

Making Sense of *Men's Health*:

An Investigation into the Meanings Men and Women Make of *Men's Health*

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Abstract

This study investigates the popular pleasures produced by readers of men's magazines, focusing primarily on the publication, *Men's Health*, which represents a new type of magazine catering for men. Using qualitative research methods such as textual analysis and reception analysis, the study explores the pleasures produced by both men and women from the consumption of such texts. The theoretical perspective of cultural studies informs this project, an approach that focuses on the generation and circulation of meanings in society. Focusing on the notion of the active audience and Hall's encoding/decoding model, this study examines readers' interpretations of the *Men's Health* text, focusing on the moment of consumption in the circuit of culture. Reception theory proposes the existence of "clustered readings" produced by interpretive communities that are socially rather than individually constructed. As a critical ethnography, the study interrogates these meanings with particular reference to questions of gender relations and power in society. Access to different discourses is structured by the social position of readers within relations of power and this study takes gender as a structuring principle. Therefore, this study also explores the particular discursive practices through which masculine and feminine imagery is produced by the *Men's Health* text and by its readers. The research findings support the more limited notion of the active audience espoused by theorists such as Hall (1980) offering further evidence to suggest that readers produce readings other than those preferred by the text and that therein lies the pleasure of the text for male and female readers. The research concludes that the popularity of *Men's Health* derives from the capacity of its readers to make multiple meanings of the text.

Contents

- 1 Introduction**
- 2 Chapter 1**
The men's magazine market
- 3 Chapter 2**
Media and society: the relationship between texts
and audiences
- 4 Chapter 3**
Methodologies
- 5 Chapter 4**
Research findings
- 6 Conclusion**
- 7 Appendix**
A Interview Guide
B Excerpts from May 2003 issue of *Men's Health*
- 8 References**

Introduction

This research project investigates the popular pleasures produced by readers of men's magazine, focusing primarily on *Men's Health* as an example of the new kind of male-oriented lifestyle magazines that have entered magazine markets in the last decade. This study is concerned with exploring the ways both male and female readers receive and make sense of the *Men's Health* text and examines the kinds of pleasures produced at the moment of consumption. By 'making sense' I mean, the way readers describe and interpret their lived experience – how they make their lives and their media consumption culturally intelligible. This study is a reception analysis, focusing on the consumption of a particular media text. As such, it is concerned with explicating the processes through which *Men's Health* is read and understood and focuses on the moment of reception in the circuit of culture.

The circuit of culture is a model that both depicts and explains the processes involved in the production and consumption of media texts (Johnson 1985). It seeks also to provide a visual explanation of the relationship between culture and society. The circuit of culture which incorporates different moments in the production and consumption of cultural products (media texts and each moment in the circuit of culture is part of a continuous circle, where each moment "depends upon the others and is indispensable to the whole" (Johnson 1983: 17).

According to Johnson's (1983) model, the circuit of culture comprises the following moments: the moment of production; the moment of consumption; the cultural texts themselves; and the lived culture and social relations within which these texts are produced and consumed. To put it another way, the production of culture involves processes of production and consumption, the product itself and the social environment in which the product is produced and consumed.

Despite their interdependence, each moment is distinct from every other moment and "it follows that if we are placed at one point of the circuit, we do not necessarily see what is happening at others. The forms that have most salience for us at one point may be very different from those at another" (Johnson 1983: 17). In other words,

different theories of the media emerge depending from which moment of the circuit the process is viewed.

As discussed above, this study is concerned with understanding the popularity of *Men's Health* and how readers make sense of the identities, relations and discourses the magazine offers. The primary focus is thus on the moment of consumption and the processes by which the *Men's Health* text is received and decoded by media audiences.

Although, as du Gay et al. (1997) note, it may be analytically useful to separate the processes of production and consumption, in reality, the two are always interrelated. Marx (in du Gay et al. 1997) argued that production and consumption were in fact the same process. Without production, there would be no product to consume, and without processes of consumption, there would be no need for production. The two are, as Johnson's (1983) model suggests, mutually dependent on each other. Consequently, although this study focuses primarily on the moment of reception, Chapter 1 will examine the moment of production and the processes of production of men's magazines such as *Men's Health*. Chapter 1 briefly outlines the growth and development of men's magazines, the development of the male magazine market and the proliferation of new male-oriented titles in the last ten to twenty years, and provides background crucial to a better understanding of the purpose and findings of this study. The chapter ends with a discussion of the magazine market in South Africa today, the kinds of magazines available to men and the identities and social roles they offer.

This discussion informs Chapter 2, an overview and discussion of the relevant theoretical literature underpinning this study. All media research is, in one way or another, an attempt to explain the relationship between media and society, texts and audiences. This chapter begins with an overview of various theoretical propositions around this relationship examining a range of theories from those that stress the power of the media over audiences to those that stress audience autonomy. This study takes the position that neither media nor their audiences are all-powerful. Instead, the two exist in a dialectical relationship of relative power. This paper takes the position that while the media and media texts have power over and within society, at the same

time, audiences have power to select and interpret media products. This chapter also examines theory around representation and discusses discourse as a system of representation, and in particular, the way discourses work to produce gendered bodies. The theoretical overview ends with a discussion of gender theories and the ‘discovery’ of multiple masculinities in gender studies.

Chapter 3 is a discussion of the methodological considerations that underpin this study including a discussion of both the qualitative research philosophy and its associated techniques. The chapter outlines this project’s two-step research process, which includes a brief textual analysis and analysis of the focus group discussions, which is this study’s primary method of data generation.

Chapter 4 examines the transcripts and tapes of the focus group interviews, analysing them in relation to both the theory discussed in Chapter 2 and the textual analysis. Also included in this chapter are the findings of the textual analysis, conducted to facilitate the development of an appropriate interview guide and more focused group discussions.

The conclusion attempts to provide some conclusions or inferences about the popular pleasures produced in the reception of *Men's Health* and also examines possible predictions for the future of the magazine industry, male identity, masculinity and gender relations in society.

Chapter 1

The men's magazine market

1. *Introduction*

This chapter examines the popularity and growth of the male magazine market. This chapter, dealing with the history of the men's magazine market and the rapid expansion of this sector in South Africa over the last decade. The focus of this chapter is on the producers rather than on the receivers of media products and is thus concerned with the production moment in the circuit of culture.

Beginning with an overview of the origins of men's magazines, this chapter moves on to discuss the developments within this sector over the last twenty years, which has been characterised by a proliferation of male-targeted magazines in the print media industry. This trend, which had its genesis in the UK and USA, has been echoed in South Africa. The chapter ends with an overview of the male magazine market in South Africa in 2005, identifying those magazines considered to be produced specifically for men. It also discusses the reluctance of some editors to identify their magazines as specifically male magazines. While some research has been conducted on the men's magazine phenomenon in the UK and USA, very little local research has been conducted in this area.

2. *The history of men's magazines*

The Macmillan English Dictionary defines a 'magazine' as "a large thin book with a paper cover, containing reports, photographs, stories etc, usually published once a month or once a week" (2002: 860). This definition is descriptive rather than functional – it explains what a magazine is, not what it does. (The function of magazines and media in society is much debated.)

The first magazines produced as a distinctive genre developed in the late seventeenth century at about the same time as the earliest newspapers began to be produced (Jackson et al. 2001). Very soon, magazines came to be considered as primarily a feminine media. Indeed, until a few years ago, the vast majority of magazines

available were produced specifically for female audiences. Consequently, while much research has been conducted on women's magazines (see White 1970; Hermes 1995; McRobbie 1991 for examples), men's magazines and their readers have received very little serious academic attention.

Until the last decade men's magazines tended to focus mostly on pornography (the so called 'skin magazines') and on special interests (for example, business and finance) or leisure activities such as sports, photography and motoring (McRobbie 1991 in Jackson et al. 2001). There were of course exceptions: magazines such *The Gentleman's Journal* in 1692, *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1731 and *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1817 were published for male readers. *Esquire*, a US title with a mainly male readership, appeared in the 1930s and as Jackson et al. (2001) argue, with its focus on consumerism and style, can be seen as an early prototype of the men's lifestyle magazines available today.

The same can be said for *Playboy*, launched in America in December 1953. Until the publication of *Playboy*, US men's magazines centred on action and adventure stories in which men faced challenges that tested their manhood through hand-to-hand combat and physical demonstrations of power. *Playboy* signalled a departure from this. Kimmel argues that *Playboy* was "the decade's most significant cultural contribution to the stock of masculine escape hatches", creating and disseminating the myth that "adventurous masculine consumerism" would be rewarded with the conquest of soft, sensual and seductive types of women who appeared in the magazine (1996:254). *Playboy*, then, was one of the first men's magazines that touted the credo that the possession of money and spending power, gadgets and fancy toys guaranteed conquests and success, both sexual and other. *Playboy* editor, Hugh Hefner famously defined the kind of man who reads the magazine:

Playboys spend most of our time inside. We like our apartment. We enjoy mixing up a cocktail and an *hors d'oeuvre* or two, putting a little mood music on the phonograph and inviting in a female acquaintance for a quiet discussion on Picasso, Nietzsche, jazz and sex. (in Kimmel 1996: 255)

This dichotomy between two different versions of masculinity – the outdoors, action man and the refined, discerning smooth-talking seducer – represented within the

magazines and typified by their readers, continues to be evident in the range of men's magazines published today. This is discussed further in Chapter 4.

McRobbie's pertinently observes that the kinds of magazines produced for men in the 1970s made "no consistent attempt to link interests with age, nor [was] there a sense of natural or inevitable progression from one [magazine] to another complementary to the life-cycle" (1991: 83 in Jackson et al. 2001). In contrast, from my own observation, women's magazines trace the female life cycle from adolescence to early-twenties, through to marriage and motherhood with magazines like *Just Seventeen*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Your Family* and so forth (albeit within a conventional definition of what constitutes women's interests and social roles).

However, the nineties saw the proliferation of a new breed of consumer lifestyle magazines geared towards male readers (Faludi 1999). These magazines, which deal with men's lifestyle, issues and interests, are essentially the male counterpart of such long-established women's magazines as *Cosmopolitan* and *Marie Claire*. Jackson et al. (2001) interpret the changes in the UK magazine market as both shaped by and shaping of a changing sociological context characterised by shifts in gender relations of power. Faludi argues that previously, men gained their sense of manhood from their place in a larger social system, one that "gave them a context and... promised them that their social contributions were the price of admission to the realm of adult manhood" (1999: 35). However, feminism and the 'liberation' of women in Western cultures have posed a severe threat to men, whose social roles (as provider and protector) are no longer assured.¹ This, coupled with the rise of the gay movement, has resulted in shifts in the definitions of masculinity circulating in society.

Therefore, it is possible to understand the new men's lifestyle magazines as a response to these challenges and as an attempt to incorporate new elements into their definition of masculinity/masculinities. The men's lifestyle magazines deal with previously taboo aspects of masculinity such as health, fashion, cooking and the male body,

¹ For example, in the UK between 1971 and 1997, the gap between the percentage of males and females in the labour force has narrowed considerably. While the percentage of economically active men has fallen slightly, the main reason for the reduction is the rise in the percentage of economically active women. In 1997, women accounted for 45.7% of the employment force, compared to just 32.3% in 1961 (Haralambos & Holborn 2000).

emphasising the shifts in gender relations that have taken place within global elite society in the last decade.

The boom in men's lifestyle magazines began quietly enough in the mid-eighties in America with the launch of *GQ* (*Gentleman's Quarterly*) in 1985 and *Men's Health* in 1986. In the same year in the UK, the first issue of *Arena* appeared and its success encouraged the launch of a UK-based edition of *GQ* in 1988. In 1991, *Esquire* was published and the trend was established. In 1994, three new titles, *Attitude*, *FHM* and *Loaded*, were launched and 1995 saw the UK men's magazine market swell with the publication of *Men's Health*, *XL for Men* and *Maxim* (Jackson et al. 2001). With the exception of *Attitude*, all these magazines cater for heterosexual males, whose lifestyle is reflected in the magazines' articles, photo-spreads and advertisements.

Inevitably, the rapid increase in publications has resulted in market segmentation with a handful of titles that enjoy mass circulation and many other smaller titles that cater more for particular niche markets. As Jackson et al. (2001) note, the slight decline in recent circulation figures seems to indicate that perhaps the male magazine market has reached its peak in the UK. Whether circulation figures have reached a plateau, the sector remains one of the strongest in the UK – remarkable, considering it did not even exist until fifteen years ago.

Similar trends are discernible in the South African media environment where the men's magazines market has expanded considerably in the last ten years.

3. *The South African men's magazine market*

3.1 *Growth of the market 1994 - 2005*

An article in *The Media*, a monthly magazine for South African media workers says “in fact, men's lifestyle titles are arguably the biggest magazine publishing phenomenon of the past decade” (Spira 2003: 25). In South Africa, as in the UK and USA, a number of lifestyle magazines for men have entered the media market. Just over ten years ago, men's magazines were limited to soft-porn publications and special interest titles focused on traditionally male leisure pursuits such as photography and motoring. In 1994 *bigblue*, a watersport magazine published by Freewind, began to include articles about beer, sex and style as well as the ubiquitous

pictures of bikini-clad babes. *Bigblue* changed its name to *Directions*, becoming the first men's lifestyle magazine to be published in South Africa, attracting advertising revenue and rapidly growing circulation figures (Spira 2003).

In 1997, Touchline Media, a division of Naspers, one of the largest and most well established of the media conglomerates in South Africa, launched a South African version of the U.S.-based *Men's Health*. As the slogan said, this magazine offered South African men "tons of useful stuff" with information about a range of topics including sex, relationships, health, fitness, business and nutrition. With the publication of *Men's Health*, the male magazine market in South Africa really took off, as the magazine's growing circulation figures and ability to attract advertising revenues in a generally depressed media climate, encouraged others to launch male lifestyle magazines such as *FHM* and *Maxim*, both UK-based publications. In South Africa, the male magazine sector grew by 13% in 2002, following its 30% growth over the past two years, in sharp contrast to the general decline of the magazine sector (Jan-July 2002 Audit Bureau of Circulations report). However, the small market of male readers coupled with the rapid expansion of men's lifestyle titles has resulted in competition for finite advertising and audience resources, forcing the closure of some of the new titles. Among those on the casualty list, was *Directions*, which closed in 2000 (Business Day 4 April 2000). *Maxim* folded later the same year and *GQ*'s circulation remains well behind that of *FHM* and *Men's Health*. However, circulation figures for *Men's Health* and *FHM* continue to grow. *Men's Health* is South Africa's leading lifestyle magazine with monthly circulation figures of 80 774 for the period January to July 2002 (Audit Bureau of Circulations report) and attracted 520 000 readers (All Media Product Survey 2001). For the period January to July 2005 the circulation of *Men's Health* had grown to 91 849, attracting a massive 719 000 readers (Retrieved 6 December 2005, from the World Wide Web www.touchline.co.za/Content/sections/mhealth.htm?PHPSESSID=941b43b60cb4bbc b5f97).

In July 2002, when I began this research, I interviewed then editor of *Men's Health*, Jason Brown, who ascribed the popularity of the magazine to a variety of factors, which, as one might expect, reveal a particularly market oriented approach. Brand focus (connecting the right advertisers with the right audience), strong visual identity

(for example, the cover, which he describes as ‘unmistakeable’) and so forth. He also argues that the magazine is popular because its content is relevant to the readers, is “informative, but irreverent” and is packed full of details. “Men love details,” he says. “They read: ‘33% of men prefer women in mini skirts’ and they think, ‘wow, really?’”. *Men’s Health* is, he says, like a big brother, providing answers rather than posing questions and always “staying on the level. I’m talking to the guy who drives anything from a Nissan to a Mazarati,” says Brown.

Although the four local lifestyle magazines available to South African men resemble each other in terms of content and style, there are also significant differences. *Men’s Health*, as the title suggests, focuses attention on health, be it through fitness, nutrition or stress management although it also includes articles and advice about relationships, sex, business and other life issues. Unlike *GQ* and *FHM*, *Men’s Health* features a male model on the cover and has far fewer ‘babes’ inside. *FHM*, first published in South Africa in 1999, targets male readers aged 18 to 25 and caters for what they perceive to be the demands of this market by typically featuring articles and photographs of “the kinds of women...who have made something of their lives of their own accord” argued *FHM* publisher, Louis Eksteen in an interview published in *The Media* (2003: 26). He continues: “guys are interested in girls like that... professional women who’ve made a name for themselves, and who also look great in a bikini” (Spira 2003: 26).

GQ is in many ways very similar to *FHM*, but differentiates itself by targeting affluent, slightly older readers and promoting itself as more elite and exclusive. Although it also features photo-spreads of scantily clad women, *GQ* contributors include many of the top journalists and writers in South Africa and the magazine is considered by both its producers and consumers to be more upmarket than *FHM*. *Gay Pages*, an independent publication first launched in 1994, is the only magazine to target and cater for homosexuals. Although the other lifestyle magazines, especially *Men’s Health*, attract gay readers, these magazines address an explicitly heterosexual audience. Editor of *Men’s Health*, Jason Brown argues that although the magazine is heterosexual, it “sees men as men. After all, we all need to shave”.

Along with *Men's Health*, the new male titles have had a significant impact on the South African magazine market in general, and on the men's magazine market in particular. They offer a range of information about masculine pursuits and interests. However, it is well to bear in mind that these new lifestyle titles are another branch in a previously established men's magazine market.

3.2 *The men's magazine market 2003*

Apart from the new lifestyle magazines, *GQ*, *Men's Health*, *FHM* and *Gay Pages*, two other distinct types of magazines are available for South African men. In South Africa, *Hustler* and *Loslyf* lead the pornographic market. Special interest magazines deal with leisure, hobbies and subject matter traditionally designated as masculine. While the lifestyle magazines focus on a variety of 'men's issues' and may include articles on relationships, sex, health, business and so forth, the special interest titles are devoted to one particular issue such as sport, leisure, business and financial, or motoring

In February 2003, I spoke to the editors of a selection of these magazines to discover how those in charge of their production define men's magazines. From the interviews, it appears that editors share a generally common view of men's magazines, which they define as simply those magazines concerned with men's issues. Men's issues were unanimously defined as money, sex, sport and motoring. *GQ* editor, Adam Cooke, put it succinctly: "Men's magazines are about things relevant to their lives – like movies, music and sport –, things they crave – like cars, clothes, glamour and babes – and things they want to know about – like their health, money and sex life."

From the interviews it is clear that editors assume that men's interests or issues (that is, those things perceived as masculine) predominately include sex, finance, sport, business, motoring and technology. However, while the editors of the lifestyle and pornographic magazines readily identify their target audience as male, many of the special interest magazines' editors are reluctant to identify their magazines as male-oriented, despite the high male readership they attract. This seems particularly odd considering that many of the special interest magazines attract a greater percentage of male readers than do the lifestyle magazines. For example, the market leaders in the

sporting category attract an average of nearly 80% male readers² as do the highest circulation motoring magazines, significantly higher than the readership figures of men's lifestyle magazines such as *GQ* and *Men's Health*, whose readership is composed of 27% females and 73% males respectively.

While the editors' responses show a consciousness of how society and culture influence the kinds of media texts produced and the audiences targeted, they show little awareness of the power media have in shaping society and culture. Implicitly, the responses seem to indicate that editors view the media products they produce as benign and powerless. Many of the editors interviewed stressed the reflective nature of the media arguing that they target men because the demographics of, for example, *Finance Week's* readership probably reflects the demographics of the corporate world. The media is perceived as "a mirror of events in society and the world, implying a faithful reflection" (McQuail 1994: 65). The metaphor of media as a mirror to society is a popular one as it negates criticism of the way society is represented in media texts. However, as Branston and Stafford point out, "however realistic or plausible media images seem, they never simply represent the world direct. They are always a construction, a representation, not a transparent window on the world" (1995: 125). This is demonstrated by the demographics and target market of the magazines studied, all of which, with the exception of *Kick Off*, target and attract a readership of largely affluent white males within the upper LSM bracket. This represents only a very small fraction of South African society in which huge inequalities of wealth and education exist. Therefore, the majority of South African men remain unrepresented in the magazine media, raising questions about editors' assumptions and claims that the magazines unproblematically reflect social reality.

Thus, as argued above, editors identify readership as a function of the social structure rather than as a result of any specific marketing or production process. Yet, as du Gay et al. (1997) argue, the production of cultural artefacts involves distinctive practices, and specific values and beliefs become associated with these practices. Before beginning production, the producers must identify a particular social group or ideal consumer at whom the product will be directed. This identification heavily influences practices of production and the

² Kick Off – 85% male; The Compleat Golfer – 80% male; Runner's World – 70%; SA Sports Illustrated – 76% male

creation of a particular image/identity for the product so that it will appeal to the particular imagined/identified consumer. Although I have discussed the producers of media products, it is with the consumer that this project is most concerned.

4. Conclusion

This chapter focused on the moment of production in the circuit of culture, examining the growth of men's magazines from the perspective of the market. The chapter began with a discussion of the history of the men's magazine market both in the US and, in more detail, the UK and the expansion of this sector in the last twenty years. It then moved on to examine closely the way this trend was echoed in South Africa and the launch of new male lifestyle magazines, followed shortly by the closure of some of them, and the consolidation of circulation and readership for, particularly, two titles: *Men's Health* and *FHM*. The chapter then discussed the other kinds of publications available on the men's magazine market, including special interest and pornographic titles and the reluctance exhibited by many editors in identifying their publications as men's magazines.

The chapter to follow will discuss the theoretical literature that informs this research project which is concerned with exploring the pleasures readers produce in the reception of *Men's Health*, the leading men's lifestyle magazine in South Africa.

Chapter 2

Media and society: the relationship between texts and audiences

1. *Introduction*

This chapter discusses the literature and theory that inform this research study. This chapter begins with an overview of the ways scholars have theorised the relationship between media and the society in which they function, moving from the early days of mass communication research, which was dominated by the transmission model of communication, towards the present day, in which a growing recognition of the role of audiences in interpreting media content, has led to a less linear conception of the communication process. The relative power of the media and of audiences is then discussed in terms of concepts such as ideology and pleasure, moving towards the concepts of discourse and representation. As this study is concerned with reception and gender relations of power and the media, the discussion then moves on to outline broadly some of the main theories generated within gender studies and the (relatively recent) 'discovery' of the existence of plural masculinities. The discussion concludes with an attempt to draw together some of the concepts and theories discussed to provide a picture against which to understand the purpose and process of this project and to provide a vocabulary with which to discuss and analyse the findings and conclusions of the research.

2. *Theories of media and society*

The history of media communication research and theory has been characterised by a concern with explicating the relationship between the media and society. Theorists have offered a number of different perspectives from which to understand this relationship. For example, theories of media and society may be classified according to the moments they emphasise in the 'circuit of culture' (Johnson 1983). The circuit of culture incorporates into one continuous circle four distinct moments in the production and dissemination of culture. These moments include the moment of textual consumption, and also the moment of textual

production, the texts themselves and the socio-cultural context in which the texts circulate.³

Another approach to the relationship between the media and society is posited by Morley (1989) who argues that theories of media and society are broadly divided between those that stress the determining power of the media (what the media do to people) and those that insist on audiences' interpretive power and freedom over meaning making (what people do with the media). This approach seems a particularly useful starting point for the purposes of this research project, which deals with audience autonomy in interpreting media texts.

In the history of mass communication, various theories that emphasise media power have emerged:

2.1 Mass society theory

The mass society thesis, so called because it is premised on the belief that modern communication systems are responsible for the creation of a mass society, stresses media power over a mass audience (Bennett 1982). This theory conceives of the media audience as a homogeneous mass, vulnerable to the persuasions of a powerful media who are "the voice of authority, the givers of opinion and instruction" (McQuail 1994: 74). According to this approach, texts are closed and separate entities whose meanings are inscribed and proscribed by institutional producers. The assumption is that media messages are created and sent on a linear path from senders to receivers and that messages are received as sent.

Consequently, research and theory arising from within the mass society approach have been concerned primarily with examining the behavioural effects of media messages on audiences.

2.2 The Frankfurt School and Marxism

The Frankfurt School grew out of the mass society theory, adapting the mass society thesis within a Marxist framework to develop a theory of mass communication that views the media as a 'culture industry', responsible for deradicalising and depoliticising the masses by legitimising the interests of the

³ For a more detailed discussion of the circuit of culture, see the Introduction.

dominant classes (Bennett 1982). The Frankfurt School believed that the media promoted a false consciousness, a capitalist ideology that blinded the masses to their social conditions of subordination and ensured their easy assimilation into the capitalist system (McQuail 1994).

The concept of ideology became an important area of concern for media theorists within the Marxist school of thought and is usefully defined by Thompson as “the ways in which meaning serves to sustain relations of domination” (1988: 370). That is, ideology can be understood as meaning in the service of power; it is meaning that operates by legitimising and reifying particular power relations through portraying them as natural and unchanging. The power of a particular ideology is increased by a process of dissimulation whereby unequal distribution of power is, according to Thompson,

concealed, denied or obscured... for example, by describing social processes or events in terms which highlight some features at the expense of others, or by representing or interpreting them in a way which effectively veils the social relations of which they are part. (1988: 370)

The concept of ideology is central to Marxist approaches to the media. Marxism is founded on the premise that the economic base determines the cultural superstructure. Those who own the means of production determine who has power in society and which groups have the power to implement social change and achieve their own ends. Althusser argued that the media are one of a number of Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), which through the dissemination of ideology work to sustain the status quo (Hall 1982). The media are seen as “instruments of control by a ruling class” (McQuail 1994: 76). The structure of ownership and control of the media determines the kinds of ideology embedded in the media products they disseminate and the cultural values of society in general. These values maintain and naturalise the dominance of one group over another.

2.3 The critical paradigm

The critical paradigm takes a Marxist approach to mass communication and is concerned with media power. In particular, this approach is concerned with the way ideological discourses are produced and function in society. Critical theory

investigates issues around who has power to define reality and is concerned with identifying semantic networks and modes of representation, and is particularly concerned with issues around language, power and signification (Hall 1982).

Central to the critical paradigm is Gramsci's notion of hegemony, which provides a more fluid and flexible notion of ideology that allows for and explains social change. Hegemony can be defined as the process by which the dominant order attempts to win consent to systems of dominance in order to maintain the status quo. It is "the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life" (Connell 1995: 77). Those in power become the primary definers of a situation, able to legitimise and win consent to particular perspectives and knowledge so that they become accepted as truths. As van Zoonen (1994) argues, media are the main agents of hegemony in contemporary society. Repeated representations of social reality in the media sustain relations of power, and regimes of truth become naturalised and reified as common sense.

The crucial point that links these diverse theories of the media is their foundation in a belief that the media exercise immense power over audiences who are credited with little autonomy or interpretive freedom in their uses of media. Communication is understood as a relatively transparent "process of transmission of a fixed quantity of information – the *message* as determined by the sender or source" (McQuail 2000: 52).

However, as Root (1986) and Morley (1989) note, an inherent contradiction exists within theories that stress the power of the media, for while the media are conceived of as 'the opium for the masses', a drug that reduces audiences to passive, unthinking zombies, the media are also perceived to have dramatic power to make audiences *do* various things.

3. *The Rise of Ethnography: From Receivers to Readers*

More recent communication theory focuses on the power of audiences over media texts and is concerned with notions of audience activity and textual polysemy. These approaches discount the idea that a text has only one correct interpretation or that meaning is inscribed by the institutional producer and resides within the

text, but seek instead to account for differential readings and interpretations through studying audience reception (Moore 1990).

In the last three decades, critical ethnography has emerged as one of the most popular research methods for the study of audience reception of media products. Critical ethnography is, as Moore indicates, “an approach which takes extremely seriously the interpretations of the media constructed by consumers in their everyday routines. At the same time it is not afraid to interrogate and situate their spoken accounts” (1993: 5). That is, while critical ethnographic studies of the media are concerned with the meanings and interpretations audiences make of media products, they are committed to locating these meanings within the larger social frameworks and structures of power and domination in which they are produced.

The rise of ethnography and reception analysis in the last thirty years, can be attributed to two key theories of media consumption: the uses and gratifications approach and, within cultural studies, Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model (1980). Both sought to explain the multiplicity of meanings that readers make of cultural products by ascribing audiences a more active role in interpretation. The uses and gratifications approach, developed in the 1960s, focused on readers’ “differences of personality and psychology” to explain differential reception of media texts (Morley 1989: 17). While the uses and gratification approach focused on *individual* production of meaning, cultural studies developed out of a concern with the *social* production of meaning and its circulation in society. Thus, Hall’s (1980) encoding/decoding model proposed the existence of “clustered readings” produced by interpretive communities that are socially rather than individually constructed (Moore 1990: 17).

Hall’s model identified two moments of meaning making: the encoding moment – the point at which texts are produced by the media – and the decoding moment – the point at which audiences receive and interpret media texts. Hall (1980) explained distortions or misunderstandings in the communication process by proposing that different codes may operate at the encoding and decoding moment. Because of this “lack of equivalence between the two sides in the communication

exchange”, different meanings may be produced at these two moments and as a result, it can be theorised that audiences are active and have power over media texts (Hall 1980: 131). That is, consumption is conceived as a socio-cultural differentiation in which consumption practices are varied rather than determined by producers (du Gay et al 1997). When audiences decode texts, the meanings they produce are influenced by socially differentiated conditions of reception, such as race, gender, age, class, education and so forth.

Because decoded meanings may vary from each other as well as from the encoded meanings, Hall’s (1980) model argues for textual polysemy. That is, a single text may have multiple meanings. Barthes (1973) argues that texts exist only at the moment of reading, at the intersection between signs (in the form of images or words) and the act of making sense of them. Meaning, therefore, resides in the reader, not in the text. It follows then, that if readers potentially can make multiple and varied meanings of a particular text, the text is never fixed, but always subject to the socio-historical context in which it is read. Therefore, it is no longer either possible or relevant to discuss a particular text as if it exists within a vacuum. Texts are produced within a particular historical context and interpretations are influenced by readers’ particular social and historical subjectivities and intertextual knowledge (Morley 1989).

Hall (1980) insists however, that the polysemic nature of a text does not imply total audience freedom over meaning making. Instead, he argues that “encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate” so that texts have a structured polysemy with patterns of preferred readings (Hall 1980: 135). Hall’s encoding/decoding model opened up new avenues of investigation for media researchers and, as one theorist has argued, “provided a middle ground between the notion of a text having a determinate meaning and an equally problematic notion of a text being completely ‘open’, upon which the reader projects his/her own meaning” (Strelitz 2000: 39). This approach argues that the meanings readers can produce are limited by the syntagmatic and paradigmatic arrangement of the text, the reader’s social position and by the text’s institutional producers.

The encoding/decoding model offered three reader positions in relation to the text: a dominant reading, an oppositional reading and a negotiated reading (Hall 1980). The theory proposed that readers who are implicated in the dominant ideology will tend to produce dominant readings, while those “whose social situations place them in opposition to the dominant ideology, would oppose its meanings in the text and would produce oppositional readings” (Fiske 1987a: 64). However, Hall later reformulated his model, acknowledging that the majority of readings were probably negotiated (Gray 1999). Negotiated meanings are those that “accept the dominant ideology in general, but modify or inflect it to meet the needs of their specific situation” (Fiske 1987a: 64).

However, in *Television Cultures*, Fiske (1987a) takes up the concept of the ‘active audience’ to develop a theory of cultural populism, which conceives of audiences as relatively free to make a multiplicity of meanings from any given text. While Hall (1980) warned that polysemy did not mean pluralism, Fiske (1987a) argues that the meanings audiences make from texts are not *determined* by their social position. He rightly criticises Hall’s (1980) focus on class determination in this process of meaning making, arguing that subsequent studies (see Morley 1980) reveal the importance of a variety of social factors in meaning production. Fiske disagrees with Hall’s (1980) theory that a text is structured to “prefer a meaning that generally promotes the dominant ideology” (1987a: 65). He argues instead, for “structures of preference” through which some meanings are preferred and some are closed off although, he implies, the range of possible inflections of meaning are virtually infinite. This is the weak point in Fiske’s argument, and one that is often criticised. Where other theories emphasise the power of the text over its audience, Fiske’s cultural populism goes to the other extreme, proposing that the reader has almost total power over the text. Fiske contends that readers have the

right to make, out of the program, the text that connects the discourses of the program with the discourses through which he/she lives his/her social experience, and thus for program, society and reading subject to come together in an active, creative living of culture in the moment of reading. (in Morley 1989: 23)

He does not however address the issue of whether readers have the capacity to take up those rights. The notion of audience's competence to 'read' texts is raised by Bourdieu (1984) in his study, *Distinctions: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, in which he discusses the social production of taste, arguing that one's ability to appreciate and understand texts is the result of one's possession of particular kinds of 'capital' (for example, academic capital, economic capital, and cultural capital). Bourdieu's study examines patterns of taste and how these patterns relate to particular social factors like class or education. He argues that the capacity, or disposition, to make judgements of taste is dependent on "the past and present material conditions of existence which are the precondition of both its constitution and its application and also of the accumulation of cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1984: 53). His argument can be extended to apply to the capacity of certain groups of individuals to decode texts so that it can be argued that although Fiske (1987a) may be correct in arguing for total textual polysemy, readers may not have access to the particular cultural resources or cultural capital required to make the multiple and resistant meanings he proposes they do (Morley 1989).

Questions of pleasure and media consumption are closely linked to questions of taste and just as Bourdieu argues that taste is socially produced, so too is pleasure.

4. *Producing pleasures*

Fiske (1989a) argues that media reception is an act of production in which audiences produce meanings and pleasures. The types of pleasures that are produced are influenced by the way audiences interpret texts. In his seminal work, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes (1973) distinguishes between two types of pleasure: *plaisir* and *jouissance*. *Plaisir* is pleasure that originates from the "text that contents...; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading" (Barthes 1973: 14). Using Hall's (1980) terms to understand Barthes, we can thus view *plaisir* as pleasure produced by a reader who situates him/herself within the dominant ideology and who decodes a text according to the dominant meanings inscribed therein.

With the pleasure of *jouissance*, however, Barthes (1973) introduces the idea of pleasure through resistance, a central notion of Fiske's (1987a, 1989) work on text

and audience relations. *Jouissance*, according to Barthes, is “the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts” (1973: 14), that breaks with the social subject position of the dominant reader in hegemony. *Jouissance* is a moment of ‘orgasmic’ release, to use Barthes’ term, and is produced when the reader resists the dominant ideology of the text or takes a subject position other than the dominant one. According to Fiske (1987a), readers’ pleasures derive from subversively decoding texts in opposition to the dominant ideology inscribed therein. That is, he argues that pleasure is produced not only because a reader *identifies* with particular ideological messages of the text, but that, in fact, the most active pleasures are those produced from resisting the dominant ideology.

Fiske (1987a) argues that for a text to be pleasurable it must be polysemic so that audiences have interpretive freedom in making meanings of it. Indeed, he goes so far as to say that where meaning is in some way prescribed by the text, it is likely to be unpopular:

If the television program fails to allow space for these non-television meaning to be generated from it, it is unlikely to be popular [as texts] ... must provide that textual space for these meanings and pleasures to be articulated with the social interests of the readers. (Fiske 1987a: 83)

Cultural populists are concerned with the social origin of pleasure, “seek[ing] the meaning of pleasure in its relationship to the social structure and to social practices of the subjects who experience it” (Fiske 1987a: 224). As discussed above, the cultural populist approach reconceives audiences as active producers, not passive consumers. From this perspective, audiences are believed to appropriate texts and make them meaningful and these meanings are not necessarily inscribed in the structure of the text, but nor are they totally dictated by social subjectivities. As Strelitz notes, Fiske provides “an important corrective to the ideological homogenising tendencies implicit in the critical theory” and his work signals a shift away from questions of ideology and meaning making to issues of pleasure (2000: 41).

4. 1 *The problem with ‘pleasure’*

Fiske (1987a) concentrates particularly on undermining the mass society theory's distinction between high and low (popular) culture and therefore, he seems uncritically to accept anything that is popular. Barthes makes a similar claim: "If I agree to judge a text according to pleasure, I cannot go on to say: this is good, that bad" (1973: 13). Although Radway (1984) agrees in part, she argues that it is problematic to consider media texts as innocuous simply because they produce pleasure and are popular.

Gray (1987) warns of the dangers of a celebration of pleasure for its own sake as it makes critical investigation into the way popular texts function in society problematic. She argues that,

By celebrating on the one hand an active audience for popular forms and on the other those popular forms which the audience 'enjoy', we appear to be throwing the whole enterprise of a cultural critique out of the window. (Gray 1987: 28)

In other words, if we become overly concerned with questions of pleasure – such as the pleasure readers get from consuming a text like *Men's Health* – it becomes increasingly difficult "to find moral justifications for criticising their contribution to the hegemonic construction of gender identities" (van Zoonen 1994: 7). Gray emphasises the point that pleasure has a source:

...we require to know how these popular pleasures and tastes come about, what are the significant dimensions of the structures, what is being kept in place and what is being rendered invisible... (Gray 1987: 29)

In other words, we need to examine why particular forms are pleasurable and understand where these pleasures originate. Fiske's (1987a) cultural populist arguments can result in an attitude whereby, warn du Gay et al:

all consumer activity becomes imbued with a romantic glow of creativity...leaving no room for questions of relative power between producers and consumers, of the very different capacities available to people to access consumer goods and services, and of the constraints differentially operating on the ability of individuals and groups to effectively make an object achieve a meaning radically different from that encoded in it by its producer. (1997:105)

Du Gay's point is a valid one, and is echoed by other theorists. Morley (1993) argues that the recent backlash in media studies against active audience theory (see Curran 1996, Murdock 1989) is a reaction to the extreme versions of this theory as proposed by Fiske (1987a), and warns that there is a danger that the value of studying audience reception might become lost as the pendulum of media research swings back from individual processes of consumption (the micro level), to the particular political, economic and social conditions of textual production (the macro level).

4.2. The problem resolved?

Gray (1999) agrees, also arguing that the repudiation of reception analysis by critical theorists is the result of an oversimplification of the history and studies that have emerged within this research field. Morley (1993) argues for a return to the less radical theories of audience reception, based on Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model of media consumption, which argues for structured textual polysemy. Morley criticises Fiske's (1987a) extreme cultural populism, for its "facile insistence on the polysemy of media products and presumption that forms of interpretive resistance are more widespread than subordination, or the reproduction of dominant meanings" (1993: 14). According to Fiske (1987a), the media has little power over audiences who constantly resist the dominant ideological messages of media products. But, like Ang (1996), Morley (1993) argues against a comprehensive model of audience reception in which "the part becomes the whole and the exception the rule" (Budd 1990: 179 in Morley 1993: 16). Both Morley (1993) and Gray (1999) argue that reception analysis and the study of popular culture is still valid, but needs to be contextualised within the larger societal framework.

Reception is a situated activity. It occurs within particular social, cultural and historical contexts. Any exploration of the meanings readers produce at the moment of reception, needs to understand those meanings in relation to the socio-cultural context in which they are produced. That is, texts and the meanings audiences make of them are always located in a social system characterised by relations of power and domination. Therefore, it is necessary to recognise that the

production of pleasure is always socio-culturally located and as researchers of popular culture we need to consider the pleasures readers get from the meanings they produce from *within the context of textual production and consumption*. Therefore, as Moores argues, pleasure should not be considered unproblematically, but instead, should be understood as “a cultural formation which is... the result of an interaction between textual features and contextual situations” (1990: 25)

Thus, in investigating the pleasures of popular texts, we need to take account of the particular social structures and power relations in which these texts are produced and consumed and the way such texts may function ideologically in society.

However as Thompson (1988) argues, there are certain difficulties attendant on judging to what degree a media product is ideological. He argues that we can only critique the ideological impact of a text at the moment of its reception at which point we must consider “both the social-historical conditions within which messages are received by individuals, and the ways in which these individuals make sense of the messages and *incorporate them into their own lives*” (Thompson 1988: 377, emphasis added). In other words, he argues, that to look only at the text and its construction in an attempt to identify ideology is to ignore that audiences actively make sense of texts in socially differentiated ways. A study of ideology must concern itself with the way particular meanings are taken up by audiences and must “examine the ways in which these messages are effective within the social relations in which the recipients are enmeshed” (Thompson 1988: 377). Thus, in examining the pleasures readers produce in reading *Men's Health*, it is necessary to examine the social context and the specific relations of domination in which the text is read.

As discussed above, this study positions itself alongside those theories that stress the mutually constitutive relationship between the media and society. While the media have power to shape audience's beliefs and indeed, their very experience of social reality, audiences have power over the media both in terms of selection and decoding of texts. Murdock (1989), who positions himself within the political

economy school of thought which emphasises media power, argues that audience researchers should remain critically aware of the relationship between the activity of media audiences and particular structures of power and inequality in which this activity is situated. That is, in discussing television broadcasting, he argues,

Whilst it is self-evidently the case that prime-time programming has to provide multiple points of pleasure for a socially differentiated audience, the formats it employs clearly operate to regulate the range of discourses and presentations called into play in important ways, preferring some whilst marginalizing or excluding others. As a consequence there are identities, experiences, and forms of knowledge which are consistently pushed to or off the edge of schedules. (Murdock 1989: 40)

Thus, the power of the media is manifested both in terms of the selection of those issues or products that are made available to audiences as well as in the way these issues are constructed and their use of particular sign systems and discourses to represent ‘reality’.

The way the media and media audiences use these systems and discourses to constitute texts (and their meanings) and of social reality will form the next point of discussion.

5. Foucault and discourse

Discourse, like language, is a system of representation that constitutes meaning and knowledge about the world. Unlike the semiotic approach to the production of meaning which takes the sign as the unit of analysis, discourse refers to groups of signs, be they words or actions (for example, hairstyle, clothing), and the way they construct both meaning and knowledge.

I shall use the term ‘discourse’ in the sense first proposed by French philosopher, Michel Foucault (1980), to refer not only to linguistic, but also to material practices. Discourses are “ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledge and the relations between them” (Weedon 1997: 108t). According to Foucauldian theory, discourse is always historically and culturally located as “in each [historical] period, discourse produce[s] forms of knowledge, objects,

subjects and practices” (Hall 1997: 46). Foucault further argues that discourse constructs particular “regimes of truth”, ruling ‘truths’ or knowledge that is socio-historically contextualised and may be overthrown by other ‘truths’ (Hall 1997).

In addition, as van Zoonen says, “discourse is never univocal or total, but ambiguous and contradictory; a site of conflict and contestation” (1994: 33). Discourses exist in relations of power to each other each competing to be the primary definer of a situation – each struggling for legitimacy as the speaker of truth. Thus, a particular discourse may be hegemonic, but its position of leadership is always in question, its meanings always a site of struggle. Therefore, discourse and discursive practices are “inextricably enmeshed in relations of power because [they are] always being applied to the regulation of social conduct in practice” (Hall 1997: 47).

Crucially, Foucault (in Hall 1997) argues that discourses are comprised of multiple statements or images that appear across a wide range of texts. A group of statements, which provide a way of representing a particular topic, concern or object, are known as discursive formations (Nixon 1997). Media texts are produced through discursive practices, which serve particular interests by privileging certain subjects, knowledge and practices over others. Media power, as argued above, lies in its capacity to shape our perceptions of reality and consequently the media are deeply implicated in the construction of knowledge and of relations of power in society.

Discourses regulate and constitute “the minds and bodies of individuals” (Weedon 1987: 108). That is, they constitute not just meanings, but also knowledge and action, allowing certain ways of thinking or talking about something and limiting or de-legitimising alternatives. Discourses constitute the rules that set the accepted boundaries of behaviour within particular societies or cultures in specific historical eras. In this way, they govern action and produce bodies as the subjects of discourse. The (generally) institutionalised nature of hegemonic discourses supports their continuance, bestowing power upon the ‘truths’ and knowledge they speak and discrediting competing discourses which carry alternative

knowledge. Generally, it can be assumed that a hegemonic discourse will serve the interests of dominant and powerful groups in society.

Foucault's (1980) formulation of power breaks with traditional top-down models, which explain power as (either implicitly or explicitly) exerted by those in positions of dominance. Instead, he argues that power operates on all levels of society. Power circulates. It is never controlled by only one group, but is "deployed and exercised through a net-like organisation", a net in which we are all to a greater or lesser extent, entangled (Foucault 1980: 98). This formulation is open to criticism: undoubtedly those with political legitimacy or access to economic resources wield more power in society. However, the important point Foucault is making is that even those who exercise power are implicated in the power of discourses and the kinds of knowledge they construct.

Therefore, we can still argue that power is diffused throughout different arenas of social existence, both in private and in public spheres, and the more invisible are the mechanisms of its control, the more naturalised seems the knowledge it purveys and the more widely accepted the power relations it sustains. As discussed above, this study is concerned with gender as a structuring variable in the differential reception of *Men's Health*. Within Western capitalist societies, the institutional base of patriarchy has largely been eradicated. Yet, despite the fact that male dominance is no longer secured through legislation, unequal gender relations are still prevalent. For example, in 1995 in rich capitalist countries, men's average incomes were approximately double that earned by women (Connel 1995). These inequalities extend beyond the purely economic into many other spheres. Although patriarchy no longer has a central power base, patriarchal ideology and discourse remain very powerful and are diffused throughout various social arenas.

6. *The Social construction of gender*

The concepts discussed above – discourse, hegemony and ideology – are useful tools for understanding the structure of the gender order and for unpicking the relations of power between 'male' and 'female' in society. Branston and Stafford argue, "one of the richest areas of discussion of representation and media forms

exists around gender identities” (1996: 125). Gender studies of the media, focusing on the masculine and feminine identities embedded and represented in media products, has become an important area of research in mass communication theory (see for example, Nixon 1997, Harding 1998, Jackson et al. 2001).

Gender has conventionally been examined from one of two opposing positions: socio-biology; and social constructionism (Connell 1995). Essentialist arguments are socio-biological, focusing on the limits and capacities of the male and female body in determining what constitutes masculinity and femininity. The body is conceived metaphorically as a “natural machine which produces gender difference – through genetic programming, hormonal differences or the different roles of the sexes in reproduction” (Connell 1995: 45). From this perspective, by virtue of the reproductive capacities of women, essentialists argue that child caring is naturally a female role; and because men are (generally) stronger and bigger, they are ‘naturally’ more aggressive, fitted for tough labour and stressful work, whilst women are not. This translates neatly into a dichotomy of gender roles in which women are placed within the domestic sphere, while men’s place is in the public sphere.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the social constructionist perspective denies any biological essentialism, arguing instead that the body is a site of social symbolism. This approach makes a distinction between gender and sex, arguing, for instance, that while ‘male’ classifies and refers to the fact of being a man, ‘masculine’ describes and refers to characteristics deemed typical of men and that these characteristics are not natural, but socially constructed. Both masculine and feminine identities are “dependent upon the discursive processes that shape group and individual expectations of what women and men ought to be” (Prinsloo 1999: 46). The power relations legitimised by these constructions create categories of inclusion and exclusion, which serve to sustain them. Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) theorised that the process of meaning making depends upon what he termed binary oppositions “or a conflict between two qualities and terms” (Branston & Stafford 1996: 27). Meaning is produced through dividing the world into categories of inclusion and exclusion where inclusion in one category indicates exclusion from the other. For example, the meaning of ‘man’ is ‘not

woman'. As Turner notes, categorising qualities into binary oppositions can produce

further transformations of the same binary principle... Assuming male and female are opposites means that, automatically, women are what men are not; if the male is strong then the female must be weak, and on it goes. (1988: 73)

That is, social practices are shaped and governed by common-sense assumptions of the appropriate conduct for men and women and these assumptions serve to maintain unequal relations of power between men and women.

Connell (1995) ultimately rejects both the essentialist and the constructionist perspectives, arguing, "the body...is inescapable in the construction of masculinity [or gender]". He argues that although the meanings of being a man may be socially constructed and symbolic, these meanings are defined and tied to the real fact of the male body:

Bodies are addressed by social process and drawn into history, without ceasing to be bodies. They do not turn into symbols, signs or positions in discourse. Their materiality (including material capacities to engender, to give birth, to give milk, to menstruate, to open, to penetrate, to ejaculate) is not erased... (Connell 1995: 64-5)

Connell argues that we should not ignore the materiality of bodies – a point echoed by Harding who argues, "the naked truth of the anatomical body which is coherently and consistently differentiated from an opposing signified body, unequivocally male or female, is the substratum upon which the edifice of gender is built" (1998: 44). Gender studies, therefore, recognises the distinction between sex and gender where sex refers to the biological and anatomical differences between male and female bodies and gender refers to the meaning these differences have been given. It is important to recognise that social constructionist theory does not ignore the body. Instead, it is concerned with the ways the body has come to mean, the constructed symbolism of bodily functions and how the body is restricted or enabled by these meanings.

Fundamentally then, this school of thought argues that gender is a social construction, not a natural result of biological difference. Gender is constructed through particular discursive practices and the gender order permeates all levels of society and culture dictating the appropriate actions and thoughts of sexed bodies and prescribing the relations of power between men and women. We are, in the main, not coerced or forced into accepting unequal gender relations of power, nor are we forced to adopt particular masculine or feminine identities. The power of the hegemonic gender discourse circulates throughout society; it is not imposed and many of its mechanisms – the means by which, for example, women accept their position of subordination – are so naturalised as to be invisible.

7. *Plural masculinities*

While feminism and feminist theory has been prevalent in academia over the last fifty years, relatively little attention has been paid to masculinity and the ways in which it is constructed. Men are often treated as essentially genderless, say Kimmel et al. who argue:

the mechanisms that afford us privilege are very often invisible to us. What makes us marginal (unempowered, oppressed) are the mechanisms that we understand, because those are the ones that are most painful in daily life. (2001: 10)

That is, the patriarchal structure of society, worldwide, and the power that accrues automatically to men because of it, have, in some sense, blinded men to the conditions or state of their manhood. Masculinity has been an invisible sign – the centre to which everything peripheral is compared and defined, but not the major focus of study itself (Smith 1996).

The first generation of works on masculinity and men emerged in the mid-1970s. These studies, influenced by the feminist theories of the time questioned these assumptions and “challenged the unexamined ideology that made masculinity the gender norm against which both men and women were measured” (Kimmel et al. 2001: 14). These early works were concerned with understanding the source of gender relations in the naturalisation of gender roles. They were concerned with examining gender as a relational concept and recognised that the meaning of masculinity differs historically and culturally, and questioned the myth of an inherent and stable masculinity.

The latest stage in the investigation of the construction of masculinity recognises that, furthermore, not only is masculinity subject to change and variation across different cultures and historical times, it also varies within any one society (Kimmel et al. 2001). We can no longer usefully speak of masculinity (in the singular), but rather of plural masculinities. There is, as Connel points out, “a growing recognition of the interplay between gender, race and class and it has

become common to recognise multiple masculinities: black as well as white, working-class as well as middle-class” (1995: 76).

Additionally, just as unequal relations of power exist between genders, unequal relations subsist among different types of masculinity with some versions having greater credibility than others. This premise forms the bedrock of a new phase in research on men and masculinities. The leading version of masculinity in society is hegemonic where “hegemony implie[s] that the dominance of certain formations [is] secured, not by ideological compulsion, but by cultural leadership” (Hall 1982: 83). A hegemonic masculinity is deeply enmeshed in the structure of gender relations that serves to maintain the legitimacy of patriarchy as natural and inevitable (Connel 1995). However, hegemonic forms of masculinity are constructed not only in relations of dominance to femininities, “but also in relation to other subordinated masculinities” (Prinsloo 1999: 47). The most obvious form of subordinated masculinity is that which is identified by homosexuality. However, as Connel notes, other masculinities are also “expelled from the circle of legitimacy” (1995: 79). He cites the use of words such as wimp, nerd, sissy, lily liver, pushover, mother’s boy and geek as terms of abuse to describe those who do not belong to the hegemonic masculinity and makes the interesting point that these terms, as much as those used to abuse homosexuals, are “easily assimilated to femininity” (Connel 1995: 79).

The media are deeply implicated in the naturalisation of these relations of power and the legitimation of certain constructions of masculine and feminine identities. The role of the media in identity formation and cultural production is hotly debated and links to the debate (discussed earlier) between theories that stress media power and those that stress audience autonomy. As argued above, this study takes the position that a dialectical relationship exists between the media and society/culture whereby media texts are both socially shaped and socially shaping. This argument has been supported by a number of media theorists (see Fairclough 1995; Strelitz 2002; Tomlinson 1991).

In looking at questions of media power and audience activity, Tomlinson (1991) argues that the media do not determine contemporary culture, but instead are

involved with the mediation of cultural experience. He argues that the relationship between media and culture is “a subtle interplay of mediations” between culture(s) as experienced directly, and culture(s) as represented by the mass media (1991: 61). He elaborates on this, arguing that,

The relationship implied in this is the constant mediation of one aspect of cultural experience by another: what we make of a television programme or a novel or a newspaper article is constantly influenced and shaped by whatever else is going on in our lives. But equally, our lives are lived as representations to ourselves in terms of the representations present in our culture. (Tomlinson 1991: 61)

In addition, not only is our lived cultural experience shaped by the way the media represent it to us, but media texts are also shaped by the social and cultural context in which they are produced and consumed. That is, media texts are both socially shaped and socially shaping and are constituted by various available discourses. As Weedon notes, women’s magazines

reveal a range of often competing subject positions offered to women readers, from career woman to romantic heroine, from successful wife and mother to irresistible sex object. These different positions which magazines construct in their various features, advertising and fiction are part of the battle to determine the day to day practices of family life, education, work and leisure. (1987: 26)

These subject positions also enable and limit the thoughts and actions of both sexes. As Weedon (1997) says, discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute “the ‘nature’ of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern” (Weedon 1997:108). What is true of women’s magazines is also true of men’s magazines although, as discussed above, the existence of *plural* masculinities has only recently been recognised and become a focus of research.

Much has been said about the impossible standards of beauty that women’s magazines set, not to mention the feelings of inadequacy that are supposed to be the adult consequences of a girlhood spent playing with Barbie dolls. Yet, men as

well as women, are under constant assault from a multitude of media images of masculinity and, as Kimmel et al argue, just as with women and femininity,

Media masculinities create standards against which men measure themselves... At the same time, the media encourage us to evaluate and judge the manhood of others by those same standards. (2001: 475)

The Foucauldian concept of discursive formations directs attention not just at a few representations of gender, but rather at the regularities which underpin the way gendered identities are generally constructed in the media, what imagery is drawn upon and what knowledge and power relations these constructions create and reify (Nixon 1997). As discussed above, while the concern has been primarily with the construction of women and femininity and women's magazines, the development of the male magazine sector is encouraging media researchers to focus also on the construction of masculinity/ masculinities in these media texts. Although some work has been done in this area (for example, Mort 1988, 1996 and Nixon 1997), these have tended to focus on representation and signification within the text itself rather than on the way the readers interpret these representations. A notable exception is a recently published study, *Making Sense of Men's Magazines*. The authors, Jackson et al (2001), focus on each moment in the circuit of culture in an attempt to account for the growth of the men's magazine sector in the UK. Part of this study was therefore concerned with engaging with the different ways readers make sense of the magazine phenomenon and of changes in the representation of masculinity.

In addition, a study by Frederico Boni (2002) dealing with the representation and reception of Italian *Men's Health* has a necessarily important bearing on this research project. Boni's paper hypothesised that the popularity of *Men's Health* in the Italian magazine market reflects the shifts in gender relations and identities that characterise modern society. Using discourse analysis and focus groups, Boni examines the (Italian edition of the) *Men's Health* text to explore the way the magazine constructs masculinity and the male body and to understand how readers make sense of these constructions. Boni's study will be more extensively discussed in Chapter 4. Despite Boni (2002) and the research studies discussed

above, little research has been conducted on the differential reception of the men's magazines themselves, or of the kinds of pleasures – be they resistant or acquiescent to the hegemonic meanings – readers, both male and female, produce at the moment of consumption of this text.

8. *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I discussed the theoretical literature underpinning this research project. Central to this has been the debate among media theorists between media power versus audience power. This study takes the position that both texts and audiences have power and that a dialectical relationship exists between the media and society. That is, media texts and society are mutually constitutive, each with a role to play in shaping the other.

The discussion moved from ideology and the production of pleasure at the moment of textual consumption to an examination of hegemony and discourse, looking at how these related concepts may be used to understand the way media texts function to sustain and transform social relations of power, particularly gender relations. The discussion moved on to elaborate on feminist theory and the 'discovery' of plural masculinities in academia and then briefly traced the research already done in the area of male magazines, indicating gaps in the research.

The following chapter discusses the particular methodological framework used in reception studies and outlines appropriate methods for further investigating the power of audiences and the power of texts. The methods are intended to provide insight into any possible gender-based differential interpretations of *Men's Health* and to discover whether the pleasures produced during the consumption of this magazine are pleasures of resistance or acquiescence with the dominant patriarchal, heterosexual ideologies and discourses that constitute the text.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

1. Introduction

As noted in Chapter 1, this study explores the meanings readers make of *Men's Health* in relation to gendered relations of power in society. This study explores the growing popularity of men's magazines by investigating how readers make sense of both the *Men's Health* text and of the popularity of the men's magazine sector in general. In particular, it explores the particular discursive practices through which gendered identities are produced by the *Men's Health* text and how these meanings are productive of particular pleasures at the moment of consumption.

A two-step research process was employed to generate data. The first research phase comprised a textual analysis of a selection of articles and functioned primarily to inform the focus group research, the second and most important of the methods used in this study. This chapter describes and discusses the generation of data, outlining the research process, sampling procedures and methods of data analysis employed. In addition to the explication of the methods used, this chapter also discusses methodological issues surrounding the qualitative research tradition.

2. Methodological considerations

The media have become an important focus of research in the social sciences because of a growing recognition of the fundamental role of the media at every level of social life. According to Deacon et al.,

[the media] are central to organising every aspect of contemporary life, from the broad patterning of social institutions and cultural systems to intimate everyday encounters and people's personal understandings of the world and their sense of themselves. (1999: 3)

Until the 1960s quantitative research methods and methodology enjoyed a virtual hegemony in the field of media and communication studies. Although qualitative research was practiced at the start of the twentieth century, it became increasingly

marginalized so that by the Second World War, communication research focused almost exclusively on methods associated with the quantitative tradition (Ruddock 2001). The popularity of this approach was largely due to the model of communication then much in currency. This model viewed communication as a transmission process in which information is transmitted from a sender to a receiver and the message is received in a manner determined by the sender (McQuail 2000). The research methods that developed within this dominant paradigm are intended to produce results that establish actual physical phenomena and discover 'laws', which govern the way society works, particularly the effects on audiences of exposure to the media (Deacon et al. 1999). Eager to replicate the scientific method of the natural sciences, researchers used methods such as the social survey and experiment to generate 'scientific' information, specifically about the effects of media consumption on viewers.

During the 1960s and 1970s, a new communication model was developed that viewed communication as a symbolic process functioning to produce, maintain and transform reality. This ritual (also known as the expressive) model explains communication as the way individuals and groups make sense and share understandings of a common lived experience (Ruddock 2001). The cultural approach of this model opened the way for methods of research that explored meaning and culture in society and qualitative research methodology returned from the margins of social science studies.

2.1. Qualitative methodology

Qualitative research is premised on the belief that society is composed of different interconnected groups and that it is through the study of the relationships and interactions among these groups that we can come to an understanding of the nature of social reality (Bryman 1988).

This [qualitative research] is a process of making large claims from small matters: studying particular rituals, poems, plays, conversations, songs, dances, theories, and myths and gingerly reaching out to the full relations within a culture or a total way of life. (Carey 1975: 190)

This research tradition is usually understood to be founded upon particular philosophical and intellectual assumptions, borrowed from sociology, about the nature of social reality and how best it may be studied.

Underpinning qualitative research is the principle of phenomenology, which recognises that humans' unique capacity for self-awareness and reflection distinguishes us from other objects of study (Bryman 1988). Bryman quotes Alfred Schutz, the first to raise awareness of the phenomenological approach:

The world of nature as explored by the natural scientist does not 'mean' anything to molecules, atoms and electrons. But the observational field of the social scientist – social reality – has a specific meaning and relevance structure for the beings, living, acting and thinking within it. (1962: 52 in Bryman 1988)

That is, because we are part of that which we study, we can only reach an understanding of social reality through our experience and interpretation of it. For researchers to study social reality they need to study how people experience it, from the point of view of those being studied. Phenomenology recognises that people differ markedly from microbes as objects of study and consequently methods of investigation need to take these differences into account. Most particularly, while the objects of study in the natural sciences (like electrons and atoms) cannot make meanings of the world in which they exist, *people* are the subjects of social sciences studies) and both can and do interpret their experiences of social reality (Schutz 1962 in Bryman 1988).

Qualitative research methodology is based also on the principles of *verstehen* and of symbolic interactionism. The latter proposes that not only do people make meanings of the world, but they act upon their understandings as well. W.I. Thomas put this succinctly in his postulation that “when a person defines a situation as real, this situation is real in its consequences” (Bryman 1988: 54 & Flick 1998). *Verstehen*, meaning “to understand”, refers to the idea of understanding social phenomena from within society. Like phenomenology, *verstehen* posits that the social sciences and the natural sciences are fundamentally different and should therefore be studied using different frameworks of understanding (Bryman 1988).

The principles of naturalism are also associated with qualitative methodology. Known also by the term naturalistic inquiry, naturalism is concerned with studying the meanings people make and their modes of behaviour within their natural setting or context. Natural settings are “the customary activity arenas for those being studied” (Lindlof 1995: 19). Naturalism is a commitment to studying social action within its own context and to limit, as far as possible, any intervention on the part of the researcher (Bryman 1988). As implied by the intellectual currents that inform qualitative research, its aim is to gain insight into the way people, groups and society interpret their lived experiences.

Qualitative research within communication studies has, as Lindlof (1995) indicates, been influenced not only by the sociological schools of thought mentioned above, but also by literary theory’s concern with the relationship between texts and audiences; gender theory and theories of power and society; and cultural studies.

Qualitative research methods such as ethnography have become popular among media researchers as the shortcomings of quantitative methods have increasingly been recognised. As some theorists have noted, “although statistical techniques can establish empirical connections between ‘facts’ of different orders, such connections do not provide a basis for prediction or theory” (Morley & Silverstone 1991: 149).

Ang (1996) and Morley et al. (1991) indicate the focus of qualitative research as being primarily on understanding particulars rather than a concern with generalising to universals. Ang (1996) argues that television audiences are becoming increasingly fragmented and segmented as the number of available programmes and channels increases. The same is true not only for broadcast, but also for print media audiences. Audience fragmentation and segmentation makes it impossible, Ang (1996) argues, to develop a comprehensive theory of the audience as present day media consumption patterns make the notion of a mass audience increasingly irrelevant. Much of quantitative research has been concerned with developing just such a specific theory, one that clearly defines and determines audience behaviour. Qualitative research makes no such claims, yielding only partial knowledge:

The understanding emerging from this kind of inquiry favours interpretive particularisation over explanatory generalisation, historical and local concreteness rather than formal abstraction, ‘thick’ description of details rather than extensive but ‘thin’ survey. (Ang 1996:71)

Thus, while qualitative research techniques produce more detailed and specific information, they cannot yield broad generalisations about the audience population. The lack of verifiable, repeatable research means that qualitative research has often been looked upon as yielding unreliable data (Lindlof 1995). However, Bryman (1988) argues convincingly that while the results of qualitative research may not be generalisable to the larger population, they may be generalised to theoretical propositions. Maxwell agrees, arguing that “generalisation in qualitative research usually takes place through the development of a theory that...makes sense of the particular persons or situations studied” (1992: 293).

Qualitative research is thus characterised by a concern with viewing events, actions, norms and values (in a word – culture), from the perspective of those being studied. This research is descriptive, providing detailed descriptions of the social situations and cultures under investigation as well as analysis. Behaviour is examined from the context within which it naturally occurs. Ang (1996) calls this radical contextualism. However, if taken to its limits, radical contextualism may be problematic as it would involve a massive research project in which every contextual framework of reception, historically and socially, would need to be investigated. When one considers that these social contexts include race, class, gender, age, ethnicity, geography, religion, income and so on, the problem of conducting full ethnographic studies is obvious. The researcher would in effect have to be both omnipresent and omniscient. To overcome this problem, Ang argues that it is imperative for the researcher to acknowledge his/her own subjectivity:

That is, by admitting that the ethnographer cannot be ‘everywhere’ but must be ‘somewhere’, we can leave the remnants of logico-scientific thinking ... for what it is in favour of narrative modes of reasoning and representation, in which not only the contexts of media consumption, but also the contexts of ethnographic knowledge production itself are taken into account”. (1996: 74)

Thus, it is important that researchers using qualitative research methods reflect on the research process and their role as storytellers, adopting a reflexive approach that acknowledges and seeks to understand their own role in researching and representation of the findings. Researchers need to reconceive of themselves not as purveyors of absolute truths, but rather as storytellers where the outcomes of research are narratives. It is simply a recognition that ethnographic research findings are constructs, partial and by nature incomplete explanations. Audience researchers who use ethnographic strategies do so to understand “other people’s as well as our own lives” (Ang 1996: 76).

3. *Method*

I used a two-step approach to explore how readers (both male and female) make sense of the *Men's Health* text, particularly in the construction and representation of masculine identities and the production of pleasures. Both steps i and ii, the textual analysis and focus group research, are part of the qualitative research tradition. The two steps in the research process are:

- i. Textual analysis of a selection of articles from one of the issues of *Men's Health*. This analysis examined, among other things, the construction of masculinity in particular, and gender in general; the kinds and variety of masculine identities available; and the relations of power these representations reinforce.
- ii. A series of six focus group interviews with a total of 31 participants, which explored the themes considered in textual analysis and focused on the types of discourses readers draw upon in discussing gender and *Men's Health*.

Due to the nature of this study, which is a thesis in partial fulfilment, space and time constraints made the undertaking of a comprehensive textual analysis of the *Men's Health* text unfeasible. The sampling procedures by which articles were selected for analysis is discussed below. The textual analysis functioned primarily to aid the development of an interview schedule for the discussion groups as the focus group interviews are intended to be the primary source of research data.

4. *Textual analysis*

4.1. *Background*

Deacon et al (1999) identify two types of textual analysis: semiotics and critical linguistics. That is, the science of signs and analysis of discourse, respectively. Textual analysis is concerned primarily with explicating the latent messages and meanings of texts. Textual analysis that incorporates both semiotics and discourse analysis enables in-depth analysis of media texts and representation. This method is known as critical discourse analysis and is an approach to studying texts that employs particular strategies to investigate and explore the dialectic that exists between texts and society. That is, it “explores the tension between...the socially shaped and socially constitutive” facets of language and discourse (Fairclough 1995: 55). Media texts are produced through discursive practices, which serve particular interests by privileging certain subjects, knowledge and practices over others. Therefore, it can be argued, the media have immense power in shaping our perceptions of reality and are deeply implicated in the construction of knowledge and social relations of power. Critical discourse analysis is concerned with the ways in which media texts “encode relations of power, authority and status” through the “naturalisation of common-sense assumptions in media discourse” (Deacon et al. 1999: 54). It therefore seeks to analyse the mutually constitutive relationship between media texts and society. Such analysis aims to make visible the (often invisible) mechanisms by which human conduct is regulated. Or as Janks succinctly says: “Where analysis seeks to understand how discourse is implicated in relations of power it is called critical discourse analysis” (1997: 329).

5.2. *Sampling of magazine articles*

The texts to be analysed were drawn from the population of *Men's Health* issues published since the start of 2001, a total population of 30 magazines. I selected two issues from 2001 and 2002 respectively and one issue from the five that have been issued in 2003, the year I began this research, bringing the total sample to five (or 1/6th of the population). The selection of an issue from each six-month period was based on availability, a sampling technique known in the literature as convenience sampling, which relies on opportunity and expediency (Deacon et al. 1999).

The articles to be textually analysed were selected using purposive sampling techniques, which are, as Arber argues, “ideal when developing interview schedules and other research instruments” (1992: 71). As the textual analysis was simply intended to generate information from which to develop an interview schedule for the focus group discussions and because each issue of *Men's Health* follows a strikingly similar formula and pattern

from which it is possible to draw conclusions about the allocation of space and particular themes, I considered the use of non-random sampling techniques to be relatively unproblematic in the context of this research. This was a subjective selection process in which four articles were selected from the May 2003 issue of *Men's Health*. The articles covered the most recurring themes in *Men's Health*. In a study by Boni (2002) which examined the Italian edition of *Men's Health*, a content analysis revealed that the themes receiving the most space in the magazine are (in order from most to least): advertising, health and fitness, general advice, and sex/sexuality. Using this as a basis, the articles selected dealt with these issues; in addition, I undertook a brief analysis of the *Men's Health* cover. See Appendix B for copies of the texts analysed.

5.3. *Analysing the data*

Fairclough's (1995) model of the dimensions of discourse and discourse analysis provides a useful framework for undertaking critical discourse analysis of a particular text. Critical discourse analysis, first and foremost is concerned with examining what Fairclough (1995) identifies as the communicative event. That is, the text, be it audio, visual or written. Investigation of the communicative event involves analysis of three dimensions:

- i. the text – which may be either verbal or visual or a combination of both.
- ii. the discourse practice governing the processes of production and consumption of the text
- iii. specific cultural, social and historical context which order these processes

That is, critical discourse analysis describes the text (that which is being studied, be it verbal, visual or audio), interpreting the processes of production and reception of the text, and explaining these in terms of the social, historical and cultural context in which the text is produced and received (Fairclough 1995; Janks 1997).

The purpose of the textual analysis was to uncover some of the themes and regularities that characterise the articles in *Men's Health* in order to better inform the development of the interview guide to be used in the focus group sessions as well as to familiarise myself with the way articles are structured and which discourses the magazine draws on in its constitution to facilitate the analysis of data generated in stage 2 of the research process. Therefore, the textual analysis is necessarily brief, attempting only to outline and broadly

discuss some of the pertinent issues. It has no pretences to be a comprehensive critical discourse analysis.

5. Focus group Interviews

5.1. Background

Focus group discussions are those in which a group or series of groups are gathered to discuss a particular topic (or focus) in the presence of a researcher or moderator (Lunt and Livingstone 1996). As with any research technique, there are both advantages and disadvantages inherent in focus groups/group discussions. Such discussions may be useful for obtaining information that might not be so forthcoming in individual interviews. For example, as Fielding notes, “they can help in identifying attitudes and behaviours which are considered socially unacceptable” (1993:142). With the rise in feminism over the past century, gender, like race, has become an increasingly delicate issue, one on which people might be expected to compromise their real opinions in the interest of political correctness. In addition, as Fielding (1993) comments, focus group interviews are also more cost and time efficient as group discussions allows the researcher interview a larger number of participants in less time than would be needed to for individual interviews. Also, the dialogue between participants facilitates more relaxed discussions and opens the way for unanticipated avenues of discussion.

5.2. Sampling and recruitment of groups

In keeping with the principles of qualitative research methodology of naturalism and so forth, discussed above, it is preferential to draw focus group participants from “‘naturally’ existing groups or communities” (Hansen et al. 1998: 165). Participants in this study were drawn from the community of students of Rhodes University. Because focus groups involve fewer participants than with some other techniques, participants are usually selected according to specific criteria thought to be relevant to the research. Sampling procedures are therefore necessarily non-random and groups are selected with the research outcome in mind.

For the purposes of this study, which explores the meanings and pleasures readers make of *Men's Health*, it was clearly important that participants be regular readers of the magazine. In addition, as this study is concerned with gender as a structural influence in media reception, gender and readership were the main organising

variables in the composition of the focus groups. As gender theorists have noted (see for example, Connel 1995; Howard and Hollander 1997) the construction of gender identity is also shaped by other social influences such as an individual's race, class, ethnicity, social status. However, due to space and time constraints, this study limits itself to an examination of the interplay between gender and reception in identity formation and the production of pleasure in media consumption.

Because class, income and education are likely to have particular ramifications for the meanings readers make of the text, the decision to use Rhodes University students as the sampling frame from which participants were drawn, limits the scope of the research findings to the way the culturally elite make sense of the text. This in conjunction with my involvement in the university Journalism Department meant that the groups were mainly composed of participants with a higher education, many of them journalism students. The result was an inevitable bias in the data generated as many of the participants were more sophisticated readers of the media than would have been the case had the research been conducted in a different environment.

Non-random sampling techniques such as snowball sampling and convenience sampling were used to recruit focus groups. Deacon et al. provide a lively description of the former technique:

Like a snowball rolling down a hill, a snowball sample grows through momentum: initial contacts suggest further people for the researcher to approach, who in turn may provide further contacts. (1999: 53)

This proved a particularly useful recruitment technique and many of the groups were gathered using this method.

Convenience sampling relies on opportunity and expediency in the recruitment of focus groups (Deacon et al. 1999). The number of groups and participants in each focus group should be determined by the nature of the research and the resources available (Hansen et al. 1998). However, Hansen et al. (1998) argue that if focus groups are intended as the main technique of data generation, a minimum of six groups should be recruited and following this advice, six focus groups were gathered

for this study, four of which were composed of male readers and two of which were composed of females. This ratio more or less reflects the ratio of male and female readers of *Men's Health*, 27% of whom are women and 73% male. Although I had initially planned to have two male groups, two female groups and two heterogeneous focus groups (consisting of both male and female readers) it became apparent as the research progressed that the composition of the groups needed to be rethought. Because of the richness and depth of discussion, it was clear that more than two male focus groups were needed before any useful conclusions about readership and pleasure could be reached. In addition, to allow participants to feel comfortable to express their views and in the interests of generating more open and relaxed discussion, I decided to maintain the (gender) homogeneity of the focus groups.

Deacon et al. (1999) advise that focus groups should ideally be composed of between five and ten participants, while Hansen et al. (1998) advise groups of between five and nine participants. Theorists consider this range as large enough to elicit debate and discussion, but small enough to minimise any nervousness or feelings of intimidation on the part of the interviewees. Two of the male focus groups were recruited through snowball sampling and both groups' participants are Rhodes University students who work as stooges at private schools in Grahamstown. These participants constituted naturally existing communities within the larger community of the university. There were both advantages and disadvantages to this. While it meant that discussions were particularly relaxed, as Jackson et al. (2001) note, participants who belong to the same friendship circles can often use particular patterns of vocabulary and constantly make in-jokes about fellow participants. (This was particularly the case in the group comprised of Kingswood College stooges, who tended to tease one of the participants, in particular, for being "such a *Men's Health* man", thus possibly inhibiting his contribution to the discussion).

Another male focus group was constituted through a mixture of convenience and snowball sampling and was composed of two of my digsmates and their friends. In addition, I sought out other participants by putting up notices at the local gym asking anyone who enjoyed reading *Men's Health* to contact me. Although these yielded nil responses, I was fortunate to take part in an aerobics class with a group of male

students, five of who read *Men's Health* and agreed to take part in a focus group. This is an example of convenience sampling.

Lack of financial resources and funding for this research project meant that I was unable to pay participants, an incentive that might have encouraged potential interviewees to take the process more seriously. Problems occurred when participants failed to arrive for the discussion and the resultant groups had less than the optimal number of participants. This was particularly the case where participants volunteered their friends to join a group. As a result of this, some of the discussion groups were smaller than the ideal size advised by theorists. This did not seem to greatly affect the quality of the discussion, despite claims by, for example, Lunt and Livingstone (1998) that fewer than six participants may impede the generation of dynamic group discussion. However, as with Strelitz (2002), I found that this was not necessarily the case, and indeed, one of the most fruitful discussions took place in a focus group of only four participants.

Another problem was the difficulty in finding enough participants who read *Men's Health*. Jackson et al (2001) record a similar problem in their investigation of men's magazines in the UK. They write, "The most common response to our request to join a focus group was the reply: 'well I don't really *read* the magazines...'" (Jackson et al. 2001: 170). My attempts at recruiting participants met with similar responses. However, further probing indicated that in fact, those people who denied reading the magazine, simply meant that either they do not read it thoroughly or perhaps do not buy it themselves. Simply, they did not view their readership to be of sufficient importance or meaningful enough to be worth studying. This issue is discussed further in Chapter 4.

6.3. *Interview setting*

Hansen et al. (1998) notes that the location of interviews and focus group discussion should be determined by convenience and the purposes of the research and that the location should be relatively neutral. The focus groups discussions took place in a variety of places depending on what was most convenient for participants. Participants of two focus group discussions comprised of participants who are stooges at a local private school. Consequently both groups met in one of the schools' common rooms. Four focus group

sessions occurred at my home, which was central and convenient both for the participants and myself. As the topic of research (the pleasures produced in the consumption of *Men's Health*) was relatively uncontroversial, locating and using a completely neutral interview setting seemed unnecessary.

6.4. Interview guide

The flexibility and open nature of focus group discussions is a boon for reception analysis, allowing respondents to answer using their own terminology and vocabulary and opening the way for discussion of themes that may not have been obvious to the researcher (Hansen et al. 1998). However, focus groups are guided discussions and must have some structure for the information they yield to be useful. After conducting a brief content and textual analysis of a sample of editions of *Men's Health*, I developed an interview guide highlighting general areas of interest and concern. These early research phases were useful in familiarising me with the content and style of the magazine and in highlighting some key issues to be discussed. In moderating the focus groups, I handed out copies of the texts I had selected and analysed to all participants. In keeping with typical reception analysis, the texts and interview guide were used to elicit discussion. I did not rigidly follow the interview guide, but allowed the discussions to develop naturally, ensuring that a similar range of topics was discussed in each group while at the same time pursuing any unexpected themes that arose. See Appendix A for a copy of the interview guide.

6.5. My role as moderator

Qualitative researchers take a reflexive approach to data gathering and analysis. The interaction between researcher and subjects of study is seen as a fundamental aspect of the production of knowledge and both the subjects' and researcher's subjectivities are considered to be important in the research process (Flick 1998). Undoubtedly, male participants, in particular, were probably inhibited by the fact that a female interviewer/researcher was guiding the group discussions. Jackson et al. (2001) note that a female interviewer of men may be problematic as the researcher must maintain a non-judgemental attitude in the face of possible sexist comments and discussion. My role as moderator was to facilitate debate and discussion by guiding the conversation and keeping it focused while allowing alternative, but pertinent issues to be explored.

6.6. *Recording the data*

Before each discussion, participants were asked to give their permission for me to record the session. Each participant was asked to introduce him/herself so that I could identify each participant's contribution to the discussion and to ensure that the transcriptions of the discussions were correct. In addition participants were required to give details about their age, career or studies, and other social demographics including some information about their families.

6.7. *Analysing and reporting the focus group discussions*

The first task of transcription was undertaken as soon as possible after each actual discussion to facilitate accuracy and to familiarise myself with the content of the interviews. Because I had previously conducted a brief textual analysis of the *Men's Health* text, bringing to light particular recurring issues and concerns of the text, and had formulated an interview guide accordingly, I was able to label and categorise responses around these themes. However Hansen et al. warn that researchers must be wary of simply "select[ing] 'striking' or 'typical' quotes which illustrate, confirm, and enhance the researcher's pre-conceived ideas of the processes and phenomena with are being investigated" (1998: 278). As discussed above, I did not adhere to the interview guide, but allowed the discussions to move into areas I had not considered. Therefore I also categorised and ordered these unanticipated themes. The categorised responses were placed under 'headings' that loosely corresponded to the 'headings' developed in the textual analysis and the interview schedule and also incorporated the new areas discussed.

7. *Conclusion*

This chapter discussed the two stages of this study's research process as well as the sampling procedures and methods of data collection, generation and analysis employed. It also discussed the philosophical base upon which the qualitative research tradition is founded, justifying the use of qualitative methods for the purposes of this study. The following chapter examines the results of the research. The results of the textual analysis are discussed, after which the findings of the focus group discussions are analysed in relation to the textual analysis and to the theory discussed in Chapter 2.

Chapter 4

Research findings

1. Introduction

This chapter is concerned with analysing and understanding the data generated through the research process outlined in Chapter 3. It considers the focus group interviews in relation to the literature and theory discussed in Chapter 2, examining regularities and patterns that emerged during the interviews, with reference to themes identified in the textual analysis and interview guide, as well as some unanticipated themes that arose during the course of the research. While this chapter is primarily concerned with discussing and analysing the focus group interviews, which form the main basis of this research study, to facilitate analysis of these group discussions, this chapter begins with a discussion of the text itself.

2. Textual analysis

Through focusing on the text I hope to identify the discourses offered by the magazine and thus make sense of how it represents gender, sexual politics and men's health. I do not wish to make assumptions about the way readers make sense of the magazine, but rather to provide a better understanding of the discourses offered by the text.

Using purposive sampling techniques, four articles were selected from the May 2003 issue of *Men's Health*. According to Boni's (2002) analysis of Italian *Men's Health*, aside from advertising, health and fitness receives the most attention in the magazine with general advice receiving the next most space. Issues concerning sex and sexuality receive the third most space in the magazine. When selecting articles to form the basis of this (necessarily brief) discourse analyse, these basic categories were used; thus, the selected sample includes an article dealing with health and fitness ('All the rage'), a sex and sexuality article ('Are you experienced?') an article dealing with relationship issues ('The ex men') and a 10-page section called 'Malegrams' which dispenses general advice and information about a range of topics. In addition, I analysed the cover of the magazine. See appendix B for copies of the texts analysed.

2.1 *Construction of masculinity in Men's Health*

Social constructionists argue that identities are neither natural nor innate, but are constructed through a process of representation. Gender identities are among the most naturalised and reified, and the processes by which they are constructed remain, for the most part, relatively invisible. For a more detailed discussion of the social constructionist argument refer to Chapter 2. *Men's Health* constructs masculinity in both its verbal and visual text.

Magazine covers are one of the crucial areas on which the text's identities are constructed. They are, quite literally, the face of the magazine. Unlike other men's magazines, which tend to feature images of half-naked beautiful women on their covers, the *Men's Health* covers typically feature a head and bare-torso shot of a male model. Characteristically, the May 2003 cover features a black and white photographic image of a young man who appears to be in his late twenties. The *Men's Health* cover model's pose is not static, but suggests movement, activity. Dyer (1992) argues that visual representations of masculinity are always constructed as active. Even if the male image is not one of actual movement, activity is still implied:

Even in an apparently lupine pose, the model tightens and tautens his body so that the muscles are emphasized, hence drawing attention to the body's potential for action. More often, the male pin-up is not supine anyhow, but standing taut ready for action. (Dyer 1992: 270)

On the May 2003 cover, one arm crosses the model's chest, his hand tucked beneath the elbow of the other arm, which is raised. His muscles are taut, the bulge of his biceps increased by of the position of his arms. Appearing relaxed, friendly and approachable the model smiles, looking directly at the reader. As Dyer (1992) argues, looking is an act, something that is *done*. The act of looking is an act of power; it is the power to look, rather than be looked at (Dyer 1992). Of course, the reader is also looking at the model and analysis of the nature of *his* gaze is more problematic. The model is inviting the reader to look at him, to take note of his biceps, his naked chest and his pectoral muscles. It appears to be an erotic, even homosexual gaze, except that *Men's Health* targets explicitly heterosexual readers. Theorists (see Kimmel 1996, Jackson et al. 2001, and Sedgwick 1985) term this a homosocial gaze, where

homosocial is defined as “social bonds between persons of the same sex” (Sedgwick 1985: 1). Kimmel (1996) argues that masculinity is defined through homosocial interaction and that it is male approval men seek. Boni comments on this in the context of the emerging male magazine market, arguing, “the recent advent of men’s lifestyle magazines ... opens up ... an ambiguous and contradictory space, where men’s bodies are represented as objects for other men’s gazes” (2002: 469). Following this, the homosocial gaze of the *Men’s Health* cover model can be seen simply as that of a man inviting other men to join in sharing a specifically masculine experience of the world.

The masculine experience *Men’s Health* offers its readers is a specifically heterosexual one. For example, the cover headlines, ‘Pop her sex cork’ and ‘Cars, Girls, Thrills’ indicate the heterosexual man’s concern with relationships with the opposite sex. The masculine experience represented in *Men’s Health* is one also premised on the tenets of capitalism and individualism. For instance, in the article ‘All the rage’, Meyer Friedman, who coined the term Type A personality, is constructed as the hero of the narrative. Applying the theory of binary oppositions to the construction of Friedman indicates an interesting dichotomy: a real man is constructed as a hero, ‘persuasive’, ‘willing’ and ‘robust’; he ‘contributes’, is open to ‘changes’, and is both ‘healthy’ and ‘moral’, a trend bucker who “spares no punches”. He is also ‘opinionated’, a ‘rationalist’ and a ‘scientist’. By implication, real men are never unwilling, weak, unsure, emotional or even unhealthy. The discursive practices constituting the text indicate that it is a masculine trait to be innovative, to dare and to break with tradition. Individualism and heroism is constructed as good, a signifier of (hegemonic) masculinity. Implicitly then, the text excludes femininity and alternative versions of masculinity.

Applying the theory of binary oppositions (see Turner 1988) to the verbal aspects of the *Men’s Health* cover yields an image of a man that is hard, strong, muscular, exclusive and body-focused; he is busy, yet calm with a plan for the future. Real men, the text implies, are never soft, nor flabby; they control their bodies and their emotions do not control them; they are always purposeful, neither idle nor aimless. Real men are busy, hard at work on their body, business, relationships or

(heterosexual) sex life – and the consequences of wasting time are dire, possibly even fatal. Even waiting in a queue can lead to a heart attack, according to ‘All the rage’! If, as argued above, the text offers a representation of masculinity that is heterosexual, capitalist and individualist, it begs the question: what new terrain does the magazine offer in its construction of masculinity?

2.2 *The body as machine*

The new elements or terrain offered by the text is evident in the magazine’s focus on health with the male body as a project for self-improvement and self-discipline. Health, fitness and style are crucial new elements that both reflect and constitute the changes in the masculine gender roles made available by the magazine. The health-focused article, ‘All the rage’ (May 2003) discusses the links between personality and disease, particularly the relationship between Type A personality and heart disease. Although, as the article argues, modern medicine means that “we now have a world effectively without smallpox, polio is on the ropes, and a zillion other diseases are now in retreat”, the modern man has a new set of problems and anxieties to tackle when it comes to his health and longevity. The article blames ill health on “the vagaries of the human spirit – lack of self-discipline, impulsiveness”. The implication is that through exercising control, men can maintain their health and delay the inevitable death of the body.

A focus on the body is thus a core feature of the new versions of masculinity offered by the text. *Men’s Health* constructs the male body as a mechanical instrument that can be fine-tuned and adjusted. ‘All the rage’ considers “the nuts and bolts of heart disease” and refers to heart disease as “plumbing problems”. The magazine compares disease to “understanding why a car’s transmission is shot” so that men can “jump start” their bodies to deal with threats or problems simply by doing particular exercises or eating particular foods. Machines need the right energy source (fuel) and similarly, male bodies need the right food and supplements to continue to run efficiently. An emphasis on food and diet is one of the new elements that *Men’s Health* and other men’s lifestyle magazines offers readers, opening new arenas for men and shifting definitions of masculinity.

In addition, the magazine's use of mechanical similes and metaphors (for example, cars, plumbing and so forth) assumes a masculine familiarity with all things mechanical that is surely rather traditional. While men's lifestyle magazines do, as Jackson et al (2001) argue, open up a new space, they still operate within a fairly conventional definition of what it is to be a man. This is nothing less than hegemony in action: hegemonic versions of masculinity are adapting to sociological, historical and cultural shifts, incorporating new elements to maintain their continued dominance.

Muscles, a physical sign of dominance and strength, feature both in the verbal and visual text with the model's muscular physique juxtaposed by the headline: "Hard muscle made easy". Muscularity, in this text, signifies masculinity; Dyer argues convincingly that muscularity is always associated with masculinity and is symbolic, particularly, of masculine power: "Muscularity is the sign of power – natural, achieved, phallic" (1992: 273). Muscles, particularly in this context, can also be read as a sign of discipline and control.

Closely linked with the text's emphasis on the male body as a machine, is its insistence on the body's speed and performance.

2.3 Speed and performance

Jackson et al. discuss the high value men's magazines place on speed and performance arguing that "all of the health magazines view speed and performance as social goods" (2001: 99). This, they argue correctly, is a function of capitalism. However, while useful in the economic system, they warn of the dangers of viewing all social activities through the capitalist prism (Jackson et al 2001). Brittan makes a similar point, arguing that "representations of masculinity in capitalist societies [demonstrate] an obsession with competition and achievement", an obsession reflected in the value both the magazines and society place on speed and performance (1989: 16).

Articles advertised on the May 2003 cover (for example, 'Hard muscle made easy', 'Instant calm' and 'The busy man's nutrition plan') indicate a concern with the speedy performance of tasks, activities and social practices. The privileging of speed

and performance is a necessary corollary to the construction of time as a scarce resource, a point emphasised by Boni who argues that *Men's Health* offers “numerous articles showing how men can deal with stress very quickly and avoid wasting precious time” (2002: 471). For example, take the opening sentence of ‘All the Rage’, “Here’s a test: you’re waiting in line – the universal helpless, hopeless situation”. In the Malegrams section, the articles exhort readers to “Absorb information faster with these speed reading tips” or to be a “Whiz Kid: breakfast in five [minutes]”.

Not only must men solve problems quickly, they must perform a multitude of activities associated with the masculine gender role. Judith Butler (1990) argues that gender is socially regulated performance. “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; ...identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results” (Butler 1990: 25). Jackson et al agree arguing, “the performance of gender is recursively monitored and subject to regulation through patriarchal institutions and ideologies” so that a ‘real’ man proves his masculinity by performing particular masculine acts and activities (2001: 13). For example, the article ‘Are you experienced’ provides a yardstick against which male readers can measure their achievements and, crucially, their *performance* as men. The message, it appears, is that before a man’s time runs out there are certain things he must have done for him to be able to consider himself a ‘real’ man.

Indeed, the notion that time will run out for the body, this male machine, is key. While articles dealing with death itself are rare, staving off death is a central, underlying, unwritten concern of the text. By offering tips and advice on how to maintain the healthy body and “save your system” the impression is given that, while ageing cannot be defeated, it can be slowed down” (Jackson et al. 2002: 101). *Men's Health* offers men a way to prolong their lives and deal with the fear of physical decline. In fact, as is discussed below, fear is a fundamental emotion the magazines seek to allay.

2.4 *The construction of certitude*

One of the magazine’s overriding concerns and a problematic it seeks to resolve, is that of male anxiety and uncertainty: about health, work, sexual relationships, ego and identity. Ulrich Beck (1997) coined the term, constructed certitude, to refer to the

process by which all uncertainty about identity, ego or self, is eliminated by means of a magical solution that banishes doubt and insecurity. As argued in Chapter 1, men's magazines emerged in a sociological context characterised by changes in the workplace and in public life, resulting in the destabilisation of traditional gender roles. While sceptical of the so-called crisis in masculinity, Jackson et al. (2001) argue that men are increasingly insecure about their role in society and the world. In the capitalist era, they argue, men's sense of identity is closely linked to their work and "their ability to perform paid employment outside of the home" (2001: 94). Faludi (1999) makes a similar claim, arguing that in today's society, men are no longer able to claim their manhood in traditional ways through achieving financial security and providing for a family. She attributes this crisis of masculinity to the rise of feminism and the increasing (economic, social and political) power of women within global elite society, which challenge men's dominance in both the public and private spheres. Jackson et al. (2001), however, argue that the entry of women into the workplace is only one in a number of changing employment patterns, which have also been affected by the development of more niche-marketed cultures and the rise of the information society. Uncertainty and insecurity give rise to a generalised anxiety – be it about relationships, the self, the body, work or finances.

Men's magazines can be seen as offering readers a constructed certitude, eradicating uncertainty or doubt and offering stability and answers in a world in which traditional roles and social relations seem to be increasingly fragile and uncertain (Jackson et al. 2001). *Men's Health* constructs certitude through specific techniques: self-administered tests, lists and fact-boxes break the world down into digestible portions and provide simple ways for readers to check on the health of their body, psyche or relationships. For example, the health article, 'All the rage' begins with a multiple-choice quiz, asking readers to choose the response that matches their reaction to waiting in a queue. Readers are thus able to self-diagnose and determine whether this is yet another thing for them to be concerned about.

In *Men's Health*, the future of the male body is cause for particular concern. Boni discusses "the uncertain body framed by *Men's Health*" (2002: 471). The male body as constructed by the *Men's Health* text is, he argues, a "risky body, which has to be protected from illness, disease and ultimately death" (Boni 2002:471). However,

articles are constructed in such a way that, while raising awareness of particular issues or problems, they also offer solutions. For example, the question and answer pattern in ‘All the rage’ creates a sense of security and certainty for the reader. Paragraphs are introduced with a question that poses a problem (“Why do only some of us get sick?” “We know how to cure people of illness. But can we cure them of being people?”). The question is then answered, usually with reference to expert sources such as scientists, doctors and psychologists. The problem is solved and uncertainty is resolved.

The solutions provided (whether how to fix a car, a relationship or body) all work to promote a sense of control. This is reinforced by words like ‘plan’ (‘The busy man’s nutrition plan’) and the use of the word ‘must’ (‘87 things you must do’). *Men’s Health* tells men to “eat this not that”, “make life easier with a wireless solution”, “claim your steak” and “be gracious about gratitude”. Articles make use of the active voice and overall, the texts high modality signals security and certainty, with facts and answers in place of opinions or the inexplicable.

The magazines can, therefore, be considered as the manifestation of what Jackson et al refer to as “the commodification of masculine anxieties” – the packaging and articulating of men’s uncertainty into a product that can be sold and seems to offer a solution or resolution to the ambiguities facing men in the uncertain world of today” (2001: 128). Advertisements contribute to this, telling men how to look, live and love (Boni 2002).

2.5 Conclusion: Men’s Health as a manual of masculinity

Magazines like *Men’s Health* represent men and masculinity in very specific ways by drawing on particular discourses available in society. Texts like *Men’s Health* are not neutral, but carry a particular ideology embedded in the discourses from which they are constituted. The content of men’s lifestyle magazines reflects and is constituted by the need to discover alternative sources of masculine confidence and the *Men’s Health* text functions to “express and resolve (albeit magically) the contradictions which remain hidden or unresolved” by offering quick-fix solutions to problems facing men today (Cohen 1980: 82).

As argued above, *Men's Health* constructs masculinity in very specific ways, using both verbal and visual signs and drawing on particular discursive formations. Jackson et al. (2001) argue that *Men's Health* offers an alternative version of masculinity – one that is concerned primarily with the healthy body. While the concern with health and fitness and self-discipline is a new one and opens up a new space for masculinity, the text locates itself firmly within a paradigm of traditional heterosexual masculinity:

An emphasis on previously repressed areas of masculine experience, including men's appreciation of other's men's bodies, fashion and health, mean that reading the magazines is part of an ambivalent social experience. While the magazines are undoubtedly a celebration of white male heterosexuality, they are also deserving of a more critical response... the magazines signal a shifting terrain of concerns related to intersubjective relations between men and women that should be read politically" (Jackson et al. 2001: 80).

It is to this that the research study now turns, examining gender as a structuring variable in the way readers make sense of *Men's Health*, and analysing the pleasures that are produced in the decoding process.

3. Research findings: focus group discussions

3.1 Introduction

This aim of the focus group discussions was to explore the question of how readers make sense of *Men's Health* and to account for the magazine's popularity by examining the source of readers' pleasures at the moment of textual consumption. In keeping with the parameters of qualitative research, as discussed in the preceding chapter, I generalise from the particular cases to broader theoretical propositions (see Bryman 1988: 90).

In studying the reception of *Men's Health*, I sought to explore the pleasures readers produce from the meanings they make of the text. Reception is a situated activity and readers bring different cultural resources to bear in the process of meaning making; I, therefore, proposed that readers' gender could affect the way they decode *Men's Health* and that the text may be differentially received by male and female readers.

However, as the research progressed, it became increasingly clear that the issue of pleasures in relation to *Men's Health* is by no means straightforward. Whilst the students bought, read, or simply enjoyed the magazine, discussions revealed an ambivalent attitude toward the magazine. The production of pleasures appears to be an often-contradictory activity with the reading experience marked by ambivalence. In other words, the meanings made by the participants, appeared to be productive both of pleasure and displeasure. Eagleton emphasises this point, arguing that "we derive pleasure from both binding and releasing, dominating and being dominated, expending and economising, knowing and not knowing, equivalencing and differencing, articulating and identifying" (1983: 61).

The students' discussions of their reading and enjoyment of *Men's Health* were focused around two primary themes. Firstly, the group discussions focused on issues around the representations of gender in the magazine and particularly on the way the magazine depicts masculinity. Secondly, the students raised issues around the perceived 'realism' or lack thereof of *Men's Health* and discussions centred on whether the magazine depicts a realistic and/or attainable lifestyle. These two themes form the basis of this discussion. However, because reception is, as discussed in Chapter 2, a situated activity, it is useful first to look at the patterns and style of

participants' attitudes towards current social trends and changes and towards gender relations in general.

3.2 *Situating reception*

Active audience theory proposes that the meanings of the text are neither inscribed by the institutional producer nor are inherent in the text, but are produced by a socially differentiated audience at the moment of reception. The meanings readers make are influenced by their positions within a socio-historical context characterised by particular relations of power and inequality (Hall 1980). In discussing television consumption, Fiske, one of the main supporters of audience activity theory, argues:

Reading the television text is a process of negotiation between this existing subject position and one proposed by the text itself, and in this negotiation the balance of power lies with the reader. The meanings found in the text shift towards the subject position of the reader more than the reader's subjectivity is subjected to the ideological power of the text. (1987a: 65-66)

Thus, in addressing the question of media power versus audience autonomy, Fiske argues that audiences have more power over making sense of media products than do their institutional producers. Tomlinson (1991) argues for a more moderate theory of audience activity, arguing that culture is formed through a process of negotiation between the representations offered by the media and the lived experience of audiences. Many other theorists (see for example, Foucault 1980, Morley 1993, and Ang 1987) make similar arguments. Therefore, in discussing the meanings readers make of *Men's Health*, it is necessary to understand a little of both the sociological context in which the magazine is produced and consumed, and the various discourses and dispositions readers bring to bear when decoding media products.

3.2.1 *Socio-cultural shifts and the gender order*

The last four decades have been characterised by the increasing destabilisation of patriarchal structures in Western cultures. Challenges to hegemonic forms of masculinity have come from Feminist and, more recently, Gay movements. As women have moved out of their traditional gender roles and into the workplace, men's conventional roles (as breadwinner, protector and so forth) have been called into question. Faludi (1999) argues, in the past, men's sense of their masculinity depended

upon their feelings of public utility and that as women have moved out of the domestic and into the public sphere, men's feelings of social usefulness have been eroded. This has resulted in shifting definitions of masculinity, exemplified by lifestyle magazines such as *Men's Health*. (This argument is presented in more detail in Chapter 1). As discussed in the textual analysis (see above), *Men's Health* (and other men's consumer magazines) open up a new space where different versions of masculinity are explored and represented, albeit within a fairly conventional understanding of what it is to be a man.

Both male and female focus group participants were obviously fully aware of these socio-cultural changes as is evidenced by the following extracts:

Kevin: I think, males, South African males, are becoming more, you know, more aware of themselves as men and their roles. Not just being the breadwinner anymore and being the guy who comes home and sits and watches TV and goes to work everyday. He's got a different role now.

Lucy: Well, you know women are moving up nowadays. I mean we aren't necessarily going to be stay-at-home mothers or even mothers... We have other choices now.

Heath: Things are definitely more equal now. I mean, relationships are... It's not like the way it was with my grandparents where supper was on the table for my granddad everyday when he got home from work, you know... Things have changed a lot since then.

KK: It's got to do [with] that whole thing of women's empowerment, like you know, women are becoming more ... Things are changing. They [women] are becoming more and more, how should I say, powerful. So... for the guys to actually impress the women, you know, they need to learn all these things, like guys are becoming less and less hard. Like the whole thing about the cooking. I mean, nowadays, if you marry someone, the chances are they'll probably be working as well and the thing is its not like in the old days where you're like the man in the house and her job is just to cook, wash and be a housewife. So,

like, you actually share the responsibilities in the house. So guys actually are like trying to learn and be kind of like, responsible: the 21st century type of man.

Such comments reveal students' awareness of the changing sociological context in which they live; they appear to believe that men need to adapt to these changes by taking on responsibilities and modes of behaviour that traditionally have been socially constructed as feminine.

KK, a young, middle class Xhosa male, comments that “guys are becoming less and less hard” thus drawing on a particular patriarchal discourse, which differentiates between men and women by associating men and masculinity with “hardness” and women and femininity with “softness”. These comments suggest KK is aware that gender roles are becoming blurred. Indeed (both male and female) participants seem aware that the concept of masculinity is shifting to accommodate social change. However, discussions also revealed some resistance to some of these shifts and an ambivalent attitude, from both male and female students, as to the way masculinity is represented in *Men's Health*. This is discussed in more detail below.

3.2.2 Socialisation

Aside from the students' awareness of, and attitudes towards, the social changes discussed above, they also bring particular social dispositions to bear in the decoding of *Men's Health* (and media texts in general). In discussing gender distinctions, students' responses indicated confusion about the source of these differences, often attributing them to both ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’. For example, take the following extracts:

Grant: I don't know if men and women are or, like, aren't inherently different. ...The thing is that with any group, any...cultural group, you're going to have your differences. Like if you get a racial group ... there are going to be inherent differences. But it's socialised. Well, I mean culturally, it's different. If it's a race thing, I do think you're born Well, maybe not. The way

you've been socialised, that's what makes the difference. It determines how you go. That's why there is the nature/nurture thing. But it's a combination.

James: I think men and women are inherently different. Not just the sex thing, but the way men and women approach things, I don't know whether that's through socialisation or the way we're brought up. But ja, men and women react differently to certain situations.

These ambiguous responses typify the discussions that occurred when this issue was raised. This is possibly the result of bringing different cultural resources to bear in discussing the issue. Bourdieu (1984) argued that one's ability to decode texts in particular ways was the result of different kinds of competence, which he called 'capital'. Because the focus group participants were drawn from the Rhodes University student body, all possessed acquired intellectual capital. In addition, many of the students interviewed either had studied or were studying journalism and some of the debates around gender and stereotyping were familiar to them. Their answers indicate tension between their academic learning and their belief systems.

Their confused answers can also be understood as a natural response to the social changes being experienced. The gender order is in a state of flux and the confusion in participants' responses is perhaps simply a reflection of the confusion many feel about men and women's roles in society.

Despite the use of the socialisation discourse, the students tended to revert to socio-biological arguments to explain the perceived differences between males and females. For example,

Fenner: Look, biologically we are different. We have different functions. If you take it down to a completely biological level, animals – men are slightly bigger and stronger because they are protectors, you know. Apparently, our vision is different as well. Women have a wider scope of vision, to help in defence of infants or something.

Jacky: Men are stronger; the average man and the average woman. So that also affects it. But I think there is a brain difference. I mean, women are just more intuitive. It's a fact, you know and I don't know if you can trace it down to a difference in brain cells...

In general, female students were more coherent and argued for constructed rather than innate differences between the sexes, while, generally, the male students tended to place greater emphasis on innate differences, arguing for instance that “guys are more sports orientated. Girls are more for conversation” and “I don't think they're as loyal to...other girls as, well...Guys are like really loyal to other guys”. Other examples include, “men sort of like cars and women don't” and in a similar vein, “with women, if they like a certain type of car they just buy it. They don't need to know about the engine”.

It became evident during the focus group discussions that the female participants were familiar with Feminist ideas and ideals and had clearly had some exposure to them. For example, Lucy, a 21-year old Journalism student critiques *Cosmopolitan* magazine as “unfeminist” (sic), while many of the Journalism students have been exposed to some of the ideas of gender theory in their studies. Female students were less inclined to attribute differences to genetics, a fact that can be attributed to their contact with and identification with Feminist ideas, which provide young women with the cultural resources (or capital) that enable them to critique the ‘naturalness’ of male dominance. Similarly, male students’ socio-biological explanations can be interpreted as a form of resistance to arguments that undermine the notions upon which patriarchy is based. Although it may be painting with too broad a stroke, in general, the male and female focus group discussions revealed different dispositions towards issues around gender.

As indicated above, this research proposed that the cultural and social attitudes (or dispositions) of the focus group participants influence the way they decode and discuss the *Men's Health* text.

3.3 *Discussing Men's Health*

In the focus group interviews, both male and female readers drew on particular discourses in reflecting on *Men's Health*. As discussed in Chapter 2, discourses constitute particular 'knowledge' and ways of thinking about the world. Thus, discourses carry particular ideologies.

Earlier in this chapter, I provided a brief textual analysis of *Men's Health*, raising some of the issues around ideologies and discourses that, according to my analysis, permeate and constitute the text. Thompson (1988) argues that to study the possible ideological implications of a text, one cannot look only at the text in isolation, but should rather focus on the way it is received. That is, one must investigate the meanings audiences make of texts and examine how (and if) the ideologies of the text are taken up by audiences and incorporated into their lives. If the dominant meanings of a text are generally resisted, the text will not function to reproduce and sustain particular relations of domination and inequality. Therefore, it is only possible to judge the ideological impact of *Men's Health* in relation to the way the text is decoded and by situating the pleasures readers produce within the wider social context of relations of power and domination.

In discussing their enjoyment of *Men's Health*, male students draw on three primary discourses. The following extract typifies the kinds of responses provided demonstrate the discursive formations drawn upon by males in discussing *Men's Health*:

James: It's just pushing all the right buttons. Like you want to be big, you want to have the best looking girl and get the best stuff.

This statement draws on hegemonic discourses of masculinity, which are based on the values associated with capitalist, patriarchal and heterosexual ideologies.

3.3.1 *Capitalist discourse*

Firstly, both male and female students appeared to take the middle class, capitalist position of the text for granted. The notion of *Men's Health* as representing the image of a successful man – where success is defined by material possessions, financial independence and corporate achievement – emerged strongly in the group

discussions. Students thus demonstrated their close affinity with Western capitalist and individualist ideologies. Students' responses revealed that they viewed these goals as inevitable and worthwhile and, while some students did question the possibility of achieving those goals, for the most part (male) students seemed to accept this as the natural 'place' to which they were headed:

Johan: [*Men's Health*] inspires me to try and be like this, to work my way up to be this corporate guy, to be able to afford this.

James: I think if at the end of the day you want to arrive somewhere this is a pretty good place to arrive...in your job, your health, your relationships whatever... material things; and if you achieve something, want to arrive somewhere, the *Men's Health* man would be a pretty decent place to arrive.

Pat: You look at that [*Men's Health*] and want to be like that. That's what you're leading towards.

3.3.2 *Heterosexual discourse*

Heterosexuality is another 'invisible' ideology that, without exception, the focus group participants seemed to buy into as was evidenced by the gender discourses they used in reflecting on gender relations and images of masculinity (and, to a lesser extent, femininity) represented in *Men's Health*. All the students who took part in the focus groups drew upon a discourse of heterosexuality when discussing gender relations. The ideology of heterosexuality in *Men's Health* seemed to be invisible to the students, whose responses showed an untroubled and unquestioning acceptance of heterosexual relations between men and women.

According to Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, readers aligned with the dominant ideology will decode texts according to the preferred or dominant meanings inscribed therein. In terms of heterosexual and capitalist ideologies (which are hegemonic in Western societies), all the focus group participants decoded the text preferentially to produce meanings aligned with the hegemonic construction of the text. Fiske argues "the reader whose social position is one of ease with the dominant ideology, who works *with* the program, will use its foregrounded ideology to reaffirm

his [or her] ideological frame” (1987:264). As all the students who took part in the focus groups were apparently heterosexual, that they decoded the text according to the dominant (or preferred) meanings inscribed in the text can be ascribed to their alignment or comfort with the dominant ideology of heterosexuality assumed to be the norm, both in the text and in contemporary society. The meanings they produced from the text therefore, reaffirmed their common-sense beliefs about the world was thus a source of pleasure⁴.

3.3.3 Patriarchal discourse

In considering other aspects of the gender relations represented in *Men's Health*, male students often commented favourably on the magazine's representations of women, arguing that these images are less sexist than those appearing in other men's magazines. Take the following extracts from two focus group discussion, both composed of white, middle class (heterosexual) students:

Fenner: FHM is more your lout: women as sex objects kind of thing.

Donavon: Ja, it's very sexist.

James: [Men's Health] is much more about [how to] please your partner, be a good husband kind of thing.

JP: Women appear in the sex articles, but also, like, how to take her out on a date. What places to go to, you know, as opposed to just sex.

Graham: It's much more like a level playing field... I mean, this [Men's Health] focuses on how to satisfy your woman rather than just satisfying yourself.

While the male students, regardless of their particular race or class, produced readings that demonstrated their close alignment with ideologies of male dominance, most female readers produced an oppositional reading of this aspect of *Men's Health*. That

⁴ Because this study focuses on gender as a structuring variable in the process of meaning making, I did not interview a focus group of homosexual *Men's Health* readers. However, following Hall's model, one might expect gay readers to produce readings that resist these meanings. This is an interesting and unexplored avenue for further research.

is, they produced readings that ran against the grain of the text. Oppositional readings are those that deconstruct or criticise the dominant ideology and tend to be produced by those social groups in a conflictual relationship with the dominant ideology (Fiske 1987b). This kind of reading, Fiske (1987b) argues, is more likely to produce annoyance than pleasure and indeed, this was evident in the female focus groups. Female students tended to question assumptions regarding what they regarded as the patriarchal structure of *Men's Health*, referring to particular articles or magazines as “sexist” and arguing that although *Men's Health* was perhaps better than *FHM* or *GQ*, in general, men's magazines objectify and exploit women and “they make women seem like sex objects”.

However, it was clear that female readers still found pleasure in reading *Men's Health*. Nor did they wholly condemn its representations of gender relations, arguing with the male students, that on the whole, *Men's Health* shows a more equal relationship between the sexes than other men's magazines. In addition, they tended to praise the *Men's Health* man because:

Joanne: I just think...the reason I would rather my boyfriend or my brother, my father, my guy friends read *Men's Health* is because he's nicer. He's a nicer guy.

Lucy: It's also like he's a nice guy. The *Men's Health* man isn't a horrible guy.

Pontsho: Ja...the portrayal is that he is a nice genuine man...

Caryn: He's the boy next door with an amazing body

Lucy: Ja, he's got everything, but he's still nice.

The above extracts show that while most female students resisted the more blatant patriarchal structures of the text, such resistance was only partial. Eagleton (1983) discusses the tensions of pleasure and displeasure where one finds pleasure in something at one level, but displeasure at another. He cites Samuel Johnson who argued that it is impossible to find something aesthetically pleasing if one is morally disgusted by it. Eagleton (1983), on the contrary, argues that because pleasure works at different levels in the psyche, one is able to enjoy something that is in direct contravention of one's own deep-seated ideological beliefs. Although Eagleton's

analysis operates more within the uses and gratifications approach of reception, which locates the production of meaning at the individual level, applying this theory to the level of the social (rather than the individual psyche) explains the ambivalence women experience in reading *Men's Health*, which on the one hand they condemn for being sexist, but on the other hand enjoy because it represents the “perfect man” and an ideal of masculinity. This seems to support Mercer’s statement that “we not only consent to forms of domination which we know, rationally and politically, are wrong, but we enjoy them” (1983: 84).

This suggests that any investigation of the pleasures involved in the consumption of *Men's Health* is a complex process as so much of the magazine is productive of both pleasure and displeasure for readers. For instance, both male and female participants both praised (found pleasure in) and criticised (were displeased by) the magazine’s representation and construction of masculinity.

3.4 *The construction of masculinity*

3.4.1 *Plural masculinities*

In discussing the kinds of men represented in *Men's Health*, male readers listed athletes, narcissists, body builders and businessmen. However, there was a conspicuous lack of discussion about male roles as fathers, blue-collar workers, househusbands, artists and so forth. Although these male roles are not prevalent in the text, the group participants did not even appear to notice their absence. Instead, they commented on a perceived absence of representations of the “outdoors” man – particularly ironic considering *Men's Health* publish a supplement, *Far Out*, which focuses on outdoor sports, adventure holidays and the like. When this was pointed out to them, students took it as evidence representations of men in *Men's Health* are contradictory:

Dudley: I actually find that stuff a bit contradictory sometimes...My image of the outdoor type is that the grooming factor is thrown out the window, yet that section is evident here [in *Men's Health*]. There are a lot of products that are actually advertised...The whole range.

Johan: And can you picture a guy going hunting with, like, his shaving kit and hair products?

Kevin: But like, they actually have...once a year or twice a year they have a supplement, a thicker magazine just about grooming. They do have a *Far Out* as well, as you say, which actually contradicts itself, you know. They have an outdoors supplement and they have a grooming supplement and the other half is a normal magazine. So it's actually quite an extensive part of the magazine...

Lauren: You can't equate the two: this muscle man and this corporate businessman. They're two different people.

Lucy: But you know, they used to have like a sports adventure section at the back...with...extreme sport and bungee jumping or hiking and stuff. Abseiling.

Lauren: I don't think the two things go together in one man though. Just like you can't be a father *and* a singleton on the prowl in the bars.

Grant: So, ja, he's [the *Men's Health* man] this corporate guy, you know. He's going to the top of the corporate ladder. And underneath the business suit, that's what he looks like? [points to cover model. See Appendix A]

Pat: Well, supposedly. They're trying hard to make us believe that. They're trying hard.

Students' responses suggest that, with a few exceptions, they find it hard to conceive of alternative and/or plural masculinities. That is, the hegemonic masculinity (heterosexual, middle class, educated) is the *only* one, making it difficult for them to account for the (relative) plurality of representations of masculinity in *Men's Health*.

While all groups took the *Men's Health* man's heterosexuality for granted, the female discussion groups concentrated on whether he is married, in a relationship or single and even whether he is a father. The male groups, on the other hand, were more concerned with whether the kind of man represented by *Men's Health* is both health-conscious *and* sporty. Whereas, in discussing women's magazines, female students argued that "they're trying to appeal to a large target market and I think that the magazines are generally divided into sections so that there's something in there for every woman – whether it's the housekeeper, the mother, the businesswoman or

whatever”, similar arguments were not forthcoming when discussing the different masculine roles offered by *Men's Health*. Therefore, as discussed in Chapter 2, it appears that masculinity continues to be considered a stable or static identity. Students are not aware that masculinity is constructed. It is the invisible centre to which everything else is relative. From the discussions it seems that readers have difficulty decoding different versions of masculinity and therefore, are critical of the magazine's perceived a lack of 'realism'.

3.4.2 *A manual of masculinity*

The focus group participants frequently discussed *Men's Health* as a guide to self-improvement. The magazine, they argued, helps one “be a better man” whether through improving one's body, image, health, sexual technique, relationships or career. Most of the male students who took part in the focus groups commented that *Men's Health* offered an ideal of masculinity and something to which they could aspire. This is clearly evidenced in the following extracts:

KK: I'm saying *Men's Health* talks about how you can actually promote your lifestyle, like you can change your life: like the whole working out and great sex tips and ... fashion. So, it's like changing your image.

Grant: This is what we want to be like one day, isn't it? Like, we want to be all these things and have all of this and be successful. *Men's Health* is saying it will show you how.

Daniel: The whole *Men's Health* image – you know, trying to be a better man. I think it's about how to be a better person, how to be a stronger man – mentally and physically.

James: If you are healthier, fitter – your state of living is better. Everyone wants to look like that [pointing to *Men's Health* cover model].

Fenner: I think the distinction between this and a woman's magazine is sort of with *Cosmo*, they've got some gorgeous woman on the cover and women sort of get, like, you know, anxiety about their looks and they try to match that. This is sort of

an ideal. This is the *Men's Health* ideal. Its saying sort of you don't have to be... to aspire to get there, but you can improve your image and be a better person – that's the whole *Men's Health*. That's their drive.

The representations of masculinity offered by *Men's Health* are perceived as an ideal and remain relatively unquestioned. The male students read the magazine as a manual on masculinity, which shows them *how to be men*. As mentioned in the textual analysis, above, gender is not innate, but is achieved through particular performance. Judith Butler (1990) argues that we all put on a gender performance, whether traditional or not, and so it is not a question of whether to *do* a gender performance, but what form that performance will take. Participants see *Men's Health* as a manual on masculine performance, providing useful tips, hints, definitions and delimitations of what it means to be a man.

This is further implied in that both male and female focus groups participants tended to make comparisons between *Men's Health* and *Cosmopolitan*, a popular and well-established women's lifestyle magazine. Indeed, it appeared that many of the readers interviewed seemed to consider *Men's Health* as a *Cosmopolitan* for men. Weedon (1987) argues that women's magazines offer a range of competing subject positions and roles for women to fulfil from mother, to daughter, wife, girlfriend, businesswoman and so on. Similarly then, *Men's Health* offers men different subject positions or roles, showing them how to live, behave and perform and what issues to concern themselves with.

This lends support to Faludi's (1999) claim, discussed earlier, that consumer magazines play a key role in contemporary culture as the primary source from which men derive their sense of identity. Both the male and the female focus group participants perceive *Men's Health* as depicting a particular lifestyle and delineating a way of being a successful man in modern society. The representations of masculinity and gender relations it offers are seen as a guide detailing how men can achieve (proscribed) aims and ambitions, relate (appropriately) to women and other men, and generally, live their lives.

In addition, without wishing to revert to a transmission model of communication, which measures the effects of media products on audiences, we can only speculate on the long term impact that lifestyle magazines such as *Men's Health* may have on society. The female students interviewed appeared to hold women's magazines responsible for many of their own insecurities. Their responses show that they blame their concern with appearances, diet, weight, physique and style on the abundance of images in the media of physically perfect females and what Caryn, a white middle class, slightly chubby girl calls "skinny anorexic models". If we see *Men's Health* as functioning in a broadly similar way for men as *Cosmopolitan* does for women, it may be blamed for similar effects on audiences. Whether exposure to men's magazines such as *Men's Health*, *GQ*, *FHM* etc is likely to have this kind of impact is as yet unclear. Certainly, the female students seem to believe that, given enough exposure, men too may start to feel insecure about whether they are living up to the standards set by magazines like *Men's Health*. This is evidenced by the following extracts from the female focus groups:

Jacky: Women's magazines don't always make girls feel good about themselves. When I look through a *Cosmo* ... I compare myself to those bodies all the time and I read about these supermoms who still have these careers and whatever and I think I should be the ultimate multi-tasker because I'm like this 'uber-female'. But I'm not, you know. And maybe it's going to be the same for men. They are also going to want to 'have it all', but be stressed because it doesn't just happen.

Pontsho: And you're also going to get a new breed of man that is like, obsessed about his body like the women are.

Caryn: Guys see the cover of *Men's Health* and think, "Oh, I wish I looked like that. That is sort of the epitome of what a man should look like". And they're going to be insecure if they don't look like that or act like that.

Indeed, some of the discussions generated in the focus groups suggest that male readers may already be starting to share this view:

Johan: My point though is that...I feel often the way girls feel about the way they are portrayed in things like *Cosmo* and stuff. That there's this perfect image out there and no one actually looks like that. I often feel ... that way about how men are portrayed in things like *Men's Health* because we all want to be a *Men's Health* kind of guy, but most men don't look like that. I think it's unfair to just often say that women are being portrayed, you know, ... stereotypically and that...we should look at the way women are portrayed. What about the way men are portrayed. What's the difference? It's the same thing. We also have to live up to a certain pin-up sometimes.

Dudley: All the men are portrayed as athletic. All the men in there [*Men's Health*]... And the problem is...it looks like what they're saying is...all men are athletes.

Greg (in discussing the Men's Health man): Well, if he's not half-naked looking like some supermodel he's wearing a suit mostly, I think. Or he's athletic. So he's always the successful male, you know. I don't know, sometimes they do target probably the normal guy, but mostly it's like the corporate successful. You're in a corporate world and you're successful and you've got a steady relationship and you can cook. It's kind of a bit intimidating.

Their insecurity is almost palpable: these are men who fear they do not match up to the ideals of *Men's Health*, who are realising their shortcomings. In the textual analysis, I discussed the way the *Men's Health* text functions to alleviate masculine anxiety in an uncertain social climate. Men's magazines such as *Men's Health* can be seen as part of "an awareness that old-style patriarchal relations are crumbling and the desire to reinscribe power relations between different genders and sexualities" (Jackson et al. 2001: 79). However, from the above discussion, it is evident that these magazines may have the unintentional effect of actually increasing unease and insecurity among men. Thus, *Men's Health* is a media product both socially shaped and socially shaping. It is the product of a particular social, cultural and historical context – one that has been characterised by instability in gender identities, with hegemonic masculinity under threat from for example, feminist and gay movements.

At the same time media texts do have cultural power in society. As Tomlinson (1991) argues, the production of culture is the result of a complex interplay between the media representations of reality and the lived experience of audiences. As discussed in Chapter 2, Tomlinson (1991) argues against the determining power of the media as producers of culture. Instead, he argues, culture is the result of a process of mediation between the audience's lived experience and the media's representations of that experience. The oppositional or negotiated meanings that readers made of this aspect of *Men's Health* can be seen as evidence in support of his claim that "media messages are themselves mediated by other modes of cultural experience" (Tomlinson 1991: 61). Readers appear to bring other kinds of social knowledge to bear on the *Men's Health* text when they decode it. While the students recognise *Men's Health* as the result of particular historical and cultural change, they appear also to believe that magazines such as these may have discernible consequences for society and for contemporary definitions of masculinity.

3.4.2 *Redefining masculinity*

In Chapter 2, I discussed gender studies' relatively recent recognition of the existence of plural masculinities. That is, in the last few years academics have come to realise that as with other social identities, masculine identities are neither stable nor inherent, but constantly shifting, their meanings never fixed but always contested. The new kind of men's lifestyle magazines of which *Men's Health* is an example, can be seen as a response to a changing sociological environment in which male dominance is increasingly being challenged. Thus, the emergence of new men's consumer magazines, which appear to offer revised and alternate versions of masculinity, can be seen as a response to the contestation of ideologies of patriarchy and heterosexuality, the cornerstones of hegemonic masculinity. By including articles about relationships, cooking, style and nutrition, the magazines attempt to incorporate new elements into their representations of masculinity. Generally, the students decoded the *Men's Health* man as a 'new man' – although they placed emphasis on different aspects of this identity and male and female students decoded these differently.

Overall, the 'new man' is decoded as the "executive type", successful, financially independent and concerned with his image and appearance – a concern that can

manifest either through a focus on material things (the latest cell phone, an expensive car) or through a concern with his appearance, be it through grooming, clothes or working out at the gym. This particularly was heavily criticised by the students whose responses showed that, largely, grooming and body consciousness is still considered very much a signifier of femininity, at least among young adults.

3.4.3 *Resisting the feminine*

Participants' answers revealed a deep ambivalence about what many viewed as the 'feminine' elements of the revised versions of masculinity offered by the magazine. While female students were critical of what they perceived as society's expectations that they should "primp and preen for them [men], but they don't do it for us", their comments showed a tendency to mock the *Men's Health* man's obsession with physical perfection. Grooming and style consciousness were decoded as unmanly and discussions on these issues produced ironic or scornful comments. For example, in describing the lifestyle depicted by *Men's Health*, Megan, an Indian middle class girl from a conservative Catholic background responded:

Megan: He would get up in the morning and set his alarm clock an hour before he has to leave...because he has to bathe in the shower for at least 15 minutes, using all the hot water...He'd shave – that would take...another 10 minutes because you have to admire every curve and shape of the face...The gelling of the hair doesn't happen now. You go and change first and that's a mission because you don't know what to wear. Then you come back to gel your hair...

This mode of describing the *Men's Health* man's concern with his looks, image and body typifies the kinds of responses offered by both male and female students. However, while female students interpreted such self consciousness as narcissistic because, according to one of the female participants, "by the time most guys look like that, they're so in love with themselves, there's not much room for anything else", male students, who frequently commented on *Men's Health's* concern with grooming and style, interpreted it as a signifier of homosexuality. To illustrate, consider the following statement from Dudley, a black, middle class, heterosexual personal trainer:

Dudley: Even if you were pretty... In fact even if you're gay, all right, 'because we all know gay guys, they... Now I don't mean to offend anyone if you've got gay friends. Even they wouldn't use all the [grooming] products in there...

And later on in the same group:

Kevin: ...So you know gay guys, they ... groom themselves and they spend money on these products.

In the above extracts, the use of phrases like “you know” and “we all know” indicate students' acknowledgement that these ideas belong to a wider social context of knowledge about the world. That is, ideas such as these are part of a particular hegemonic discourse of sexuality, on which students draw in discussing *Men's Health*.

The association of homosexuality with grooming and style consciousness explains why many of the (apparently staunchly heterosexual) male students interviewed rejected these aspects of *Men's Health*. Although the Kingswood College group did not explicitly make this association, grooming and style consciousness were decoded as effeminate:

Pat: He wakes up and definitely shaves with a Mach 3.

Dov: No stubble for him. I reckon he'll have one of those energy shakes.

Pat: And those white puffy towels. Definitely. Or one of those robes.

From the above examples it is clear that neither the male nor female focus group participants produced the preferred reading of the text (according to my textual analysis) – that manliness can now encompass previously feminine elements such as skin and hair care. Men self-conscious about their physique, clothes or hair are perceived as insecure, which in turn is considered unmanly. (This last point will be returned to later in this chapter.) While the male students seem to read such concerns as evidence of homosexuality, the female students do not, instead criticising it as narcissistic.

Such differing interpretations point to the polysemy of the *Men's Health* text. Fiske (1987a) argues that polysemy is a necessary condition for a text's popularity. However, in this case, the meanings (heterosexual) readers made of this, were not productive of pleasure, but instead produced displeasure.

Caring for self is read as a form of pampering, incommensurate with hegemonic forms of masculinity and participants' responses show resistance to the magazine's attempts to redefine this masculinity. This, it could be argued, indicates broader patterns of resistance (from both men and women) to some of the changes occurring within society. Perhaps men are resisting the changes while also recognising that they need to incorporate some elements of the subordinate cultures that are challenging their dominance, *in order to maintain that dominance*.

Some new elements reflected in the magazines *are* receiving more acceptance, as is evidenced in that while grooming was for the most part rejected, students revealed a cautious acceptance of other "new" aspects of masculinity like cooking. Although discussions revealed a widespread derision of men who drink "shakes" or "smoothies", most male students admitted willingly, even proudly, that they had attempted to cook at one time or another. However, most did not cook often; nor did they take it seriously. They just "put it [the meal] together with something on top" or "whipped it up" or "threw a few things in the pan".

One of the students interviewed responded a little differently: John, a 28-year-old lecturer currently working on his PhD, was not only older than the other members in the group, he was also the only one working and therefore, with access to "throwaway cash" – something emphasised by the other members of the focus group. John was often the butt of jokes in the group because other participants thought he took the magazine too seriously. Therefore, his responses show a tendency to deflect possible criticism. For example, in discussing his forays into cooking, he says:

John: I've tried some of the recipes and they were very cool. Most of them heavily involved alcohol so... I've made the beer bread one. That was brilliant. I've made that a couple of times. And also, like the pasta dishes that have got more wine than pasta in.

During the course of this focus group discussion (and, indeed, in all the male groups), it was evident that the male students considered alcohol to be a signifier of masculinity while alcohol consumption bestows membership to male culture. Strate (1992) comments on the association of alcohol (and particularly beer drinking) with hegemonic constructions of masculinity. In analysing the construction of beer advertisements, he argues, “there is no question that drinking is presented as a central masculine activity, and beer as the beverage of choice” (Strate 1992: 79). This is highlighted by the fact that alcoholic consumption was not mentioned in the girls’ discussion groups. Thus, John’s emphasis on using alcohol when cooking can be interpreted as an attempt to affirm his masculinity while engaging in traditionally feminine behaviour, like baking.

Later, within the same focus group, in discussing his consumption of *Men's Health*, John said,

John: I mean, I’ve actually bought it for a fair while and, I’m going to be slated now, but I’ve got a whole rack of them. Probably like forty or fifty of them. More. And obviously, I read what I sort of feel like reading at the time and if there’s something that appeals to you or a challenge that you’d like to do. Like the adventure sports, like occasionally they’ll have something about iron man and I think, you know, it would be nice if in five years time to sort of do the iron man and try that as an idea. And then they give you ideas about how to start working for it.

Again, in admitting to taking the magazine seriously, he attempts to make this more acceptable to his peers by citing Ironman – a test of manhood (traditionally defined in terms of physical strength and stamina) if ever there was one!⁵

In their study of men's magazines in the UK, Jackson et al. (2001) note that in discussing their magazine reading habits,

⁵ The Ironman Triathlon is an annual event held in the US state of Hawaii and featuring three endurance events: swimming, biking, and running (Retrieved 10 August 2005 from World Wide Web http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ironman_Triathlon)

A process of distancing was commonly used by...participants to avoid the charge of taking themselves or the magazines too seriously. Such a disposition was evident in men's descriptions of their reading practices as "browsing" or "flicking through" with little or no sense of commitment to a particular title. (Jackson et al. 2001: 136).

When asked about their consumption of *Men's Health*, male students evinced a similar disinclination to seem to identify too closely with the magazine or to take it too seriously. Participants "just sort of scan the cover", "pick it up and take a look" or "look through it". Those whose answers revealed that they did take the magazine seriously either ridiculed themselves or were ridiculed by others in the groups. For example,

Fenner: I'm actually quite sad. I'll read something cover-to-cover, but...if I haven't got time then I will sort of browse. There's a cool thing in this latest magazine about beer. About the health aspects of different beers. That sort of thing I really enjoy. That's really interesting hey.

In both the extracts quoted above, the students justified their more serious consumption of the magazine with particular examples that they found interesting. Significantly, Fenner cited an article about alcohol and John mentioned a body building competition – both, as discussed above, are considered signifiers of masculinity.

3.4.4 Hard muscles

Indeed, physical strength and the male body were key areas of discussion among the male students when reflecting on *Men's Health*. However, while the representations of the male body, fitness programs and body building articles in *Men's Health* were key areas of discussion in the male groups, female students touched only briefly on these issues.

Although it would be convenient to argue that textual polysemy is evidenced in the fact that while male students appear to identify with the visually represented males, women readers read the men's bodies and hard muscles as objects of an erotic gaze,

this did not seem to be the case. Indeed, the female students hardly commented on the images of the male body as it is represented in the magazine, but were scornful of the narcissism they saw necessary for such a body to be achieved. These do not appear to be a source of pleasure for the female readers. While the male students appear to identify in quite a straightforward way with the men depicted in the magazine, female students' relationship to the text is more complex. Their relative disinterest in men's fitness, health and body in the magazine, indicates their apparent identification with the masculine subject position offered by the text, and their general silence on the fitness and (male body) oriented health articles, as well as on the visual representations of men depicted in the magazine, can be seen as evidence that while they appropriate certain articles, those elements that are perhaps less polysemic and which cannot as easily be adapted to their needs, are (virtually) ignored. (A more detailed discussion of this follows below.)

In contrast, the male focus groups were dominated by discussions of the gym programs, fitness regimens and visual images of masculinity and muscles in *Men's Health*. Although clearly related to issues around grooming and taking care of oneself, the male students considered focusing on 'getting big' or building muscle at the gym to be a far more normal sign of masculinity than, for example, using moisturizer. That is, they accept a concern with honing and toning the masculine physique appeared to be accepted as part of hegemonic definitions of masculinity.

In considering the images of men offered by *Men's Health*, the male students initially focused exclusively on the physical body depicted in the magazine. As discussed in the textual analysis (section 2 above), *Men's Health* places emphasis on the masculine physique. The magazine's covers always feature a photograph of bare-chested, well-muscled male models and the headlines draw attention to the physical (for example, on the May 2003 cover: 'Hard Muscles Made Easy'). In discussing pictorial representations of men and masculinity in the media, Dyer argues that in male imagery, "the body quality that is promoted is muscularity" (1992: 271). Muscularity, he contends, signifies power, physical strength and discipline and these in turn become signifiers of masculinity. In addition, "muscles, as well as being a sign of activity and achievement, are hard" (Dyer 1992: 274). I have already cited KK's comment that in the 21st century "men are becoming less and less hard" and discussed

the culturally constructed association of masculinity with hardness (and its associated qualities of toughness, hardiness, stamina and so forth) and the association of femininity with softness (and associated qualities of pliability, yielding, and gentleness).

These distinctions stem in a rather obvious way from the actual physical sexual characteristics by which we usually differentiate between male and female. It also relates to the particular (culturally constructed) roles of men and women that are often taken as common sense and which see men as providers and protectors and women as nurturers (Haralambos & Holborn 2000). As such, we can interpret both the male and female students' resistance to the self-care and self-consciousness espoused by *Men's Health*, as a rejection of the blurring of these gender roles. That is, men concerned with looking after their physical selves are seen to be taking over the nurturing role that, within patriarchy, has been considered a feminine domain. Roksha, a 20-year-old Indian student, who offered a very traditional definition of a man's role, as "husband, father and provider", had this to say about the *Men's Health* man:

Roksha: He's groomed. He's taken care of himself. It's not the rough, rugged man, you know, that's been out beating down wood all day. You know what I mean? He's like, in an office. He's got manicured nails, this perfect smile and there's gel in his hair. I mean, what's he grinning at?

Her comment suggests that she decodes the *Men's Health* man's concern with grooming, style and image to mean that he would no longer be able to fulfil those traditional roles as provider and protector. She appears to read his muscles as a sign of self-obsession rather than as a signifier of strength.

Male students decoded the representations of the body in *Men's Health* in a similar way. While admiring and desiring the muscular physique of the *Men's Health* cover man, they were often quite scornful of these gym-bred displays of manliness. For example, consider the following exchange:

Heath: But they don't often have many pure sportsmen. Guys who actually go out and play sports on the weekend or whatever. It's all about looking good as

opposed to going out there and like, playing a game of rugby or hockey or tennis.

Jamie: Well, like at school and stuff you usually did tend to try get big so you could play sport. To make you strong, to make you a better athlete. But now it's just to get big for the sake of getting big.

Greg: Ja, if you go to the gym, how many of the guys are actually sports guys. Like at the Rhodes gym, they're just there to pump up.

As the above extract shows, the students tended to distinguish between building muscle to build strength, power and stamina, and building muscle to be more physically attractive. It appears that for muscles to function as a sign of masculinity, they must serve a purpose. For example, a hard, muscular physique enables men to fulfil traditional masculine roles such as protector and provider.

Interestingly, however, the distinctions made by the students did not necessarily extend into their own lives. In fact, many of the participants admitted to following *Men's Health's* gym programs and to taking supplements and most of the male students are gym members. Thus, many of the male participants had embarked on fitness regimes and were critical of the way *Men's Health* simplified the arduous task of achieving physical perfection.

3.4.5 *Hard muscles made easy?*

Readers displayed a generally ambivalent attitude to the way they see *Men's Health* simplifying complex issues. The magazine's focus on speed and performance has already been extensively discussed in the textual analysis (section 2.3). From the discussions, it seems that readers produce negotiated readings of this aspect of the text. On the one hand, readers are sceptical of what they see as *Men's Health's* promise to solve your life in "ten easy steps" and are resistant to the messages that say everything is easy – or can be easy as long as you read *Men's Health*. This is demonstrated in the following extracts and exchanges from the male participants:

Fenner: The first thing I saw when I looked at this cover was 'Hard Muscle Made Easy'. I'm actually a qualified gym instructor so I sort of think, hard

muscle made easy? That's quite a statement let me look what the article is actually talking about. Because it's not easy.

Daniel: They always try to show how to get hard muscle easily, but you can never...

Fenner: There's no shortcut, hey. It's just dedication.

James: It [*Men's Health*] makes everything straightforward though.

Donavon: Ja, trying to simplify your life.

Daniel: Well, they wouldn't want to say; 'Hard muscle, the difficult way'.

Who's going to read an article like that?

Fenner: Most of these things aren't easy anyway. It's only easier because it explains how to do it. You're not having to go out and speak to people.

Greg: Ja, but if you're talking about quick fixes, look at all those headlines – all of those: Hard Muscle Made Easy, Pop Her Sex Cork, Instant Calm. Even supplements! Supplements is a quick way of getting bigger...Its amazing. You see that's how they sell! That's my point. They try to make you think, quickly, I can get there, you know. I can look like this *quickly*, so let's buy the magazine and be like this.

Kien: Ten easy steps.

Pat: Ja.

Dov: What was wrong with the ten easy steps they gave you last month?

Grant: Ja, it's like trying to make health in a quick and easy step. Everything in it is like...five easy steps or whatever...Its trying to get away from – well you're gonna have to work your arse off to get where you want to be. They're just trying to sell: well if you do this for like a few times... It's just the easy way out.

Kevin: I think...some of the advanced workouts seem a bit simple. I think ... you find that the main headline of these magazines, especially *Men's Health*, they promise you a good body in a short space of time.

Johan: Quick fixes

Kevin: so they wouldn't want to be realistic about the actual sacrifice you have to make in order to get into shape, you know. Because everyone wants to have a real good body, so they try to make it simple for the readers.

Johan: But what irritates me is the pictures of these guys doing these quick fixes are already, definitely have done years of gymming [sic].

Again, as with the discussions about the 'realism' of the *Men's Health* text, participants tend to focus their criticism on the representations of the male body offered by the magazine. That is, they find displeasure in the quick fix solutions around men's fitness and health, which they perceive *Men's Health* to offer.

However, the students' comments also showed that they enjoy the way *Men's Health* breaks down various problems making them easier to deal with. Students comment that, for example, they "dig the little quick tips they give you" about other areas of their life. This suggests that while they are wary of the promises *Men's Health* makes about achieving a particular body or state of fitness, they find pleasure in the notion that other difficulties may be overcome more easily. In the textual analysis of *Men's Health*, I argue that the magazine attempts to construct certainty for its male readers through offering quick fixes and easy ways to overcome difficulties – in relationships, health, body image, fitness and so on. Another interpretation of their responses, and one that is dealt with in more detail in the discussion of realism and pleasures below, is that the male students unconsciously accept that the lifestyle depicted by the magazine is their right. Male students both heavily criticised and also praised *Men's Health* for the perceived 'realism' (or lack thereof) of the magazine's representations of lifestyles and of men.

3.5.1 *Male pleasures: realism*

Media research into the reception of media products has revealed that audiences often judge the merits of particular media products according to the extent to which they find them 'realistic'. Theorists (see for example Ang 1985 and Ellis 1982) argue that conceptions of what is 'realistic' may differ among viewers and that consequently, the very notion of reality is polysemic. Ellis defines 'realism' as "the expectation that a particular representation should present a 'realistic portrayal' of character and event" (1982: 6). These expectations, he explains, operate at different levels:

Indeed, part of the complexity (or confusion) of the use of the term comes from the fact that when realism is demanded from a representation, it is always more than one type of realism that is demanded. (Ellis 1982: 7)

Similarly, in her study of Dutch women's reception of American soap opera, *Dallas*, Ang (1985) argues for two discourses of realism. Judgements based on the degree to which the actual material aspects of the text resemble or differ from the lived conditions of the viewers, she calls empirical realism. This would correspond to what Ellis calls viewers' expectations of a "surface realism" and which operates on a denotative level (1982: 6).

Emotional realism, on the other hand, operates on a connotative level and measures textual 'realism' according to the subjective experience of the world it offers (Ang 1985). That is, as Strelitz (2002) notes, the *Dallas* audience viewed the programme as realistic to the extent that, both for the audience and for the *Dallas* characters, "...happiness can never last forever but, quite the contrary, is precarious" (Ang 1985: 46). In other words, although the material world of *Dallas* was often judged 'unrealistic', viewers recognised aspects of the emotional lives of the characters and judged the programme as 'realistic' on that level. These two realisms, emotional and empirical, correlate to two discourses of realism audiences draw upon when reflecting on their consumption of media texts.

During the course of the focus group discussions, marked differences emerged between the ways male and female students made sense of *Men's Health* in terms of its representations of 'realism'. The male students responses drew on empirical discourses of realism, judging *Men's Health* (and lifestyle magazines in general) according to whether they believed them to be realistic or not. Criticisms against the realism of *Men's Health* were levelled primarily at its representations of the male body and readers questioned the text's implicit assumption that all men can attain this physical ideal.

The following extract from the St Andrews group demonstrates this point:

Fenner: First of all he's [the *Men's Health* cover model] got his biceps sort of flexing. You're never going to stand around like that. He's flexing and for these photo-shoots, guys go for like two weeks and dehydrate themselves. He's basically sick. He's basically got 'flu. He's actually not well.

(The group laughs)

Fenner: I'm serious, okes...He's actually sick at that moment. You don't look like that. To get that ripped you've got to dehydrate yourself. So, you can't actually look like that normally.

Donavon: Ja, if you went to the beach you wouldn't see many guys that looked like that; that big, that ripped.

This theme was discussed in detail in another of the focus groups: Dudley, a personal trainer, had this to say about what the group perceived as the unrealistic images and expectations of the male physique represented in *Men's Health*:

Dudley: Me personally, I don't have that problem because I've trained long enough to realize that my body is a certain type. I know my body type and whenever... From people coming in to train, right, its very few that – I think if you've been training for a long time you realize what your body is capable of and you setting goals and saying I've got to be a real *Men's Health* model when your body doesn't allow it, that kind of genetic structure, its unrealistic...

And Johan, a slightly built 23-year old, who later revealed that he was taking a supplement called Mass Builder and following a strict body-building routine in an effort to "get big" had this to say:

Johan: I think...the implication here though...that people look at that and say "I want to be like that" and they get frustrated when they can't but they don't realize that genetically they may not be able to and they get frustrated and they start thinking..."I'm useless, I can't look like that".

The consensus was that the physical images of masculinity, especially the emphasis on muscularity, depicted in the magazine was ‘unrealistic’. This criticism operates at the denotative level because of a perceived lack of empirical realism.

While on the one hand, the male students agreed that *Men's Health* provides an unrealistic image of masculinity in its physical embodiment, their responses revealed a significant degree of faith in the magazine’s representations of a particular lifestyle particularly from those groups composed of white males. Take for instance the following extract from a group composed of middle class white young men:

Fenner: I think it [*Men's Health*] shows quite a balanced lifestyle. Sort of the part in your life where everything you need to be successful: you’ve got your fitness and your relationship, your work. ... This is much more realistic.

James: Ja, you’ve got to work hard to achieve it, but it will be your ultimate goal.

Fenner: I mean, if you’re going to get out there and do it, you will...get there, you know.

Jamie: It’s kind of showing the way our lives should go, you know, with the job and a relationship and everything in its place and stuff. It’s what we’re going to go off and do.

Similarly, in reflecting on the kind of lifestyle *Men's Health* portrays, Pat argues, “But I mean, is that not describing what we’re going to be – like what we’re aiming for eventually?” Others in the group echoed these sentiments:

Dov: ... This is the dude you want to be

Grant: Ja, it is. You look at that and want to be like that. That’s what you’re leading towards.

Dov: Look the thing is, now I’m definitely looking forward to getting a bit older, finishing varsity, get a job, finding a place to stay. Obviously, I’m never going to have a body like that, but I’d like to lose a bit of weight. I’m just thinking of how I’m going to get my life, once varsity is over, in order. Now

maybe I don't fall into that [*Men's Health*] exact category, but I do want to be a bit like that sometime.

Thus, it can be argued that for male readers pleasure is produced through a process of imaginative identification with the lifestyle shown in *Men's Health*. Although most of the male participants are in their final year at university and are still living a student lifestyle, they identify with the ambitions and concerns dealt with in *Men's Health* and see the lifestyle it depicts as realistically attainable. The text appears to act to reaffirm their sense of the positions they will fill in society, thus producing pleasure. Indeed, Dov, a final year law student commented explicitly on this:

Dov: I was in Joburg now, seeing old varsity mates and they said let's meet at this pub. The guys were going to meet there after work. And you know I've just come from Grahamstown so I wear a pair of shorts, nothing fancy. Whatever. I went into this pub and I thought I was walking into the pub from *Ally McBeal*! Like everyone had come from work, you know: suits, ties. Young guys who've just finished varsity, first year working. Also got a bit of cash to throw around. They seem like the guys who'd go out and look at the magazine and say, 'Oh well, I'll cook that for dinner tonight'.

Students appear to find the text realistic on the connotative level; as Ang (1985) argues, they are able to identify with the subjective experience of the text and identify with the ambitions, concerns and problems that *Men's Health* deals with even though their lives, at present, bear little outward resemblance to the lifestyle depicted by the magazine. Ellis (1982), in discussing cinematic viewing pleasures, argues for two distinct ways in which audiences identify with the text. His argument is that,

First, there is [the experience of] ... dreaming and phantasy that involve the multiple and contradictory tendencies within the construction of the individual. Second, there is the experience of narcissistic identification with the image of a human figure perceived as other... The spectator does not therefore 'identify' with the hero or heroine: an identification that would, if put in its conventional sense, involve socially constructed males identifying with male heroes, and socially constructed females identifying with women heroines. The situation is more complex than this, as identification involves both the recognition of self in the image on the screen, a narcissistic identification, and the identification of self with the various positions that are

involved in the fictional narration: those of hero and heroine, villain, bit-part player, active and passive character. (Ellis 1982: 43)

Essentially, Ellis (1982) is arguing that media readers identify with a subject of the text either through recognition of an image (narcissistic identification) or through recognition of a role (for example, as the hero of the piece). Commenting on this, Neale (1992) argues that texts work to channel and regulate identification to support traditional sexual divisions and the gender order of patriarchy. Therefore, masculine subject positions or roles encourage male identification and vice versa. As Hall (1980) argues, texts have a preferred meaning that work to sustain the dominant order. However, with Thompson (1984), this study takes the position that ideology only works at the moment of reception. From the above discussion of male students' reception of *Men's Health*, it can be argued that they appear to engage in a process of narcissistic identification with the *Men's Health* man, which involves a process of recognition.

It seems therefore, that for the male students, the pleasures of *Men's Health* can in part be seen as a reconfirmation of their dominant position in the social structure. That is, they decode the text as representing a realistic lifestyle, corresponding to the real empirical world, a world in which their power and success is assured. This follows Jackson et al.'s (2001) observation that the men's magazines can be seen as an attempt to reinscribe patriarchal masculinity in a social context where this is increasingly challenged.

Therefore, it can be argued that *Men's Health* does indeed appear to work to reaffirm patriarchal ideologies among male readers. However, the meanings and pleasures produced by female readers were somewhat different.

3.5.2 *Female pleasures: escapism*

As argued above, male students' pleasure in reading *Men's Health* derives from the perceived 'realism' of the text and their narcissistic identification with the *Men's Health* man. In contrast, responses and discussion in the female focus groups indicate that the pleasures of *Men's Health* for female readers may be, in part, the pleasures of fantasy or escape. Despite disagreements over the degree of realism of *Men's Health*,

the focus group discussions indicated that, for female students, realism per se was not a criterion upon which enjoyment of the magazine was either based or justified. On the contrary, the female students seem to find pleasure from reading *Men's Health* as an escapist text.

In her study on the reception of romance fiction, *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway (1984) investigated the pleasures of romance novel reading of a group of female readers from the midwestern town of Smithton, USA. She discovered that, for this group of women, the act of reading was significant in itself, as it constituted an escape from the responsibilities and attendant expectations of their social roles as mothers or wives. Radway expands on the notion of escape as used by the Smithton women, arguing that they used the word in two distinct ways:

On the one hand they used the term literally to describe the act of denying the present, which they believe they accomplish each time they begin to read a book and are drawn into its story. On the other hand, they use the word in a more figurative fashion to give substance to the somewhat vague but nonetheless intense sense of relief they experience by identifying with a heroine whose life does not resemble their own in certain crucial aspects. (1984: 90)

In Radway's (1984) study, the romance readers escaped into a fantasy world in which they identified with the heroine who is loved and cared for by the hero. The irony is that these women desire escape from the patriarchal structure of their lived experience and choose to escape to one in which patriarchy and unequal gender relations of power are equally prevalent⁶. Thus, while the act of romance reading may be interpreted as oppositional, these readers are still operating within traditional, conservative bounds - an ambiguity of which Radway (1984) is fully aware. Importantly, the Smithton readers were not aware of these contradictions.

While the female students I interviewed did not view the act of reading *Men's Health* as blatantly resistant or oppositional, the discussions revealed that, like the Smithton women, they enjoyed reading *Men's Health* because in some sense, it constituted an

⁶ As Radway argues, romantic fiction is usually structured along patriarchal lines as is evidenced by the fact that the novel "unfailingly ends at the precise moment when the heroine is gathered into the arms of the hero who declares his intention to protect her for ever" (Radway 1984: 97).

escape. As with the Smithton women, this escape was of two types. Firstly, the magazine constitutes an escape from the images of female perfection with which the female students argue the media is saturated. This theme emerged strongly in both groups as is demonstrated by the following extracts:

Lerato: Sometimes it's just nice not to see perfect women all the time.

Kath: with *Men's Health*, you don't have any of those lipstick ads, shaving gel ads and sometimes those get so overpowering in the women's magazines and after a while seeing all these perfect, airbrushed models just gets so boring.

Pontsho: In *Men's Health* it's the men who are airbrushed and have to compare themselves. So it's cool for me to read, you know – I don't have to compare myself to those guys.

This last statement highlights the second form of escape that reading *Men's Health* appears to involve for the female students. Reading *Men's Health*, the women argue, allows them escape from the particular social pressures and expectations these young women feel to look a particular way or fulfil particular gender roles and engage in particular kinds of gender performance:

Kath: Girls...they just seem to be portrayed as the weaker sex [in *Cosmopolitan*] and it irritates me so it's much easier to read something like *Men's Health*. It's the fact that like, it's a lot more assertive in its things and it's a lot more, like, 'go out there and get it' mentality. Whereas the women's magazines are like, 'How to snare your man' and 'How to make sure you keep him faithful'.

Penny: It's more light-hearted, you know. We were actually discussing the other day, wouldn't it be nice if there was a *Women's Health* because we also want light and charm and anecdotes and little stories... *Men's Health* has these trivial bits of information and corny jokes, but it's fun. The whole attitude is different to *Cosmo[politan]* or whatever, where it's always serious stuff about relationships and how you have to be a certain way, you know.

While, as I have argued above, the ‘world’ of romance fiction is constructed around patriarchal notions of gender roles, one must consider what kind of world it is that these students believe they are entering when reading *Men’s Health*. Using similar phrases and images as the male students, the girls describe the world of the text in terms of success: in money matters, careers and relationships. The people (men) who populate this world have “a career and a car”, are “economically independent, well-off” and are “going places, connected. Have a little bit of power already”. This is the world to which the female students believe themselves to escape when they read *Men’s Health*. The magazines allow them access to values and behaviour, such as anger, ambition, a “go out there and get it” mentality, which are socially constructed as a masculine.

As with the Smithton women of Radway’s (1984) study, the irony is that the students believe themselves to be escaping from the particular social structure of the ‘real’ world by entering the world of the text, which however is the product of (and in turn helps perpetuate) those patriarchal ideologies they are seeking to avoid. However, like the romance readers, while these young women produce pleasure from projecting themselves into this world, they do not identify with the “lusty” women who appear in the magazine, but identify instead with the kinds of men represented. That is, following Ellis (1982), the female readers engage in a process of identification associated with dreaming or fantasy (escape) by identifying with the masculine subject position offered by the text. In doing so, they are resisting the patriarchy of the text.

Radway’s study was published almost two decades ago. As discussed above, the past twenty years have been characterised by shifting power relations between men and women (for further discussion see Faludi 1999, Kimmel 1996, Jackson et al. 2001). The female students who took part in this study are very much a product of these changing sociological conditions as was revealed by their responses to questions about dating and relationships. From their responses, it appears rather than desiring romantic escape, they wish instead to be fully accepted into this culturally designated masculine world.

Caryn: The main reason I read it [*Men's Health*] is...I don't really want to stare at pretty women. I would rather forget that they exist and pretend I fit in here.

Penny: We're moving pretty fast and they [men] are struggling to keep up... Like almost like we're reclaiming how men are. Like, we're becoming a bit more aggressive and we're getting to the top of different companies...

For female readers then, part of the pleasures of reading *Men's Health* are the pleasures of escapism. *Men's Health* constitutes an escape from the plethora of representations of women and femininity that permeate the media. While there are (limited) female images in the magazine, female readers appear to ignore these, identifying instead with the masculine subject position. The text offers relief from images of female physical perfection, as well as from the various social expectations of women these foster.

This appropriation of the *Men's Health* text by female readers indicates a resistance to the dominant meanings and uses of the magazine as students produce a negotiated reading of the text. The mere fact that they are reading a magazine intended for men means they are using the magazine in a different way to that intended by the producers – yet another example of the polysemy of the *Men's Health* text. In addition, while the institutional producers of the magazines intend for it to be read as a 'realistic' reflection of reality, female students' discussions indicated that they decoded it as means of escape from that reality.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter was concerned with the analysis of the information generated through the research methods outlined in Chapter 3. Beginning with a textual analysis of selected articles from *Men's Health*, various themes of the text were uncovered, like for example, the magazine's focus almost exclusively on the male body, which differentiates it from most other magazines available in the South Africa print media. The discussion moved on to an analysis of the focus groups, using the textual analysis to facilitate discussion and analysis of the discourses employed by both male and female students in discussing the *Men's Health* text.

Part of the purpose of this study is to explore how readers decode and make sense of the new representations of masculinity that constitute the *Men's Health* text and what pleasures such decoding engenders. It became apparent from the discussions that both male and female readers have deeply ambivalent attitudes towards the new definitions of masculinity offered by magazines like *Men's Health*. On the one hand the focus group participants rejected some of the new elements of masculinity represented in the text (for example, grooming and nutrition), while on the other hand discussions indicated an awareness and acceptance of the changing nature of the gender order.

From the focus group discussions, it was apparent that although people read them for pleasure, they are not unaware of the problems – particularly men's health's obsessive quest for male bodily perfection. My position is not that of the cultural populists – that anything popular should be celebrated because it is productive of pleasure. Instead I argue that these pleasures are frequently the result of readers' identification with or resistance to the dominant or hegemonic ideological compulsion of the text. Indeed, despite Fiske's (1987a) stress on the joyous pleasures of resistance, most participants seemed to take pleasure in conforming to the dominant meanings, buying into the knowledge constituted by the hegemonic patriarchal, heterosexual gender discourse of the text.

Conclusion

Cultural studies attempts to synthesise the various moments in the circuit of culture: production and consumption, the text and the socio-historical context in which it is produced and read. Cultural studies does not view these processes as separate fields of study (despite often being treated as such), but instead approaches the study of media consumption by viewing media texts as a site of cultural struggle in which a variety of forms of power are exercised. The focus of this field of study is the point at which text and reader meet and the interchange of meanings that takes place at this point. This being so, the aim of this research project was to explore questions of pleasure in the consumption of a particular media text – *Men's Health* – using focus groups to discover how readers interpret and decode the text to make sense of their own lived experience.

In keeping with the tenets of cultural studies, qualitative research methods were used to generate data for this research study. Qualitative research methods such as ethnography and reception analysis have grown in popularity among media researchers as the shortcomings of quantitative methods have been increasingly realised. As some theorists have noted, “although statistical techniques can establish empirical connections between ‘fact’ of different orders, such connections do not provide a basis for prediction or theory” (Morley & Silverstone 1991: 149). Qualitative methods produce data characterised by “a rich descriptive and interpretive account of the lives and values of those subject to investigation” (Morley & Silverstone 1991: 150). Qualitative research, Morley et al (1991) argue, provides a thick description of the complexities of media consumption patterns.

As with all reception focused studies, “there is no position ‘outside’ reading from which one can read the responses of other readers” (Allen 1987: 101). Because the researcher is actively involved in the research process (through guiding and interpreting discussion) a reflexive or “self-conscious” approach is needed in addition to systematic methods of data collection and analysis (Morley et al. 1991: 154). Morley et al. highlight the problems involved in the interpretation of data by the researcher, urging for such interpretation to be “reflexive about its own partiality, incompleteness and structured gaps” (1991: 157). My interpretation of both the

textual analysis and the way the focus group participants decoded *Men's Health* is inevitably coloured by the particular interpretive community/ communities to which I belong. Qualitative research yields a narrative and, as a researcher, one is involved essentially in telling the story of other people's stories. As a result, research findings are always structured by external factors and our knowledge is thus, always partial. But as Geertz has noted, "this is not as fatal as it sounds, for ... it is not necessary to know everything in order to understand something" (in Morley et al 1991: 157).

While this research paper is limited in scope, using only six focus groups and a brief textual analysis, it still has value in that it contributes to the general store of theory about reception analysis and the relationship between media and society, text and reader. The research findings provide some evidence to suggest that readers do make a multiplicity of meanings from a text and the research suggests that this process of meaning-making is related to readers' socio-historical background. The research also suggests that one cannot prescribe what meanings will be made from a media text. To that extent, the research findings shows that readers have quite substantial power over the way they decode the text, a finding that supports the more limited view of the active audience as espoused by Hall (1980).

Fiske (1987a) argues the pleasure of the text is related closely to media text's polysemy. He argues that if a text is not polysemic, it will not be popular. This research project lends some support to this theory. Clearly male and female readers make a variety of meanings from the text, according to their social needs. This, I would suggest, is one reason for the popularity of *Men's Health*.

Increasingly, it appears that in a world where identity and relationships are ever changing and unsure, men are looking to male lifestyle magazines to discover *how to be men*. The growing circulation figures and increased range of choice in the men's magazine market bears testimony to this. These Cultural and social changes have characterised the last fifty years as Feminist ideas have gained increasing influence in society. This, along with the rise in the Gay movement has led to the destabilisation of traditional gender roles. To compensate, old forms of masculinity have been replaced by an "ornamental culture" – a postmodern culture of display in which men's sense of their masculinity is dependent on image, style and consumerism. Magazines such as

these tell them what to think, what to buy, what to wear, and even what to eat. The analysis of the focus group research suggests that men use the magazines to reaffirm their dominant position in society, seeing it as a realist text that both describes and prescribes the life they should be leading.

Female participants use the magazines in quite a different way; their pleasure in the text is gained by decoding it in ways that negotiate its preferred meanings. Instead of regarding the magazine as an object of a voyeuristic or erotic gaze, female participants identified with the masculine subject position of the text, using the magazine as a means of escape: from the homogeneous representations of women that characterise women's consumer magazines; and from the unequal gender relations of power against which they still struggle.

My research produced little evidence, however, to support the *jouissance/plaisir* divide theorised by Barthes (1970) and Fiske (1987a). Fiske theorised that the most active pleasures derive from resisting the ideological impetus of the text and from producing negotiated meanings. Indeed, measuring pleasure is inherently problematic. For instance, how can one decide that the female student's pleasures in producing a negotiated reading of the text which sees it as an 'escape' from some of the realities of their lives is any greater than male students' pleasures in preferentially decoding *Men's Health* and reading it as a 'realist' text, which serves to reconfirm their positions in the social world?

One of the most exciting avenues opened up by this research, and one that could benefit from further study is the way the women readers made sense of the *Men's Health* text. In the focus groups it became clear that in decoding the text, female participants resisted some of the ideological impetus of the text by resisting the patriarchal messages inscribed therein. In doing so, they appropriated the text for their own uses to gain a sense of empowerment in what continues to be a male-dominated socio-historical context characterised by unequal gender relations of power.

While this research supports claims that audiences are, at least to some extent, active in producing meanings from media texts, it also supports the thesis that the media have power in society. In discussing sexism and gender inequality with relation to

Men's Health, participants tended to argue that these magazines were simply reflecting the socio-historical reality, by arguing that “that’s just the way it is”.

Comments such as these indicate participants acknowledge that,

ideas, responses, ways of talking do not exist within each individual as self-contained or internally consistent, but as part of a wider social context, in which we as researchers play a part. We are either assumed to share their position (‘you know what I mean’) or to be naively unaware of it (‘what men really want’) or defensive of it (‘I know it’s sexist/sad but...’) and so on. (Jackson et al. 2001: 172).

For example, one of the focus group participants, James, is defensive of the widely accepted social attitudes regarding gender relations which he apparently shares. He is 3rd year journalism student and has been exposed to learning and current academic thinking around issues of masculinity and gender. In addition, just prior to the focus group discussion, he wrote an essay on men's magazines. However, he is a male in modern South African society and as such belongs not only to the more academic interpretative community of Rhodes University, but also to the male community which has particular concerns and interests to protect. These are two conflicting positions and the tension between them is evident in the discourse he uses. To the extent that (mostly male) participants saw the representations of masculinity and gender relations in *Men's Health* as natural, the media have power because they reify and naturalise systems of domination and inequality.

Therefore, the theory that the media and society are mutually constitutive appears to be supported by this research although the way this occurs cannot easily be predicted. Whether *Men's Health* is a ‘realistic’ reflection of masculinity or not, it is undoubtedly true that the magazine constructs representations of masculinity and manhood in very specific ways and that these representations are a source of both pleasure and displeasure for readers, both male and female.

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Interview Guide

I am conducting research about *Men's Health* and the popularity and growth of men's magazines in South Africa in the last decade. I am trying to understand why both men and women enjoy reading the magazine and what readers think it is saying about men and women and the relationship between them in today's socio-historical context.

A. Dispositions and discourses

1. Do you discuss the relationship between girls and boys? With who? Friends? Family? What role, if any, did your parents play a role in forming your opinions? What about Hollywood movies? Magazines? *Men's Health*?
2. Would you dislike it if a girl asked you out on a date? Do you think it is the guy's job to initiate a date?
3. If you go out on a date with a girl, do you pay for the date? If you pay, do you expect the girl to kiss you (at least) or have sex with you? (for all male discussions)
4. If you go out on a date with a guy, do you expect him to pay for it? If he does, do you feel any obligation to kiss him or have sex with him? (for female discussions)
5. Do you think men and women are inherently different? In what ways?

B. General questions of regularity of readership, purchasing and so forth

1. Do you buy *Men's Health*? When do you usually buy it? Do you subscribe? When did you first start to read it? What did you read before?
2. What made you buy/look at/read *Men's Health*? Who do you think it appeals to? How do you read it (when, where?).
3. Have you ever discussed articles in male magazines like *Men's Health* with anyone (partner, friends, fellow students etc)? What do they think of them? What kind of things do you or would you talk about? What do you do with the magazines when you've finished reading them?

C. Pleasure and displeasure

1. What makes you prefer *Men's Health* to other men's magazines available? How do you think it differs from other men's magazines (e.g. *FHM*, *GQ*)

2. What do you like/dislike about the magazine? What do you think of the pictures/articles? Anything you particularly like/dislike/remember from those you've read?
4. How different do you think these magazines are from other magazines available (e.g. special interest magazines, women's magazines etc)?
5. What would you like to see included that isn't already there? Anything that should be excluded?

D. Representations of gender

1. What kind of men appear in *Men's Health*? What kind of men do you notice appearing in the articles, adverts and fashion spreads? What do you think about the images of men in the magazine?
(Elicit: Do they show an 'ideal' of a successful man? Is it something – male readers aspire to? Should they aspire to this?)
2. What kind(s) of lifestyle(s) do you think are shown in *Men's Health*? Does the lifestyle represented by the magazine differ from/resemble your lifestyle? If so, how?
(Elicit: Are the lifestyles realistic?)
3. How do you think women are portrayed? What do you think of the images of women in the magazine?
4. What kind of relationship do you think is shown to exist between men and women?
(Elicit: is it realistic? Do they notice that it is heterosexual? etc)
5. In the last 10 years many new men's magazines have appeared. Why do you think that is? Do you think men are changing? If so, in what ways? If not, can you think of other reasons for the growth of men's magazines?)

Hand out two excerpts from *Men's Health*:

May 2003 cover

Group discussion around:

The photo of the male model? Realistic? Homosexual? Do you think the magazine would sell better if the cover featured a female model? Why/not?

Do you like or dislike it? Why?

Group discussion of the articles focused around these questions or issues:

What is the article saying? Do you agree with the message? Give reasons for your answers. What do you like/dislike?

Do you think these texts are typical of the kind of stories and images found in *Men's Health*?

If you were describing this article to a friend, how would you do so? What is the story?

[Elicit: are the readers aware of the reassuring bent to the article? Does the pleasure they feel when reading it arise as a result of the way the article constructs certitude? Do they notice the heterosexual discourse? Or is it invisible? Do they read with or against the text? In other words is this plaisir or jouissance?]

