

## **A 'Manual on Masculinity'? The consumption and use of mediated images of masculinity among teenage boys in Ireland**

DEBBIE GING

*School of Communications, Dublin City University*

**ABSTRACT:** Most of the research on masculinity in Ireland stresses the influences of family, work and education in the construction of gender (Ferguson, 1998; Ferguson and Synott, 1995; Ferguson and Reynolds, 2001; McKeown et al., 1998, Owens, 2000). Although the impact of the entertainment media is regularly alluded to, there is a dearth of empirical work in this area. While it is generally agreed that mediated images play a highly influential role in young people's lives, both the nature and the scope of this influence remain unclear in the absence of concrete ethnographies of reception. This paper discusses the findings of a quantitative and qualitative investigation into Irish male teenagers' consumption and reception of a broad range of media texts and discusses these findings in relation to the relevant literature. It points to the shortcomings of both 'hypodermic needle' theories, which claim direct media influence, and of some active audience theories, which posit consumers as impervious to ideological influence. Contrary to popular discourses which frame the media as an autonomous, regressive force that lags behind a more progressive reality, the findings presented here suggest that mediated fictions are part of wider 'gender scripts' (Nixon, 1996) that both inform and are informed by the social structures within which (male) viewers are immersed.

**KEYWORDS:** Masculinity, entertainment media, effects, the male audience, 'affirmation texts'

### **Introduction**

The past two decades have borne witness to important public debates about men's roles in a changing society. This focus on men and masculinity has challenged the hitherto invisibility not only of male power and privilege but also of male suffering and anxiety, and it is primarily in the media that these new and often contradictory

discourses on masculinity are being articulated and (re)negotiated. In Britain alone, the popular press has coined a plethora of new terms such as the New Man, the New Lad, Millennium Man, the Dad Lad, Metrosexual Man and Colditz Man (Beynon, 2002). However, as well as offering men and women 'the culture's dominant definitions of themselves' (Gamman and Marshment, 1988: 2), mediated fictions are also a highly responsive and expedient source of information with regard to how society is thinking and talking about recent changes to the 'gender-scape'. Oftentimes, these discourses are confusing and contradictory: in the entertainment media, gangsters, criminals and hard men are enjoying a resurgence in popularity; yet a set of counter-discourses in the news media expresses a fear of deviant or anti-social male youth (Devlin, 2000) and of 'men running wild' (Beynon, 2002: 128).

Most academic studies of masculinity in the media employ feminist critical analysis and have tended to focus on the textual representation of men and masculinity. By and large, they conclude that the majority of mainstream media texts perpetuate dominant ideologies of gender (Donald, 1992; Hanke, 1998; Strate, 1992). However, such approaches have been challenged by theorists who claim that, rather than presenting an ideologically coherent view of masculinity, the mainstream media are increasingly involved in contemporary society's 'troubling' or problematisation of masculinity. Postmodern and post-feminist theorists, in particular, tend to view contemporary images of machismo not as reasserting or valorising hegemonic masculinity but rather as articulating anxieties about the impossibility and redundancy of the hypermasculine. In film studies, a number of influential theorists (Cohan and Hark, 1993; Tasker, 1993; Neale, 1983 and Smith, 1995) have argued that the hegemony of the heroic or hypermasculine male has always been underpinned by insecurities and contradictions. Cohan and Hark (1993: 3), for example, contend that Hollywood film texts 'rarely efface the disturbances and slippages that result from putting men on screen as completely and as seamlessly as the culture – and the criticism – has assumed'.

Common to all of these theoretical standpoints is the construction of an ideal or hypothetical spectator who is configured by the text's mode of address. What is largely absent from the literature, however, is what Annette Kuhn (2002) refers to as the 'social audience', in other words the actual spectators and consumers of mediated images. According to Hanke (1998:185), 'men are missing as television viewers. Apart from the tradition of film study which has theorised the male gaze and the male spectator, masculinity as a dimension to social audiences' reception practices remains invisible except in a few studies (Morley, 1986; Steinman, 1992; Fiske and Dawson, 1996).' In Ireland, although the impact of the entertainment media is regularly alluded to in the sociological literature on masculinity, Irish media studies has not yet produced any significant work in this area. With the exception of a small number of journal articles and book chapters on masculinity in cinema by Barton (1999, 2004), Pettitt (1997), Murphy (2003), Ging (2004) and McCabe (1994), there is virtually no scholarship in Irish media studies that

focuses exclusively on masculinity. Ethnographic or reception studies, outside of Lohan's (2000) research on men's use of the domestic telephone and Curtin and Linehan's (2002) study of masculinity and urban space, are also notably absent.

The present study thus steps into two gaps; firstly, it addresses the lack of attention given to the media in masculinity studies in Ireland and, secondly, it responds to the absence of masculinity and the male audience in Irish media studies. As it is the first study of its kind in Ireland, it is intended as a preliminary mapping of the field, which raises a small number of key questions. It is therefore conceptualised not as derivative, but rather as grounded in a specific place/space in Ireland in 2003. In this sense, it responds to Judith Mayne's call for more specific, local studies, which focus 'less on large theories that can account for everything, and more on the play and variation that exist at particular junctures between the competing claims of film spectatorship – as the function of an apparatus, as a means of ideological control, on the one hand, and as a series of discontinuous, heterogeneous, and sometimes empowering responses, on the other' (Mayne, 2002: 45).

### **Methodology**

The current study emerges in the context of these diverse and frequently oppositional perspectives on the relationship between media and audiences. Since it asks not only what and how male teenagers consume but also attempts to situate participant responses within wider social contexts, the methodology adopted was underpinned by the need to analyse media and media use in the context of boys' everyday lives: the questionnaires and focus group discussions were thus designed to elicit media-specific data as well as more general information about boys' attitudes toward gender and social change. The study was carried out in two consecutive phases: Phase One involved a questionnaire containing both quantitative and qualitative questions, completed by 187 transition-year students from a total of 9 secondary schools. Phase Two consisted of seven focus groups with students (between 5 and 7 per group) who had participated in Phase One. These were held in five of the initial nine participating schools. Data collection took place between November 2002 and May 2003.

The schools were evenly divided between rural and urban locations across the country, and included both co-educational and single-sex as well as religious and inter-denominational schools.<sup>1</sup> Five of the 9 schools were running the Exploring Masculinities programme in transition year.<sup>2</sup> The questionnaires were coded by a research assistant and an SPSS database was used to generate the key quantitative findings of the study. The open/qualitative components of the questionnaires were transcribed, coded and subsequently analysed for repetition of particular words, concepts and discourses as well for evidence of radically conflicting responses. This systematic approach to the qualitative data ensures that quotes selected are representative rather than random or arbitrary utterances selected to support or refute emerging hypotheses.

The focus groups were designed as recorded, semi-structured group discussions, with a variety of visual material (film clips, magazine and television adverts, song lyrics, photos of media personalities, etc.) used to stimulate discussion. Importantly, the 'artificiality' implicit in watching and discussing media images in a classroom environment was not perceived as problematic. It emerged from the questionnaires that participants spent a lot of time discussing films and television programmes they had watched among friends and classmates. Group responses and engagements were thus considered to be as relevant as individual responses, since it is in formal and informal group situations, or what Curtin and Linehan (2002: 68) refer to as 'geographies of inclusion', that boys and young men learn and perform the rules of normative masculinity. As well as enabling participants to discuss texts and genres in much the same way as they normally would, the group dynamic provided a rich primary source of information as to how young men interact and how collective opinion shapes dominant responses to mediated images.<sup>3</sup>

Boys in transition year were chosen because these students are generally aged between 15 and 17. The late teens are considered to be a crucial phase in identity formation and are usually also the time at which most anxieties and insecurities are experienced. According to Paul van Heeswyk (1997: 5), 'The central psychological task for late adolescence is what Erik Erikson (1968) called "identity formation"'. The results of a recent *Irish Times*/MRBI poll (2003) indicate that the late teens is also the period during which young people consume most media and are most exposed to popular culture. According to Brown et al., 'individuals actively and creatively sample available cultural symbols, myths, and rituals as they produce their identities. For teens, the mass media are central to this process because they are a convenient source of cultural options (Brown et al., 1994: 813).' Choosing transition-year students also provided the researcher with extant groups for the focus groups discussions.

### **Quantitative findings**

The purpose of the quantitative phase of the study was to establish which media forms, genres and texts were popular among boys of this age. Although variables such as geographical location (urban or rural), social class and whether students attended single-sex or co-educational schools were encoded into the database, these generally did not produce significant statistical variations. The most salient differences tended to emerge between the individual school and peer cultures, whereby, for example, students who had transition year coordinators committed to gender issues tended to have more diverse media tastes and were significantly more accepting of alternative or non-normative images of masculinity. Neither the quantitative nor the qualitative data produced significant statistical variations between participants who had undergone the Exploring Masculinities programme and those who had not.

### Media use

The most interesting overall finding to emerge from the quantitative data is the enduring popularity of traditional leisure activities, such as sport, reading and socialising with friends, and of 'old media', such as television. Participants reported spending an average of 3 hours per day watching television, which concurs with the findings of the 2003 *Irish Times/TNS MRBI Youth Poll* and with the 1999 *Youthscape Survey* (1999: 21). This supports Sonia Livingstone's claim that, 'Despite all the hype about new media displacing old media, for most children television remains far and away the most popular medium in terms of time spent with it' (Livingstone, 2002: 60). The popularity of films and television is also evidenced by the amount of time participants spend talking about them: 87 per cent said they talked about television with their friends, while 93 per cent said they talked about the films they watch with friends and classmates.

When participants were asked what they liked to do in their spare time, the most frequently cited activities were television (62 per cent), sports (40 per cent) and spending time with friends (30 per cent). Cinema (25 per cent), reading (17 per cent), computers (16 per cent), music (15 per cent) and gaming (13 per cent) were the other major activities mentioned. Some 80 per cent of participants living in rural areas said they watched television, compared to 57 per cent of those living in urban areas. Boys living in urban areas indicated that they liked to play more sport (44 per cent versus 29 per cent) and to spend more time 'hanging out' with friends (36 per cent versus 19 per cent) than their rural peers. More specific questions about the use of individual media indicated that 21 per cent attend the cinema regularly, 65 per cent regularly watch films on video or DVD, 57 per cent read for pleasure, 98 per cent watch television and 72 per cent play video games.

### Top texts and genres

The study participants consume mainly American and British media. Texts and images which have been the subject of considerable criticism regarding their portrayal of masculinity, most notably action films, war films, male-oriented digital games, the revamped gangster genre and performers such as Eminem featured centrally among this data. However, while male-oriented genres and stereotypical representations of masculinity were strongly evident in participants' tastes and preferences across all media forms, this was most evident in relation to films and digital games. Television and musical tastes, on the other hand, tended to be less stereotyped, with boys consuming some texts and genres typically associated with female audiences. However, they were less enthusiastic about discussing these genres in the focus groups than they were about more stereotypically male genres.

The most popular television genres were comedy and sports or sports-related dramas, such as *Dream Team* and *Footballers' Wives*. In response to an open question, the ten most popular television programmes were (in order of popularity)

*The Simpsons, Friends, The Sopranos, Jackass, Family Guy, Dream Team, Ali G., Scrubs, Eastenders* and *Father Ted*. The ten most disliked television programmes were soaps, *Fair City, Coronation Street, Neighbours, Star Trek, Eastenders, Emmerdale, Barney*, cookery, garden shows, *Home and Away* and *Prime Time*. However, although participants listed typically female genres such as soap, cookery and gardening programmes among their least favourite, when asked specifically whether they watched soaps, 62 per cent answered positively. Seventy-seven per cent of participants living in rural areas said they watched soaps, compared to only 57 per cent of participants living in urban areas.

The most popular film genres cited by participants were action (60 per cent), comedy (54 per cent), horror (29 per cent) and thriller (19 per cent). When asked in an open question what their favourite movies were from the previous year (2002–2003), the most frequently cited were (in order of popularity) *The Lord of the Rings, American Pie, The Fast and The Furious, Blade 1 and 2, Signs, Shrek, Austin Powers, Star Wars, Scary Movie* and *Harry Potter*.<sup>4</sup> However, participants quoted such a diverse range of film titles that a generic analysis of these lists yielded more robust results: action films accounted for 46 per cent of all the titles listed, 19 per cent were comedy, 7 per cent teen comedy, 7 per cent horror, 6 per cent crime, 3 per cent thriller and 4 per cent drama. Participants thus attributed more popularity to horror and thriller and less to gangster/crime than their selection of film titles indicated was actually the case. Participants also had very clear ideas regarding the gendering of film genres: when asked what genres they thought appealed most to men, 80 per cent said action, 23 per cent horror, 22 per cent said comedy, 18 per cent said pornography and 14 per cent said thriller. The top five genres considered to appeal most to women were romance (84 per cent), comedy (21 per cent), drama (19 per cent), chick flicks (9 per cent) and action (4 per cent). Again, the popularity of horror, thriller and pornography was overestimated, suggesting that young men are conscious of certain expectations made of them regarding their choice of film genres. In spite of this, 43 per cent of participants considered that the films they themselves watched were not aimed explicitly at men and 51 per cent said they sometimes watched films aimed at women. This indicates the extent to which the male-oriented appeal of much mainstream cinema is perceived as gender-neutral by male audiences.

When asked in an open question who their favourite male actors were, the most frequently cited were (in order of popularity) Mel Gibson, Bruce Willis, Robert de Niro, Adam Sandler, Samuel L Jackson, Al Pacino, Vin Diesel, Jim Carey, Nicholas Cage, Tom Cruise and Will Smith, all of whom star in predominantly American films from the action, gangster and (teen) comedy genres. Favourite female actors, who were admired for their looks rather than their acting, were Sarah Michelle Gellar, Halle Berry, Cameron Diaz, Jennifer Lopez, Sandra Bullock, Jennifer Aniston, Julia Roberts, Angelina Jolie, Jennifer Love Hewitt and Penelope Cruz (only one participant mentioned an Irish female actor, Pauline McGlynn from *Father Ted*).

The most popular digital games among Irish 15–17-year-old males at the time of data collection (January – May 2003) were *Grand Theft Auto*, *FIFA soccer*, *Championship Manager*, *Final Fantasy Games*, *Metal Gear Solid*, *Medal of Honour*, *Resident Evil*, *Gran Turismo*, *Colin McRae* and *ISS pro evolution*. A generic analysis of the games listed revealed that the most popular genres were action (52 per cent), sports-soccer (20 per cent) and other sports-related games, including driving, wrestling, snowboarding, rugby and basketball. Strategy (5 per cent), role-playing (4 per cent) and simulation (1 per cent) were considerably less popular. As was the case with film genres, participants displayed a strong awareness of gender segregation in the games market. When asked whether they thought there were games aimed specifically at men, 88 per cent of those who answered said yes, while 64 per cent said there were games aimed specifically at women. When asked to explain the difference between men's and women's games, most participants alluded to violence, killing, action, fighting, gore and sex as key ingredients of men's games, whereas women's games were considered to be primarily about dancing, singing, designing stuff, creating families or puzzles.

With regard to musical tastes, rock was the most popular genre (18 per cent), followed by dance (17 per cent), rap (11 per cent) and pop (11 per cent). The ten most popular bands were The Red Hot Chilli Peppers, U2, Scooter, Coldplay, Eminem, Nirvana, Oasis, Dr Dre, Blink 182 and Nelly. Although male bands and musicians were the most popular, numerous female artists were also mentioned, including Britney Spears, Dido, Christina Aguilera, Alanis Morissette, Shakira, All Saints, Avril Lavigne and Alicia Keys. When asked what type of music they disliked, most participants mentioned boy bands and metal bands such as Korn and Slipknot.

While high percentages of participants said they had, at some stage, read men's magazines such as *Loaded* (84 per cent), *FHM* (78 per cent), *Maxim* (41 per cent) and *Front* (15 per cent), with the number of participants who had read these magazines being consistently higher among participants living in urban areas, very few participants said that they were regular readers of these publications: only 25 participants from the entire sample (of 187) claimed to read *Loaded* regularly and only 22 said they were regular readers of *FHM*. Interestingly, a similar percentage (29 per cent) said that they sometimes read women's magazines, though only 15 participants said they did so regularly.

In response to the question, 'If you could choose to be a famous person, who would you be and why?' the top four celebrities chosen were David Beckham, Roy Keane, Bill Gates and Eminem. Almost half of participants said they would choose to be a sports personality, roughly a quarter said they would be a famous musician and one fifth named actors. Very few participants chose political or historical figures and nobody chose a religious figure, which echoes the findings of Gash and Conway's (1997) study of heroic figures with Irish and American third and fourth-grade children. Only a handful chose politicians or celebrities working in a political context. A relatively small percentage of participants (16 per cent) chose

Irish figures, with the vast majority being American or British sportsmen, musicians or actors. There was a strong co-relation between sex of subject and the sex of the figures chosen. Only one participant from the entire sample chose a female celebrity, Samantha Mumba.

Taken together, the quantitative findings of this study do not indicate significant deviations from studies such as the *Boys to Men* report (1999: 3), which found that the media texts most watched by boys in the United States are characterised by highly stereotypical representations of men and women and contain significant levels of violence. Similarly, the American *Fair Play* study (Children Now, 1999), which analyses many of the video games that were popular among the Irish participants, concludes that the majority of the games offer only male player-controlled characters, contain serious violence and accentuate gender stereotypes. However, while it is unlikely that the ubiquity of such representations has no impact whatever on young viewers, studies which assume a direct, one-way relationship between media consumption and masculine socialisation tend to overlook the possibility that audiences use fantasy and fiction consciously, creatively or ironically, as well as the possibility that regressive images of masculinity might be doing more than merely lagging behind a more progressive reality.

### **Qualitative findings**

While socially-specific readings of media cannot be used to generate representative or universalising theories, they can 'put flesh' on existing theoretical frameworks (Fiske and Dawson, 1996), by revealing readings that are both supportive and contradictory to certain hypotheses. The qualitative findings of this study were derived from the five focus groups, as well as from the open-ended questions in the questionnaires. Some qualitative data also emerged from e-mail exchanges and individual interviews that took place after the focus groups. Given the perceived need to situate participants' media consumption patterns, viewing practices and tastes and preferences within the wider context of their experiences of and opinions about masculinity, the focus groups and the questionnaires covered a wide range of both media-specific and general questions relating to gender.

### **Men are from Mars, women are from Venus**

In terms of the boys' general attitudes, there was strong evidence of internalisation of postfeminist discourses on gender. Participants spoke of gender difference in predominantly biodeterminist terms. This 'equal but different' discourse on gender equality was strongly reflected in and clearly influenced the way in which the boys consumed and understood media. The following e-mail exchange with a participant from School A was representative of the majority viewpoint:

I: If we are getting closer to equality, why are the men and women in films and on TV so different?

A: Men and women are different. Not better or worse, just different. We are getting closer to equality and rightly so. Men and women should be treated equally and given the same opportunities. Men and women are portrayed differently because, quite simply, they are different. Even if boys and girls weren't exposed to the media, the boys would still play soccer and shoot each other with toy guns, while the girls would still want to take care of dolls and dress them up. It's the way we are. This brings me on to your next question.

I: Where do you learn how to behave like a man?

A: The answer is that we would naturally act like a man even if we weren't taught. We would still hunt and fight without outside influences (media, parents, etc.). I suppose that we mostly learn how to behave by our peers.

This discourse was also apparent in participants' widespread acceptance of the gendering of media as normal, as well as in their lack of awareness of the persistence of a dominant male gaze in popular culture. Their internalisation of 'revolving door' rhetoric enabled them to accept the sexual objectification of women as unproblematic on the grounds that men too are objectified in popular culture. Such attitudes were noticeably less prevalent, however, in the groups whose TY coordinators were committed to gender issues.

Feminism and feminists were viewed in almost exclusively negative terms, although most participants believed gender equality to be both desirable and, for the large part, already achieved. They spoke of equal employment opportunities in positive terms, they felt their lot was considerably better than that of their fathers' and they embraced the idea of women in the workplace. Participants also displayed positive and optimistic views about fatherhood, and many said they would be prepared to be stay-at-home dads when they were older. However, as Anthony MacMahon (1997) has cogently argued, this optimistic rhetoric of new mannism may effectively be preventing rather than facilitating progress by promoting the myth that equality has been achieved as well as facilitating a widespread tolerance for ironic sexism (according to whose logic sexism is now sufficiently outmoded to be considered funny).

Indeed, many of the contradictions which underpin postfeminist/new mannist accounts of gender equality were strongly evident in the data. In spite of the widespread belief that gender equality has been achieved, when asked who did most of the housework, 63 per cent of participants replied mothers, 4 per cent said everyone in the family, 2 per cent said both parents, 2 per cent said themselves and only 3 per cent said their fathers did it (22 per cent did not answer this question). Meanwhile 20 per cent of participants said their mothers worked at home, compared with only 1 per cent of fathers. Discussions about the stereotypical portrayal of women in certain games, films and men's magazines generally prompted liberal

responses, whereby it was agreed that women do this kind of work out of choice – ‘They’re getting paid’, ‘They chose their career’, ‘They’re not complaining’ – and that there are equivalent magazines showing naked men for women.

### **Resistance, rebellion and oppositional readings**

Participants had mixed views regarding the impact of media on their own attitudes, identities and behaviour. Some felt the media were a powerful influence, though mostly only on children younger than themselves, whereas others felt that it was possible to resist the influence of media if you were intelligent enough. As Joseph Tobin (2000) found with Hawaiian schoolchildren’s talk about the media, participants tended to cite different – oftentimes opposing – discourses on media effects from the larger culture. In fact, Tobin reads the relentless citationality of the students’ responses partly as a form of resistance, which enables them to answer the interviewer’s questions without being self-revelatory or self-incriminating. Although participants in this study were generally keen to show that they did not take action heroes seriously, they frequently oscillated between the extremes of media effects discourses on the one hand, and active audience discourses on the other, sometimes in the same sentence:

#### Focus Group 1:

I: What about the heroes of those films, right, the action muscle men or whatever, do you take them seriously?

A: No

I: Not at all?

B: No [laughter]

#### E-mail exchange with participant from Group 1

I: Are they positive role models for young men?

A: In many ways yes! Like sticking up for yourself and others! But being violent [*sic*] isn’t leading a good example!

I: Do you think they influence young men?

Not really because those characters are in different worlds than we are!

#### Focus group 6:

I: ...and do you think the films you watch on the tv have any effect on you or influence you in any way?

A: When you see all the car films and all you just want cars

B: Yes

C: All the gunge and you just want action and all that...but you are hardly going to go out and kill people

B: No you don’t want to kill people no way

E-mail exchange with participant from Group 1

- I: Do you think the characters in these films/games are positive role models for men?
- B: Not really as in the sense of all the action and killing. But for instance in the Die Hard films, he is trying to save people's lives especially his wife's life, this can have a good impact if you look at it like that.

Participants also exhibited ostensibly conflicting views about media realism: while realistic violence and fight scenes were frequently given as reasons for liking particular video games and films, participants were also keen to point out that these texts had nothing to do with real life. The perceived realism of *The Sopranos*, for example, was seen to add to the programme's dramatic credibility, yet only in relation to American life. It was popular precisely because 'they're different from us' and because 'It shows real life in America, over here it wouldn't be real'. This concurs with comments made in Lacey's (2002) study by male British viewers of *The Sopranos*, for whom the iconography of Italian-American culture and mob masculinity were seen as much more glamorous than, for example, the eastend gangsters of Guy Ritchie's films.

Although, when asked directly, participants tended to downplay the effects of the media, in discussions about the MTV stunt show *Jackass*, they often spoke enthusiastically about infamous copy-cat stunts that they themselves or young men they knew of had been involved in. Two of the groups spoke of real fight clubs that had been set up in Cork and Dundalk in the wake of David Fincher's film. These discussions, often based on second-hand anecdotes, were highly animated and sometimes difficult for the researcher to follow as one story led to the next. For participants, however, this was clearly familiar territory.

Focus group 7:

- A: In America fight clubs like that went up all over the place after that, then people realised they were getting punched in the face.
- B: I know a place they did start a fight club
- I: Here in Drogheda?
- B: Yes
- I: Did it last long?
- B: It lasted about two or three months, until the parents started getting suspicious.
- I: So the parents put a stop to it?
- B: They just kind of copped on. The Matrix or something came out on release ... no it wasn't, it was ... they stopped for a while. It was getting closer to when Jackass came out. We were in the library one day and they got one of the fellows to go into the internet and he was there looking at it and the boys came in and there was murder. I've seen it on video, it's

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better than Jackass, it's the most original thing I've ever seen, they go through the shopping centre on a bike and crash into the security guard and the security guard....

I: And they video this?

B: Yes they have it all videoed.

I: Are they from this school?

B: No they are not from this school, they are from St. X's.

While the majority of texts that were popular among the boys were understood by the researcher to be 'safe', in the sense that they do not challenge or threaten normative masculinities, they were often perceived by participants as risqué or threatening to the *status quo*. This was particularly evident in discussions about digital games such as *Grand Theft Auto* and television programmes such as *Jackass* and *Dirty Sanchez*, where the self-conscious performance and celebration of immature or 'blokeish' behaviour, after the viewing event, was a key part of the pleasure associated with these programmes. In these discussions, the boundaries between the televised stunts, real stunts performed by participants and their friends and the performance of pleasure associated with these stunts were often blurred.

Although most participants agreed that blokeish or immature behaviour was 'cool', they were unable or reluctant to explain why in the group discussions. In an e-mail exchange with a participant from focus group 2, he explained:

See, in school it's a jungle, survival of the fittest, if people know they can walk on you they will. You gotta have a certain image to survive (i.e. rough man, stud or messer). Messer is probably the best way to describe myself in school.

However, whether for most boys adopting the role of 'messer' is a conscious strategy for survival, a means of achieving peer group approval or a form of 'protest masculinity' (Connell, 1995) was unclear. Certainly, both the qualitative responses from the questionnaire and comments made in the focus groups suggested that some of the participants had internalised certain negative or pathologising discourses about men and masculinity. This was most evident in their perceptions of women as more mature, more complex, more emotional and better at dealing with problems than men on account of their ability to talk. Men, on the other hand, were often described as insecure, immature and unable to show their emotions. When asked, for example, whether boys and girls experienced different problems, many of the responses alluded to emotion and boys' inability to talk about problems:

Guys have trouble talking about problems.

We prefer to bottle it up inside until we go insane.

Not really but men tend to act as if they haven't got problems so you may think men do not have problems.

Yes, we can't express ourselves as easily. We don't express ourselves easily because we are afraid our friends will find out and we will be sneered. Yes they have to act "hard" in front of other fellas  
Boys have to act hard and drink to show off.

According to Imelda Whelehan (2000: 66), lad culture's consumers' acceptance of and collusion in the portrayal of men as simple, lager-swilling creatures is driven by a desire to evade complex issues of gender inequality: 'Somewhere along the line it is as if 1.5 million men are basking in reflections of their own dumbing down as part of a refusal to examine their most deep-seated prejudices against women.' While participants were often critical of the constraints imposed on boys to suppress emotion and act hard, they also seemed to derive considerable pleasure from the performance of tough, blokeish masculinity. It remains unclear, however, whether and to what extent these boys simply accepted boorish and immature behaviour as an innate masculine trait or as a 'necessary fiction' (Nixon, 1996) for survival, or whether the pleasures offered by the male-only, responsibility-free world of *Jackass* and *Grand Theft Auto* were part of a response – conscious or otherwise – to the social problematisation of masculinity.

### Lad Culture

According to Whelehan (2000), Lad Culture is part of a conscious backlash against feminism, political correctness and new mannism, which invites a knowing complicity with the male audience ('who should know better') based on the escape clause of irony: those who take offence at Lad Culture's sexism are accused of being humourless or of not 'getting' its ironic intentions. David Gauntlett (2002) and Natasha Walter (1998), on the other hand, read Lad Culture as an anxious attempt to come to terms with changing masculinity. Gauntlett claims that, since Lad Culture is primarily about sparring playfully with feminism, it appeals only to men in their thirties or forties, and can have little meaning for a generation of younger men, who accept women as equals and do not feel threatened or emasculated by social change.

While very few of the Irish participants regularly read lad magazines such as *Loaded*, *FHM* or *Front* (approx. 20 per cent), they did not consider themselves as excluded from the target audience of men's magazines and were generally enthusiastic and uncritical about the content. Moreover, a significant number of other, typically laddish media texts were highly popular. These included *Jackass*, *Dirty Sanchez* and *Men Behaving Badly*, American teen/'gross-out' movies such as *American Pie* and *Road Trip*, the new gangster cycle in British cinema (exemplified by the films of Guy Ritchie) and digital games such as *Grand Theft Auto*. Although the appeal of such texts is routinely attributed by critics and media theorists to their deployment of laddish irony (Monk, 2000; Chibnall, 2001), the boys in this study appeared to have little or no conscious grasp of laddism's anti-feminist

backlash politics, nor did they display any coherent understanding of ironic sexism, outside of commenting that 'you're not supposed to take it seriously'. None of the participants in any of the focus groups was able to explain *Loaded's* tagline, 'For men who should know better'.

When asked whether there were particular advertisements on television that participants liked, 38 out of the 81 participants who responded cited alcohol adverts, with Carlsberg, Budwesier, WKD and Smirnoff Ice most frequently mentioned. The popularity of beer advertising, in particular, would appear to support Strate's (1992: 5) claim that beer commercials 'constitute a guide for becoming a man, a rule book for appropriate male behaviour, in short, a manual on masculinity.' However, whereas work tends to play a key role in American beer advertising, with mechanics, cowboys, construction workers, lumberjacks and farm hands rewarding their labours in a homosocial ritual at the end of the day, the most popular beer ads among the Irish participants were those which celebrated laddish camaraderie and a responsibility-free lifestyle, in particular the Carlsberg and WKD campaigns.<sup>5</sup> Typical responses were:

- Carlsberg ads. Because you can relate to most of the fantasies they portray. Nearly every man thinks of the Carlsberg ads!!
- Carlsberg – Because I'd love to live in a Carlsberg world.
- WKD ads. Because they relate to friends having a laugh.

The celebration of laddish pleasures, coupled with the absence of ironic readings, was particularly evident in relation to the Sony Playstation game series *Grand Theft Auto*, which was the most popular game at the time of fieldwork (January–May 2003). This game combines elements of driving, first-person shooting and strategy genres, and can therefore be played at a number of different levels. However, participants' descriptions of and responses to the game showed a clear interest in the criminal aspects, with a strong focus on drugs-running, shooting and picking up prostitutes. The game carries an 18 certificate and is aimed at an older generation who can tap into the 'retro' appeal of 1980s brash clothing and music and the ironic sexism played out by its male gangster characters. However, there was little evidence that participants read the game ironically, and few expressed interest in its aesthetic values or humour, concentrating almost exclusively on action and criminal activities. The main appeal of the game was that it allows you to do anything you want. According to one participant, it is 'Fun and challenging and feckless. You steal cars, kick the shit out of ordinary people, destroy and wreak havoc' or, as another participant put it, 'things you would get punished for in real life'. The following focus group exchanges were typical:

- I: So why is this game so good?  
 A: Because you can do whatever you want.  
 I: Why, is it 18?  
 A: Because you can kill people you can do anything.

- I: Em, what's this about because I've never played it?  
A: Going around killing people, stealing cars.  
B: Doing jobs, drug running.  
C: Picking up prostitutes.  
I: Drug running?  
A: Pickin' up da hoos.  
[Laughter]  
C: Running round da Vice City wit ya bitches.

Rather than enabling male viewers/readers to articulate anxieties about social change and men's place in the new gender order, the laddish texts discussed here seemed to provide the boys with another means of publicly performing and affirming their heterosexuality, by emphasising their interest in women, beer and cars. If anything, they were perceived as feckless and fun spaces, free from the pressures, responsibilities and complexities of 'real life'. While these findings support Gauntlett's (2002) claim that younger boys do not connect with laddism's ironic intentions, they also challenge his claim that Lad Culture has no appeal for this age group. On the contrary, it was seen to offer transgressive pleasures, in that it enabled the boys to indulge in fantasies about the criminal underworld and its attendant freedoms from social responsibility. However, participants' lack of understanding of laddism as an ironic response to second-wave feminism suggests that its extreme gender stereotyping may be less critically accepted by boys and young men who appear to understand images of hypermasculinity and misogyny not as parody but rather as masculinities with subversive or subcultural appeal.

Given that most participants were resistant to the idea of media influence, yet did not demonstrate a conscious ability to decode texts ideologically, the extent to which comments about media influence could be treated as resource was limited. More interesting was the way in which participants performed their media usage as well as 'descriptions of their usage' (Lohan, 2000: 172) in group discussions, and how discussions became particularly intense when films and programmes were perceived as relevant to participants' lives. Indeed, the most salient overall finding to emerge from the qualitative dimension of the study was that, for these boys, discussions about media texts functioned as an important way of policing and, to a lesser extent, negotiating and challenging the acceptable boundaries of masculinity.

While individual exchanges often suggested more diverse tastes and greater tolerance of non-normative masculinities, the tendency within group discussions was to gravitate toward a repertoire of 'safe images', whereby the more dominant members of the group generally set the agenda. For example, although David Beckham was rated highly in the individual questionnaires, nobody admitted to liking him in group discussions, and he was frequently ridiculed for his vanity and for wearing women's clothing. Programmes, films, games and magazines which generated animated and enthusiastic discussion, as well as a lot of laughter, thus functioned as 'affirmation texts', whereas others, especially 'feminine genres'

such as soaps or *Sex and the City*, tended to provoke negative comments and clearly did not have the same social exchange value. Lad Culture was thus a particularly rich source of 'affirmation texts'.

### Media violence

Given the generally high content of violence, particularly in the films and digital games most frequently cited by participants, this topic often came up for discussion in the focus groups. According to the *Fair Play* report (1999: 2), 'video games' unique interactive capabilities may make them even more likely to influence children's attitudes, beliefs and behaviours than more traditional forms of media.' In the present study, when asked in the questionnaires to explain what happens in their favourite games, participants – without exception – adopted the subjective position of the game character ('You have to build up an army', 'You are the manager of a football team', 'You drive around killing people and robbing cars') and never referred to 'The player' in the third person. However, while the first-person role-play nature of gaming appears to invite strong identification with the protagonist, it is difficult to determine how this might influence players, given that most participants cited fantasy, entertainment and skill as the main attractions. Participants themselves strongly rejected the notion that violent content in video games encouraged or endorsed real violence. According to one participant, 'People say games like G.T.A. get kids into guns and killing at a young age and that's why crime rates so high, but this is only used as an excuse to the problem. Kids play these games and watch these films because they're entertaining.'

Of the limited number of male audience studies available, most challenge the notion that mediated violence encourages or endorses violent behaviour, claiming instead that mediated violence functions symbolically as a cipher for other – generally class-related – struggles and anxieties (Robbins and Cohen, 1978; Walkerdine, 1986; Fiske and Dawson, 1996; Lacey, 2002). In this study, however, discussions about David Fincher's film *Fight Club* revealed that participants did not read the film metaphorically but rather somewhat literally: it was not considered to be an interesting film because of its postmodern irony (Sconce, 2002), its blistering critique of and simultaneous internalisation of consumer culture (Church-Gibson, 2004), its masculinity-in-crisis rhetoric (Giroux and Szeman, 2001) or its homoerotic subtext (Brookey and Westerfelhaus, 2002) but because participants could relate it to a core concern in their lives, namely the realities of male violence and fighting in Irish towns, cities and suburbs. In the various group discussions about violence, many participants spoke of the fear of getting beaten up as one of the main problems that young men had to contend with, and cited bullying and an inability to discuss problems as key factors in male suicide. In spite of this, however, there was also a certain admiration associated with being able to defend oneself. These contradictions suggest that even boys who do not necessarily want to get involved in fighting often see it as a necessary way of asserting their

masculinity. For them, *Fight Club* was about the allure of physical violence and, at the same time, a fear of violence and an awareness of its futility as a means to resolving conflict.

Although non-preferred or non-dominant readings aptly illustrate that men actively use mediated fictions to negotiate the realities of their everyday lives, they do not necessarily indicate a radical challenge to hegemonic constructions of gender. In her study of *The Sopranos*, Lacey suggests that Tony Soprano's appeal to middle-class, middle-aged male viewers has less to do with violence and glamour and more to do with the drudgeries and tensions of his everyday life. As one respondent (Rodger, 35), who identified strongly with Tony's work and family pressures, commented:

I'd like to see [Tony] find a way out, away from the expectations of his family, of everyone. I'd like to see him figure out who the fuck he wants to be, to do what he wants to so that he can say 'fuck you'. I'd like the same for myself (Lacey, 2002: 103).

Similarly, in the present study, while Eminem was generally considered to be a 'cool' figure on account of being controversial, one participant commented in an e-mail exchange:

When Eminem was younger his father left and he thought his mother hated him, I was the same. He was also brought up in a poor family so was I. Nobody understands what he says in his music about his childhood and family because they don't know what he went through but I can relate to him a lot.

Rather than illustrating that oppositional or negotiated readings are possible, these examples serve to show that oppositional or negotiated readings are, in fact, the norm (Mayne, 2002). More importantly, they indicate that non-preferred readings are by no means synonymous with ideological resistance: that Lacey's respondents picked up on the masculinity-in-crisis subtext of *The Sopranos* may in fact signal little more than their prioritising of a more recent variant of hegemonic masculinity (the male as victim of feminism) over another, more traditional one. Indeed, rather than resisting or subverting dominant ideologies, oppositional readings can sometimes produce even more regressive decodings, as is the case, for example when parodic or ironic hypermasculinity is (mis)interpreted as straightforward machismo. As Fiske and Dawson (1996: 308) have pointed out, 'Representations of violence may well offer potentially progressive meanings in class or racial politics but repressive ones in those of gender.'

**Real men don't watch soaps: responses to 'feminine' genres and non-normative masculinities**

Predictably enough, texts and genres typically aimed at women or featuring non-normative masculinities did not function as 'affirmation texts', outside of providing the boys with an opportunity to perform – sometimes in highly exaggerated ways – their dislike of the texts. This was most prevalent when participants were shown magazine advertisements featuring naked men or models potentially coded as gay (Davidoff Cool Water, Yves Saint Laurent M7, Jean Paul Gaultier, Abercrombie & Fitch). These images generally prompted participants to engage in exaggerated demonstrations of their 'non-gayness', which took various forms: sometimes they expressed disgust, shielding their eyes and begging the researcher to take the image away, while other times they pretended to be gay or called each other 'gay' or 'queer'. These performances of homophobia were a considerable source of amusement within the groups, but they also enabled participants to achieve a sense of consensus regarding what is permissible and what is not.

In spite of the boys' claims that both men's and women's bodies are equally objectified by the media, images of men in submissive poses were deemed highly inappropriate. Again this highlights the inconsistencies of postfeminist/new masculinist rhetoric, whose notions of equality and role reversal are blind to the gaze economy of contemporary media culture and its radically different construction of male and female nudity and homosexuality. The following exchange was typical:

Focus group 6:

I: What do you think of those ads?

A: It's disgraceful

B: For men's spray you should put women on it

I: For men's perfume you should put women on it why?

B: Because they are showing men with women's clothes on them and people are looking at them

Interestingly, these kinds of responses were a lot less prevalent in the two schools with Transition Year coordinators strongly committed to gender issues: many of these participants said they did not have a problem with the images or with homosexuality generally because they had been brought up to respect difference, although they were aware that many of the young men in their school performed homophobia as part of the 'policing' of masculinity. As one participant commented, 'They mightn't even feel that way, they just act because they feel it's what they should do.' This suggests that both school and family play a significant role in equipping children with the requisite skills to negotiate media messages. Thus, while Beynon (2002) rightly asserts that media representations tend to offer men limited versions of the 'masculine', it is also useful to consider that limited versions of the masculine (in school, family and community life) may also restrict young men's

ability to explore and enjoy the diversity of images of and discourses on masculinity that are becoming increasingly available in the media.

While talking about soaps did not provoke the same level of negativity, participants were nonetheless highly aware of their potentially emasculating associations and of the fact that watching them often elicited negative reactions from others. Several focus-group participants made excuses for watching them:

I: Do you all watch soaps?

A: I do

B: When I'm in me gaf I have to watch them because me ma has to watch them.

A: I haven't really got a choice in the house, me sister watches the soaps, I get hooked into them so I end up watching them as well.

When asked in the questionnaires what kinds of things people said about soaps and soap viewing, the vast majority commented that if you watched soaps you were likely to be called 'queer', 'faggot', 'gay', 'homo', 'wussie', 'sissy', 'pansy', 'pussy', 'a mammy's boy', a 'woman' or a 'girl'. Participants said that soaps' detractors were also likely to describe the programmes as 'silly', for 'aulones', 'grannies', 'mothers', 'sad housewives' and 'women with nothing better to do'. In spite of this, when asked specifically in the questionnaires whether they watched soaps, 62 per cent of participants said yes. The five most popular soaps overall were *Eastenders* (40 per cent), *Coronation Street* (38 per cent), *Home and Away* (9 per cent), *Fair City* (8 per cent) and *Emmerdale* (7 per cent).<sup>6</sup> The quantitative data also revealed that 29 per cent of participants sometimes read women's magazines and that programmes typically aimed at a young female audience were regularly watched, for example *Sex and the City* (34 per cent), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (27 per cent) and *Ally McBeal* (19 per cent). While participants were not interested in discussing these programmes or magazines in the focus groups, they were more comfortable with discussing non-normative images of masculinity and tended to express more tolerant views in individual exchanges. For example, it was only in the questionnaire context that one participant felt sufficiently comfortable to say of David Beckham, 'I hate him being a footballer but I love the way he dresses and looks.'

### Conclusion

'... images do not walk in straight lines.' (Graham Murdock, 1999: 14)

What boys say about the media is often less important than how they perform descriptions of their media usage with one another: they find in the mass media a potent source of references for constructing a repertoire of acceptable codes and signifiers of masculinity or what I have termed 'affirmation texts'. In this sense, the

media can be said to function as a 'manual on masculinity' (Strate, 1992). However, rather than the direct effects model implied by Strate, which suggests that boys learn how to behave by imitating mediated masculinities, the process appears to be a more complex and active one, whereby audiences actively perform media usage as a means of affirming and, in some cases, policing masculinity. This is often a conscious process: many of the boys' comments indicate that they are not only aware but also critical of the performative nature of masculinity, yet see it as a necessary means of survival. As one participant put it:

Around a good friend you don't gotta impress just the way you are. That's when you know me and when I'm not acting, but I am a good actor.

In this sense, participants both critique and collude in the persistence of rigid constraints on their masculine identities. Although the justification of patriarchal norms is coming under increasing pressure (Connell, 2002: 73), the notion that men are now upholders of a 'hybridised' or 'bricolage masculinity' which enables them to 'channel-hop' across 'versions of the masculine' (Beynon, 2000:6) may be overestimating individual agency by foreclosing analysis of the power structures within which most boys are, in reality, immersed. More research is needed to explore both the extent and significance of the consumption and reading of non-normative masculinities by boys and young men, particularly in non-peer contexts of reception.

The participants in this study showed themselves to be active and media-literate viewers, who creatively use mediated texts and images to make sense of their lives and of masculine identity generally. However, the findings challenge the idea that media literacy is synonymous with an ability to decode texts ideologically. There is little evidence that boys' media consumption – or at least the public performance of their media usage – actively challenges hegemonic masculinity. Thus, while it is widely accepted that different viewers bring different sets of tools and value systems to the texts they consume, these are unlikely to produce liberating or empowering pleasures unless they enable audiences to recognise and deconstruct dominant ideologies of gender.

That non-normative images of masculinity were more positively accepted by boys in schools whose Transition Year coordinators were strongly committed to gender issues supports the argument that audience responses to media are best understood in the context of 'wider gender scripts' (Nixon, 1996: 314). According to Roper and Tosh (1991: 14), 'how men would like to be has obvious implications for the ways in which they act in everyday life.' Conversely, however, how men act in everyday life also has significant implications for how they would like to be. As Kimmel (1987: 20) has commented, images of gender are 'texts on normative behaviour' but they are only 'one of many cultural shards we use to construct notions of masculinity'. Until diversity and difference are genuinely endorsed by the school, family and wider social cultures within which young men grown and

learn, it is unlikely that their consumption of mediated images and the pleasures, meanings and functions afforded by these practices will be as creative, performative or exploratory as many postmodern theories envisage.

### Notes

1 Non-probability (quota) sampling was used. Two schools were co-educational and seven were single-sex boys' schools. Two were inter-denominational and seven Catholic. Three were predominantly middle-class, five were mixed and one was almost exclusively working-class.

2 The Exploring Masculinities programme is an educational programme for Transition and Senior Cycle Boys and Young Men in single-sex schools in Ireland, which was launched by the Gender Equality Unit of the Department of Education and Science in 2001.

3 In two cases, where more silent group members did not contribute, it was decided to conduct one-on-one interviews. In the case of School C, these were conducted after the group discussion. In School A, e-mail exchange was used with the first focus group where, due to the large number of participants, it was difficult to determine who was speaking and several comments required further clarification.

4 While there is some correlation here with the top ten films overall in the Republic of Ireland for 2001/2002/2003, films such as *What Women Want*, *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Veronica Guerin* are absent from participants' top films, while films such as *Blade*, *The Fast and the Furious*, *Signs* and *Scary Movie* do not feature in the national annual top ten lists (source: <http://www.medialive.ie>).

5 The 'Carlsberg Don't Do...' series and the WKD advertisements consciously celebrate postfeminist 'blokeishness', as popularised by television programmes such as *Jackass*, *Dirty Sanchez* and *Braniac Science*.

6 The more male-oriented soaps were the most popular. According to Christine Geraghty (1990: 194), the narrative organisation of soaps became increasingly centered on male process toward the end of the 1990s, when male characters began to outnumber females on both *Eastenders* (19:17) and *Coronation Street* (29:24).

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