Gael Garcia Bernal. Their onscreen kiss rather predictably attracted media attention and further accusations of queerbaiting.<sup>31</sup> What is interesting in Bad Bunny's case is the extent to which media speculation about his sexuality has been routinely racialised. The singer is often portrayed as challenging the misogyny and homophobia of Latino machismo by expressing contemporary (and progressive) attitudes towards gender and sexuality, both in the content of his songs and videos and through his personal style, which rejects heteronormative binarisms.<sup>32</sup> So, while Bad Bunny does not go as far as to articulate a 'queer' identity, his aesthetic – both in terms of his musical output and his personal style – is meant to be read as resolutely queer. This has meant that he has become an object of study for scholarship in recent years. Luis Figueroa for example sees Bad Bunny's iconography as a deployment of camp:

Drawing from the extravagant and eccentric camp aesthetics, Bad Bunny makes visible the artificiality of the hypermasculine performance that characterizes the mainstream celebrities in Latin trap music. [...] Bad Bunny's camp exceptional individuality demystifies the naturalness of the hegemonic masculinity performance in Latin trap while simultaneously reinforcing its limits. Thus, Bad Bunny represents a transgressive masculine performance that makes visible the limits of hegemonic masculinity without disrupting or expanding them.

(2020: 88)

It is the performance of his star image as much as his musical output that is of note here. An article in *Dazed* magazine hyperbolically makes the case for the 'cuntification' (that is the extreme feminisation) of Bad Bunny informing us that:

Though Benito Ocasio is not explicitly queer, he does dress like a hometown homosexual who has just discovered *Jaded London*. [...] Bad Bunny doesn't want to look like a judge on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, he wants to be the glamour model that waves the flag at an actual drag race [...] Regardless of his perceived sexual preferences, it's Bad Bunny's proximity to wealth and fame that allows him to dress outside of masculine dictates.<sup>33</sup>

Much media reportage focusses on Bad Bunny's style sense, his enthusiasm for high fashion, and his status as a 'fashion leader'. Attention is given to his extravagant styling and mixing of male and female clothing, which connects to broader discussions around substantive shifts in how masculinity (and gender more broadly) is performed and transacted. At the same time, it connects to well-worn popular media discussions around the supposedly 'vexed' issue of men wearing skirts.<sup>34</sup> The construction and interpretation of Bad Bunny's image are inconsistent, reflecting the extent to which many mainstream media outlets still struggle with, or feel anxiety about, contemporary, youth-oriented attitudes around gender and sexuality. A case in point is the hilarious profile accompanying Bad Bunny as the cover model for the June 2022 issue of the American edition of *GQ*. The edition features a lavish high fashion spread showcasing the singer's extravagant fashion sense – a style that we think unlikely to be emulated by many of *GQ* readership. The profile, clearly written with a US mainstream market in mind and likely overseen by publicists anxious to present the star as 'relatable' – especially given his imminent casting as the superhero 'El Muerto' in a shelved Marvel project – ignores any question of gender play or questions of sexuality. Instead, it strives to situate him as recognisable, sensitive and, notably, *heterosexual* in ways that undermine the image he has presented elsewhere, including in his own accounts.<sup>35</sup>

His 2022 album *Un Verano Sin Ti* was a global success, but it is important to note that much of his music and videography largely adhere to culturally specific, heteronormative standards. However, there are significant moments in his

work where he engages with sexual politics and exhibits a level of self-conscious ambiguity and play that could be understood as an expression of at least a liminal queer positionality. For instance, the 2018 release *Caro* was accompanied by a video in which Bad Bunny's vocal performance is ventriloquised by the fashion model Jazmyne Joy whose shaved head and fashion sense is identical to Bad Bunny's own.<sup>36</sup> As Samuel Fouts argues in 'Caro: Bad Bunny and the Symbolic Rupture of Gender' (2023), the overlapping of the two performances – one male and one female – deliberately suggests that the masculinism of the musical form can be disrupted, and thereby queered, through performance. This approach is far removed from the mere 'flirtation' with queerness that popular journalism has often decried.

*Yo Perreo Sola*, from his 2020 album *YHLQMDLG* (an abbreviation in Spanish for I do what I want), is a track about female empowerment and a challenge to the endemic machismo of the musical form that Bad Bunny is associated with. The song's video begins in a teenager's bedroom: a boy's enjoyment of an animation (of a rabbit of course) is interrupted by an interactive YouTube video of Bad Bunny in red latex drag singing 'I dance alone' and thereby rejecting the unwanted attentions of men who pursue her/him.<sup>37</sup> Much of the media reportage and, for that matter, the growing body of academic work on Bad Bunny and his implicit critique of Latino masculinity rather scrupulously avoids a fundamental aspect of his celebrity image. Unlike Harry Styles whose celebrity status might be understood as framed as a teen heartthrob transformed into an adult sex symbol for a new century and new demographic, Bad Bunny's musical content and self-presentation are overtly about sex in capital letters. In fact, in an interview in 2023, the most unlikely of publications, *Vanity Fair*, became one of the few mainstream outlets to acknowledge this:

Horndoggery is a hallmark of the Bad Bunny brand. His lyrics are thick with sex, from anilingus to road head, and partners so wet, he could baptize himself. [...] His music is hypersexual and überspecific but not degrading. He's filthy, sure, but he's sensuous, rehashing his hookups with an almost holy worship. 'Sex is one of the most beautiful and deepest things in the world,' Martínez says, twisting off a garlic knot from a bed of creamed spinach. He and his publicist, Sujeylee Solá, laugh because, despite its prevalence in his songbook, he isn't often asked about this topic. 'Maybe I'm thinking about sex a lot during my free time. I have a lot of free time.'<sup>38</sup>

Bad Bunny's social media presence demonstrates the extent to which his gender blurring personal style and interest in sexually 'fluidity' extends to the sharing of intimate, provocative and nude photos on Instagram in a manner that would rarely be thought of as typical image management for a major international recording act. These acts of self-sexualisation – the thirst trapping practices

that we will discuss in more detail in our final chapter – demonstrate his engagement with social media (which was the route to his musical success in the first place) and the extent to which the star’s sexualised body is, as we have repeatedly observed, capital in a somatic society.<sup>39</sup>

### Queer Acts: Troye Sivan, Orville Peck and Lil Nas X

So far in this chapter, we have discussed how aspects of queer politics, style and queer ways of looking have become assimilated into mainstream consciousness and, albeit in a sometimes denuded manner, into popular and consumer culture often through the nexus of fashion and pop music. While performers like Harry Styles and Bad Bunny can be seen, using Nicholas de Villiers’ (2007) formulation, to ‘cruise’ queerness by adopting a performance style, maintaining a social media and public image, and employing a queer aesthetic, there are also a range of prominent musical acts who both self-identify as queer men. These artists articulate a queer sexuality and leverage their sexualised bodies to achieve a queer worldview/viewpoint that then becomes accessible to a wider mainstream audience.

An initial case study is offered by the Australian singer, actor and YouTuber, Troye Sivan. In a *Vogue* feature, reviewing his album, the performer is described, in breathless terms as:

part of a generation of young artists who have, since the start of their careers, unapologetically told their stories through the lens of their queerness. Indeed, his oeuvre reads like a gay coming-of-age story: there are the nods to boyhood and coming out in the trilogy of *Blue Neighborhood* music videos; reflections on the innocence of early sexual experiences in ‘Seventeen’ and ‘Bloom’; he points to the body-image challenges of existing as a gay man in ‘STUD’; to heartbreak in ‘The Good Side’ and the ache for love of ‘Angel Baby’; and now the winds of liberation, sexual freedom, and confidence in ‘Rush.’<sup>40</sup>

Sivan came to international prominence when at 13 years of age he was cast in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (dir. Gavin Hood, 2008) as the youthful version of Hugh Jackman’s titular character. He had already appeared in Australian TV talent shows as a singer and by 2013 was signed to a major label. He had been actively posting and establishing a fanbase on YouTube since the late 2000s, first through singing and later on, by discussing his identity, famously revealing his sexuality in a vlog of 2013.<sup>41</sup> In 2023, Sivan was awarded the accolade of *GQ Australia*’s ‘man of the year’ in a move that was touted as an indicator not just of redefined standards of masculinity in the 2020s (a wider popular conversation that draws in figures like Bad Bunny and Harry Styles as exemplars) but also as a sign of a more progressive and inclusive Australia. In his acceptance, Sivan himself was to note that:

It's not lost on me the irony of me winning 'man' of the year when I did drag for the first time this year. I feel more in touch with my femininity than ever, and I think it speaks to a point I'd really like to make, which is that my relationship with masculinity has been very strange my entire life. I existed in this grey area between not being invited to sleepovers for girls' nights and not getting along with any of the boys.<sup>42</sup>

His musical output and more specifically the videos that promote that content have moved on from teen gay romance stories to become progressively more overt in their expression of a queer viewpoint, and particularly an expression of queer desire.<sup>43</sup> As early as 2018, with the much-discussed title track of his album *Bloom*, Sivan's work is alluding to a gay male sexuality that provoked much comment on its release. The song was routinely described across the music media as a celebration of anal sex and Sivan's styling by this point presented him as the paradigmatic blonde, passive, 'twink' as Corey Geraths (2022: 258), writing about *Bloom* as an object of study, notes.<sup>44</sup> By the release of his third album, *Something to Give Each Other* in 2023, expressions of queer sexuality were foregrounded as a central thematic concern in his artistic output. The promotional image for the album is Sivan's joyful face positioned between the legs of a muscled male torso. The video for the single 'Rush', directed by Gordon Von Steiner, shot in Berlin and art directed in a manner that emulates Wolfgang Tillmans' photography of the city's gay club scene, Sivan drinks beer in leather chaps at an outdoor party and then proceeds to enjoy dancing and sexual encounters with a diverse group of equally young and sexy partygoers. The fashion consciousness of the video is visually striking, and the 'provocative' representations of queer sex, alcohol and implied drug consumption evoke a defiantly youthful hedonistic atmosphere and club/party culture as an example of what Michael Warner (2002) described as a 'counterpublic'.<sup>45</sup>

The excitement and promise of utopian queer sex that the video for 'Rush' offers is not however a consistent message in either Sivan's lyrical content or the visual representation of his music. This is perhaps most arrestingly illustrated in the track, 'One of Your Girls' and its accompanying video, which attracted widespread social media comment. In the song, Sivan expresses his romantic and sexual interest in a, presumed, straight man and the lengths to which he would be prepared to go to have a sexual encounter with him:

[Chorus]  
 Give me a call if you ever get lonely  
 I'll be like one of your girls or your homies  
 Say what you want and I'll keep it a secret  
 You got the key to my heart and I need it  
 Give me a call if you ever get desperate  
 I'll be like one of your girls.

[Verse 2]

Everybody wants you, baby (Everybody)  
 You should insure that waist (With the highest policy you can get)  
 But nobody wants you bad as I do  
 Baby, let me plead my case, yeah.

The video promoting the song reprises the 1990s Calvin Klein campaigns for the fragrance *CKone* and the connected *CK* fashion line, which was associated at the time with the emergence of so called ‘heroin chic’. In the video, a range of men – youthful, muscular, black and a hirsute, ‘bear’ type – are depicted undressing. Following this montage set up, a muscular (and, of course, shirtless) blond male model, *Disney Channel* alumnus Ross Lynch (like Sivan, a child star), receives an erotic lap dance from Sivan, who is dressed in full Britney Spears-inspired drag.<sup>46</sup> It is perhaps instructive to make a comparison here between Bad Bunny who, as already discussed, also adopted drag in the video for ‘Yo Perreo Sola’ to sing about female empowerment and resisting unwanted male attentions. In contrast, Sivan adopts drag to attract the sexual attentions of a straight man, if he were to ‘ever get desperate’. The sexual and gender politics here seem curiously retrograde; indeed they are more than a little reminiscent of the girl group hits of the 1960s where women plaintively beg for men to love them, waiting by the telephone for the call that will never come. Here the queer utopianism of ‘Rush’ and the progressiveness that the song promises are undermined by a representation of a queer person impersonating a cisgender woman as a fantasy substitute for the ‘real thing’.

The country and western performer Orville Peck offers a different type of fantasy from Sivan’s, organised around the ersatz camp erotics of the cowboy and rural Americana. The landing page for his website featuring the masked Peck in full country music regalia at what appears to be a country fair, rodeo or carnival surrounded by a diverse group of scantily clad revellers, along with the campy reprising of Western tropes in the video for ‘Daytona Sand’, suggest a fantasy mid-West where being queer is part of, even if not fully accepted within, the wider narrative of small-town America.<sup>47</sup> As Shana Goldin-Perschbacher describes him in her book *Queer Country*, Peck performs as a ‘mysterious gay crooner [...] whose signature look is a fringed “Lone Ranger” mask that disguises his identity while allowing him to create deeply moving musical performances in a homophobic world’ (2022: 197). Peck’s adoption of a mask in all public appearances is a visual representation of his attempt to subversively ‘trouble’ the nascently queer musical form of country music, and belongs to a lineage that includes Patrick Haggerty, K.D Lang and others (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2018). In the video for ‘How Far Will We Take It’, Peck duets with Noah Cyrus, daughter of Billy Ray and sister of Miley. Cyrus and Peck show their bodies to best advantage as they both try to seduce the same man. To point to the queer tone and content of the song and its visual treatment, the video opens with a direct visual quote from Kenneth Anger’s *Fireworks*, with Peck holding the prone body of both singer’s romantic obsessions.<sup>48</sup> The potential for

reading this text again as regressive is undercut at the end of the video when the dream boat focus of their sexual attentions is left alone and dejected in a motel room while Peck and Cyrus drive off into the sunset together. Their seductions implied as a form of unruly queer play.

While both Sivan and Peck have become queer recording artists with major labels (EMI and Warner Records respectively) it is perhaps Montero Lamar Hill, known as Lil Nas X, who has gone the furthest in creating a star image grounded in queer aesthetics and confidently foregrounding his sexuality. Rejecting the twists and turns that he feels other artists have made to sanitise their acts to meet industry expectations of what appeals to a mainstream audience,<sup>49</sup> Lil Nas X notes that this is the opposite of his own *modus operandi*:

‘I feel like I’m definitely much more “out there” with it,’ he told CBS Sunday Morning. ‘It’s always been, “OK, if you’re gay, this needs to be sanitized. Let’s not include anything sexual.” It’s like, ‘Be gay without being gay. We don’t wanna know what happens behind closed doors, or we don’t want you to express that.’<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, Lil Nas X has made sexualised representations a central feature of his public image and articulated this as a strategy bound up in his sense of self-esteem as a queer person of colour and a desire to disrupt normative standards. For example, in the elaborately staged video for ‘MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)’, the artist, situated in what might be best described as an Afro-futurist, digital Garden of Earthly Delights, has erotic encounters with various iterations of sexual temptation before descending, in the manner of a pole dancer, to hell to simulate sex with Satan himself.<sup>51</sup> Even in the context of a frivolous short feature in *Allure Magazine* Nas is described as ‘so hot, he could melt an iron beam like a stick of butter. He is so hot that, if he were a menu item, he would come with four chili peppers and a Surgeon General’s warning’, and he uses this platform to articulate a message about body positivity:

I feel like I am at the absolute peak of my self love right now, in terms of loving how I am, accepting how I look, and also just seeing the beauty in myself. Growing up, I didn’t see many people like me being considered beautiful or handsome and whatnot, and able to be in certain spaces and places that I am now.<sup>52</sup>

Lil Nas X is a pivotal figure and important because he articulates and represents a black queer subjectivity in and through his sexualised body which moves beyond cruising queer politics or stylistic play. It is for this reason that he has been a particular object of study for scholarship. As Wallace and Shields (2022: 110) note:

In shedding layers of his outfit, Lil Nas X also sheds marginalization and confronts a world that continually contests Black queer humanity. He

personifies what we know to be true: Subjectivity involves more than articulating a definition of self, and the Black queer subjects we examine make that evident. Consequently, queer subjectivity means exposing complications and wrestling with cultural contradictions that comprise the Black experience.

## Selling Queer Sex

Everyone we have discussed so far in this chapter, indeed in this entire book, is invested in selling the promise, or the fantasy, of sex to a greater or lesser degree. From film, to fitness, to fashion, we have illustrated the ways men's bodies and the idea of masculinity itself are presented as sites of pleasure and opportunities for commerce. In the final section of this chapter, we will focus more specifically on some examples of the distribution of more explicit (rather than suggested) representations of sex, particularly queer sexuality. As we described in the Introduction to this book, we see sexual representation, including products of the porn industry, as integral to wider popular culture in the 21st century – no longer marginal or taboo practice – but mainstream content in the digital realm. Consequently, we have avoided parsing out sexual representation or dedicating a specific chapter to porn as a domain of cultural production. In our concluding chapter we will revisit this to challenge the utility of the term 'porn' in the 21st century media ecology. We also want to note that many of the examples we have discussed elsewhere in this book are instances of a queer viewpoint (the homoeorotics of Calvin Klein and D&G, for example) or of queering masculinity as it is presented as object of desire. However, much of this material resides more in the promise than the delivery of queer/gay sex. Additionally, we acknowledge an especially rich vein of queer artistic practice across photography, fine art and performance art that engages specifically with sex, but unfortunately falls outside of the scope of this book. Our focus is necessarily limited to the ways in which contemporary queer aesthetics and politics intersect with commercial popular culture. Notwithstanding these reservations and limitations, there is value in examining how queerness is expressed in and through sexually explicit material, especially because some of the more interesting figures who might be seen to queer masculinity operate in this domain.

In the first instance, given our earlier discussion about the so-called queer-baiting phenomenon, it is productive to consider the ways and the extent to which material adjacent to that discussed elsewhere in this book – particularly the spornosexual body in Chapters 1 and 3 – can be regarded not just as a shift in contemporary modalities of masculinity, but also as a (albeit limited) queering of masculinity itself, or whether it can be dismissed as merely an explicit example of queerbaiting. It will not surprise readers that our interest lies in the former rather than the latter proposition.

For example, a specific, though relatively minor, strand of recent social media content presents apparently working-class British men, many of them tradesmen (blue-collar workers), who have cultivated a social media presence through sexually provocative posts designed, at least in part, to drive traffic to platforms like *OnlyFans*, where sexually explicit content is available for a fee. These men knowingly play up the classed dimensions of their sex appeal as ‘real’ and unreconstructed men engaged in manual labour. Everything from their manner of speech, demeanour and personal style – spray tans, tattoos and veneered teeth – exploit ideas of masculinity that are classed, racialised, socially, culturally and geographically located.

Among this cohort, Billy Essex has, perhaps, the highest profile. His Instagram page is a collection of holiday snap shots and gym selfies, and his *OnlyFans* profile foregrounds his Englishness and class location in emphatic terms: ‘#BILLYESSEX ENGLISH BOY ESSEX BORN’.<sup>53</sup> Essex exists in a wider circle of men who produce similar content such as the builder ‘Big Harry’ and ‘Jay the Plasterer’, who describe themselves on their respective *OnlyFans* pages:

I’m Big Harry 6’3 Fucking boss! Love tattoos, gym and rough sex? SINGLE<sup>54</sup>  
 Big filthy testosterone fuelled plasterer. I got my tool for the lads.  
 Follow my sexual journey with me. See what filthy stuff I get up to on building site.<sup>55</sup>

We have written elsewhere about the phenomenon known as ‘gay for pay’, which refers to men who self-identify as heterosexual but work in the sex industry, particularly in the gay porn industry (Mercer, 2012; Stadler, 2013; Escoffier, 2003). Whether this term continues to have purchase at this point is a matter of debate for us, as it no longer adequately captures what is at stake. Billy Essex, Big Harry and Jay the Plasterer do not explicitly declare their sexualities, and their content is not organised around the idea of straight men who ‘become’ gay in any categorical sense. Instead, these men showcase their bodies and have sex with each other to garner followers and financial reward in the attention economy. They leverage a class-based spornosexual, hypertrophic masculinity that is intended to excite all sexualities. This sexual modality, which we have identified throughout this book across multiple domains, will be revisited in our final chapter. It is presented not as any kind of queer challenge to normative standards, but rather as ‘normal’ contemporary masculine sexuality. We see individuals such as Billy Essex, Big Harry or Jay the plasterer as engaging in what Hakim (2018) describes as spornosexual labour, as discussed in Chapter 3. Our argument is that this kind of content is adjacent to, but not the same as, performers whose sex work and sexual representation are fully located in the domain of queer cultural practice.

## Sagat

As Paris hosted the 2024 Olympic Games, an advertising campaign across the city's Metro stations featured actor, model, designer and singer, Francois Sagat, assuming the classical pose of the discus thrower to advertise the Folie Bergère burlesque show, *Fantasma Circus Erotica*, in which he performs.<sup>56</sup> Sagat is an especially interesting example of the ways the queer male body becomes part of popular culture. He is also probably the most written about person we have discussed in this chapter.

Beginning his career in French gay porn that eroticises Arabic 'beur' identities, Sagat, whose surname – like Zidane's – is replete with axiomatic associations, has cultivated a career that extends beyond the porn industry into fashion, art cinema and performance. The iconicity of his image, which conflates racialised and sexualised signifiers of masculinity, makes him an especially complicated figure epitomising what we have previously identified as saturated masculinity – a body, an identity and a sexuality so overburdened with contradictory meanings that it becomes unstable.<sup>57</sup> His scrupulously self-managed image, described by Mehammed Mack as 'image engineering' (2017: 245) is entirely predicated on disrupting binary models of gender (masculinity and femininity) and gay male sexuality (top vs bottom). As Evangelos Tziallas notes, 'his muscular frame, masculine stature, tanned skinned, beard and tattoos dissolve the threshold between "French" and "other," active and passive and performing and passing' (2014: 97). Tziallas further argues that Sagat's contested ethnicity is also part of this disruptive, performative play: 'Sagat's unstable identity (French, Lebanese and Slovakian) only speaks to the instability of signifiers in a transnational, global world, where physical features and cultural signs are exchanged and up for grabs' (2014: 107). Elsewhere, the over-determined nature of his muscular body and his hypermasculine, hypersexualised performance style have been regarded as a form of drag, which Mack (rather waspishly) described as 'financially successful ethnic drag' (2017: 26). Peter Rehberg also notes that transformation is at the heart of Sagat's image 'from teenage (sissy) boy into a porn stud' (2023: 4). In the same essay, Rehberg argues that:

From the very start, the obvious signs of body modification – his tattoos and his sculptured body – paradoxically, were Sagat's ticket into this world of 'authentic Arab masculinity'. Sagat's porn persona turns 'Arab-ness' into a form of glamour, in a not dissimilar manner to the visual technologies with which gay men produced clone masculinity in the 1970s and 1980s [...] Given the obvious performative character of his porn persona, Sagat's later confession that he was in fact not of 'Arab' but of French-Slovakian descent was almost unnecessary. The theatricality of his representation of masculinity was there from the very start.

(2023: 2)

Sagat's own account of himself points to the extent to which his image and the ideas of gender and sexuality that he summons up are both strategic and designed to draw attention to their own construction. As Ojeda-Sagué observes:

He describes himself as a 'transsexual' because he has taken testosterone to augment his appearance. A confusing comment perhaps, since Sagat identifies as a man and was assigned male at birth, but it seems that what he means, most basically, is that his secondary sex characteristics are in some way driven by hormone manipulation. [...] describing Sagat's performances as 'drag', mark that Sagat's exterior is thought of as an artificial and technological construct. Rather than using hormones to move from one gender to another in a trans embodiment, Sagat's use of hormones is framed as the technology that allows him to embody a specific image of virility. Knowing his career, we can say that Sagat's 'body shell' is a construction specifically of a racialized gender embodiment.

(2020: 11)

As we noted earlier, fashion advertising, especially since the mid-1980s, has been invested in sexualising the male body, a trend that has escalated at specific moments in the intervening years. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that alongside the popularisation of the spornosexual aesthetic during the mid 2010s, porn actors themselves have been cast in fashion campaigns, editorials and on runways. Sagat is one such example, as Matt Ryalls notes:

François Sagat has been appearing in fashion editorial since modelling for menswear designer Bernhard Willhelm since 2007. His hyper-masculinity appeals to a gay, porn aware fashion audience, and through his film, fashion and art collaborations, Sagat has now achieved celebrity status. Since officially retiring from gay porn in 2013, Sagat has capitalized on his fashion credentials by launching his own clothing and underwear range 'Kick Sagat', using himself as muse. Now fully repackaged as artist and fashion brand, Sagat understands as well as any other major fashion brand that when it comes to selling fashion, porn moves work.

(2016: 459)

Sagat has modelled on the runway for Canadian fashion brand *Dsquared* and has been photographed by the, now notorious, celebrity fashion photographer Terry Richardson, responsible for many of Tom Ford's more controversial campaigns.<sup>58</sup> His work in genre and art cinema has also brought him attention, in work ranging from the neorealistic *Homme au Bain* (dir Christophe Honoré, 2010) to Bruce la Bruce's darkly satirical and explicit *L.A. Zombie* in which Sagat plays the eponymous zombie who, in an appropriately disruptive queer turn, fucks the dead back to life.<sup>59</sup>

## 'FTM'

In this chapter, we have focussed on the intersections of queer culture, queer style, and sexualised masculinity. For this last section, we bring our attention to the figure of the transman and how their masculinity is leveraged, primarily through the genre that has become known as FTM (female to male) porn. There is a sizeable literature about trans porn and transmen in porn specifically (Adair and Aizura, 2022; Ballard, 2014; Davy and Steinbock, 2012; Edelman, 2015; Goldberg, 2020; Pezzutto and Comella, 2020).<sup>60</sup> This scholarship is, in part, a corrective to the relative lack of visibility of transmen across popular culture compared with transwomen.<sup>61</sup> With the growing circulation of FTM sexual content across aggregator sites, social media and platforms such as OnlyFans and JustForFans, the transman has assumed a particularly pronounced sexualised identity. It is worth noting that while there is no inherent reason transmasculine performers could not produce videos having sex with females (and such material does exist), FTM porn almost exclusively refers to sex between two men, at least one of whom is a transman.

In 2005, towards the end of Titan Media's dominance of the gay porn industry, the studio released one of their final 'porn operas'. The film was called *Cirque Noir*, described by Titan as 'a twisted fuck of a movie' and was distinguished for including the first onscreen appearance of Buck Angel. Titan's promotional copy instructs us to 'gasp when you see Buck Angel, The Man with a Pussy, double fist Logan Steele and Tober Brandt!'<sup>62</sup> Buck Angel was launched into the porn industry as a trans performer – a proposition that was presented as an exciting, even shocking, novelty prospect. As butch as the rest of the roster of stars in *Cirque Noir* and very much in keeping with Titan's casting policy of older, muscular and resolutely masculine models, Angel was 'revealed' as an aggressive sexual performer – muscular, bald, and macho – he embodied the signifiers of an assertive and aggressive version of gay masculinity. Angel was not just a man, but a veritable sexual 'ubermensch'. The controversy that his appearance provoked at the time, his subsequent diversification into porn production, activism, and the cultivation of a celebrity profile, have meant that Angel has been, for some, a divisive figure in the trans community. Not least because of his public pronouncements about his sexuality; in particular, about his choice to not undergo genital surgery, and, instead, to celebrate his vagina as a source of sexual empowerment.<sup>63</sup> As Marcel Barriault notes:

It is in this context that Angel emphatically declares: 'I'm 100% male. I consider myself a man [...] except for the fact that I have a pussy, which I enjoy getting fucked' [...] By employing decidedly female referents that harken back to his unchosen sex, like 'pussy' or 'cunt', Angel (perhaps unwittingly) positions himself politically outside the prescribed discourse, and in this way alienates himself from some members of the broader trans community. In this light, Angel's comment about his sexuality exemplifies

the tension he has created, and continues to create, between those who see him chiefly as a ground-breaking and award-winning porn visionary, and those who see him as an exploiter of his body, purely for profit and personal advancement.

(2016: 134)

Critique of Buck Angel continues today, and an essay by Lauren Rosewarne offers a thoroughgoing assessment of Angel's contribution to the porn industry and the wider debate around trans activism and trans rights:

Angel's politics and ideology are often muddled, and some of his views and chosen expressions seem anachronistic. He is also one of – if not the – most well-known transmen, and one who has made substantial contributions to the discourse via his porn, his documentaries, and the continued broadcasting of his missives on social media. A person does not have to be liked or universally celebrated, nor even very consistent with their positions to be acknowledged as being part of the story of a changed and changing society.

(2023: 26–27)

In the context of this book, the substantive change that Buck Angel has effected, as noted by Rosewarne, is aptly described by Carlita Greene: 'Buck Angel's very presence indicates that the term 'man' is more complex than previously considered' (2010: 240). Furthermore, Greene notes 'that this claiming of his "male pussy" disrupts the notions of gender and meanings of masculinity versus femininity, which may be one of the reasons that he is popular with his fans and criticized by others' (2010: 45). Whether Angel's contribution to gender politics is truly paradigm shifting or not, it is difficult to argue against the significance of his presence in the industry. His relatively slim oeuvre, by the standards of most porn performers, has nonetheless played a crucial role in providing the conditions for the emergence of a nascent FTM gay porn genre.

For example, 15 years after Cirque Noir, *Treasure Island Media*, a studio famed for the early production of bareback gay porn, released *Bussy: An FTM Fuck Film* (dir. Dice, Kenny Host, Que Grande, Max Sohl, 2020).<sup>64</sup> In keeping with its carefully curated brand identity, *Treasure Island* markets FTM sexuality as an 'extreme' or niche interest, as part of their 'Porn Stash' line. Similarly, specialist studios have emerged to cater to the appetite for FTM content as a niche interest.<sup>65</sup> We find the bracketing and implicit fetishisation of transmen through these more narrowcast porn avenues less interesting than the evidence of mainstream gay porn producers like *MEN* featuring transmasculine performers in their videos, albeit within the framework of what they often describe as 'pansexual' content.<sup>66</sup> In videos such as *My Trans Roomie* (2022), in which transman Stevie Trixx is caught masturbating and then proceeds to have sex with his 'straight' roommate Johnnie Donovan, or in *Raw Bussy Workout* (2021), where trans performer Tommy Tanner's gym session escalates to sex

with the macho Marcus Kage, here, the erect penis as proof of masculinity and as evidence of excitement and satisfaction, is destabilised as gay porn's currency of first choice. Even though the sex depicted across these texts is often (if not always) normative (in terms of the social roles of the performers and the settings of the videos) and penetrative (with the FTM performer assuming the receptive role), masculinity in these videos is nonetheless not reducible to the phallus after all.

We note that many of a new generation of transmasculine sex workers maintain social media presences alongside commercial porn industry work, as well as selling sexual content on platforms such as OnlyFans. These men often articulate their sex work and their ability to represent transmasculine sexualities as inherently connected to political and personal ambitions. In part we see these aspirations as a reflection of the neoliberal conditions discussed elsewhere in this book, and especially as articulations of the process of entrepreneurial self-actualisation. Furthermore, this is evidence of the extent to which, in a somatic society, the body is a fundamental mechanism through which activist politics are enacted.

Trip Richards, for instance, is a successful performer who has worked with an array of commercial porn producers; he has an active social media presence and is engaged in the creation of his own sexual content.<sup>67</sup> Richards' image might be seen as an updated version of Angel's hypermasculine, uber-macho, sexual persona and, like Angel, he is an articulate commentator on his positionality as a trans sex worker, offering his own message of body positivity and pansexual identity:

I absolutely use my adult work to promote a message of inclusivity and body positivity. While I am unapologetic about the fact that this is my livelihood, I think that adult models are in a unique position to push forward an atmosphere of sex positivity and destigmatization. In addition, some people don't believe that porn is a good path toward trans inclusion. I disagree with this; showing trans bodies as desirable is part of normalizing us. I have always identified as bisexual, and once I encountered the term pansexual (which explicitly includes transgender and nonbinary people), I switched to using that label. There's still a lot of social stigma against exploring being bi/pan, paradoxically even within the broader queer community.<sup>68</sup>

In a 2020 interview in *The Advocate*, Richards stresses that 'physical characteristics do not define manhood', and that 'being a man is about identity not appearance'. These words were accompanied, perhaps intentionally ironically, by a series of portraits in which Richards was gradually undressed in the manner of a striptease to reveal his nude self. In the article, he discusses the contemporary fetishisation of the transman in porn and the need to disrupt normativity:

Fetishization is, in my opinion, a natural part of eroticism. It only becomes problematic when it occurs to such an extent that it obscures basic humanity. Since porn is my full-time job, I don't have a problem with fans seeing my body as a sexual object [...] I think a bigger issue is the way that trans men are shoehorned into certain types of sexual roles/role-play, such as always being seen as bottoms or submissives, I fight against these assumptions in my own work, and have made a concerted effort to produce films where I am in dominant and topping positions, just so that people realize that trans male sexual roles are as diverse as cismale roles.<sup>69</sup>

Richards is not alone in questioning assumptions nor of drawing attention to the reception of transmen in the wider gay community. Trans performer Luke Hudson notes that homonormative standards often result in prejudicial and exclusionary behaviours that he aspires to challenge in his personal and professional life, as he explained to Savas Abadsidis for *Hivplusmag* in 2017:

Hudson has only done scenes with cis gay men and is vocal about the dissonance between the cis and trans gay male community. 'It's a little sad to think that in this community we belong to, trans men who are gay tend to be excluded when it comes to being considered as partners' [...] What he imagines is a future 'when we can get trans boys with scars or trans boys of colour and different body types and then the trans guys watching that porn who wonder and question "Hey, could I look like that?" get an answer. And the answer is always yes.'<sup>70</sup>

Similarly, Austin Spears, whose tattooed 'skaterboy' iconography is far removed from either the macho persona of Trip Richards or the clean-cut image of Luke Hudson, became a contestant on the second season of the *Pride TV* reality competition show *Hot Haus*, where current adult performers compete to be awarded the title of 'The Next Queer Sex Symbol'. Despite Spears' unruly and disruptive image both on social media and in his abandoned sexual porn performances online, the show revealed him to be a sensitive and reflective man who, like his contemporaries, sees his public profile as a sex worker and performer as a platform to represent transmasculine sexuality and promote body positivity.<sup>71</sup>

We were hesitant to 'reduce' a discussion of sexualised transmasculinity to a section at the end of this chapter, particularly because public debates, often toxic and transphobic, are frequently so fixated on how transwomen occupy public space that transmen often seem to disappear. We believe that transmen and their visibility across social media, including in FTM Porn, create conditions in which masculinity can be queered through the revealing of a body that, if nothing else, disrupts heterosexist logic based on sexual roles, sexual desire and sexual objects. This is something that Elijah Edelman disputes:

Trans bodies should not be viewed as functioning to either universally reproduce gender norms, as much as they should not be viewed as providing opportunities to ‘queer’ or transcend normative gender or sexualized ideologies. Trans bodies can be, as discussed here, complicated, unexceptional and variable; they matter only in so much as we wish them to.

(2015: 159)

We tend to disagree with Edelman here and instead want to conclude this chapter by arguing that visibility matters, and the opening up of options to think critically about normative bodies and identities is equally important. This is what we understand ‘queering’ to mean, and we see this as overwhelmingly positive and necessary for effecting social and cultural change. Our views align more closely with those of trans scholar Sandy Stone, who argues for the transsexual body as ‘text’ (a concept that resonates with both of us, given our background in British Cultural Studies):

In the transsexual as text we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries [...] a productive force to multiplicatively divide the old binary discourses of gender [...] I suggest constituting transsexuals not as a class or problematic ‘third gender,’ but rather as a genre—a set of embodied texts whose potential for productive disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored.

(2006: 31)

This, albeit utopian, vision of what transsexuality means in the contemporary moment and the potential that transsexual desire offers lead us to consider where we are now and what is next for masculinity as a site of sexual investment in the digital age. However, in the next chapter we will divert ourselves away from youth, youth cultures and young bodies. In Chapter 6 we move on to consider how the other end of the generational spectrum is routinely and increasingly sexualised across media culture, with a dedicated focus on the exciting prospect of sexy older men.

## Notes

- 1 Savage, M. (2024, 7 May). Shock for Australia, joy for fan favourites including Ireland, Croatia and Ukraine. *BBC*. Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/cydr51d7mypt#:~:text=In%20the%20words%20of%20his,a%20black%20hole%20in%201985!%22>
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- 60 Adair, C. and Aizura, A. (2022). ‘The transgender craze seducing our [sons]’; or, All the trans guys are just dating each other. *TSQ* 9 (1): 44–64. Ballard, F. J. (2014). Transcendental gazes: Pornographic images of transmasculinity. In: Padva, G., Buchweitz, N. (eds) *Sensational Pleasures in Cinema, Literature and Visual Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Davy, Z. and Steinbock, E. (2012). ‘Sexing up’ bodily aesthetics: Notes towards theorizing trans sexuality. In: Hines, S., Taylor, Y. (eds) *Sexualities: Past Reflections, Future Directions. Genders and Sexualities in the Social Sciences*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Edelman, E. A. (2015). The cum shot: trans men and visual economies of ejaculation. *Porn Studies*, 2(2–3), 150–160; Goldberg, R. (2020). Staging pedagogy in trans masculine porn, *TSQ*, 7(2), 208–221; Pezzutto, S. and Comella, L. (2020). Trans pornography: Mapping an emerging field, *TSQ*, 7 (2), 152–171.
- 61 Non-binary fashion brand Both& launched a campaign featuring transmen that was a rare example of transmasculine visibility that received media coverage. Their website includes an essay and resources for transmasc people: <https://www.bothandapparel.com/blogs/journal/what-does-it-mean-to-identify-as-transmasculine>; see also Maskell, E. and Tabberer, J. (n.d.). This transmasc fashion brand staged a 90s-style, Calvin Klein-inspired photoshoot – and the pics are fire. *Attitude*. Available at [https://www.attitude.co.uk/style/fashion/this-transmasc-fashion-brand-staged-a-90s-style-calvin-klein-inspired-photoshoot-and-the-pics-are-fire-429142/?fbclid=IwAR3\\_q7FsXEJkTbeM03KatfD0qpBuHRCHK8iBLL-s\\_goJdViGk4uVcNcOGdM](https://www.attitude.co.uk/style/fashion/this-transmasc-fashion-brand-staged-a-90s-style-calvin-klein-inspired-photoshoot-and-the-pics-are-fire-429142/?fbclid=IwAR3_q7FsXEJkTbeM03KatfD0qpBuHRCHK8iBLL-s_goJdViGk4uVcNcOGdM)
- 62 Titanmen website: <https://www.titanmen.com/dvds.php?id=138&single=1>
- 63 See: <https://buckangel.com/pages/about-us>; Buck Angel. (2023, 4 April). Buck Angel: ‘I’m a trans elder. Trans activists don’t speak for me’. *Broadview News*. Available at <https://www.broadview.news/p/buck-angel-im-a-trans-elder-trans>
- 64 See: [https://timfuck.treasureislandmedia.com/movies/bussy?\\_gl=1\\*3pgijq\\*\\_ga\\*NTAxMDI0NTQ4LjE3MjA3Nzc2MjE.\\*\\_ga\\_856YR247CH\\*MTcyMDc3NzYyMS4xLjEuMTcyMDc3NzY1NC4yNy4wLjA](https://timfuck.treasureislandmedia.com/movies/bussy?_gl=1*3pgijq*_ga*NTAxMDI0NTQ4LjE3MjA3Nzc2MjE.*_ga_856YR247CH*MTcyMDc3NzYyMS4xLjEuMTcyMDc3NzY1NC4yNy4wLjA)
- 65 See: <https://ftmmen.com/models>; <https://ftmplus.com/>; <https://jockpussy.com/>
- 66 See: <https://www.men.com/scenes?q=trans>
- 67 Instinct Magazine. (2021, 23 June). Trip Richards is unapologetically sexy. *Instinct*. Available at <https://instinctmagazine.com/trip-richards-is-unapologetically-sexy/>
- 68 Philadelphia Weekly (n.d.). Trip Richards OnlyFans interview. Archived web page. <https://philadelphiaweekly.com/trip-richards-onlyfans-interview/>
- 69 Stanford, R. (2020, 26 August). Trans sex worker Trip Richards explains it all to you. *Advocate*. Available at <https://www.advocate.com/photography/2020/8/26/trans-sex-worker-trip-richards-explains-it-all-you>
- 70 Abadsidis, S. (2017, 28 October). Who’s this hottie changing the face of adult films? *HIV Plus magazine*. Available at <https://www.hivplusmag.com/sex-dating/2017/10/28/whos-hottie-changing-face-adult-films>
- 71 See: <https://www.tiktok.com/@antifabussy?lang=en>; <https://www.instagram.com/manifestingmommies/>; <https://www.pride.com/gay-tv/hot-haus#rebelltitem1>

# 6

## WHAT ABOUT DADDY?

In August 2024, George Clooney (63) and Brad Pitt (60) appeared as the cover models for the British imprint of *GQ*.<sup>1</sup> Dressed in matching white Tom Ford suits, sunglasses and, without any clear motivation, photographed chest deep in a swimming pool at Pitt's luxurious Chateau Miraval estate in the south of France, the image was widely circulated across the web. The cover story feature accompanying this striking image was apparently motivated by the two stars 'having crossed the threshold of 60' and focussed on their longstanding friendship, their equally long careers, the experience of ageing and was accompanied by a set of images of the pair of Hollywood stars dressed in menswear of a casual understatement that betokens wealth and self-confidence. Every garment and accessory was scrupulously chosen for each star and reads like a check list for elite mature fashion; Manolo Blahnik and Christian Louboutin shoes, Prada, Hermes and Saint Laurent menswear, Charvet nightwear, Omega watches, Tom Ford tailoring. Clooney has, for many years, been referred to as the silver fox, a term we will discuss later on, but it seems that Pitt, who, as we noted in Chapter 2, was once the very epitome of lithe, youthful sex appeal has also graduated to this status. What remains unchanged for both men is that they are still regarded as sex symbols; indeed their age has only amplified this.

We have argued throughout this book that in a somatic society masculine identities are grounded in the visual, the social expectations of male bodies and their material and cultural manifestations, the ways masculinities, particularly sexualised masculinities, are embodied. When it comes to discourses of age and ageing, the focus in popular media and broader cultural representations has routinely defaulted to notions of frailty, decline and exclusion and yet, as life expectation across Western states is extended, what it means to be, to possess, an ageing masculine body is evolving, producing different cultural meanings of sexy male bodies as they age, in the service of consumerism. Our previous

chapters have focussed on numerous examples of young male bodies and argued to a greater or lesser degree that youth and sexual desirability/sexiness are largely coterminous. We should also not forget that the *People Magazine* list of the ‘sexiest men alive’ discussed in Chapter 2 included men who might be considered past their ‘prime’ – assuming that ‘prime’ in a youth obsessed culture could be considered one’s early thirties.

In the past two decades, there has been considerable work on what age means for masculinity (Thompson, 2006; Marshall and Katz, 2002; Drummond, 2003; Katz and Marshall, 2003; Calasanti and King, 2005, 2007; Jones and Pugh, 2005; Simpson, 2013a, 2013b; Clarke et al., 2014; Hearn and Wray, 2015; Jackson, 2016) much of which has moved us away from homogenising analyses that regard old age as single and monolithic (Hazan, 1994), experienced by men and women in similar ways and specifically as ostensibly about loss. Indeed, in his book-length study, Thompson observes that ‘old men are above all else men whose gender practices testify to the growing prevalence of ageing masculinities within their communities’ (2006: 6). Thompson, drawing on Bourdieu, suggests that theories of masculinity have mostly failed to account for age despite their willingness to explore other intersections such as race and class. This has often meant that ‘It is as if one masculinity script universally applies to boys, midlife men, and old men’ (2006: 4). Which in turn, contributes to the idea that older men – especially those whose physicality no longer keeps up with that script – are ageing into ‘diminished masculinity’ (2006: 1) and ‘are routinely melded into the social category of “seniors” and collectively viewed as degendered, even genderless’ (2006: 2). Such conceptions, of course, overlook the ways that men may well leave behind various masculinised fields as they age – that they move into different spheres of interests and influences beyond work or fatherhood – and that increasingly research needs to move beyond assumptions that the biological process of ageing inevitably leads to diminished physical abilities and perceived emasculation. Even if the transition into ageing may take time, Thompson shows that most old men quickly accept their bodies’ new limitations and focus instead on what they can do. As Thompson writes, ‘at some point in later life, most old men’s transformed habitus has *largely* discarded the “taste” for the gendered practices of their youth and embraced instead the dominant masculinities that organize the fields of later and late life’ (2006: 85, original emphasis).

Particularly useful in Thompson’s account is his demonstration of how men tend to adopt more relational identities as they age. As our earlier chapters have shown, masculinities among younger and midlife men often require projection of autonomous and fully independent selves, but Thompson shows that as men age and embrace ageing masculinities, they also perceive themselves relative to others; that is, they focus on their relationships with others, defining themselves through these relationships and the obligations they engender. For some men, ageing means leaving behind the strictures of being the breadwinner and becoming more open to the obligations of caregiving, recognising for example,

the pleasures of being a grandfather, of taking on aspects of childcare which they had previously regarded as a wife's responsibility. Thompson also takes a resolutely intersectional approach to exploring how race, class and sexuality shape experiences of ageing masculinity old men participate in and how they experience gender in multiple ways. Throughout this book, we have examined how forms of consumption and the presentation of an insistent sexualised masculinity have become increasingly important to practices of gender. In this chapter, we will consider how these might intersect with ideas of ageing.

### The Silver Fox

Media studies has long examined the gendered representations of ageing, noting how film and TV characters who were older and male embodied more desirable and positive traits than older women (Vernon et al., 1991); other research has highlighted the dearth of Hollywood romantic roles for women over 40 – a problem noted by actor Jessica Lange:

It's not a level playing field. You don't often see women in their 60s playing romantic leads, yet you will see men in their 60s playing romantic leads with co-stars who are decades younger.

*(Lange quoted in Miller, 2017: n.p.)*

For decades, Hollywood has been criticised for its continued gender disparities in the roles available to ageing actors. Male stars like Cary Grant, Sean Connery, Richard Gere and Harrison Ford were able to maintain their status as leading men well into their fifties and sixties. More recently identified as 'silver foxes', their mature appearances – characterised by silver hair and a rugged, distinguished demeanour – only enhanced their onscreen appeal, allowing them to take on roles as action heroes, romantic leads, as well as more traditional patriarchal, authoritative figures. For instance, Connery (then aged 65) starred in *The Rock* (Dir. Michael Bay, 1996) as an action hero; a 49-year-old Gere headlined *Runaway Bride* (Dir. Gerry Marshall, 1999) as a romantic lead; and Ford (then aged 55) was cast as the President of the United States in *Air Force One* (Dir. Wolfgang Peterson, 1997). These roles capitalised on their ageing personas, reinforcing the notion that male stars could age gracefully while retaining their cultural (and sexual) desirability.

Their female contemporaries often faced more limited and age-specific roles: actresses who had once been leading ladies were frequently 'relegated' to playing mothers, grandmothers or other supporting roles that emphasised their age rather than their sexual allure or psychological complexity. Sally Field, for example, who had played romantic leads in the 1980s, was cast as Tom Hanks' mother in *Forrest Gump* (Dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1994), despite being only ten years older than him. Similarly, Diane Keaton, though a celebrated actor, was often cast in roles that centred around her status as an older woman, such as in

*The First Wives Club* (dir. Hugh Wilson, 1996). This persistent double standard, where ageing male stars could transition into roles that celebrated their maturity, saw female stars typecast into roles that often diminished rather than enhanced their earlier screen personas.

Writing in the early 1970s, Susan Sontag had noted this sexual double standard whereby ‘men are “allowed” to age without penalty, in several ways that women are not’ (1972: 31) and the contrasting expectations placed on male and female actors remain very clear even when stars are not onscreen. While male stars are often celebrated as Silver Foxes, their grey hair, wrinkles and signs of ageing enhancing their allure and signalling wisdom, power and sexual appeal, their female counterparts face relentless pressure to maintain a youthful appearance. Celebrity women are frequently compelled to resort to plastic surgery, Botox, hair dye and other cosmetic enhancements to conform to the rigid standards of beauty, particularly if they want to continue working. Jane Fonda and Nicole Kidman have been open about their use of cosmetic procedures to not only maintain their appearances, but to retain their status and marketability. George Clooney and Pierce Brosnan are not subjected to the same expectation that they will fight the ageing process and indeed their grey hair and crow’s feet are frequently praised as markers of their timeless attractiveness. Silver foxes also get to transition to suit wearing – a form of dress that

is more strongly imbued with ideas of power and authority. ... Functionality, status, power are all central themes of hegemonic masculinity and reflected in formal male dress. Though erotic elements are not absent, they are muted, compared with their role in mainstream women’s dress; and this had implications for how age is played out in this cultural field.

(*Twigg, 2020: 109*)

Where women must maintain their sexual appeal by dressing provocatively, flashing flesh to signal their desirability and worth as sexual partners, older men can effortlessly don a suit which not only transforms them into suave, sophisticated and revered silver foxes but also turns the suit itself into a symbol of sexiness, its allure magnified by its association with their mature and ‘foxy’ masculinity.

This reflects broader societal attitudes towards ageing and gender. Thompson (2006: 634) argues that ‘lived masculinities are negotiated performances, that help maintain the gender scripts that are “out there” in culture, institutions, and in relationships, and reveal relations of dominance and subordination’. This is why, he suggests, older men are assessed as more intellectually competent and, most importantly for our purposes here, supposedly more attractive than women of similar age. Much of this draws on what Kathleen Woodward termed ‘the youthful structure of the look’ (2006: 164) – the cultural tendency to reduce an older person to their age, particularly if female. While older men could be seen as wise, authoritative and still sexually appealing, older women are often viewed through a lens of diminished desirability and relevance.

These gendered dynamics in contemporary Hollywood regarding ageing continue to persist as actors such as Tom Cruise, Denzel Washington and Keanu Reeves remain prominent in action roles well into their fifties and sixties. They are though more complex than this binaristic account suggests and it is increasingly the case that the pressure to maintain a Hollywood body (and face) that conforms to prevailing beauty standards is one that is brought to bear on men as well as women. For example, Tom Cruise's rumoured cosmetic procedures and paparazzi photographs of his 'beach body' have attracted much tabloid speculation suggesting his saggy physique indicates his sex symbol status is diminished, and their mockery of his vanity is essentially emasculating.<sup>2</sup> So even as Cruise (age 62) continues to star in the *Mission: Impossible* franchise, and Keanu Reeves (59) has revitalised his career with the *John Wick* series – in roles that highlight their characters' endurance, skill and, in many cases, a romantic subplot that affirms their sexual appeal – both actors are required to perform and maintain an athletic physicality that strives to refute or even overturn the gendered discourses of ageing. A further (and overdetermined) example is provided by Hugh Jackman who, at 55, has reprised his star role as Wolverine in *Deadpool & Wolverine* (dir. Shawn Levy, 2024). Jackman was first cast as the hypertrophic, uber masculine superhero in *X-Men* (dir. Brian Singer, 2000) almost 25 years earlier and gained a fan following and star status as much for his muscular physicality as for his acting talents. It is very striking that Jackman's physique, far from diminished, is amplified to the most extreme levels for this new Marvel property and his 'body transformation' has once again attracted fevered attention. As we noted in Chapter 2, the expectations of the Hollywood body have already raised the bar in terms of what might be considered a standard body, but in Jackman's case his status as star, as superhero action cinema regular, as sex symbol and as middle-aged man all coalesce around a body that would literally tear Pitt and Clooney's Tom Ford suits to shreds.<sup>3</sup>

### Understanding the 'Daddy' Figure: Explorations of the Older Man in Contemporary Culture

The 'daddy' figure in popular culture has historical and cultural contexts which are both complicated and contradictory like so many of the other vectors of masculinity that this book has tackled. While the daddy's exaggerated masculinity and eroticism have served to critique and destabilise traditional notions of gender and family within queer communities, in more mainstream, heteronormative contexts we need to recognise daddy's capacity to radically undergird traditional paternal norms while at the same time seeming to destabilise or disrupt others, depending on context. The situating of the daddy figure as both a subversive and normative force reflects ongoing cultural shifts not least the importance of queer identities in shaping perspectives on sexualised older masculinities. Understanding this is key to appreciating daddy's significance to contemporary discussions of masculinity and sexuality.

At its most banal, the term 'Daddy', of course, denotes the historically straightforward nomenclature used by children to refer to their fathers. Contemporary representations of family life have redefined fatherhood as a more nurturing and emotionally available social role, the name daddy more broadly associated with affection, kindness and understanding. This use of daddy nonetheless has its roots in the hypermasculine and authoritative role of the father – the familial authority often associated with dominance and control as described notably by Freud (1899, 1910). In 21st century popular culture though, the term has become a meme reproduced across any number of comment and journalism platforms that is freighted with a set of meanings ostensibly sexual in nature that are complicated, ranging from the humorous, to the coyly provocative, to fantasies of power dynamics, economic dependence and even taboo sexual practice.<sup>4</sup> The term in these contexts transcends its literal meaning, representing a role that is about power, care, protection and sexual attraction, and reflects complex dynamics of authority, nurturance and desire that are symbolic rather than familial, highlighting how cultural language evolves to encapsulate relationships and roles that go beyond traditional family structures.

In addition, the daddy figure has often taken on a darker form, where the emphasis sometimes shifts to sexual sickness and perversion, suggesting a disturbing undercurrent of incestuous desire and power dynamics that can be exploited in narratives of sexual deviance. For instance, the controversial film *Blue Velvet* (dir. David Lynch, 1986) offers a vivid portrayal of this twisted version of the daddy figure through the character of small-town gangster, Frank Booth, played by Dennis Hopper, that is still as arresting and as likely to cause offence as it was 40 years ago.<sup>5</sup> The plot concerns the college student Jeffrey Beaumont's return to small town America following his father's heart attack. Lost and bored, Jeffrey finds a severed human ear on waste ground and this discovery leads him away from suburban normalcy and towards an altogether different set of 'familial' relations and a distorted, pseudo father figure in the shape of Booth. Frank is a violent, sadistic psychopath who demands to be called daddy by Dorothy, the night-club singer, played by Isabella Rossellini, whom he brutally dominates. His sadistic behaviour, which includes physical abuse, rape and psychological torment, positions him as a still deeply unsettling embodiment of the perverted gangster patriarch. The dynamic between Frank and Dorothy, where she is forced to humiliate herself under his command, while Frank, high on drugs inhaled through a surgical mask, mewls 'Baby wants to fuck' regressing through drugs from father to child, before he rapes and beats her, produces an alienating theatre of cruelty. The disturbing blend of power, control and sexual degradation that characterises this perversion of the daddy archetype is deployed for shock effect to overturn the staged artificiality of Lynch's suburbia via the spectacle of the monstrous dominant daddy figure, and is undoubtedly one of the reasons that *Blue Velvet* continues to provoke such conflicted responses from critics, theorists and audiences alike.

While Lynch's *Blue Velvet* portrays the daddy figure in a particularly malignant form, it is important to recognise that the daddy within real (rather than cinematic) BDSM communities manifests in consensual, structured dynamics. Weinberg, Williams and Moser (1984) highlight that in those contexts roles are clearly defined, and the exchange of power is both consensual and mutually fulfilling. The daddy figure in such relationships provides not just dominance, but also care and nurturance, creating a dynamic that is deeply personal and erotic. As Mike Albo writes:

The daddy, or more specifically, the leather daddy, has been around for a while in gay eroticism (where, let's face it, all sexual fetishes and flexibilities are begat). It's had a long sadomasochistic fantasy history.<sup>6</sup>

The 1970s saw gay communities adopting daddy as a term, particularly within leather subcultures, to refer to older, attractive men whose appearance and demeanour brought with them elements of the father figure, his strictness, his experience and his potential for care. These leather or SM relationships fundamentally embraced the power exchange between a dominant partner and a submissive partner, manifesting in various forms such as Sadist/masochist, Master/slave, Dom/sub or Trainer/puppy dynamics. In BDSM contexts, the daddy figure typically assumes a dominant role, characterised by care, guidance and authority over a 'boy' or submissive partner. There is no doubt that the erotic appeal of the daddy figure in BDSM is deeply tied to the eroticisation of power differentials which can enhance sexual arousal and satisfaction by fulfilling deep-seated psychological and emotional needs (Sisson, 2007). Despite misconceptions, which may mistakenly associate these dynamics with incestuous or paedophilic tendencies, BDSM communities understand the daddy as complex form of role-play, steeped in the language and symbolism of power, taboo and eroticism. As Newmahr (2010) explains, these relationships involve the intersections of pain, taboo and power, where roles like daddy are fluid and dynamic, constructed and negotiated within the community. Leo Bersani, in a chapter called 'The Gay Daddy' in his foundational *Homos*, describes the fluid and performative nature of this kind of sexual play by reference to Foucault and within the context of BDSM, stating that 'the mobility of desire defeats the project of fixing identity by way of a science of desires' (1995: 107). Consequently, it is not unusual to find younger daddies with older boys, boys who are tops, or daddies who bottom, reflecting the diverse and multifaceted nature of these identities beyond conventional S/M or leather dynamics. Sisson suggests that S/M sexuality is particularly resonant in postmodern, post-procreative society because it flaunts socially constructed power, gender roles, identity and eroticism (2007: 28).

Tom of Finland, renowned artist of gay subcultural style, significantly influenced the visual rhetorics of the BDSM daddy figure in his iconic depictions of hypermasculine men. His artwork frequently portrayed bikers, leather-clad figures and other masculine archetypes, such as cowboys, lumberjacks and

policemen, in sharp contrast to the effeminate stereotypes of homosexuality prevalent in mid-20th century culture. The exaggeration of the physical attributes of his characters created a stylised form of masculinity that became both a form of artistic expression and a mode of cultural resistance. Circulated widely in homoerotic physique magazines, Tom of Finland imagery contributed to the formation of a distinct ‘gay macho’ aesthetic, a visual and cultural template influencing gay men’s physical appearance, fashion and body language particularly through the muscular ‘clone’ look of the 1970s and to elements of what Richard Dyer called the ‘phallic hysterics’ (2002) of hyperbolic masculinities associated with muscle-building. Tom of Finland’s work continues to be celebrated for its impact on the visibility and acceptance of diverse expressions of masculinity in both gay and mainstream cultures, although we should note the ways that work has to be radically de-sexualised in order to move into more mainstream spaces; see for example Paasonen’s essay on Tom of Finland in which she details the processes by which ‘the sexually explicit becomes implicit, the pornographic turns into homoerotic and the risqué is transformed into a marker of tolerance’ (2019: 448).

Our own work on gay pornography has highlighted the re-emergence of the mature male as a figure of sexual interest, arguing that the shift towards digital media has resulted in a proliferation and segmentation of body types and representations. The increased popularity of ‘Daddy porn’ caters to and creates an interest in the older man and the mature body as a site of erotic fascination as a consequence (2012: 313). Contextualising these shifts within broader debates on pornography, we have argued that feminist critiques of porn, particularly Andrea Dworkin’s, have shaped academic discourse. Dworkin’s assertion that pornography is repetitive and unchanging is contrasted with our own view that pornography, especially gay pornography, is highly responsive and evolves with technological, cultural and geopolitical changes (2012: 315). If American gay pornography of the 1980s and 1990s, characterised by idealised masculine icons such as the ‘blond beach boy’ and ‘tanned body-builder’, was deeply influenced by the AIDS crisis and an overemphasis on health and cleanliness (2012: 316), more recent representations of eroticised older men on websites such as *Hot Older Male* and the *Daddyhunt* video series reveal various narrative and representational strategies, where younger men actively pursue older men, challenging traditional power dynamics and presenting the older man as an object of desire (2012: 319). Federico Zecca also insists that ‘the ageing body in contemporary pornography is not a single, monolithic entity, it is a plural category ... [which] acquires different meanings and establishes multifaceted relations’ (2021: 193). Focussing on various sub-genres of online pornography, Zecca examines how older bodies are subjected to representational strategies which variously constructs the older protagonist as a ‘sexual freak’, their bodies (and their sexual desire) a grotesque spectacle; or ‘a chauvinist fantasy, glorifying the phallic power of older men against young girls’ while a further ‘strategy understands age as part of a wider project of (self)

expression of non-normative bodies and desires' (2021: 200). Similar typologies are, we will show, at work in mainstream representations of ageing masculine bodies.

BDSM of all orientations occupies an uneasy space in popular culture, policy, lawmaking and medicine constantly required to reaffirm its adherence to safety and consensuality and to remove or play down elements that could be conceived as problematic. But particular opprobrium is reserved for gay BDSM: witness the seemingly annual news media claims of 'public street orgies in which men engage in heinous sex acts'<sup>7</sup> levelled at the Folsom Street Fair in San Francisco and demands that it should become more 'child friendly'. The 'hyper-masculinity' on display at such events is, as Andrew Childs critically reminds us, often understood through an essentialist lens so much so that 'daddy' is claimed to reinforce traditional heterosexual gender roles without recognising his subversive resonance in those spaces where alternative masculinities can flourish. For example, the leather contests and the emphasis on muscular bodies and dominance may well reflect traditional hypermasculine ideals, yet leather communities also embrace diverse body types and roles that challenge conventional norms (2017: 5) so that hypermasculinity is negotiated and redefined within specific social and spatial contexts.

In an essay in the field of game studies, Braidon Schaufert's (2018) analysis of the game *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator* highlights the 'slippage of meaning' between the words daddy and 'father' in the context of both the game and, Schaufert argues, in queer culture. This blurring of roles illustrates how queer communities have constructed the erotic 'daddy figure' to expose the performative aspects of masculinity and fatherhood, softening the traditionally hypermasculine and sexualised daddy figure, focussing more on positivity and emotional connections rather than power, which both disrupts and upholds normative family dynamics.<sup>8</sup> For Schaufert then, the daddy figure, in this specific gaming context at least, is simultaneously both inherently normative and offers up the potential for subversive and disruptive play. This potential for transformation blurs the lines between normative standards of masculinity and those deemed inappropriate. Schaufert (2018) argues that the appeal of the daddy figure lies in its ability to subvert and play with traditional notions of gender, sexuality and family. The figure of the daddy has become a versatile and contested symbol, capable of embodying both traditional paternal authority and queer eroticism. This duality allows for a complex and dynamic representation of masculinity that can simultaneously challenge and reinforce societal norms. Mike Albo has suggested that

a daddy industry is developing. There are now tons of non-leather daddy porn sites, a hookup app, DaddyHunt for 'Gay Daddies, Silver Daddies, Muscle Daddies, Bears, Leather Daddies, Big Daddies, and Daddy-Lovers.' There is an increasing number of gay porn actors and escorts, who, despite the decimation of the gay adult film industry thanks to Internet, have

extended their careers into middle age with equal, if not greater, popularity (Chase Hunter, Allen Silver, and Cole Maverick, to name a few); according to one male escort friend, getting good ‘reviews’ from satisfied customers on the website Daddy’s Reviews has become crucial for business.<sup>9</sup>

From roots in BDSM subcultures to its permeation into mainstream media and everyday vernacular, the daddy figure has evolved to represent a complex and intricate interplay of dominance, and eroticism. So how (and where) does the daddy appear in mainstream culture?

In contemporary media, the daddy figure is often portrayed as an older, confident man who commands respect and exudes a sense of control and stability. This archetype taps into deep-seated cultural narratives about masculinity, where power and experience are central to attractiveness. The daddy figure is not just a protector or provider in the traditional sense, but also a symbol of sophistication and emotional depth, making him a desirable and complex character. A recurring theme in such portrayals is the balance between authority and vulnerability. Characters like George Clooney’s Ryan Bingham in *Up in the Air* (dir. Jason Reitman, 2009) and Bradley Cooper’s Jackson Maine in *A Star Is Born* (dir. Bradley Cooper, 2019) illustrate how the daddy archetype can contain a dualism; a commanding presence with elements of tenderness and introspection. The daddy is not only attractive because of his physical appearance or (former) success, his projection of a stable and mature form of masculinity is also both nurturing and strong. That duality is what makes the daddy figure so compelling in romantic and sexual contexts – he is someone who can protect and provide, but also someone who understands and empathises; in short, he embodies the heteronormative fantasy of the ‘ideal’ romantic partner.

As we have already noted, the sexualisation of the daddy archetype reflects broader societal shifts in how age and masculinity are perceived. In contrast to the alternative and dominant ideal of youthful virility, the daddy figure is valued for his life experience, wisdom and the power that comes with maturity, evident in characters like Pierce Brosnan’s Daniel Rafferty in *Laws of Attraction* (dir. Peter Howitt, 2004) or Daniel Craig’s performance of James Bond in *No Time to Die* (dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga, 2021), where gravitas and skill are key to their sexual allure. These characters suggest that masculinity can be both potent and refined, and that attractiveness in older men is linked to qualities like confidence, intelligence and emotional resilience. Ultimately, the daddy archetype can serve as a counterpoint to competing representations of masculinity; it offers a vision of male sexuality that is deeply intertwined with maturity and experience, challenging the idea that only youth and physical prowess are desirable.

A useful case study is offered by Prince Oberyn Martell, played by Pedro Pascal in the fantasy behemoth *Game of Thrones*, who is a fascinating embodiment of the daddy archetype, blending sexual allure, confidence and a sense of authority alongside a more progressive and complex understanding of masculinity. Oberyn’s character is defined by his charisma, his unapologetic sexuality

and his formidable skills as both a warrior and a lover. Oberyn Martell combines power, experience and sensuality: an older, experienced man who commands respect both on the battlefield and in the bedroom. Oberyn embraces his sexuality with openness and without shame, stating, ‘The gods made [women] ... and it delights me. The gods made [men] ... and it delights me. When it comes to war, I fight for Dorne. When it comes to love – I don’t choose sides.’ His relationships, particularly with his lover Ellaria Sand, reflect a mature, egalitarian dynamic that defies traditional gender roles, making him a figure who is both authoritative and deeply passionate. These traits make him a compelling daddy figure within the narrative of *Game of Thrones*, while also contributing to Pedro Pascal’s broader cultural resonance as a celebrity and as an actor.

Pascal’s natural charm, combined with his ability to portray characters who are both strong and emotionally nuanced, has added traction to his image construction as the daddy archetype. In the public imagination, Pascal embodies the same qualities that make Oberyn so captivating: confidence, maturity and a charismatic blend of power and vulnerability. Pascal’s off-screen persona, often demonstrative of his warmth, humour and approachable demeanour, further solidifies his status as a modern-day daddy. Additionally, Pascal’s openness about his own experiences and his advocacy for social justice aligns with the more progressive aspects of the daddy archetype and defies traditional expectations of masculinity by embracing a more fluid, inclusive understanding of what it means to be a man. Pascal’s ability to parlay and cultivate the specifics of the daddy persona, both in his roles and as a celebrity, and to do so with good humour, has significantly aided his raised stock as a Hollywood star. We will later note how Pascal seems to collect these titles: he has been labelled a DILF and has become closely associated with a particular social media variant of the daddy: the zaddy. Indeed, at this moment, he is widely regarded as the embodiment of this 21st century confection.<sup>10</sup> We think this illustrates how the mediated drive towards novelty, particularly through social media – whether through viral memes or neologisms – does not lead to greater definitional precision. Instead, it amplifies contradictions, ambiguities and perpetual wrangle over meaning, which we argue are a feature of the contemporary moment and characteristic of the condition that we have termed saturated masculinity.

The HBO series *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) offers another particularly complex example of the daddy archetype. Over 60 episodes, Tony Soprano (played by James Gandolfini) attempted to keep his two families in order while also maintaining his lifestyle as the dead-eyed playboy of New Jersey. Overweight, depressed, done-in by the effort of juggling fatherhood and being a mob boss, Tony is nevertheless seemingly irresistible to women as a sexual partner but also as a provider, protector and authoritarian figure. James Gandolfini’s physical presence is a key aspect of his portrayal of Tony Soprano and certainly complicates traditional ideals of attractiveness bringing a certain raw, magnetic appeal that aligns with the Daddy persona – a powerful, protective, albeit

flawed, patriarch. The complexity of his emotions, coupled with his struggle to maintain his daddy status, mirrors the idea that the daddy figure is not just about power and authority but also about deep, often conflicting emotions that resonate with broader cultural discussions about masculinity, power and family dynamics. And in the end, understanding the daddy phenomenon requires exploring characterisation because the term encompasses more than just physical appearance. While a single image might cause online commentators to label someone daddy, it is through the intricate blend of traits – such as authority, maturity, virility and a dangerous sexuality – that we can truly define the term. The daddy figure often embodies a sense of mastery and control that is implied in an image but deeply rooted in character. Not every sexy man is a daddy; it is the combination of these complex qualities, including the undercurrent of power and potential danger, that often enables a man to be ascribed this status.

And it is not only in fictional representations that we see this blending of traits. In a recent article, *Metro* journalist Kristina Beanland, attempted to explain why newly elected UK prime minister Keir Starmer ‘is the new Downing Street Daddy’.<sup>11</sup> The article highlights the significant cultural shifts we have argued are central to the digitally driven, neoliberal and somatic society. As we finalise this manuscript, Starmer is just into his first month leading the country, but Beanland had little to say about his politics or policies. She focussed instead on whether he is ‘the hottest resident ever to work in Number 10’, and his supposed embodiment of aesthetics, masculinity and power. In making that observation we are not suggesting that the article should be dismissed. The article illustrated the ‘sexy’ and consumable elements of Starmer’s persona, drawing on a range of TikTok and Twitter content that exemplifies the immediate and visceral reactions to public figures we focus on in Chapter 7. This is quite an everyday example of celebrity politics, where the emotional connections formed with politicians (whether through admiration or desire) are as influential as policy analysis. However, it also demonstrates the critical role bodies play in the somatic society, particularly through the language used to describe Starmer’s physical and stylistic attributes. Using phrases like ‘fine figure of a man’, and drawing attention to his ‘high cheekbones’ and ‘beautiful hair’, not only focus our attention on his physique but also enhance his appeal by associating those traits with power and competence. These descriptions highlight how bodily aesthetics are not merely incidental but central to constructing a powerful public persona.

More importantly, the article sexualises power through using terms like ‘ultimate power as PM’ and the depiction of him as a ‘rebel’ to meld his physical appeal with his authoritative position, suggesting that Starmer’s desirability is amplified by his political power and vice versa. This alignment of body aesthetics with political power reflects the broader societal fascination where the physical body becomes a primary site for projecting personal and professional capabilities that has been our focus throughout this book. Calling Starmer Daddy further emphasises this mix of physical allure and authority. It

implies a kind of rugged, experienced attractiveness coupled with a paternalistic form of authority, promising both care and control. This not only sexualises but also paternalises power, portraying it as both protective and authoritative, thereby making it more desirable in a society often valuing visual information over more substantive political discourse. So, rather than dismiss this seemingly trivial column filler, this article offers an insight into how effectively Starmer's body and narratives around it can be commodified and consumed.

As with any term which involves 'slippage', it is always possible that the least progressive usage lurks beneath – for example, in the particularly vivid presence of Donald Trump vying for his second term in office. We have described Trump elsewhere as embodying a 'zombie masculinity' that is characterised by entitled rage and incomprehension at its own redundancy (Mercer and McGlashan, 2023). To his detractors Trump is a felon, a liar, a rapist; the 'Groper in Chief' or 'Cadet Bonespurs', the kind of embarrassment who shouldn't be able to occupy space on the world stage. On 14 July 2024, a bullet fired from a nearby rooftop narrowly missed Trump as he spoke on a podium in Pennsylvania – as we write this book we can't know how this is likely to play out long term for Trump's campaign but, within hours, an image of Trump, defiant in the face of this assassination attempt, was emblazoned on T-shirts alongside the boastful slogan, 'Can't Take Daddy Down', the pairing seeming to confirm Trump as resolute and unyielding, an exemplary figure of patriarchal masculinity. Trump has long been described as Daddy by his supporters, from the 'Save Daddy Trump' Internet game to t-shirts proclaiming 'Daddy's coming home' or reassuring voters 'Don't worry! Daddy's on his way', suggesting that Trump's supporters do not merely see him as a political leader but as a paternal protector, a figure who will stand against and, following the events in Pennsylvania, has himself stood against, perceived threats to the US nation with unwavering strength. The rush to wear these T-shirts is more than an act of political solidarity; we can understand it as a collective embrace of a patriarchal archetype, resonating deeply with feelings of loyalty, protection and defiance. Trump's symbolic role as daddy apparently taps into broader patterns of cultural ascriptions of authority to the father figure and offers an expression of reverence, loyalty and affection. This dynamic interplay not only shapes political movements but also reflects deeper societal currents and the seeming yearning for a guiding paternal figure.

Numerous commentators have noted how the daddy figure, as it is used by Trump's supporters, transcends traditional leadership. Perhaps it taps into a primal need for security and authority, evoking a sense of familial protection and patriarchal power, though as it derives from Internet culture, we should perhaps be cautious about ascribing any singular and serious meaning to Trump's daddy-dom. On platforms like Reddit and 4chan, Trump's supporters often use the term daddy in a semi-ironic, affectionate manner. It has become a meme within these communities, reflecting both genuine support and the playful, sometimes irreverent, nature of Internet discourse. In an article for

*Medium*, Dale Beran suggested that Trump resonates with younger supporters on 4chan who see him as a ‘loser who won’.<sup>12</sup> His incompetence and bombastic style are appreciated precisely because they mirror their own sense of disillusionment and hopelessness. In embodying both ‘alpha’ and ‘beta’ characteristics, Trump appeals to those who feel they have been failed by society. His success is viewed as a defiant expression of despair, embracing conspiracy theories that the system is rigged and celebrating the emptiness of his promises. His role as daddy is not then an easily explained patriarchal trope wherein the father figure is embraced because he will make everything right; the term daddy as applied to Trump by his supporters is a complex blend of irony, emotional connection, rebellion and cultural commentary. It reflects their complicated (and conflicted) relationship with him, admiring his defiance of authority while acknowledging, often humorously, his flaws and the unlikely nature of his success.

That success is not, at this point, guaranteed – an article published less than a month after the assassination attempt has observed that Trump is now

[c]ast in a new light. He formerly seemed more ominous and threatening, which, whatever its political drawbacks, signalled strength; now he seems not just old but low-energy, stale, even pathetic. He has become the political version of Fat Elvis.<sup>13</sup>

Elvis’s final years, characterised by his bloated appearance and erratic performances, stand in stark contrast to his earlier image as the king of rock ‘n’ roll. This ‘Fat Elvis’ phase, while still retaining traces of his former greatness, became overshadowed by his physical and emotional deterioration. Similarly, Trump’s attempts to maintain a youthful and virile image through artificial means – his distinctive hairstyle, tanning and assertive public behaviour – are efforts to cling to a powerful daddy persona. The daddy label is inherently unstable. In Trump’s case, this label appears to be slipping into a more degenerate portrayal of decay and excess. Wehner’s linking of Trump with the ‘Fat Elvis’ trope then underscores the idea that the last impression is often the most enduring, and just as Elvis’s demise has become a significant part of his legacy, so too it seems that Trump may become defined by a similar narrative of decline and self-indulgence.

## The Dadbod

According to *Men’s Health* in an excited 2024 headline, ‘The Olympic Games Have Simply Never Been Hornier’. It is certainly true to say that the 2024 Paris Olympiad has generated more than one social and mainstream media ‘event’ focussed on the physical attributes of the male athletes. Pole vaulter Anthony Ammirati garnered attention that he probably neither expected nor wanted when he failed to qualify for the finals of his event when he caught his crotch on the crossbar, knocking it to the ground. He subsequently mocked the media

interest in his penis rather than in his performance as an elite athlete.<sup>14</sup> French diver Jules Bouyer's tight swimming trunks (and distracting bulge) and Italian swimmer, Thomas Ceccon's abs (momentarily glimpsed at his award ceremony) attracted a level of attention that seemed disproportionate to their significance.<sup>15</sup> The Dutch swimmer, Arno Kamminga's see-through-when-wet swimwear was discussed albeit humorously in terms of its 'legality'.<sup>16</sup>

The 2024 Olympics has provided many opportunities to circulate sexy images of partially dressed, athletic and, importantly, young men who have gone on to become viral, motivated by a new(ish) type of popular, ostensibly online journalism that derives news from events gaining traction on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and Twitter/X. But these are not, in fact, the serried ranks of optimised sporting bodies of the sort discussed in Chapter 3 (and the apparently tantalising prospect of their penises) that have attracted our attention here, but another viral sensation about an Olympian's body.

When one imagines water polo athletes, a tanned, muscular Adonis might be the first image that comes to mind. However, the Croatian water polo player, Josip Vrljic attracted a storm of attention for his physique, which did not conform to this stereotype. His physical presence (he is 6 feet 6 inches tall), his lack of muscle definition and what appeared to be a 'beer belly' meant that he was quickly identified as an exemplar of the 'Dadbod' physique. This was connected to his age, though at 38 he is far from old, even for an Olympic athlete. The website Brobible described him as 'monstrous', and Boredpanda reported that he was hailed as a 'unit' (slang for physically large). In both cases these remarks were framed as expressions of admiring awe rather than the kind of body shaming we might expect.<sup>17</sup> The Croatian newspaper *Večernji list*, responding to the international attention, even interviewed the athlete to find out what his favourite meals were, happily reporting his preference for a regional dish of stuffed peppers.<sup>18</sup> *MSN Total Sports* reported, in a grammatically confusing fashion, that 'social media is losing their minds' over Vrljic's body, and once again the account was not one of ridicule or disgust but a general atmosphere of admiration and positivity.<sup>19</sup> Regardless of a body that does not immediately conform to the aspirational Olympian ideal, the viral spread of images and positive comment about Vrljic's body demonstrate the extent to which the idea of the Dadbod has become, quickly, a feature of popular culture and everyday speech. Once again, illustrating how in a somatic society bodies are the material through which meaning and value are made, distributed and discussed.

The figure of the Dadbod has emerged as a significant cultural phenomenon blending notions of laid-back, content masculinity with a subtle yet persistent emphasis on sexual appeal. The Dadbod refers to a male body type that is 'softly round', suggesting a man who has settled into parenthood, partnership or midlife, often at the expense of his previously chiselled physique. Indeed, it is the very quality of being at ease with a suboptimal corporeality that motivates the sexualisation of this type. The Dadbod is not necessarily to do with age or aged bodies, but it is connected to ideas that challenge the hegemony of the

gym-trained aspirational body or the Hollywood body that have dominated so much of this book. This is a body that celebrates a (proscribed) version of ordinariness and with it an implicit symbolic resistance to neoliberal logics and expectations. A body then that, far from being ridiculed, is framed in some quarters as decidedly sexy in part at least because it seems antithetical to competitive standards. What marks out this specific phenomenon is perhaps the mixture of ironisation and titillation that coalesces around the Dadbod and the extent to which it reflects a contemporary sensibility that suggests the paradigm of 'sexy' is more capacious than commonsensical accounts allow, and that 'real' bodies and 'real' men can be regarded as sexy; in short, a fetishisation of an idea of 'ordinariness'. While she didn't invent the neologism (in fact its provenance is uncertain), Clemson University student Mackenzie Pearson is widely attributed with popularising the term 'Dadbod', soon becoming known as the 'Dadbod expert'.<sup>20</sup>

The Dadbod is a nice balance between a beer gut and working out. The Dadbod says, 'I go to the gym occasionally, but I also drink heavily on the weekends and enjoy eating eight slices of pizza at a time.' It's not an overweight guy, but it isn't one with washboard abs, either.<sup>21</sup>

Initially embraced as a form of body acceptance, the Dadbod quickly became a viral phenomenon,<sup>22</sup> symbolising a shift away from the hyper-muscular ideals often portrayed in media. However, the Dadbod also introduced new contradictions, suggesting that men must balance being laidback with maintaining a certain level of sexual attractiveness. Jonathan Allan has pointed out that while mainstream media, such as *Men's Health* or *GQ*, have at times denounced the dadbod, it has also been embraced in various contexts as a desirable form of masculinity (Allan, 2022: 84) that carries an appeal rooted in its relatability and perceived naturalness. The Dadbod, as McIntyre, Negra and O'Sullivan suggest, is 'key to a certain kind of narrative of male retreatism from the increasingly anxious ethos of bodily regulation and age transcendence' (2022: 438), going on to argue that 'what the Dadbod showcases is an unwillingness to regulate pleasure for the sake of fitness. As a sign of the refusal to sacrifice, the Dadbod is positioned outside or beyond male body neoliberalisation' (2022: 439). The Dadbod figure is therefore a relatively contested category, simultaneously describing a body type and an implied identity. As Clay and Brickell note:

There is fierce disagreement and debate over the Dadbod's meaning, value, social significance, and whether it should be praised, denounced, or both. A site of fraught contradiction, the Dadbod simultaneously embodies and resists a range of neoliberal values. Its connotations include disgust and abjection, but it also conveys a sense of comfort, safety, fun, and a relaxed attitude that ties into powerful signifiers of masculinity, independence, and freedom.

(2022: 81)

Celebrities, like actors Leonardo DiCaprio and Chris Pratt, have been pivotal in the popularisation and discussion of this neologism. According to the UK's *Sun* newspaper, DiCaprio's relaxed beach photos gave hope 'to all men as he shows off Dadbod in Miami' although the story goes on to rebuke the actor for being unlikely to win any awards for looking good. 'Between the Dadbod, the man bun and the scraggly beard, Leo in 2020 is proof that good bone structure will only take you so far.' Beneath a picture of his 'faded abs' and 'large belly', the journalist also snarked that 'Leo is famous for dating younger women.'<sup>23</sup> Chris Pratt's body transformation journey, from a chubby sitcom actor in *Parks and Recreation* to a fit superhero for *Guardians of the Galaxy* (dir. James Gunn, 2014) only to later revert to a more relaxed physique, has also been widely covered and celebrated in mainstream media and amplified across social media platforms. The coverage is once again contradictory. The 'transformation' has been used by some news outlets to justify 'before and after' images and to promote workout routines to achieve a 'ripped' body like Pratt in his Marvel form. Other commentators have instead celebrated Pratt's recovering the Dadbod charms that secured his celebrity status, viewing it as more authentic and attractive compared with the more synthetic Marvel version.<sup>24</sup>

As hashtags like #DadBod and other viral memes such as 'Dadbod Squad' (which is a popular meme more than it is a singular group as there are many social media feeds using this name) appear to celebrate this body type, it certainly seems that a community that values 'authenticity' (a loaded term if ever there was one in this context) over 'perfection' (and a muscular physique is framed as the gold standard of perfection) has developed.<sup>25</sup> For some commentators, the Dadbod redefines masculinity by decoupling physical fitness from masculine worth suggesting that a man's value is not solely tied to his physical appearance but also to his character, achievements and ability to balance various aspects of life, including family, career and personal well-being. For others, the celebration of the Dadbod challenges ageist attitudes that associate ageing with a loss of attractiveness and vitality. By highlighting the sexiness and desirability of older men with Dadbods, media representations purport to push back against the idea that only youthful bodies are attractive. This shift encourages a more expansive view of attractiveness that honours the natural ageing process, yet it remains tethered to the idea that anxieties and pressures around body image are central to the workings of a somatic society.

In the 'Pool Party' episode of *Modern Family* (Season 11, ep 4), gay dads Mitch and Cam end up hiding away from the party because they 'can't take [their] shirts off at this smoke show!' Surrounded by younger men, the tensions surrounding body image and the idealised male physique are painfully clear, reflecting the complex dynamics of sexualised masculinities in contemporary culture. Their reluctance to expose their bodies speaks to the anxieties of not conforming to the chiselled, hypermasculine standards of both popular culture and the gay pool party, underscoring the lingering pressures that the Dadbod faces in a society that scrutinises and sexualises male bodies. Mitch and Cam's

insecurities reveal how far-reaching the impact of these ideals can be, as they navigate their own sense of self-worth and desirability. It is their concern about daughter Lily internalising their body shame that ultimately persuades them and their friends to embrace their physiques and bomb the pool (to a soundtrack of Lizzo's *Boys*), in as powerful an act of defiance against the unrealistic body standards imposed on men that a mainstream sitcom can muster.

The Dadbod supposedly promotes body positivity by acknowledging that physical changes, such as weight gain and loss of muscle tone, are natural parts of ageing but it is moot that it encourages men to embrace their bodies as they are, or that even in its most affectionate usage it fosters a healthier and more realistic self-image. Even if DiCaprio's numerous beach photos displaying his relaxed physique have become iconic representations of the Dadbod, media coverage doesn't always frame these images positively – see our example from *The Sun* above. And while some emphasise DiCaprio's confidence and attractiveness despite not having a traditionally fit body, others have been only too happy to indulge in 'body-shaming by stealth'.<sup>26</sup> The promotion of the Dadbod implies that men with more traditional, muscular physiques are somehow less relatable or less 'real', subtly shaming those who maintain a high level of physical fitness. On the other hand, it also creates a standard that men should ideally be soft and relaxed, reinforcing a different kind of body expectation, a different form of pressure, where men who do not naturally fit the Dadbod mould might feel inadequate or inauthentic, further complicating the relationship between masculinity and body image. As we have seen throughout this book, contradiction and ambiguity undergird so many of the ways in which sexualised masculinity is constructed and discussed. As Barbara Ellen noted in an article in 2020:

The Dadbod is about being fit enough, just not narcissistically 'it's all about me' uber-fit. It's about having minor love handles, not letting yourself go. When women talk about Dadbods, they really mean 'Hollywood-casual Dadbod': the likes of Matt Damon, father of four, photographed ambling around, looking relatively normal.<sup>27</sup>

The concept of the Dadbod might be an attempt to domesticate and contain the overtly sexual and heroic aspects of the male body that are celebrated in Hollywood and have resulted in the Hollywood Body discussed in Chapter 2. The hyper-muscular, chiselled physiques of action heroes and leading men are traditionally associated with power, dominance and sexual virility. However, the Dadbod shifts this narrative, promoting a softer, more approachable body type that aligns with the roles of fatherhood and is ostensibly domesticated. This shift reflects a societal expectation for men to transition from the public sphere of heroism and sexual conquest to the private sphere of family and home life. By embracing the Dadbod, men are perhaps encouraged to adopt a more subdued physical presence that is less intimidating, less overtly sexual, and more

focussed on the comforts of family life. This could be seen as a form of containment, where the once-celebrated powerful male physique is tamed and softened to fit within the confines of domestic expectations.

We end this section by, depressingly, observing that it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Dadbod is yet another instance of unequal and sexist assessment of men over women. As Brian Moylan wrote in *Time*:

While a man is valued for his warm and fuzzy demeanor, a woman is valued as a sexual object. And the women in question don't look like they've ever entered an all-you-can-eat Buffalo Wing contest like their Dadbod brethren.<sup>28</sup>

While the Dadbods, of Seth Rogen or Leonardo DiCaprio, are often celebrated for their 'relatability' or their departure from the hyper-fit action hero image, women in similar positions, those who might carry extra weight or appear less toned, cannot avoid the critical scrutiny of media outlets and social media users. Memes and viral content celebrate the Dadbod while continuing to shame women's bodies.

## The DILF

A perhaps more explicitly sexualised and much discussed construction of contemporary masculinity that is centred around fatherhood has emerged with the DILF or Dad I'd Like to Fuck. Jonathan Allan (2022) notes that the concept of the 'DILF' parallels the 'MILF' (Mother I'd Like to Fuck) – a mainstream porn category – but functions differently in terms of societal perception and media portrayal. While the MILF is often objectified based on signifiers of age, stripped of maternal agency, and is never pictured with her children, the DILF is frequently presented as both a more active participant in parenting and as a desiring and desirable sexual agent. As Simon Mills in *GQ* summarises the DILF ushers in difference, 'The new breed of fathers is here: changing nappies, taking charge ... and turning heads.'<sup>29</sup>

Debuting in the early 2010s, the DILF reflects a range of changes across popular culture around the representation of contemporary masculinity and women's sexual interests in men, especially as they relate to parenting. By the mid-2010s the term was so established in the popular lexicon and consciousness that French luxury fashion brand Balenciaga's decision to use male models walking the runway for their Spring/Summer 2018 show with their children attracted global media coverage.<sup>30</sup> According to Angela Smith, in the article 'Bulging Biceps and Tender Kisses: The Sexualisation of Fatherhood', it is the increasing social acceptability for men to engage in 'hands-on' fatherhood roles traditionally associated with motherhood that has led to the sexualisation of fatherhood; particularly in popular media, where being a dad offers opportunities for men to display a desirable body image. The emergence of the DILF,

particularly on social media, offers images of conventionally handsome men caring for their children (Smith, 2017: 1); see for example the Instagram account *DILFS of Disneyland* ‘the happiest place on Instagram!’.<sup>31</sup> For Smith, these representations indicate something of a shift in dominant forms of masculinity, blending traditional macho elements with nurturing roles. Drawing on examples from popular culture, including many of the celebrities already discussed elsewhere in this book, Smith illustrates how fatherhood is increasingly depicted in a sexualised manner. Celebrities such as Benedict Cumberbatch, Matt Damon and David Beckham are shown in media not only as caring and attentive fathers but also as physically attractive figures, blurring the lines between ideas of a ‘traditional’ taciturn patriarchal masculinity and the new man who embraces both strength and tenderness (Smith, 2017: 3). In the essay ‘One Sexy Daddy’ Jonathan Allan agrees that the Dadbod and the ‘sexy daddy’ (the DILF) align with broader cultural trends towards inclusive and diverse representations of masculinity, challenging the rigid ideals of male beauty and performance, and offering a model of masculinity (and male parenting) that values emotional connection and caregiving. The media’s emphasis on the muscular bodies of the fathers, particularly in acts of childcare like carrying their children, highlights this dual representation. Allan cites examples of Instagram posts where men are shown holding their children in ways that emphasise their muscular physique, combining the imagery of strength and nurturing. For Allan, these visual representations underscore the evolving narrative of masculinity that integrates traditional male attributes with the qualities of a good father (2022: 88). Smith (2017) goes further still, and explicitly links the DILF to the impact of Second Wave Feminism on changing perceptions of masculinity. She sees the rise of female empowerment, and the subsequent blurring of gender roles, leading to new forms of masculinity that incorporate traits previously perceived as feminine. This shift is evident in the way men now openly discuss their involvement in childcare as having a positive effect on their personal growth and emotional development (2017: 6). Smith makes the case that this transformation is celebrated in the media, with fatherhood portrayed as a source of personal joy and motivation, as seen in the public narratives of figures like the tennis player Andy Murray and actor Chris Hemsworth (2017: 8).

As we have already noted, journalistic practice has been key across the 20th and 21st centuries, not just in the coinage but also in the popularisation of categories of masculinity and their embedding in popular consciousness. The daddy, the Dadbod and the DILF all provide ample material for the generation of features and that perennial of online lifestyle reportage, the listicle; so in 2015, *Hollywood Reporter* offered readers ‘15 Hot Hollywood Dads that are Total DILFs’<sup>32</sup> and, as we write this book in 2024, *Pride* has compiled ‘15 celebrity DILFs we’re not ashamed to obsess over’.<sup>33</sup> Editors, online and offline, seemingly cannot get enough of this idea. Smith contends that these are images that evidence the sexualisation of fatherhood (2017: 10) but at some level her analysis works to desexualise the Dads we’d like to fuck. The emphasis on

second wave feminism and the omission of the metrosexual, spornosexual and gay liberation in her history of the DILF works to sequester and safely contain this figure within the context of normative (by which we mean heteronormative) parenting.

We contend that the term DILF represents a shift in how masculinity, particularly in the context of ageing men, is perceived and valued in contemporary culture more broadly than Smith's account suggests. Unlike traditional portrayals of older men as merely wise, authoritative or paternal, the DILF embodies a more pleasure-oriented and consumerist construction of masculinity, inviting an explicit appraisal of the older man's sexual desirability, asking not just if he is aesthetically pleasing, but if he is sexually appealing – if he is, indeed, 'fuckable'. Unlike the dadbod which emphasises comfort and whose appeal is overtly non-threatening in nature, the DILF forces a reckoning with a man's physicality, inviting us to evaluate not just his looks but his virility, sexual energy and the potential pleasure he might provide as a sexual partner. Just as the figure of the Daddy has reappropriated and mutated aspects of patriarchal (hegemonic) masculinity, towards a more hedonistic assessment that prioritises sexual performance and desirability, the DILF is not just admired from a distance as a figure of comfort; he is actively fantasised about, suggesting a cultural shift where older men are increasingly viewed as viable objects of sexual desire.

This appraisal is deeply intertwined with consumerist culture, where the DILF is not just a person but a marketing category and a product to be consumed and enjoyed in his own right. The aesthetic elements of the DILF; his appearance, style and physical condition – are all scrutinised under a consumerist lens that values surface appeal and the promise of satisfaction. In this context, masculinity is once again commodified, with the DILF representing a package of desirable traits that can be accessed through fantasy as well as the processes of consumption. This consumerist approach encourages men to maintain or cultivate physical fitness, stylish grooming and a youthful demeanour, which enhance their sexual appeal and marketability, and thereby engage in the discourses of aspiration discussed in Chapter 3.

Across social media platforms men are categorised under hashtags such as #DILF, #DILFsoftiktok and #DaddyEnergy; fan edits, lip-syncs and skits pay homage to the sexual appeal of mature male celebrities. For instance, following episodes of *The Last of Us*, tweets like 'Pedro Pascal is the DILF we didn't know we needed' garnered thousands of likes and retweets and captions like 'Serving DILF looks' or 'Aged to perfection' proliferate on Instagram. We have already discussed Pedro Pascal, but his avatar daddy status means that we will return to him once more in the next section. The various ways his presence features across social media suggest there is a distinct category of men entirely framed in terms of their sexual viability. Pascal is an example of the ways a celebrity can achieve significant levels of parasocial attachment, the ways TikTok and other social media sites illustrate the intense emotional connections

creators feel for individuals with whom they can have had no direct contact (Rojek, 2016: 16). Illouz's argument that technological infrastructures present us with figures as 'commodity on public display' (Illouz, 2007: 79) perhaps explains how the figures of the Daddy, the DILF and the most recent incarnation, the Zaddy, are highly commercialised and resonant across platforms.

### Oh Zaddy!

At the risk of repeating ourselves in offering yet another definition of contemporary colloquial appreciation of the older man, we cannot omit the Zaddy. According to *Esquire* (appropriately, given the magazine was the venue for the introduction of the 'crisis of masculinity' in 1957), the Zaddy is a Daddy 'with swag' – who is attractive and, crucially, fashionable.<sup>34</sup> It may also be that Zaddy-dom is less to do with age per se than with a self-conscious acceptance of one's attractions. For example, Zayn Malik (at only 31) previously of the boy band *One Direction*, is often described as a Zaddy, even using the term in his social media presences.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the Hollywood actor Ryan Reynolds (a more tenable 47-year-old) has also been described using the term. However, it is our old friend Pedro Pascal to whom Zaddy has been most consistently applied, a figure on whose body and personality the evolving discourses of daddydom have been played out most dramatically. Pascal's public persona, augmented by famed personal charm, elevates him to an even more desirable status than merely a Daddy or a DILF in media reportage. So, when *Vogue France* reported that he 'broke rules' by wearing shorts as part of his Valentino-designed outfit for the Met Gala in 2023, we are assured that the "daddy of the internet" sent fans crazy as he arrived at the Met Gala in a knee-flashing red and black Valentino look'.<sup>36</sup> Across the extensive media coverage of his rise to celebrity status, Pascal's allure is not merely described as being about traditional markers of masculinity like power or status; rather, it's his ability to elicit and fulfil sexual desire that makes him so compelling. His appeal has nothing to do with actual fatherhood (he is not in fact a father) and everything to do with his embodiment of a sexually capable, confident and culturally attuned masculinity. As a Zaddy, Pascal is discussed as exuding a certain charismatic 'zing' – that extra zesty element that makes him more than just attractive but irresistibly fuckable. His combination of good looks, sartorial flair and an effortless charm aligns perfectly with the Zaddy's redefinition of ageing masculinity, where vitality, sexual appeal and sophistication are paramount. In this way, Pascal acts as the prototype Zaddy: a man whose desirability is as much about his modern masculinity as it is about the tangible, almost palpable sexual energy he is regarded as embodying.

Across all of these Daddy variants an ideal of enduring vigour and virility can be seen, qualities that are traditionally associated with youth but are now being extended into middle age and beyond. The emphasis on sexual appeal

underscores the expectation that men remain not only physically attractive but also sexually potent well into their later years, tying into broader societal pressures for men to defy ageing by maintaining an active lifestyle, fitness and sexual vitality, aligning with the neoliberal imperative to continually optimise oneself and engage in the processes of consumer culture. In this way, we can say that the Daddy, DILF and Zaddy archetypes perpetuate the idea that masculinity is tied to sexual prowess and that this aspect of a man's identity should be preserved, if not enhanced, as he ages.

## Ageing Bodies

So far, we have looked at the ways that the idea of masculine maturity has been framed as sexually interesting and explored some of the pressures that ageing men face in contemporary culture, particularly as they navigate societal expectations of vitality, sexiness and relevance. The narrative of decline, endemic across culture, not only reflects personal struggles but also underscores broader ageist attitudes. These attitudes increasingly impose a significant burden on older men, who exist in a context in which there is an expectation, in fact a requirement, to retain youthful vigour and sexual appeal in order to remain relevant. The emphasis on Elvis's weight gain and faltering performances, touched on earlier, for example, highlights how elderly bodies are often viewed as abject, ugly and failing – an uncomfortable contrast to the culturally idealised young, hard bodies that remain objects of desire. In a somatic society where ageing men are expected to remain active, stylish and sexually capable, the expectations of what it means to age successfully have necessarily been recalibrated. The New Man, Andrea Waling writes, 'signaled their masculinity not just via what they owned in assets (big cars and appliances)' as was the case for the man of the 1950s, 'but also how they presented themselves. Clothes, gadgets, and fashion became the essentials for masculinity, along with objects means to display wealth in an era where the politics of looking changed to incorporate the male-on-male gaze' (2020: 56). Attached to the physical was also a psychic difference in the new man; Rosalind Gill notes that the "new man" is generally characterized as sensitive, emotionally aware, respectful of women, and egalitarian in outlook' (2003: 34).

Both the new man and the metrosexual challenged claims of men's lack of interest in fashion and grooming and yet there is little sustained discussion of how their challenge might have morphed in relation to their ageing (after all, the Generation X, 'new men' of the 1980s are now in their fifties and sixties). Rees Jones et al. observed in 2008,

that the general expansion of consumption has now surely impacted men of all ages and the cohorts of people retiring today are those who participated in the creation of the post-war consumer culture. The period marked by the

decades of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of youth-orientated consumer markets directed at these cohort located subcultures (Black and Pemberton, 2004) [which now] provided the basis for generational identities which are continuing to be played out many decades later [...]. The once young consumers of the post war period have grown older, all the while retaining their propensities to be active players in a society where the pursuit of lifestyle and identity is as likely to emerge out of the commodities purchased as it is out of the ascribed identities of employment.

(103–104)

Many ageing men today were once part of influential subcultures, such as mods, punks and glam rockers, which played a crucial role in defining their identities and fashion choices. As these men age, they navigate the tension between maintaining their stylish, rebellious past and adapting to the realities of an ageing body. For example, those who embraced metrosexuality in their youth can be assumed to continue to value grooming and fashion. These pressures are further complicated by the intersection of ageing, masculinity and sexuality within different cultural contexts. For instance, Michael McMillan's exploration of ageing black men in a chapter entitled 'Daddy Cool', highlights how fashion and 'stylin' which encompasses dress, grooming and demeanour, is central to self-presentation and identity. This practice of 'stylin' can be understood as a form of embodied resistance, enabling the maintenance of dignity and assertion of individuality in the face of ageism and racism (McMillan, 2022: 41). 'Stylin' is not just about looking good but about conveying strength, resilience and the maintenance of an intangible cultural continuity. As the fashionable young men of previous decades have aged, they have retained their desire to project an image of themselves that is not only sophisticated and stylish but also virile and attractive resisting those stereotypes of frailty and invisibility in older age. The bespoke suit, for example, becomes a powerful symbol of cultural pride, virility and the assertion of continued relevance in the face of both ageism and racism. This sartorial resistance, while empowering, also underscores the additional layers of expectation placed on ageing men, particularly those from marginalised communities, to conform to, or resist dominant cultural narratives of decline.

Thomas Walz, in an article 'Crones, Dirty Old Men, Sexy Seniors: Representations of the Sexuality of Older Persons' (2002), critically examines evolving representations of older individuals' sexuality in American society. Traditionally, older people have been depicted as either sexless or inappropriately sexual, with stereotypes such as the 'dirty old man' or the benevolent but asexual grandparent dominating popular media. For Walz, these portrayals are often fraught with confusion, uncertainty and contradictions, reflecting societal discomfort with the idea of sexual activity in later life (2002: 100). However, he goes on to note that these stereotypes are slowly being challenged by new

cultural representations that depict older individuals as sexually active and attractive. Popular literature and media aimed at older audiences are beginning to portray seniors as healthy, vigorous and interested in sex, provided they maintain a youthful appearance and behaviours. This shift signals a growing acceptance of the idea that sexuality does not diminish with age but can continue to be a vital part of life for older adults (2002: 101) and creates new cultural imperatives for older men, emphasising the importance of physical health and attractiveness as essential components of ageing well. 'Ageing well' encourages older individuals to stay fit and maintain their appearance to be seen as sexually viable. By promoting the notion that older men can still be sexually desirable, contemporary culture is redefining the narrative around ageing and sexuality, fostering a more inclusive and positive view of later life (2002: 102). Walz suggests that the increasing visibility of sexually active older individuals in media and popular culture is reshaping societal attitudes towards ageing. As the Baby Boomer generation continues into old age, and is joined by the Generation X demographic, these trends are likely to gain momentum, further dismantling outdated stereotypes and promoting a more nuanced understanding of sexuality that includes older adults. While the positive aspects of broader acceptance of ageing as a stage of life that can be just as vibrant and fulfilling as any other should not be denied, we might still be critical of the ways the wellness industries have adeptly responded to this shift, targeting older men with products and narratives that exploit ideas of potency for commercial gain. Ideas of 'successful' and 'active' ageing emphasise continued productivity and challenge traditional narratives of ageing by promoting a consumeristic, anti-ageing culture. The complex relationship between ageing, sexuality and masculinity is explored, particularly how modern sexual medicine and changing societal norms have recalibrated expectations of lifelong sexual activity as a cornerstone of healthy ageing in this concluding section.

### **Getting Older and the Need to Keep on Keeping It UP**

As we have already noted, the literature on ageing and sexuality reveals a persistent discomfort (even disgust) at the idea of sexually engaged older people, despite significant changes in the definitions and experiences of older age. While contemporary culture has begun to embrace the idea of the 'sexy senior' or the DILF, there remains a deep-seated reluctance to fully accept older bodies as actual sites of sexual pleasure and desire. This reluctance is reflected in the cultural narratives that continue to associate old age with decline and desexualisation, even as they simultaneously promote ideals of lifelong sexual activity as a cornerstone of healthy ageing in a contradictory fashion that we have now become familiar with.

The advent of medications used to treat erectile dysfunction such as Sildenafil (sold under brand name, Viagra) and Tadalafil (Cialis) and other sexuopharmaceuticals

have profoundly reshaped the narrative of male sexuality, particularly as it is linked to life course. Historically, ageing men were often depicted as experiencing an inevitable decline in sexual function, with diminished erectile ability serving as a marker of this decline. However, the introduction of drugs like Viagra, Cialis and others, has ushered in a new era, where the narrative of 'impotence' has been supplanted by one of rejuvenation and continued virility. This new storyline, heavily promoted by pharmaceutical companies, emphasises the possibility of regaining and maintaining youthful sexual performance well into older age, thereby reinforcing a version of masculinity that is intimately tied to continuous sexual capability.

Pharmaceutical advertising campaigns, as Maria Gurevich et al. argue (2017, 2018), play a crucial role in constructing and disseminating this ideal. These campaigns portray older men as still capable of achieving robust erections and, by extension, maintaining their masculinity, evidenced by their sexual prowess. The marketing strategies often include imagery of virile, confident men who, with the aid of these drugs, can continue to perform sexually at a level comparable to that of their younger selves. The presence of women in these advertisements serves to validate the men's use of the drugs, reinforcing heteronormative gender and sexual roles where men are expected to be the sexual initiators, and women the nurturers who sustain their partners' virility.<sup>37</sup>

This portrayal not only challenges traditional notions of ageing, which often desexualise older men, but also imposes new pressures on them to conform to this ideal of lifelong sexual activity. The use of sexuopharmaceuticals becomes a marker of personal responsibility and autonomy, aligning with broader neoliberal discourses that emphasise self-improvement and the management of one's body. The consumption of these drugs is framed as an exercise of control over one's sexual health and performance, suggesting that a man's worth, even in older age, is closely tied to his ability to meet societal standards of virility and sexual competence. In a fascinating account of Viagra-spam, 'Potency Is Important for a Real Man: Affective Readings of Shame and Performance Anxiety in Spam Selling Viagra and other Sexuopharmaceuticals' (2021), Mie Berk Jensen and Stefan Jänicke explore the pervasive and influential nature of spam emails, and their impact on perceptions of masculinity and male sexuality. Despite the negative connotations associated with spam – often dismissed as irrelevant or harmful – they argue these emails play a significant role in shaping cultural narratives around male sexual performance. Their analysis of a vast archive of spam emails from 1998 to 2018 reveals how spam not only markets quick and easy solutions to erectile dysfunction but also ties these solutions to broader promises of life improvement and emotional well-being. The language used emphasises the necessity of sexuopharmaceuticals for maintaining masculinity, suggesting that a man's worth and identity are closely linked to his sexual capabilities and that not using these drugs will lead to anxiety, worry and a diminished sense of self: 'Instead of begging your penis to work, better swallow the blue

pill.’ The study highlights how it is not just mainstream advertising but also the more repetitive, targeted, personalised and exaggerated messaging of spam that contributes to the medicalisation of male sexuality, presenting the use of Viagra and similar drugs as essential for achieving and maintaining an idealised (and priapic) version of masculinity: ‘Potency is important for a real man.’ This construction of masculinity is paradoxical, promoting the idea that to be a ‘real man’ one must rely on pharmaceutical intervention, reinforcing the notion that virility and sexual performance are critical components of male identity at any age. The cultural shift towards the ‘sexy senior’ or ‘sexy oldie’ archetype – exemplified by figures like legendary footballer Pele, who endorsed Viagra, underscores the broader acceptance of this narrative. This shift moves away from viewing old age as a period of sexual retirement towards an expectation that men should remain sexually active and desirable throughout their lives. However, this new ideal also reinforces the notion that ageing is something to be managed, corrected and, where possible, reversed through medical intervention. The ‘forever-functional’ ageing man (Marshall and Katz, 2002) becomes a symbol of successful ageing, but also of the pressures men face to maintain not only their physical health but also their sexual vitality.

This pressure to sustain sexual performance into older age is not without its contradictions: the promotion of sexuopharmaceuticals like Viagra offers an alternative to the narrative of inevitable decline; it also imposes a new form of surveillance over men’s bodies. Erectile dysfunction, once considered a natural part of ageing, is now medicalised and treated as a condition requiring pharmaceutical correction. This medicalisation of male sexuality both reflects and perpetuates the idea that a man’s masculinity is inherently tied to his ability to perform sexually. Furthermore, the discourse surrounding sexuopharmaceuticals intersects with broader themes of consumerism and neoliberalism. The narrative of personal choice and autonomy in managing one’s sexual health echoes the consumeristic ethos that permeates modern society, where the body becomes a site of continual self-optimisation. Men are encouraged to purchase and use these drugs not only to maintain their sexual function but also to align with an aspirational lifestyle where perpetual sexual readiness is equated with success.

This emphasis on maintaining sexual function into older age also highlights the ongoing negotiation of masculinity and sexuality within the context of ageing. The pressure to conform to the ideal of the ‘sexy oldie’ can be both empowering and oppressive, offering men the possibility of continued sexual vitality while simultaneously imposing unrealistic expectations. This duality reflects the broader contradictions in contemporary culture, where ageing is both embraced and resisted, celebrated and feared. The medicalisation of male sexuality and the cultural shift towards the ‘sexy senior’ thus represent a complex interplay between individual agency and cultural inscription. While these developments challenge the desexualisation of older men, they also impose new

forms of discipline and control over male bodies, reinforcing the idea that to age well, one must continue to be sexually active and virile. This new imperative of ‘sex for life’ (Katz and Marshall, 2003) suggests that ageing men must not only manage their physical health but also their sexual identities, navigating the fine line between maintaining sexual vitality and avoiding the pitfalls of becoming the ‘pathetic dirty old man’ (Walz, 2002).

The rise of sexuopharmaceuticals and the associated cultural narratives around male sexuality in older age underscore the complex and often contradictory pressures faced by ageing men and further illustrate Preciado’s thesis of a pharmacologically determined subjectivity (2013). As the line between medical necessity and consumer choice blurs, the pursuit of lifelong sexual activity becomes both a marker of successful ageing and a source of potential anxiety. The intersections of masculinity, ageing and sexuality continue to evolve in response to cultural, medical and societal forces, and we will need a nuanced understanding of the challenges and expectations that shape the experiences of older men in contemporary society. As ageing men navigate these complex cultural landscapes, they are often caught between the demands to maintain sexual vitality and the pressures to conform to more domesticated, less overtly sexualised ideals.

So how do older men in the 21st century negotiate and find their place in a somatic society where bodies and especially sexual bodies carry such value and, furthermore, how does that practice of negotiation feel? For cultural analysts, part of the answer lies in uncovering the traces evidenced in visual materials and media products. In the contemporary moment, one route is to consider the workings of social media practices and the extent to which these are not the exclusive domain of the young. This line of enquiry is the impetus for our concluding chapter where we explore how bodies accumulate in social media archives, a phenomenon we describe as ‘algorithmic desire’ and examine how artificial intelligence (AI) is already impacting our relationships with our sexual bodies.

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# 7

## 'THIRST TRAPPING'

### Digitised Desire and the Online Sexual Economy

Finally, we come to the contemporary mechanisms of digital popular culture, sexual ethics and the body in the digital age and how the sexualised masculine body circulates in this context. In this chapter we extend our discussion of sexualised male bodies as they circulate across (ostensibly digital) media culture and consider the extent to which platforms and technology indicate shifts in the cultural status of eroticised bodies. We hesitate to suggest we are discussing the 'future' of sex and sexuality or that we are exploring 'new' technological developments, partly because we are mindful that the rate of change brought about by, for example, artificial intelligence (AI), has been exponential and that by the time many readers engage with our writing some of the 'new' we have described will almost certainly have become the commonplace. Rather, our focus is on how, in a somatic society within a largely digital culture, bodies of all genders have become visible and accessible in ways that would have been seen as either impossibly utopian or as the collapse of social order in the previous century, depending on the politics of the observer. Bodies are not just visible in a somatic society however; instead, we argue that the distinctions between the personal, the private and the public have collapsed in the digital realm in ways that have interesting implications for a contemporary sexual ethics grounded in the significances of the sexualised male body as it circulates across platforms.

Although this is a co-authored book, sections of this chapter are in part autoethnographic and concerned with affect; how it feels to have a sexualised body in a somatic society. This concluding chapter will involve then a personal account of the affective dimensions of masculine sexualisation in the digital realm. As part of a parallel research project, I (John Mercer) have been thinking about the circulation of the sexualised bodies of older gay men in digital culture, especially in digital photographic practice. In part this is connected to

thinking about questions of generation; what it means to be an older gay man, but also questions of mental and physical well-being specifically for a generation (the demographic known as Generation X) who were expected to be eviscerated by the AIDS crisis. Additionally, this is a project considering what sexual desire/desirability looks like for older gay men with an ambition to move beyond the stereotypes of the 'bear' or the 'daddy' that we discussed in previous chapters. To do this work, I set up an Instagram profile in my own name using only one image of myself, a commissioned portrait from the 'Harsh/Beautiful' series made by artist James M. Barrett.<sup>1</sup> With this profile I began to curate an international collection of profiles of self-identified gay men who create and post images of their bodies on the platform.

This methodology is aligned with cultures of scrolling and browsing that are the serendipitous, standard methods any user of a social media platform might deploy; a digital 'dilettantism' to borrow from Marcel O'Gorman (2006: 69), who presciently discussed image making and circulation in the digital age almost five years prior to the launch of Instagram. It felt particularly important and authentic to me to respond to the algorithm as it was meant to be used in order to understand the affective workings of algorithmic desire (a term we expand on later). This meant following suggestions for profiles I might find interesting made across multiple Meta platforms as well as Twitter/X and then mining the followers of those profiles for further leads and connections. As of May 2024, I had gained a very modest 295 followers (including some personal friends and work colleagues) based on my minimal and far from sexually provocative social media presence but had amassed a curated list of over 1,900 profiles; a sizeable digital archive/repository of largely mature (admittedly a broadly cast definition), gay male bodies/identities/sexualities. The affective dimension of encountering, daily, thousands of social media users posting images of muscular torsos, gym 'gains', beach holidays, cruises and circuit parties, posed images in bathroom mirrors, in changing rooms, underwear shots, swimwear shots, 'glamour' shots, is one I am still trying to process. Not long after creating my profile, and as a result of James M. Barrett's status as an artist with many personal collectors and social media followers, I was contacted by the owner/curator of 'Dishy Dads' an Instagram aggregator (a curated profile that collects themed posts) asking if I would be happy for my portrait to be included in their feed.<sup>2</sup> Naturally, I agreed with the view that understanding how it feels to have one's image circulating as part of this digital economy 'hotness' would be instructive or at least lead my process in a specific dimension given that I had committed to a strategy of digital serendipity.<sup>3</sup> My image was posted alongside 65 other images of men, broadly of my age group, many of them shirtless, many of them hirsute, many of them muscular. While initially enjoying the good-natured mockery of friends and colleagues online, that was tempered by generational expectations about the extent to which this was appropriate or advisable behaviour for a man 'of my age', I soon became keenly aware that I was not just interested but concerned about my modest but

growing tally of ‘likes’ with a mixture of affirmation and anxiety. I felt fearful (and this is not too strong a word) at the prospect that my face might be commented on. This veering between emotions, a fractured, fragmentary contradictory set of affective states is, we suggest, typical of the experience of ‘sharing’ in the digital age, having a direct corollary in the equally fragmented iterations of masculinity that we have explored throughout this book and in this book’s organisation as overlapping and interrelated vectors of masculinity across popular culture. We note here that this iterative dimension of gender, in this case masculinity, is amplified as it is performed via social media. The feelings that these images precipitate are heterogenous and complicated, including envy, desire, sometimes bewilderment and most often a sensation of overwhelm. The plenitude, limitlessness and unending nature of this parade of masculinity, often in its most overdetermined mode, undermines any idea that gym-trained bodies and developed muscles are exceptional; indeed it reinforces the idea that these are ordinary bodies. We will discuss this archive, the clues it might give us about 21st century masculinity and the representations of masculinity that it offers later. This chapter is not confined to a discussion of middle-aged gay bodies or a reprisal of the content of the previous chapter but is instead about how male bodies and sexualised representations of masculinity proliferate across a range of social media platforms. We are especially interested in the affective dimensions, what Raymond Williams described 50 years ago as the ‘structures of feeling’ precipitated by this seemingly unending digital array of masculine corporeality. Williams’ term, first used in *Marxism and Literature* (1977), is related though not equivalent to both Hegel’s ‘zeitgeist’ and Gramsci’s ‘hegemony’ without their explicit connections to questions of power and ideology.<sup>4</sup> As Williams, presciently as ever, notes:

The term is difficult, but ‘feeling’ is chosen to emphasize a distinction from more formal concepts of ‘world-view’ or ‘ideology’. It is not only that we must go beyond formally held and systematic beliefs, though of course we have always to include them. It is that we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, [...] An alternative definition would be structures of experience: in one sense the better and wider word, but with the difficulty that one of its senses has that past tense which is the most important obstacle to recognition of the area of social experience which is being defined. We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a ‘structure’: as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely

otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies. These are often more recognizable at a later stage, when they have been (as often happens) formalized, classified, and in many cases built into institutions and formations. By that time the case is different; a new structure of feeling will usually already have begun to form, in the true social present.

(1977: 128)

In this chapter, then, we consider the creation and circulation of digital images of the self as part of the emergence of what has previously been described as 'selfie culture' as object of study alongside the evolution of 'selfie studies' as a field of enquiry. This leads us into discussion of the shifting dynamics of the public and the private in the digital realm in the context of what Richard Lanham describes as the 'economics of attention' (2006). We will pay attention to the archival significances of social media platforms, and Instagram in particular, and the centrality of algorithms in the construction of what we (and Matthew Flisfeder, 2021) describe as algorithmic desire. We also look at OnlyFans as a social media platform that draws many of the themes of this chapter (indeed this book) into dialogue and questions the utility of some of our critical language around masculinity, sexuality and sexual content in the 21st century. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is inevitably one of our considerations and so we pay particular attention to the consequences of an AI imaginary when it comes to sexualised masculinity, the versions of male 'hotness' that AI produces and the cultural, political and affective dimensions of the AI body.

### **A Cautionary Interlude on Selfie Studies and 'Selfie Culture'**

Our discussion here and the underpinning research it flows from might be regarded as a contribution to the field of selfie studies and the aligned digital media studies research on self-image making. At this time, there is a sizeable literature on the selfie, much of it initiated in the mid-teens. In fact, the period between 2015 and 2017 marked a high-water mark for selfie research, driven partly by the term's widespread use across popular culture and highlighted by the *Oxford English Dictionary* naming 'selfie' as their 2013 'word of the year'.<sup>5</sup> In the decade since, it is notable how the making and sharing of images of the self have become a routine feature of everyday life for many, while academic and popular discussion of selfies have coalesced around a set of orthodox framing discourses. These familiar themes have recurred throughout this book, concerning the impact of the circulation of images of perfect/perfected bodies on body image concerns and dysmorphia increasingly affecting men as well as women. Such framing is then linked to the amorphous and ill-defined category of online 'harms' and seen as evidence of a widespread digitally mediated culture of narcissism. Indeed, the term narcissism is conspicuous for its routine use in this context, sliding between its application in Freudian psychoanalysis and a

more popular and generalised coinage that could be applied to much of the subject matter of this book.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, narcissism is so frequently summoned up in popular discourse, as well as in social psychology and so called cyberpsychology literature that has proliferated around the study of selfies, that it seems almost commonsensical to frame digital self-image making exclusively in such terms.

This as a major weakness in the popular and scholarly framing of self-image making, so much so that much of the research in social psychology and aligned fields demonstrates a confirmation bias. Diefenbach and Christoforakos's witty essay title, 'The Selfie Paradox: Nobody Seems to Like Them Yet Everyone Has Reasons to Take Them. An Exploration of Psychological Functions of Selfies in Self-Presentation', elegantly sums up what is at stake for many researchers across the social sciences.<sup>7</sup> By contrast we, alongside many scholars in digital media studies, would caution against using this language even if it is leveraged as a heuristic frame for thinking about selfie images.<sup>8</sup> It is a reductive and ultimately dead-end theoretical position that writes off a mode of cultural production and suggests there is nothing more to say about it outside of the lens of objectification, lack and 'harm' both to the self and others; in short, the kinds of arguments this book seeks to overturn. That there are far more complicated dynamics at play: for many people and especially those whose identities are marginalised, self-image making is part of a fundamental process of identity formation/construction in the digital age. Our project here focusses on masculinity and its sexualisation in contemporary (largely digital) culture and aware that the digital/legacy media distinction is increasingly anachronistic, we are cautious about using early 20th century Freudian language uncritically to describe the vastly different social, cultural, political and sexual context of 2024 compared with 1914. Gabriel Faimau, for instance, describes the field of selfie studies organised across a range of theoretical and conceptual frameworks and makes a case for the cultural significance of the selfie that aligns with our shared view, seeing self-image making as:

'A new communicative language,' it allows the selfie-taker to tell his/her own stories through and in the taken selfies. Shipley (2015) contends that the selfie is a semiotic field through which one re-imagines oneself as part of a dispersed urban and transnational society. In this act of reimagining, a selfie-taker creates his/her own image and tells a story of his/her own composition. [...] selfies offer a technologization of self in which the visibility and materiality of the selfie enact a construction of self or configuration of one's identity. It should be noted, however, that identity making does not occur in a vacuum as it takes place within the context of social relationships that require an individual to navigate his/her connectivity. Thus, selfies function as an identity making tool or an identity marker in the constellation of social relations.

(2020: 6)

With these reservations expressed, we propose an alternative framework for thinking about digital self-image making situated in the context of neoliberalism and, as we have already argued, in a somatic society. We regard self-image making in many respects as the apogee of the workings of a somatic society; the expression of identity and the deriving of social and cultural capital in and through the circulation of images of (masculine) bodies. Narcissism is an inadequate frame to account for these practices. In *Perfect: Feeling Judged on Social Media* (2023), Ros Gill uses interviews with young women to explore how 'ambivalence' is their prevalent attitude to the pleasures of gaining attention on social media platforms and the negative consequences of online abuse and trolling, all of which is informed by a desire to achieve the perfection that Heather Widdows (2018) identifies in her research, at the same time as realising an equally unattainable 'realness'. In their book *Digital Intimacies: Queer Men and Smartphones in Times of Crisis* (2024), Jamie Hakim, James Cummings and Ingrid Young identify ideas around control and vulnerability as interrelated discourses that frame theorisations of intimacy and smart phone dating app usage and how users articulate their experiences. We note that in both cases this is empirical research focussed respectively on the responses of young woman to their social media use and the queer and gay male experience of dating apps, but the contradictory 'structures of feeling' evoked in both contexts and by both groups are also very productive frames for thinking about the self-image making practices and sharing of men's bodies. Such research sits alongside parallel debates around the distinctions between public and private bodies/forms of sharing and communicating.

### Public and Private Bodies

A constellation of factors highlights the significances of self-image in the age of social media; primarily centred around a partial collapse of the boundaries between the public, the personal and the private: the nuances of digital intimacy, and the redefinition of sexual ethics and ethics of the body in a digital context. The dichotomous relationship between public and private spaces and behaviours is of course not so immutable as it might seem and has been widely debated across digital media studies and beyond.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, researchers often point to the so-called 'privacy paradox' in the digital realm where users claim privacy is a core concern, yet their behaviours do not necessarily coincide.<sup>10</sup> This is especially true of the sharing of self-images, including intimate ones, and for 'thirst trapping' practices, where deliberately sexually provocative images are shared to gain followers – a topic we will discuss later. Walsh and Baker's comments on selfies and their relation to shifting attitudes to the distinction between public and private are instructive here:

The selfie challenges the traditional demarcation between 'public' and 'private' social life. This division between these spheres can be pointed to in numerous analyses of contemporary social life. [...] Although the boundary

is ‘porous and ambiguous’ [...] consumers of the selfie appear to not pay the same deference to the boundary as did previous producers and consumers of traditional photographs. The selfie appears to straddle this dichotomy of public and private photograph, decreasing the clarity of the division between public and private social life.

(2017: 14)

Amparo Lasén and Edgar Gómez-Cruz make an even more thoroughgoing argument about the relations between privacy and the formation of liberal subjectivity, suggesting that:

The notion of ‘subject’ and, more specifically, the modern concept of an individual subject are narrowly related to the notion of privacy. This is linked to the liberal conception of individuals as economic subjects, as private property becomes the ultimate basis for privacy. Practices and discourses associated to digital images nowadays are revealing transformations in both realms: the shaping of the self and one’s privacy.

(2009: 206)

They conclude with:

The visibility afforded by the display of self-images finds in the other’s gaze, which become an embodied form of recognition, the guarantee of the subject’s being. Being visible, being present, in front of a crowd of strangers is one of the aspects of being public which nowadays is performed at the junction of online and offline places.

(2009: 214)

Larissa Hjorth argues that this blurring of notions of privacy can be connected to a concomitant rethinking of what intimacy might mean in a digital environment:

In a digital material environment, intimate relations are not simply performed in pairs, bounded groups or cultural contexts; rather they also traverse and entangle the online with the offline. This traversing sees physically public worlds entangled by electronic privacy, and an electronic public that is geographically private. [...] Changes of spatial, temporal, and relational boundaries are central for understanding intimacy in a digital culture where new conventions and expectations continuously emerge. As Walker Rettberg (2014) notes, technologies not only help us see ourselves but also shape how we see ourselves.

(2018: 63)

Digital media, and social media more specifically, have played a pivotal role in blurring the lines between public and private spaces, sparking complicated

debates about security, especially identity theft, and associated harms. This issue is widely discussed across news media and political discourse, with legislators keen to regulate social media platforms, the content shared, and who can gain access to it. These well-established debates around regulation and control of the media coalesce around the global power and influence of technology companies whose reach exceeds local legislative frameworks, are not our focus here. Instead, this chapter examines how sexualised masculinity circulates across social media platforms such as Instagram or TikTok, Twitter/X, Facebook in order to argue that the global scale of self-image making on these platforms brings attention to men's bodies – nude bodies, muscular bodies, masculine bodies that have often been marginalised, censored or deemed obscene in mainstream culture and legacy media. As these erotic male bodies become ubiquitous, they shift from being private, adult content to become part of the public conversation and popular culture. Masculine bodies that are routinely and repetitively presented not just for admiration but also for their sexual appeal represent a profound shift from the private consumption of erotic or 'adult' content into a public realm not only at the level of visibility but also by virtue of the sexualised masculine body becoming part of a public conversation and part of popular culture.

### Thirst Traps and Algorithmic Desire

In December 2019, online celebrity news outlets excitedly reported that the Australian 'heart throb' actor Liam Hemsworth, in the words of *US Magazine* 'had to Google "thirst trap" after learning he'd posted one'.<sup>11</sup> In subsequent weeks, online outlets followed suit by creating listicles of the best celebrity thirst traps. *Buzzfeed* for instance compiled a list of 31 celebrity images found on Instagram, many of them professionally photographed, editorial images of celebrities well known for their toned bodies and public profiles as sex symbols such as actors Zac Efron and Channing Tatum, singers Liam Payne, Ricky Martin and musician Jason Derulo.<sup>12</sup> We pause to note here the problematically racialised dimension of thirst trapping here as it is, once again, mostly white bodies and ethnicities that are routinely foregrounded. It is notable for instance that one of Derulo's Instagram posts caused some controversy when it was removed by the platform for contravening community standards because of the 'visibility' (and implied size and state of arousal) of the performer's penis in a pair of tight-fitting swimming trunks.<sup>13</sup> The post was removed because of 'nudity or sexual activity' even though neither of these things was an accurate description of the content of the image.<sup>14</sup> Derulo's well-publicised complaints were organised around what he described as the 'discriminatory' nature of this ban. He suggested that female Instagram posters routinely present their bodies in a provocative manner but are treated differently by the platform and that he could not 'help his size'. Putting to one side the debatable logic of the performer's argument, it is perhaps more significant to note that there might be a

motivation grounded in racialised stereotypes that have not attracted the same attention. Derulo is black and it is hard to ignore the speed with which an image of a handsome, muscular black man was censored and the ways in which the assumed sexual threat of the black body can be reduced to a bulge in a pair of shorts. Many of the celebrities included on the BuzzFeed listicle have posted images qualitatively more sexually explicit but, in this case, Derulo appears, as far as Instagram's content moderation policy is concerned at least, to have been cast in the role of hypersexual black man who is 'obscene' in the correct sense of that word. We will return to the question of race, which runs like a thread throughout this book, towards the end of this chapter.<sup>15</sup>

While the term 'thirst trap' is gender neutral and is also frequently used to describe candid, sexy female social media posts, it has nonetheless become a term closely associated with the circulation of images of men's bodies designed to be consumed for their sexual frisson. The relatively trivial celebrity gossip around Liam Hemsworth's thirst trapping antics is informative on more than one level. In the first instance it illustrates the extent to which a great deal of contemporary online media reportage is derived from 'private' or 'personal' social media posts and the porosity of public and private image making and sharing. It also points to the extent of the digital media coinage that aims to articulate a specific form of sexual affect that shared images aim to evoke. Notwithstanding Hemsworth's somewhat dubious naivete, the principle of the thirst trap is simple enough to grasp; sexy images, produced and circulated via social media to garner affirmation (likes). Thirst trapping practices are especially instructive in terms of thinking about the circulation of male bodies and ideas of masculine sexiness in the digital realm, across social media platforms and further afield in the popular cultural ecosystem. As a colloquialism the thirst trap summons up a network of factors and determinations that are central to our collective understandings of sex and sexuality and the extent to which masculinity as a sexual object can be thought of as, variously, a lure, a temptation and of course a threat. All of this is situated within the attention economy, where social media users attempt to leverage their 'hotness' to capitalise on the simultaneous immediacy and irrationality of desire. Hotness here is another affective category/adjective used across discussions of social media and it essentially serves as the currency of the thirst trap. Nicholas Carah and Amy Dobson, in an essay on how young women's bodies are used to promote nightlife venues, suggest that 'hotness functions as both a set of dominant, relatively stable, gendered visual characteristics of a body that constitute heterosexiness and as the capacity to deploy one's body to affect others' (2016: 7). When it comes to male bodies and sexualised masculinity, we suggest the specifics of 'heterosexiness' are largely redundant in these spaces. Instead, a broader 'pansexiness' or 'ubersexiness' is more significant – a sex appeal that traverses rather than transgresses the homo/hetero binary. In this context, where 'homoeroticism' is consistently and so insistently presented as an opportunity for pleasure regardless of gender or sexuality, it becomes an empty signifier.

While not the only social media platform for the circulation of self-image making, Instagram is by far the largest, and therefore has significant consequence for thinking about how ideas of masculine sexiness are circulated in the digital age. To be 'Instagrammable' has become a commonplace to describe attractiveness. Instagram is the fourth largest social media platform (after Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube) and can boast that 20 per cent of all global Internet users access the platform daily accounting, as of 2024, for around 500 million daily users.<sup>16</sup> Given the vastness of the databank that Instagram holds it is important to emphasise the extent to which our object of study is narrow and specific: masculinity presented as sexual/erotic spectacle. In this regard alone Instagram matters not just because it's the most mainstream and established picture-sharing platform but also because of what the mass of data that it holds constitutes; in short an enormous archive of sexual desire, a map and a digital catalogue of desirability that has consequences not just for future scholars of sexuality but also for the developers of the burgeoning AI industry, and perhaps further as yet unimagined implications for how the big data of sex might be leveraged in the future.

One of the consequences of this mass of data is the production of a phenomenon that we are describing as algorithmic desire. The algorithms driving nearly every aspect of network capitalism – from search engines to online shopping and social media – are designed to capture and hold users' attention by showing us more of what we are presumed to be interested in, according to algorithmic logic. The real value lies in the data extracted from that attention, making it crucial to attract and maintain interest which can then be expressed as traffic, likes, user engagement and sales. We argue that this embedding of desire into the processes of network capitalism parallels and reflects the broader mechanisms of consumer culture; thus, algorithms function as machines of desire. In a book of the same title, Matthew Flisfeder uses the term algorithmic desire, differently inflected but in ways that are productive and useful for us. In particular, Flisfeder draws attention to what might be described as an algorithmic worldview, created by programmers, which is incomplete, heuristic and approximate, that has profound implications for what is presented to us and what 'sense' is made of our own interactions with online platforms:

Before an algorithm can be designed, programmers must first define the reality of the algorithm, and therefore must make assumptions about the world, which they do, presumably, by relying on the frameworks of knowledge to which they have access, depending upon their relative (class) position in society. O'Neil notes that designers often lack certain data for behaviour that they are interested in, for which they must substitute 'proxies' or stand-in data. This point shows further that not only is algorithmic design premised upon the particular social position and frameworks of knowledge accessible to programmers, but also that the representations of the world used in the design of algorithms rely upon the

interpretive practices of the designer, who must use proxies to represent absent data. Furthermore, the fact that proxies exist to account for incomplete or missing information is an indication of the fact that reality is itself lacking.

(2021: 127)

Our use of the term algorithmic desire acknowledges the ways that algorithms produce a worldview or, according to Flisfeder, ‘define a reality’ which in turn produces structures of feeling using Williams’ formulation that are ‘at once interlocking and in tension’ (2021: 127).

Algorithms such as Instagram’s are expressly designed to show you more of the same material that you search for in order to encourage you to continue to engage; to grab your attention and keep it. These same algorithms learn from users’ interactions and build up an archive of knowledge based on our browsing behaviours. These algorithms of desire mobilise and cater to our desires, archiving them, and by maintaining our attention, in turn, constructing the parameters and contours of desire. Images of bodies are categorised and ‘tagged’; bodies that become data points that can be sorted and ordered according to their sameness; the bodies that are the source of value and meaning in a somatic society are streams of data.

Furthermore, it is not hyperbolic to claim that the meanings this mass of data offers up for qualitative and quantitative research is on a scale that has no direct comparison. Instagram is an archive that provides evidence both for the primacy of certain, limited, racialised and classed models of masculine physical desirability and producing them not so much as exceptional but instead as ‘normal’ as well as ‘normative’. Simultaneously, the platform’s vast data volume also allows for the sharing and celebration of diversity and divergence from those normative standards. This claim once again reinforces a contradictory and fractured sense of what self-image making and sharing via social media platforms looks like and feels like, and reinforces why both this chapter and this book foreground a sense of ambivalence. We see in platforms like Instagram a digital archive of sexualised masculinity in a moment of uncertainty and ambiguity and posters and users’ attempts to negotiate the feelings of vulnerability and the desire to control their images, their identities and their desires that Hakim, Cummings and Young have noted (2024). For example, in October 2023, adult entertainer Rogan Richards created an Instagram post which included a relatively impromptu video of him flexing his muscles in his underwear while proceeding to remark on what he saw as the essential stupidity of this act. He accompanied this video with a text comment that is instructive and articulates the combination of affects that posting precipitates for both poster and reader and the ambiguous and contradictory sense of vulnerability that is attendant on these practices:

The other day I posted me stretching my arms above my head topless, wearing only underwear. And the response I got was massive. And the

validation I felt was addictive! Maybe I'm missing something from these modern trends and there's something about posting really simple acts that represent nothing other than how sexy I am. Maybe it's using sex [at] a pure basic and intimate level and there is something truthful and real about that.<sup>17</sup>

As we have noted elsewhere in this book and earlier in this chapter, Richards is not alone in using platforms like Instagram to leverage his aspirational physique for a range of reasons and with a range of results that map onto a standard account of the logics of social media; to garner attention within the context of the attention economy of social media, to gain validation in the context of a somatic society in which social and cultural meaning resides in bodies, for entrepreneurial purposes of self-promotion in the context of neoliberalism and with the desire (and injunction) to share that is the demand placed on all social media users. There are cultural and (for some) significant financial gains to be had from an engagement in this economy. The idea that of course 'sex sells' is a facile truism and as old as marketing and advertising, but this is an economy one can enter without a marketing budget or a product to sell apart from the value that resides in the digital record of one's body as sexual object. In this context not only is there a blurring of distinctions between public and private images but there is also a dismantling of the already porous boundaries between specific types of image-making and what we will describe for the sake of convenience here as 'body work'. For example, if we look at the Instagram profiles of social media influencers such as James Whipp from the UK, Diego Doig or Mario Hervas from Spain, fitness trainers and models such as Fabien Sassier from France, reality TV personalities such as the Mexican David Ortega and adult performers such as the American Beau Butler, Spanish Äingeru Vilabrilö or the British Danny Wyatt, even while there are differences in geographical location and differences in terms of image content, rhetoric and style there is little to mark out as qualitatively different in how this heterogenous group choose to represent themselves and their pansexual bodies and identities.<sup>18</sup> The deliberate arbitrariness of this range of examples illustrates the international reach of a representational blurring of distinctions between fashion, fitness and 'adult' content as well as the concomitant blurring of distinctions around sexual identities and address to audiences. This also provides evidence of the sporno-sexual phenomenon, coined by Mark Simpson (2014) and later expanded upon by Jamie Hakim (2018, 2019).

### **Why Only Fans Isn't Porn**

Thirst trapping practice extends beyond Instagram, and it is not at all uncommon for influencers to maintain an array of social media profiles, including a presence on the subscription based social media platform OnlyFans. For instance, the almost supernaturally handsome Italian fashion and fitness model and social media influencer, Pietro Boselli, has 3.5 million followers on

Instagram, a personal website, maintains a presence on TikTok, YouTube, X/Twitter, Patreon and also joined OnlyFans in 2024 with extensive social media promotion from the platform.<sup>19</sup> Just as ‘Instagrammable’ has become a widely used neologism, the idea of setting up an OnlyFans account now carries specific connotations in popular consciousness, symbolising the gig economy-based leveraging of one’s body as sexual capital for financial return; somatic capital in a somatic society. The exponential growth in users, content creators and revenues (over \$2 billion in 2022 with projections that it will be closer to \$18 billion in 2024) has made OnlyFans a major digital presence, with stories circulating of creators earning millions.<sup>20</sup> The platform has become an object of study for researchers across a range of disciplines, focussing on an array of issues including sex work in the gig economy (Easterbrook-Smith, 2022; Swords, Laing and Cook, 2022), ‘amateur porn’ (Ryan, 2019), creating and selling sexual content (Cardoso, Chronaki and Scarcelli, 2023), corporate communication strategies and the category of ‘not safe for work’ NSFW (Van der Nagel, 2021). Although OnlyFans was not originally intended as a platform for the distribution of sexually explicit content, its mission to allow content creators to retain ownership and monetise the content they produce has inevitably led to its adoption as a primary outlet for such material. This has not been without consequence for the company though. A confused (and swiftly reversed) decision to ban ‘adult’ content from their platform in 2021 – prompted by financial institutions threatening to refuse to process transactions – resulted in a wave of negative publicity. This incident solidified OnlyFans in the popular imagination as a social media space primarily catering to those looking for sexual content.<sup>21</sup> The platform is used by a variety of content creators with a concentration of sex workers as well as celebrities and health and fitness influencers who make full use of the lack of restrictions around sex or nudity that have become typical of the larger platforms. For example, in 2021 the Vienna Tourist Board took to the platform, setting up an account in reaction to their previous censorship issues with both social media platforms and local authorities in England and Germany, who had deemed their advertising art images promoting the city’s gallery collections as sexually offensive.<sup>22</sup> These controversies in digital and physical contexts highlight how issues surrounding sex, sexuality and the ‘explicit’ remain live topics of debate, largely because of the value placed on bodies – particularly naked and sexual bodies – in a somatic society. They also reveal how, in a digital culture, analogue distinctions between what is and is not ‘explicit’, the power or otherwise of images of sexuality, and the very definition of porn itself are increasingly contested and fluid.

Readers will note that while we have discussed aspects of FTM and gay porn in the previous chapters, porn has not figured as a central focus in a book concerned with the sexualisation of male bodies across 21st century media cultures. There are several reasons for this. In the first instance we have both written extensively about this topic elsewhere and we do not intend to revisit our well-documented positions here (Mercer, 2017; Smith, 2007). Second, this book (and this chapter) attempts to move beyond the ghettoisation of sexual

representation, arguing that sexualised masculinity in the contemporary moment extends far beyond a specific mode of production and consumption. We contend, as we have already noted, that the bracketing of porn from the rest of popular culture – a practice historically intended to mark porn as a gateway into a world of objectification, depravity, harm – makes little sense in a digital context. More contentiously, we argue that the very category of ‘porn’ is becoming increasingly anachronistic. Porn has always been a vexed term with a constant debate over definition marking out the early years of the field of porn studies, especially around the launch of the *Porn Studies* journal in 2014. In porn studies, the term serves as a heuristic device to bring a group of sexually explicit texts and practices into view rather than an attempt to define, classify or ossify them. Even between the two authors of this book (who are also both editors of the *Porn Studies* journal) there is not a settled consensus on the continued value of porn as a term with one of us thinking that it is largely redundant and the other thinking that it still retains value. This is more than a disciplinary issue of debate of concern to specialists alone. Notwithstanding our own reservations, antique terms belonging to an analogue culture including pornography (also obscenity) still have popular purchase as they are attached to sets of debates concerning the amorphous category of ‘harm’ often grounded in moral panics about threats to young people (especially young women) who are framed as vulnerable. Like porn, harm is hard to define, elusive, frightening, tantalisingly ambiguous and capacious (almost anything could be harmful). Porn and harm are routinely linked in the popular consciousness as well as in the minds of media commentators, policy makers, legislators and lobbying groups.

Our argument, and it is an ironic one given that we have both spent most of our academic careers researching and writing about pornography, is that terms such as porn, obscenity, even harm are too ill defined to be of sustained value except to those who seek to suppress sexual expression and freedom of speech. We suggest that the term ‘pornography’, originating in the mid 19th century, is increasingly irrelevant and inadequate for describing the array of sexual representations and erotic self-presentations that are circulating across platforms like OnlyFans. Our contention, which we recognise as controversial, is that the kinds of explicit content shared on OnlyFans does not fit the traditional definition of porn tied to specific systems of production, distribution and consumption. This underscores the need for a new language and a revised framework for understanding sexual content in the digital and social media age.

The term ‘sexually explicit material’, expressed as the acronym SEM, is sometimes used for the kind of digital content we are discussing here, and this is not unhelpful.<sup>23</sup> SEM avoids the puritanical squeamishness that often leads American scholars to use the term ‘adult content’ instead of ‘porn’. However, SEM may be so devoid of eroticism and so neutral that it risks losing not only its meaning but also its political significance – similar to how MSM (men who have sex with men) is used in medical discourse to separate sexual practice from identity. In an era where words are highly politicised, the need for

precision around language is amplified. For writers like us, trained in the traditions of British Cultural Studies, the connections between language and ideology have always been important. What is at stake here is not a denial of porn's existence or the associated porn studies scholarship, nor a search for a sanitised term to avoid offence. Rather, it is about finding language that is suitable for the 21st century and fit for the purpose of describing content without relegating it to the margins of popular culture or labelling it as taboo or 'obscene'.

The small sample of Instagram influencers mentioned in the previous section of this chapter exemplifies content creators who also diversify into sexually explicit (or at least provocative) content on OnlyFans. In Chapter 3 we discussed sports personalities who have created content for sale on the platform from across Olympic sports such as the diver Matty Lee to Rugby League players, especially the account 'Rugby in the Buff' which has attracted media attention for their sexy OnlyFans accounts.<sup>24</sup> In recent years and to illustrate the extent to which sexual content is no longer relegated to the margins of culture, we can note the extent to which there is an increased aligning of reality media formats and celebrity culture; in short that creating thirst trapping content, leading to an OnlyFans account is a recognised (and legitimate) strategy for establishing status as a celebrity. Examples abound including male and female *Big Brother* contestants from all the territories where the show is franchised to a story in 2022 that a popular *Great British Bake Off* contestant 'might' launch an OnlyFans account.<sup>25</sup>

Of all the reality TV properties that are already well placed for this alignment, the dating show *Love Island* is probably the one that most clearly capitalises on the conjuncture of sex and nascent fame. The contestants of *Love Island* (again both male and female) are keenly aware that the show conflates sex and celebrity and sex as the basis *for* celebrity and commodification of the self as sexual object; the reality TV format par excellence of a somatic society. The format already engages in what might be described as televised thirst trapping and has become the focal point of a contradictory and fractured mix of excitement, prurience and contempt from both mainstream and social media commentators – a defining characteristic of the contemporary moment. It is no surprise, then, that popular contestants of the programme often enhance their profiles as celebrities, and augment their incomes, by becoming OnlyFans content creators.<sup>26</sup>

## The AI Self

In December of 2022, the *Lensa AI* app (that had existed for four years already) developed a viral following amongst Instagram posters largely as the result of the development of so-called 'magic avatars'. The magic avatar utility uses AI to produce hyperreal stylised images based on uploaded selfies. *Lensa's* marketing text describes it thus: '*Lensa* is a brand-new way of making your selfies

look better, than you could have ever imagined. Forget about conventional filters and photo editing tools.<sup>27</sup> During the early months of 2023 it was hard to ignore AI-enhanced images of John's Instagram cohort transformed into Roman gladiators, astronauts, sexy cavemen or fantasy fiction warriors. In every case the magic avatar version was more hypertrophically muscular, more athletic, more cut, more handsome, had a squarer jaw, more piercing eyes.

Inevitably and (readers will appreciate) purely in the spirit of academic curiosity rather than the narcissist impulse that so many social scientists regard as the primary frame for understanding the creation and sharing of images of the self, I (John) decided to upload a modest but nonetheless topless selfie of myself to see what the results might be. The app generated 15 images, all of them in varying degrees of undress and all of them physically 'enhanced' versions of the, very average, physicality on display in the original snapshot; broader shoulders, developed upper chest and arms, all characteristics that I have never had in real life. The changes however extended beyond muscularity to a *mise en scène* that seemed designed to situate this radically 'improved' image of the self. Seeing versions of oneself in the manner of a muscular neo-classical artist's model or a Victorian strongman or indeed as a loincloth-wearing fantasy barbarian was uncanny in the proper sense of that term. Using AI to transform one's face and body into a fantasy object, and an object of sexual desire, is both instructive and sobering. Indeed, the app generated some considerable controversy on several fronts. First it was criticised for recycling and plagiarising the creative labour of artists, violating intellectual property rights. Additionally, concerns arose about the ownership of the images generated by the app. Lastly, the app was criticised for creating (or defaulting to) sexualised representations regardless of the user's intention to create them.<sup>28</sup>

We are keenly aware that we are authoring this book at a point where the full potential of AI is only starting to be realised and consequently exactly what this kind of image manipulation might mean and be used for in subsequent years has yet to be determined. We are also conscious that our provisional observations at this point will almost certainly be overtaken by the exponential rate of technological development so our observations here should be understood inevitably as belonging to a specific cultural moment. Nonetheless these 'non-selfies' and specifically the heightened hyperreality that they produce create a somewhat destabilising sense of who is represented in these quasi-images of the self. Akin to the function of the commissioned portrait in the predigital age, these are images that offer to replace the disappointments of documentary reality that the photographic image provides and instead replaces them with hyperbolic representations of an 'ideal' (if improbable) self. The magic avatar offers up the potential and possibility of a physicality and aesthetic standard that one might aspire to achieve at the same time as reminding you that this is beyond your means. The *Lensa* magic avatar offers what Heather Widdows describes in her discussion of beauty as 'the transforming body, a body of potential and possibility, and the imagined body, full of promise' (2018: 3).

At the same time, it represents another digital manifestation of Berlant's 'cruel optimism' (2011), a concept we see as emblematic of the somatic society. Once again, we suggest that feeling matters when considering the implications of how easily these 'perfected' images – often only loosely connected to the physical self – can be produced and circulated in moments of social, cultural and technological change and uncertainty. Moreover, there are significant ethical and judicial implications here with the advent of so called 'deep fake porn' made using AI tools (Maddocks, 2020; Story and Jenkins, 2023).

AI tools are not just used in the production of transformed images of the self or indeed in the production of deepfakes. It is especially instructive to consider how, through the large data sets that result from algorithms that mobilise algorithmic desire, artificial intelligence 'imagines' (and we are using this term advisedly) hotness and what constitutes a sexy man. AI can not only produce images of you as the perfected subject but also can produce the 'ideal' masculine face and body. For example, clearly speaking to a specific gay male demographic with an equally specific overdetermined mesomorphic physicality, Instagram, Facebook and Fanvue (an AI creator subscription site) are venues where users can encounter and follow 'Bill Thomas' also known as 'Big Bill'. According to his Fanvue profile, Bill is a 'Boston based Musclebull bodybuilder turned Strongman, Gay, versatile, wide range of tastes in men'. He is also not a real person but an AI creation with over 5,000 followers on Instagram.<sup>29</sup>

In 2023 a flurry of online news reportage covered the release of a set of images made using *Midjourney* AI software with the prompt 'most attractive man in a country' and a further, more specific, reel of images related to the most attractive man in each American state.<sup>30</sup> It is noteworthy that in all the examples provided, attractiveness – regardless of nationality or ethnicity – follows an extremely specific and narrowly conventional standard, which we argue aligns with a predominately Western model of attractiveness. Traction is provided in an article in *The Atlantic* by Caroline Mimbs Nyce who suggests that AI has a 'hotness problem'.<sup>31</sup> We would go further still and argue that, currently at least, AI not only has a hotness problem but also a 'whiteness problem'. For example, in a far from scientific experiment, both authors of this book, based in the UK, used a range of seven, freely available, AI text to image generators and input the same prompts: 'handsome man', 'group of handsome men', 'handsome man in swimwear', 'handsome men in swimwear' and 'sexy man'. After repeated attempts, in every case the images that were produced through these relatively neutral and open prompts were, without exception, images of young, muscular and most significantly, white men. The AI programs appear to operate on a demonstrably racist logic, equating beauty – in this case male beauty – with white beauty.<sup>32</sup> We also found it interesting that search prompts containing terms such as 'sexy', 'underwear' and in some cases 'swimwear' were disallowed with the warning that 'this prompt might produce sensitive content'. This reflects the paradoxical deplatforming of sexual content by AI developers and tools seen across social media (Tiidenberg, 2021), even in

a digital media landscape where sexualised masculine imagery is now commonplace. Despite these restrictions tied to 'community standards', platform governance and issues of censorship and sexual propriety, they do not deter those intent on exploring or exploiting the erotic possibilities that AI opens up for an artificially 'imagined' male hotness. Instagram, for instance, hosts a multitude of profiles devoted to sharing the limitless examples of sexy men that AI tools can generate reinforcing cultural ideals around youth, athletic bodies and cultural whiteness as axioms of hotness.<sup>33</sup>

In this closing chapter, we have explored some of the complexities and interplay between digital culture, masculinity and the representation of male bodies, arguing for the need to move beyond outdated frameworks and terminology. The rise of platforms like Instagram and OnlyFans has not only blurred the lines between public and private, fashion and fitness, and even 'adult' content but has also brought to the forefront the limitations of traditional concepts like 'pornography' and 'beauty'. These platforms have created the spaces where Western standards of attractiveness and racialised ideas of male beauty and male hotness are both reinforced and contested, often through AI-generated or enhanced content that reflects and perpetuates these cultural norms. As we have shown, the algorithms and digital tools that shape this landscape are not neutral; they embed specific values and biases, from the racist logic underlying AI representations of beauty to the deplatforming of sexual content even as sexualised images proliferate. The implications of these developments are far reaching, challenging us to reconsider how we understand and categorise sexualised imagery in the digital age. The ubiquity of eroticised male bodies, the shifting definitions of what constitutes 'explicit' content and the growing influence of AI-generated imagery all point to the necessity for a new language and frameworks that more accurately reflect the realities of the 21st century and which move beyond the simplistic binaries and outdated notions that have long dictated the tenor and politics of discussions of sex, sexuality and representation. In essence, the digital age demands a rethinking of how we conceptualise and discuss masculinity, beauty, and sexual and sexualised content. The challenge is not just to describe these phenomena accurately but to develop vocabularies that capture their fluidity and complexity, enabling deeper understanding of the cultural and social dynamics at play. Going forward, it will be crucial to interrogate these shifts, to recognise the power of language, pleasure and desire in shaping both our perceptions and the cultural landscape itself.

## Conclusion

Attempting to draw together the various threads of our exploration into sexualised masculinity into a conclusion, we are once again struck that traditional understandings of masculinity – both everyday and theoretical – are increasingly inadequate for capturing the complexities and contradictions of contemporary lived experiences and the representations that surround us.

Throughout this book, we have argued that masculinity has never been a monolithic construct but is instead a fluid, multifaceted phenomenon shaped by myriad factors, including media discourse, cultural practices and individual realities. We have also suggested that the processes of change have sped up during the late 20th going into the 21st century – the advent of digital and social media has contributed to exponential change and our practices as academics need to recognise both the continuities and contradictions in what it means to be a man and the meanings that masculine bodies carry in 2024. As our discussions have shown, the digital age has significantly eroded binary distinctions that once seemed foundational. The distinctions between gay and straight, public and private, or pornographic and mainstream content are no longer as clear-cut as they once were. We see this in the normalisation of sexualised content across various media platforms and in the shifting attitudes of younger generations, who are less likely to rigidly adhere to traditional labels. These shifts underscore our argument that the scholarship in the humanities, particularly in masculinity studies, must move beyond outdated frameworks that no longer adequately reflect the realities of contemporary society.

We emphasise that this book is not just about rehashing ideas from the past. While acknowledging the significant contributions of feminist and queer theorists from the 1980s and 1990s, we argue that it is time to move beyond these frameworks to address the realities of the 21st century. The media landscape, societal attitudes and the lived experiences of individuals have evolved, and so too must our theoretical approaches. Our hope is that this book will inspire further scholarship that embraces the complexity, contradiction and ambiguity of contemporary masculinity, recognising it as a dynamic and evolving phenomenon.

Our central focus here has been on sexualised masculinity and a key concept that has contributed to our discussion is that of a ‘somatic society’, where the body has become a critical site through which meaning is made and where capitalist processes operate. In this context, masculinity is not just represented in the media but actively shaped by it, creating what we have termed ‘saturated masculinity’. This is a masculinity not only reflected in media but also produced and consumed through it, highlighting the porous boundaries between public and private and, indeed, between previously rigid categories such as gay and straight. It is evident that the landscape of gender and identity has undergone profound transformations, driven by digital technology, neoliberal economics and the pervasive influence of somatic culture. We have traced the evolution of the male body from a symbol of power and authority to a commodified object of desire, revealing new dimensions of masculinity that were previously marginalised or obscured. Our chapters collectively argue that the sexualised male body is now central to understanding masculinity in the 21st century, not just as a passive recipient of social expectations, or admiring looks, but as an active participant in the digital economy and a crucial locus of identity formation.

Our journey began by examining the increasing visibility of sexualised male bodies in media and popular culture, challenging the orthodoxy that men are

less subject to the pressures of physical appearance and eroticisation than women. We explored how reality television, cinema and fashion have contributed to the normalisation of the muscular, sexualised male body, setting new standards of attractiveness that are both aspirational and oppressive. This shift marks a significant departure from previous ideals of masculinity that prioritised stoicism, emotional restraint and physical dominance over sexual appeal. The commodification of the male body, deeply rooted in the logics of neoliberalism, has turned bodies into capital to be optimised, displayed and monetised within a competitive marketplace.

It has been important for us to demonstrate that this commodification has occurred in complex and often contradictory ways and that these ideals are negotiated in different social and cultural contexts. We have explored numerous examples of the visibility of youth and its importance to 'hotness', and it would have been easy to claim that the changes we highlight are merely generational. But, as our discussion of the 'Silver Fox' showed, ageing is being recontextualised, and the reclamation of ageing masculinity as desirable and powerful highlights the fluidity of masculine ideals and their susceptibility to change. This intersection of age and desirability underscores the broader argument that masculinity is increasingly defined by its capacity to be sexualised, regardless of other social roles or identities but this dynamic also extends far beyond personal identity into every area of social, cultural, economic and political life. As we highlighted, pressures to maintain an athletic, youthful appearance will now persist well into older age tied, in no small measure, to economic survival and societal expectations. As governments of all persuasions shift responsibility for health and well-being onto individuals, and as the financial realities of dwindling state support and social care force many to remain in the workplace for longer, being perceived as youthful and vital (often through demonstration of having maintained sexual attractiveness and viability) becomes essential – not just for personal self-esteem, but for maintaining relevance and employability in increasingly competitive job markets.

Nevertheless, our critique extends to the neoliberal and capitalist frameworks often invoked in discussions of masculinity. We argue that these frameworks should not be seen merely as discourses imposed on cultural products but as lived experiences that are deeply intertwined with the daily realities of individuals. The commodification of masculinity, as seen in digital platforms like OnlyFans, where men monetise their bodies without concern for the gender or orientation of their audience, exemplifies how these economic processes play out in the real world. Our analysis has shown that the sexualisation of the male body may be a relatively recent phenomenon, gaining momentum in the late 20th century and becoming a dominant cultural force in the 21st century. This shift challenges traditional arguments about hegemonic masculinity, which have historically prioritised power, dominance and rationality over physical beauty and sexual appeal as the defining societal imperatives for men. We demonstrated how the rise of the 'buff billionaire' and the 'spornosexual' reflects new

models of masculinity deeply intertwined with neoliberal ideologies. Once again, in these models, the male body becomes a site of investment, optimisation and aspiration, aligning physical fitness with economic success and social status.

Central to our argument is the idea that these developments represent not just a shift in how masculinity is represented, but a fundamental transformation in how it is lived and experienced. In somatic societies, the body is not merely a vessel for identity – it is the primary medium through which identity is constructed and performed. This has profound implications for how men perceive themselves and others, as well as for the broader cultural narratives surrounding gender and sexuality. The body project, as we and others have termed it, is a key site of masculine selfhood, too often perhaps a form of ‘cruel optimism’, where the pursuit of an ideal physique becomes synonymous with the pursuit of success, desirability and social capital.

Moreover, we have highlighted the critical role of neoliberal markets and social media in perpetuating these ideals. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok have become significant venues where the sexualised male body is not only displayed but commodified, turning personal fitness into a lucrative business and creating new forms of labour centred around self-presentation and self-surveillance. The influencers and fitness models who dominate these spaces are not just selling workout routines; they are selling aspirational identities, rooted in the promise of personal transformation through disciplined bodily practices. This commercialisation of the male body underscores the pervasive influence of neoliberal values, where the body itself becomes a form of capital to be invested in and maximised. The notion of the body as a form of capital is not new – there are many accounts of how men have capitalised on their physicality, particularly in the context of manual labour – but the contemporary landscape has introduced a significant shift and the emergence of digital platforms has further complicated this picture. In turn these platforms have democratised the production and consumption of sexualised content, blurring the boundaries between public and private life and making the personal body a public spectacle.

In the digital age, the ‘working man’ body is no longer just a symbol of labour, or physical endurance, or an inchoate manliness; it is also a commodity that individuals, especially those on social media, can strategically market as both ‘ready for work’ and ‘ready for sex’. Our analysis of ‘thirst trapping’ and the rise of social media influencers demonstrates how male bodies are leveraged for economic gain in ways that were previously reserved for female bodies, while still retaining their fitness for work in a kind of dual optimisation merging traditional notions of masculine capabilities with the contemporary demands of digital visibility and desirability. The phenomenon, which we have termed ‘algorithmic desire’, shows how digital algorithms shape and reinforce specific ideals of masculinity by promoting content that conforms to certain standards of attractiveness. The implications of this are likely to be profound, as they suggest that our desires are increasingly dictated by the logic of digital capitalism, where visibility and virality are the ultimate goals. It is also crucial

to clarify that our exploration of sexualised masculinity is not a denial of the ongoing realities of sexism, misogyny or homophobia. Instead, it is a continuation of feminist thought – a call to expand our understanding of how these issues intersect with the lived experiences of men. To acknowledge that men, too, experience objectification and sexualisation is not to detract from the experiences of women but to deepen our collective understanding of gender dynamics in a rapidly changing world. As such, our work here is not only a reflection of current societal shifts but also a forward-looking contribution to ongoing feminist debates.

A thread running through this book is an interrogation of the role that race plays in these developments. The racialised dimensions of masculine beauty standards, particularly the privileging of whiteness in AI-generated imagery and social media algorithms, reveal that even in seemingly democratised digital spaces, exclusionary practices persist. Historically, as we discussed in our chapters on Hollywood and fashion, film stars and models of colour have often been excised from mainstream discussions of masculinity, their contributions and representations marginalised in favour of telling the stories of their white counterparts. The emergence of the black male supermodel, while sometimes presented as a recent phenomenon, actually builds on a longer history of black men who have navigated and challenged limited narratives of masculinity. But, as we explored the evolving representations of masculinity in this book, it is clear that the meanings attributed to sexy black male bodies are only beginning to change and that significant work remains to be done to fully integrate and recognise the diverse and complex portrayals of men of colour in broader discourses on masculinity. By analysing the representations of non-white masculinities, we have highlighted the ways in which these bodies are both included in and marginalised by dominant cultural narratives. Similarly in our discussion of 'queerbaiting' and the commodification of queer aesthetics we saw further illustration of how marginalised identities are often co-opted for profit, rather than being genuinely embraced or understood.

The commodification of the male body, the role of digital platforms in shaping and responding to desire, and the interplay of race, class and sexuality within these dynamics all highlight the need for continued, sustained and more nuanced approaches to studying masculinity. These processes are very far from one-directional; they are shaped by the very experiences and identities they engage with. Individuals and communities have not only adapted to digital and social media technologies but have also redefined their purposes, often in ways that transcend the original intentions of their creators. Take TikTok, for instance – initially designed as a platform for recreation, it has evolved into a powerful tool for social and political communication, driven by users who leverage the platform to reach into the very foundations of societal issues. The body remains at the centre of much of this engagement, serving as both the medium and message in ongoing dialogues between technology, identity and cultural change. These reciprocal relationships (even if uneven) underscore the

complexities of contemporary masculinity and, especially for us, sexualised masculinity, calling for a deeper understanding of how these forces interact and evolve together. As we look to the future, it is clear that the sexualised male body will continue to play a crucial role in shaping not just individual identities, but the broader cultural and economic systems in which we all participate.

Even as our analysis has traversed significant ground, there remain areas that merit further investigation: the complexities of contemporary masculinities, particularly as they intersect with race, class, sexuality and digital technology, present a vast landscape of inquiry that cannot be fully captured within the scope of a single volume. We have laid some groundwork for understanding sexualised masculinity in the digital age, but there are important dimensions of this topic that we have only begun to touch upon. As the boundaries of gender become increasingly fluid, especially within younger generations, the experiences of non-binary and gender-fluid individuals in relation to somatic culture and digital platforms offer fertile ground for future research. Similarly, the experiences of men with disabilities navigating the pressures of a sexualised body cultures deserve deeper attention. These areas represent crucial intersections that challenge the normative standards of masculinity, sexualised or not, offering alternative narratives that can broaden and deepen our understanding of male identity in the 21st century. We hope that future scholars will take up these threads, expanding the conversation to include voices and perspectives that we have not been able to fully explore.

Our analysis has largely focused on Western norms and ideals and we are painfully aware that the global implications of digital masculinity remain an area ripe for exploration. Non-Western perspectives on masculinity, particularly as they engage with or resist the globalised ideals propagated by platforms like Instagram and OnlyFans, could reveal significant variations and resistances. The impact of globalisation on local masculine identities, as well as the digital divide that excludes certain populations from these conversations, warrants further study. We encourage researchers to explore these cultural and regional dynamics, which could offer a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of how sexualised masculinities are constructed and experienced worldwide. Moreover, our examination of the digital economy's role in shaping masculinity could benefit from a more detailed economic analysis. We have discussed the commodification of the male body, but a closer look at the economic forces driving this phenomenon, particularly in the context of the gig economy and gendered and raced labour, would undoubtedly bring valuable insights. Understanding the financial pressures that men face in maintaining a marketable body, and how these pressures differ across different identities, are also areas that have been discussed elsewhere but deserve further exploration. We see this as an opportunity for future research to build on our work, providing a richer economic context to the cultural analysis we have presented. Finally, while we have engaged with the ethical implications of AI and digital manipulation in shaping masculine ideals, this is another area where further inquiry is needed. The long-

term implications of AI on how we think of ourselves as individuals with bodies, how we image ourselves alongside the potential for deepfakes to erode trust in visual media, and the psychological impact of interacting with idealised digital representations are all critical issues that will warrant deeper investigation. These technological advancements are rapidly evolving, and their implications for masculinity – and gender more broadly – are only beginning to be understood and we encourage other scholars to continue these lines of inquiry, exploring the ethical and social dimensions of these technologies in greater depth. We openly acknowledge these omissions because we do not see them as gaps in our work, but rather as openings for further scholarship. The terrain of masculinity is vast, and the intersections of gender, sexuality, technology and culture are continually shifting. Our hope is that this book serves as a foundation for others to build upon, inspiring new research that will expand the boundaries of what we understand about masculinity in the digital age. The areas we have highlighted are crucial to ongoing conversations about gender and identity, sex and sexuality, somatic and digital cultures, and we are excited to see what future scholars, bringing their unique perspectives and methodologies, will find as they explore these dimensions.

## Notes

- 1 See: <https://jamesmbarrett.com/background/>
- 2 See: <https://www.instagram.com/dishydads/?hl=en>
- 3 In many ways the Instagram aggregators of thirst trap content are particularly interesting for the ways in which they simultaneously function as what might be regarded as informal archivists and tastemakers and second because of the ways in which their practices are performing manually in a manner analogous to the work that social media algorithms do digitally. Readers can see how the category of 'daddy' that we discussed in Chapter 6 becomes an identity category around which aggregators can build digital archives of material:  
<https://www.instagram.com/damndaddyofficial/?hl=en>; <https://www.instagram.com/the.scruddy.homo/>; [https://www.instagram.com/perfect\\_maturedaddies/](https://www.instagram.com/perfect_maturedaddies/); <https://www.instagram.com/hairyfixation/> <https://www.instagram.com/instantmuscleaddies/>
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- 6 Alise Tifentale provides an acute and perceptive contextual chapter on the social and cultural status of the selfie as well as research in the field in: 'The Selfie: More and Less than a Self-Portrait', in Moritz Neumüller, ed., *Routledge Companion to Photography and Visual Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 2018), 44–58.
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- 8 We are of course not alone in challenging the relatively facile overinvestment in narcissism as a conceptual frame and wanting to see digital media cultures including

- self-image making as part of a complex assemblage of dynamics and affects. An excellent overview of a range of debates around intimacy, privacy and the digital realm is offered in Shields-Dobson, A. Robards, B. and Carah, N (eds) (2018). *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*. Palgrave Macmillan.
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- 18 See: [https://www.instagram.com/jameswhipp\\_/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/jameswhipp_/?hl=en); <https://www.instagram.com/mariohervas/> [https://www.instagram.com/yetifit\\_/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/yetifit_/?hl=en); <https://www.instagram.com/diegord7/?hl=en>; <https://www.instagram.com/davidortega55/?hl=en>; <https://www.instagram.com/danwyattxx/>; <https://www.instagram.com/beaubutlerofficial/> [https://www.instagram.com/aingeru\\_v/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/aingeru_v/?hl=en)
- 19 Pietro Boselli site: <https://bio.site/pietroboselli>; Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/pietroboselli/?hl=en>; <https://www.instagram.com/p/C74GnlpRGxC/>
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