EXPLORING IDENTITY ISSUES IN BRITISH MEN'S MAGAZINES' PROBLEM PAGES: A CULTURAL STUDIES PERSPECTIVE

EDUARDO DE GREGORIO GODEO
University of Castilla-La Mancha
Eduardo.Gregorio@uclm.es

1. Introduction

During the last few decades, men and masculinity have been undergoing an increasing process of change in the Western world. In countries like Britain traditional assumptions about the meaning of manhood have been challenged and called into question (Horrocks 1994; Segal 1997; MacInness 1998; Connell 2000; Stoltenberg 2000; Beynon 2002; Whitehead 2002). As men's studies theorist Michael Kimmel announced by the late eighties, "that men are today confused about what it means to be a 'real man' —that masculinity is in 'crisis'— has become a cultural commonplace, staring down at us from every magazine rack and television talk show" (1987: 121). The socio-cultural circumstances of the last few decades in Britain have had an outstanding impact on men, and masculine identities have experienced a process of destabilization which greatly contrasts with the historically taken for granted and unaltered foundations of patriarchal masculinities. As argued by various theorists (Nixon 1996: 204-206; Edwards 1997: 81-83; Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks 2001: 14, 35-36; Beynon 2002: 164; Benwell 2003: 13-14), throughout the eighties, the so-called 'new man' made his way into the public arena as an image of masculinity only to lose ground in the nineties to the so-called 'new lad', who was to replace him as the dominating subject position in the discourses on masculinity articulated in different popular-culture vehicles in contemporary UK, men's magazines included.

This paper is concerned precisely with men's magazines as a cultural artefact which, by the late nineties, had become "the fastest-growing magazine sector" (Smith 1996: 1-2) in Britain —only ten years after they were launched— and, at the beginning of the new century, "had established a mass market and were, in some cases, outselling the most popular women's magazines" (Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks 2001: 1). In Benwell's view, "men's lifestyle magazines are both representative site and mobilizing force of crucial cultural shifts in masculinity" (2003: 7). In particular, this study focuses on problem pages as a genre significantly unattended in studies of the men's magazine in the UK. Drawing upon a cultural studies perspective on 'identity', this contribution examines men's lifestyle magazines' problem columns in relation to the constitution, and enduring presence, of so-called 'newmannism' and 'laddishness' as major subject positions made available to male consumers when reading these periodicals. Through the exploration of a selection of problem pages published in men's magazines over the 1999 summer and autumn period —including *FHM*, *GQ*, *Later*, *Maxim*, *Men's Health*, *Sky Magazine* and *ZM*— this paper challenges the above-mentioned commonly held view identifying newmannism and laddishnes with the life of the British men's magazine in the eighties and the nineties respectively.[1] Thus, rather than attempting to demonstrate any new changes in men's subjectivities at the end of the twentieth century, the emphasis of this study will be on showing how, as substantiated by the analysis of problem pages in 1999, not only laddishness but *also* newmannism were full of vitality at the end of the nineties. In other words, the evidence provided by the examination of counselling columns will demonstrate that newmannism did not fade away with the emergence of laddishness in the men's magazine early in the nineties.

2. Cultural studies and identity

This paper delves into the masculine identity negotiation processes activated when reading a popular-culture artefact of a textual nature such as men's lifestyle magazines' problem pages in contemporary UK.[2] The focus and scope of this contribution is framed within recent examinations of identity in contemporary cultural studies, where "the turn towards issues of gender and race has helped to reorient the discussion of identity: overwhelmingly in recent years, its focus has been on the politics of particular identities within specific historical conjunctures" (Turner 2003: 212). Indeed, this research project may be claimed to be consistent with the agenda of cultural studies, which, according to Barker's definition in *The SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies*, could be conceived of as a domain of enquiry "constituted by a regulated way of speaking about objects (which cultural studies brings into view) and coheres around key concepts, ideas and concerns that include

articulation, culture, discourse, ideology, identity, popular culture, power, representation and text" (2004: 42).

With Barker's recent definition in mind, cultural studies can be regarded as "an interdisciplinary or postdisciplinary post-structuralist field of enquiry that explores the production and inculcation of culture or maps of culture" (2004: 42).[3] In an attempt to devise a model to account for the practices of cultural production and consumption in society, du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay and Negus have coined the term 'circuit of culture' to refer to the particular interaction of a number of fundamental moments "through which any analysis of a cultural text or artefact must pass if it is to be adequately studied" (1997: 3). Together with the analysis of practices of representation, production, consumption and regulation, the study of identities is one of such necessary processes for the examination of cultural artefacts, products or practices. As Edgar and Sedgwick point out, "the issue of identity is central to cultural studies, in so far as cultural studies examines the contexts within which and through which individuals and groups construct, negotiate and defend their identity of self-understanding" (1999: 183).[4] Edgar and Sedgwick's reference to context here underlines another fundamental tenet of cultural studies, namely its radical contextualisation —temporal and spatial— of cultural practices including those of identity construction, in a specific social formation. As Grossberg insists, "a cultural practice is a complex and conflictual place which cannot be separated from the context of its articulation, since it has no existence outside that context" (1994: 8).[5]

In its theoretical approach, this paper adheres to an 'anti-' or 'non-essentialist' (Woodward 1997: 11 and *passim*; Barker 2002: 109) view of identity within contemporary cultural studies. Contrary to 'essentialist' or 'orthodox' views assuming that people have a true and autonomous self, a position widely held across the social sciences and the humanities (Brooker 1999: 109-110; Johnson 2000: 277-278) considers that identities are contingent, culturally specific constructions which are socially produced, and are always a response to an 'other', namely something external and different from it. As Baldwin, Longhurst, Smith, McCracken and Ogborn (1999: 224) put it, "the making of the self requires a constant interaction with the non-self or non-identity: the social world". Following the impact of post-structuralism upon contemporary cultural theory, identities have accordingly come to be theorized as being constructed discursively. In this view, discourses are seen as "'regulated' systems of meanings or representations" (Lewis 2002: 25) producing 'subject positions' which, in the course of their social interactions, individuals take up —or resist— to become social subjects. Such subject positions may be understood in terms of "the spaces from which one speaks and observes in a discursive formation" (Andersen 2003: 8). Hall has seen 'identities' in this regard as referring

to the meeting point, the point of suture, between, on the one hand, the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpelate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and, on the other, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken'. (2000: 19)

As Barker explains in a more 'palatable' fashion, identity represents "the processes by which discursively constructed subject positions are taken up (or otherwise) by concrete persons' fantasy identifications and emotional 'investments'" (2004: 94). Therefore, the very concept of identity entails an idea of instability and fluctuation, since not only do identities emerge "within the play of specific modalities of power" (Hall 2000: 17), but, given that meaning is never completed, they also become "a 'cut' or snap-shot of unfolding meanings" (Barker 2002: 109).

3. Men's magazines and problem pages in Britain

Following Edwards's classification of the current market of magazines focusing on men as their primary readers in the UK, a clear distinction can be established between "a list of fully style-conscious and self-conscious general-interest magazines aimed directly and overtly at a male readership" and "a gargantuan group of men's interest magazines which covertly target men as their primary readership including car, computing, photography, sport and technical titles" (1997: 72-73).[6] The general-interest periodicals —which are the object of this contribution— specialise in the masculine lifestyle. As Edwards adds, the so-called general-interest magazines for men have "a fixed targeting of single, affluent, city-dwelling, high-earning and high-spending, primarily heterosexual men" (*ibid*, 76). According to Mort's (1988: 211) initial market research, men's lifestyle magazines were launched for a target male reader of twenty-five to thirty-five years of age. Smith's (1996: 32) more recent research confirms this audience tendency, reporting that as many as 59% of the 25-to-34-year-olds regularly buy and read these magazines in the UK.

Although there is a strong tradition of special-interest magazines dating back to the 19th century in Britain, it was only in the mid-eighties that general-interest magazines started being published in the UK. After the appearance of *FHM* in 1985 and *Arena* in 1986, classical titles like *Sky (Magazine)* and *GQ* emerged during the late eighties. A number of widely read magazines continued this trend in the early nineties, including *Esquire* (1991), *Loaded* (1994) and *Maxim* (1994). Titles like *Stuff for Men*, *XL for Men*, *Later* or *ZM* were successfully launched during the late nineties, contributing to the consolidation of this print-media sector in the UK.

Apart from interviews with famous male icons and celebrities, men's magazines incorporate various features to do with sport, health and fitness, sex and women,

travel, art and menswear. Advertising is very prominent, with many pages dealing with male clothing and accessories, tobacco, alcohol and technology. In most of these publications, problem columns are a recurrent feature where male readers pose a wide range of questions on the masculine lifestyle. It is remarkable, however, that general studies about masculinity in the British men's magazine (Nixon 1996, 2001; Edwards 1997; Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks 2001; Benwell 2003) have consistently neglected the analysis of this section, which is often acknowledged (cf. Thibault 1988; Moran 1989) as crucial to an analysis of identity representation and construction in lifestyle publications. Following the long-standing tradition of 'agony aunts' in women's magazines, counsellors offer readers advice about relationships with girlfriends and wives, emotional dilemmas, health and fitness, sexuality, body care and grooming, and masculine fashion. Since counselling columns first appeared in *The Athenian Gazette* in the late 17th century (Kent 1979: 1), the genre has tended to be associated with women and femininity. In particular, from the early 20th century onwards, the genre has been intertwined with women's magazines in "the form of the personalized letter and personalized answer" (Ballaster, Beetham, Frazer and Hebron 1991: 123). Nonetheless, with the advent of the men's magazine in the mid-eighties, problem columns have started to specialise in the masculine lifestyle.

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4. Reading men's magazines as identity negotiation

As discussed above, a widely held view within contemporary cultural theory has come to see discourses as regulated systems of meanings of representations. Since Foucault introduced the notion of discourse to refer to "the practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (1972: 49), discourses have tended to be understood as

> ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice: a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society. (Hall 1997: 6)

Cultural and discourse theorists admit the existence of 'gendered discourses' constituted in society by actually "positioning women and men in certain ways" (Sunderland 2004: 21). As substantiated by attempts to bridge the gap between linguistics and cultural studies like critical discourse analysis (e.g. Fairclough 1995), such abstract constructs as discourses are manifested in the actual genres that individuals draw upon in the course of their interactions as social subjects, and may be traced in tangible texts. Men's magazines have been described as "an important

site for the articulation of aspects of modern masculinity and addressal of the male consumer" (Benwell 2003: 6). Through the commodification of men's gender anxieties, these publications have been conceived of as "giving men the discursive resources to handle their changing circumstances and experiences" (Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks 2001: 156). So, along with other popular-culture genres including the advertising of fashion and toiletries for men, television soap operas or radio shows (cf. Edley and Wetherell 1995: 3-4), men's lifestyle magazines may be said to have a key influence in the representation, construction and circulation of various masculine subject positions and to map out what it means to be a man in the UK nowadays.

With these premises in mind it may be said that what differentiates media discourse genres from other kinds of discourse is the production of a special type of subject position labelled as 'ideal readers' —or viewers or listeners— with which actual media discourse consumers negotiate their own reading positions.[7] 'Negotiation' here refers to the discursive process whereby individuals take up, or resist, the systems of values and beliefs incorporated by specific subject positions. As Mills suggests, "individual subjects should not be simply seen to adopt roles which are mapped out for them by discourses; rather, they experience discomfort with certain elements implicit in discourses, they find pleasure in some elements, they are openly critical about others" (1997: 97). Thus, reading problem pages in such a media-discourse vehicle as men's magazines —problem pages included— entails an act of negotiation of individual readers' identity with the belief systems associated with the meaning of masculinity created by the magazines as textual products.[8] In other words, it is up to actual readers, "where the signifying system of the text intersects with the value system of the culture" (O'Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery and Fiske 1994: 284), to decide whether they agree with or challenge the 'preferred reading' (cf. Watson and Hill 2005: 243) of content features, like problem pages published by the magazines' editorial boards as representative of men's lifestyle, anxieties and concerns.

5. Newmannism and laddishness at the crossroads in the magazines' problem pages

Within contemporary discourses on masculinity in Britain, so-called 'newmannism' has come to designate a masculine subject position "that, while acknowledging that men and the male role have now changed, is unclear about how and so indiscriminately scrambles together elements derived from both the 'nurturer' and 'narcissist' strands" (Beynon 2002: 164). Newmannism is often discussed as a discursive construct permeating men's magazines from their appearance in the mid-

eighties to the emergence of the new lad in the early nineties (Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks 2001: 1 *et passim*; Benwell; 2003: 13). As Edwards's (1997: 72-80) analysis reveals, throughout the eighties, the 'new man' was a prevailing image of masculinity in the features of the men's magazines' market, for instance, in *Arena, GQ* or *Esquire* among other titles.[9] In popular-culture genres like these, the new man took shape as a new kind of man who had come to terms with his traditionally neglected emotional dimension, and now showed greater attention to and respect for women's requirements and demands, and an unusual concern with his personal appearance:[10]

> New man represents the ideal partner for the modern, liberated, heterosexual woman. He is a softer, more sensitive and caring individual, who also avoids sexist language, changes nappies and loves to shop all day his own clothes. (Edley and Wetherell 1997: 204)

Newmannism has been seen as resulting, to a certain extent, from the impingement of second-wave feminism on men since the seventies, so that this new image of masculinity is argued to have been born in

> an attempt to resolve some of the obvious contradictions of the Classic Macho, to recognize and make peace with the feminine within itself, in response to feminist critiques [...]. If the old man was characterised by his abhorrence of all things female, the new man was invigorated by his enthusiastic embrace of female roles and qualities. (Chapman 1988: 227)

Admittedly, the figure is expected to comply with many of the requirements of the feminist movement, so that "this 'new man' is supposed to demonstrate a wider range of domestic involvements, a wider range of emotional responses and a greater willingness to criticize his own practices" (Hearn and Morgan 1990: 16).

Contrary to the generalised view of men's magazines analysts, an analysis of the questions that magazine editors select for publication in the problem pages examined in this paper reveals that, as late as 1999, the image of the new man was full of life in these publications. By way of example, a negotiation process is sometimes carried out between male readers who find it difficult to come to terms with the ideological apparatus of the sort of (pseudo)feminism endorsed by women, and counsellors who somehow validate such beliefs by promoting more nurturing attitudes in men. The following sample revolving around the social effects of ageing upon both men and women is illuminating in this respect. In fact, anxieties about ageing and personal appearance underlying questions like this are characteristic of the importance of the body "for modern people's sense of self-identity (their sense of who they are as understood in terms of their own embodied biography)" in late capitalist societies (Shilling 1997: 69):

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Q. Despite being only 23, my girlfriend still maintains many of the prejudices of the proto-feminists. One such bias is that in our "lookist" society, women get a raw deal because they age quicker than men. Is this true?

Simon Cook, London

A. Yes and no. This theory, like many half-truths of folklore, does have a basis in medical fact. The male has more of the sex hormone, androgen, running around his system than the female and this makes his skin more resistant to ageing. This is coupled with the fact that a man's skin is usually oilier than a woman's, therefore more moist and less prone to falling apart. The result is that men do have a better deal than women in this area —but in the brave new dawn of genetic engineering, your fledgling feminist's daughter may well catch you up. JM. (GQ, September 1999, p. 252)

Questions about conflict within relationships in the home repeatedly project this image of a man willing to satisfy his girlfriend's or wife's demands, and to embrace a great number of roles formerly associated with 'the feminine'. Excerpts like this may be highly indicative of the persistence, in contemporary British society, of what Abercrombie and Warde (2000: 7-8) regard as "cultural stereotypes of women [and men] as in, for example, the unequal distribution of housework, [and] in images of femininity which describe women as helpless and passive":[11]

Q: I live with my girlfriend and over the last few months we've been having huge arguments, usually started by her complaining that I always control what we watch on TV. I work hard and want to just sit and relax. Can we do anything to sort this out?

THE EXPERT

You can do something to sort this out. If you are sharing your life and living space with your partner there is bound to be conflict about who controls what and who feels they are making most of the sacrifices. You both need to realise that living together and making compromises means listening too and accepting the other person's point of view. If you don't you will end up being like two separate states at war and you might need to bring in the UN in the form of a relationship counsellor. (Later, September 1999, p. 27)

Wider socio-cultural processes accounting for the emergence of narcissistic and self-centred selves —among both men and women— in modern western societies (cf. Lash 1980: 85-86; Giddens 1991: 171-179) similarly underlie various questions in the problem pages. The concern over and deeper preoccupation with the world of feelings emerges, by way of example, in questions where readers explore emotional dilemmas triggered when living in partnership. So, notwithstanding the "caring, sensitive and nurturing depiction of fatherhood" (Lazar 2000: 380) permeating popular-culture discourses on masculinity in present-day Britain, many questions revolve around the readers' difficulty in conforming to this fundamental feature of the new man, counsellors' replies often adopting an encouraging position in return.

> *Q: My girlfriend keeps dropping very unsubtle hints about her friends having babies, and keeps stopping to look in Mothercare when we go out shopping together. Part of me knows that this is the next step in our relationship, but I'm terrified.*
>
> *THE EXPERT*
>
> *Fathering a child can be seen as one of the most definitive acts which signals a man's maturity. A lot of men panic, thinking "I'm not ready yet", in a vain attempt to stop growing up. A surprisingly large number of men walk out of relationships within the first few months of the birth of their baby. There are many other aspects to the scenario —fear of failing as a father, fear of ageing, loss of other possible sexual partners, etc— but it all boils down to whether you have the courage to overcome this uncertainty, as there will never be a 'right' time to have a baby. To be able to overcome these fears is part of the growing process which changes us from lads to men.* (*Later*, September 1999, p. 26)

The new man's "attempt to express masculine emotional and sexual life [...] engaged in forms of compromise" (Rutherford 1988: 32) is not only manifested in men's relations with their girlfriends or wives, but also in other relations among men, for example, in the course of male friendships:

> *Q. My best mate has recently got a great job and I'm really jealous. What can I say to him?*
>
> *J S, Oxford*
>
> *A. Tell him that you want to feel pleased for him, but that you also feel very envious. If you can communicate that envy in terms of what you wish you had —rather than what a jammy git he is— then he's also less likely to feel quite so threatened or undermined. And by focusing on exactly what you envy about your mate's job, you can begin to look at ways to achieve the same for yourself.* (*ZM*, August/September 1999, p. 80)[12]

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It has to be stressed that, along with the impact of second-wave feminism, the new man is often discussed as having come into existence as a result of the strong influence of consumerism upon men, which produced an unusual preoccupation with body care and male fashion: "what was distinctive about the 'new man' imagery [...] was the space it represented for the display of masculine sensuality, the sanctioning of a highly staged narcissism through the codes of dress and grooming" (Nixon 1996: 202). As a matter of fact, much of the early configuration of this image was articulated on the basis of men's representational practices in the advertising pages of men's magazines, so that "it was through the presentation of these menswear designs in popular representations that the 'new man' was often coded" (Nixon 1997: 295). At the end of the nineties, the new man image is still evoked recurrently in how-to features about grooming, and in advertising pages about menswear and accessories. Questions about personal looks and body care are similarly found in the magazines' problem columns on a regular basis, thereby positioning readers as active consumers:

> *Q. Ever since I hit 25 last year I've become aware of how knackered I look. My mates are the same age but could easily pass for younger, whereas my face has become saggy and tired-looking. My boss keeps teasing me and people quite often think I'm well into my thirties. I'm very conscious of my double-chin and jowls —are there any exercises I could do to firm up my face?*
>
> *TV, Northampton*
>
> *A. Your appearance has a lot to do with general well-being. A stressful lifestyle, poor sleeping and eating habits, too much booze and a lack of exercise have a hugely negative effect on how you look. Scrutinise your workload in relation to exercise, hobbies and social activities, and aim for a balance. Facial exercises will help in addition to cardiovascular workouts. Ensure you sleep at least six hours per night and eat a wholesome and varied diet. (FHM, September 1999, p. 304)*

Samples like this evince the importance of personal appearance in contemporary societies, where

> the state of the body is seen as a reflection of the state of its owner, who is responsible for it and could refashion it. The body could be taken as a reflection of the self because it can and should be treated as something to be worked upon, and generally worked upon using commodities, for example intensively regulated, self-disciplined scrutinized diets, fitness regimes, fashion, self-help books and advice. (Slater 1997: 92)

This is a well documented trend characteristic of modern societies like Britain, where "the individual's intense investment in commodity culture is explicable to the degree that his or her identity [...] is negotiated in large part through consumption" (Jagose 2003: 113). Thus, questions about menswear and male fashion abound to such an extent that titles like *GQ* have developed a special section on 'Style Counsel' for a readership assumed to need expert advice in this area:

> *Q. I am a bit confused about the correct time to wear short or long socks. I understood that long socks were for formal wear and short socks reserved for sports wear only. Which is correct?*
>
> *Andrew Pennington, London E1*
>
> *A. Short socks are a worry. Generally disdained, short socks should only be worn for real sporting activities: otherwise, the archaically named "full hose" (ie, just below the knee) are for general use. This way, men can avoid the unattractive NHG (Nasty Hairy Gap) associated with badly trained TV personalities. (GQ, August 1999, p. 168)*

At any rate, it should not be forgotten that, by the early nineties, new versions of masculinity started to be promoted from the pages of a new generation of men's lifestyle magazines including *Loaded*, *Maxim* or *Stuff for Men*, where the so-called 'new lad' had started to elbow his way forward. As discussed by Edwards (1997),

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Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks (2001) and Benwell (2003), the certain 'feminisation' and loss of traditional male values by the new man contributed to a re-creation of hegemonic and patriarchal masculine values, very much in response to the aura of newmannism which had invaded men's magazines over the eighties.

To move on, then, from the longer-standing constructions of newmannism, to the new 'laddish' discourses on masculinity: they were seen to partake of

> a male culture which may be seen as a reaction to the idea of the caring, sensitive 'new man' produced by the feminist movement. So laddism is characterised by a climate of rough behaviour, excessive drinking ('lager louts') and all-male attendance at soccer matches. (Storry and Childs 1997: 338)

This image of masculinity, which some theorists like Rutherford have labelled as 'retributive man' represents "the struggle to reassert a traditional masculinity, a tough independent authority" (1988: 32). As maintained by Edwards in his analysis of the evolution of men's magazines in the nineties, "the success of *Loaded* has led other titles to drift increasingly towards using New Laddism, as opposed to narcissistic New Mannism, as a means of selling magazines" (1997: 81). In addition to the new titles, that appeared in the past decade, the new lad pervaded the features of other magazines like *Sky Magazine*, *FHM*, *GQ* or *Arena*, which had been loyal to the newmannist project in the eighties.[13] As a result, all of these titles ended up incorporating some of the most destructive and ruthless aspects of masculinity; hence, for example, the plethora of articles echoing aggressive and disruptive male behaviour in soccer matches; the value attached to sexual triumph as an indicator of virility; or the underlying homophobic attitudes in the humour and irony of many features.

An examination of men's magazines in the late nineties confirms that the image "of a riotous young man enjoying life to the full" (Beynon 2002: 164) has persisted and can be discerned in the questions and answers of many problem pages, as illustrated by the next instance from *Maxim* that delves into men's drinking practices:

> *Q: If I drink water between pints on a booze binge, will I get pissed slower or quicker?*
>
> *Charlie Squires, Essex*
>
> *A: The water makes little difference either way, according to Mark Bennett of Alcohol Concern. 'The amount of alcohol and the period of time determine how drunk you get. Nothing else'. Drinking water may reduce your speed and capacity but not the amount of alcohol in your body. You'll be in the bog more often too, which cuts boozing time. Bennett's advice is, 'Know how much you can drink before you start out —and stick to it. Use soft drinks to keep within your limits'. (Maxim, October 1999, p. 202)*

The image of a new man striving to cooperate with his partner in household chores and coming to terms with a historically uncared-for emotional dimension often coexists in the magazines with a community of lager louts celebrating the pleasures of sex with no strings attached and exhibiting purposefully neglected codes of menswear. This form of masculine identity "allows young men to return to the traditional pursuits of alcohol, sex and football" (Seidler 1997: 10). In Edwards's view, "where the New Man was caring and sharing the New Lad is selfish, loutish and inconsiderate to a point of infantile smelliness. He likes drinking, football and fucking and in that order of preference" (1997: 82). As the following excerpt from *Sky Magazine* exemplifies, this kind of laddishness is sometimes to be found in the form of parody in the problem columns of some magazines, side by side with the would-be new men seeking advice in a cultural artefact traditionally associated with women and femininity:

> *Dear Karen,*
>
> *Since I was six my grandfather has been sexually abusing me, and now I'm 18, I'm starting to enjoy it. I'm trying to get into a relationship with my best friend at school. He's not gay but how can I convert him?*
>
> *BS, Newquay*
>
> *Can you spell "therapy"? You need professional help. No shit, Sherlock. Trying to convert someone to being gay is as smart as trying to convert someone to being straight. Honey, get on the phone to the Samaritans and get yourself sorted. As for that grandfather, gimme a gun. Actually, how dare you write in with a real problem! Write to someone cuddly next time. One of those fat, ugly women's mag people.* (*Sky Magazine*, March 1999, p. 146)

At the end of the nineties, problem columns like 'Dear Karen' in *Sky Magazine* come to herald the ideological apparatus of laddishness by means of the apparently inoffensive humour of its questions and answers —probably created in an artificial way.[14] In this particular magazine a role inversion is implemented between an exaggeratedly 'masculinized' female counsellor and the male readers at whom she pokes fun because of their lack of manhood and often effeminate attitudes. As the sample below shows, readers are often invited to engage in practices of "heavy drinking, drug-taking and riotous behaviour" (Beynon 2002: 162) and return to "traditional masculine values of sexism, exclusive male friendship and homophobia" (Benwell 2003: 13) mapping out laddish subject positions:

> *Dear Karen*
>
> *I'm desperate to shag this 22-year-old. I know her very well and we are good friends, though I've fancied her since day one. She has huge tits. But I'm worried if I make a pass and she doesn't like it, she'll hit me.*

Adam, Manchester

Your problem is that you want a fuck but don't have the balls to ask. Christ, I've never seen such a wimp. Pussy does not spill out of those little gumball machines at the mall, you know. (If it did, I'd own a few.) You have to risk your arse to get some —that's the law. So, yellow-belly, why not take her for a drink and then say you fancy her? You know, in a few years you'll look back on this and think, "All that fuss over a pair of tits that aren't even attached to an offshore bank account and a bag of drugs". (Sky Magazine, September 1999, p. 163)

Moreover, the "post-permissive heterosexual script of 'cars, girls, sport and booze'" (Nixon 2001: 381) characterizing the representations of the new lad in the men's magazines' sector throughout the nineties emerges again and again in questions about sport and fitness featuring in the problem column of titles like *FHM*. The following sample illustrates this tendency, which is consistent with broader socio-cultural processes in Western societies regarding the body as a historically specific medium through which identity is produced and presented. As Benson maintains, in addition to the positive evaluation of thinness and the highly negative view of body fat, "in the last ten or fifteen years or so, this has been joined by ideas of hardness and muscularity, not just for men but also for women" (1997: 127):

Q. How long does it take to become unfit? I have a couple of friends who continue to exercise regularly if they feel ill, but I know others who stop until they feel better. Both parties say they are doing the correct thing —so which is the best route to follow in order to stay fit?

RA, West Sussex

A. It is essential to be healthy when exercising, so avoid training when you have a cold, are injured or feel unwell. To decrease the regression ("losing fitness") rate, particularly when you are unwell for a long period, "active recovery" will help maintain your pre-injury fitness. This means being active, but in a pain-free way (see "The Comeback Trail", right). And finally, the rule of thumb for regression is that it takes a third of the time it took you to build your fitness up as it does to lose it. (AL) (FHM, July 1999, p. 10)

Nonetheless, a tension between newmannism and laddishnes has to be acknowledged in the discourse of men's general-interest magazines in the UK in the late nineties. The examples above make it clear that, in 1999, titles like *FHM* incorporated problem pages which could sometimes be located within the boundaries of new man discourses and, sometimes, within more laddish repertoires. In addition, as many questions in the problem columns reveal, readers striving to hold on to laddish self-centredness encounter replies that inculcate more newmannist attitudes and patterns of conduct. The result in many questions is the projection of "a would be New man who can't quite shake off his out-moded, but snug fitting, laddishness" (Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks 2001: 35). The

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following extract dealing with a man's anxiety over fathering for fear of losing his libido, and the counsellor's recommendation of more nurturing attitudes, is highly representative of this trend. In point of fact, questions like this shed light on the, so to speak, selfishness and individualism so valued in high modernity (Giddens 1991: 74 and *passim*) and, consequently, the conflicts and tensions (Woodward 1997: 23) experienced by individuals having to negotiate their identities in different aspects of their lives:

> *Q. My wife is pregnant with our first child and I don't want to be in the delivery room when it pops out —the thought makes me feel sick, and I'm sure it would murder my sex drive. Got any good excuses I can use?*
>
> *BH. Portsmouth*
>
> *A. This is a common fear among men, but not always a rational one. "Your sexuality is not that delicate", says Frank Pittman, a marriage and family therapist who thinks it's going to take more than a slippery placenta to destroy your sex drive. His advice: take a front-row seat. "The more involved you are at the beginning of the process, the sooner and stronger the connection will be between father and child", says Pittman, a trifle optimistically. But if you think you may be particularly squeamish, make sure you don't hang around at the business end —make yourself useful by mopping your wife's brow or, better still, holding her hand and letting her crush yours when the going gets tough. Oh, and ignore all the abuse she'll throw at you for causing all the pain.* (*Men's Health*, July/August 1999, p. 97)

6. Concluding remarks

As discussed in sections 1 and 5, in the view of men's magazines analysts (i.e. Nixon 1996, 2001; Edwards 1997; Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks 2001; Benwell 2003), the image of the new man featured prominently in titles like *Face*, *GQ* or *Arena* during the mid- and late eighties, but, from the early nineties onwards, this subject position died out as a result of the 'colonising' effect of laddishness from new magazines like *Loaded* or *Maxim*. In line, then, with the arguments outlined above on the evolution of the men's magazine, the colonising effect entailed the replacement of newmannism with a new laddish orientation in titles that displayed newmannist images during the previous decade.

However, the present study of problem pages in 1999 reveals that *both* subject positions on masculinity were still flourishing in men's lifestyle magazines at the end of the last decade. Although analyses of the men's magazine in Britain have insisted on the vanishing of newmannist representations of masculinity in the early nineties, the coexistence of both laddishness *and* newmannism in problem columns as late as 1999 proves to be an indicator of the permanency of both subject

positions in these publications at the turn of the millennium. The examples included herein have been selected as representative of a tendency whereby titles like *GQ*, *ZM* or *Later* evidence a more newmannist orientation in contrast to the aura of laddishness manifested in magazines like *Sky Magazine* or *Maxim*.[15] Nevertheless, at times, a tension between both subject positions may be identified throughout the problem pages of *Men's Health*, *FHM* and, to a lesser extent, *Maxim*. It is significant that, in some of these magazines, the new man is projected in articles about committed fathering and in lists for improving looks, while the new lad emerges in light-hearted articles about sexual paradises for holiday-makers, usually accompanied by semi-pornographic pictures of female models. It is hardly surprising in this respect that male commodities like toiletries, scent or menswear are advertised as much as beer and spirits in these magazines. In any case, it is precisely the continuance of trends initiated almost two decades ago that needs drawing attention to in a study about the men's magazine at the end of the nineties, since —at least as far as problem pages are concerned— this finding calls into question previous approaches to the evolution of these publications in the UK.

Men's magazines have had a key role in both representing and constructing these versions of masculinity. From a historical viewpoint, the very birth of a new magazine market centred upon the masculine lifestyle is significant of the changing gender identities and relations in contemporary Britain. In contrast to the long tradition of women's magazines dating back to the eighteenth century, men's general-interest magazines did not appear until the mid-eighties. For, traditionally, patriarchal constructions of masculinity had prevented men from engaging in the practices of self-consciousness manifested in the life-style magazine. Echoing the trade debates in the British magazine sector before the first men's magazines started being published, Nixon (1996: 129) quotes a 'state of play' article by Simon Marquis in *Campaign* (26/7/1985: 37), a daily forum for media practitioners in the UK:

> While women become "friends" with their magazines there is an inbuilt male resistance to the idea of a magazine that makes public and shares ideas about being a man. To men it is an unacceptable contradiction. Self-consciousness is permissible, even attractive, in a woman; it is perceived as weak and unmanly in a man.

The social circumstances of the past few decades —including the feminist challenges, the impact of consumer cultures on men or the shifts in gender relations in the workplace or the home— triggered what scholars like Petersen (1998: 1) describe as 'the masculine crisis of identity'. Moreover, the rise of narcissistic, individualistic selfishness characterising exchange relations in late capitalist societies like Britain (Giddens 1991: 148; McGuigan 1999: 90), the impact upon individuals of the competitiveness inherent to modern social formations, or the

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perception of bodies as a medium through which identity messages are transmitted, should not be disregarded as an element that forged men's —and women's— selves in the end of the millennium context. Indeed, men's magazines were born as cultural artefacts which offered men "a form of constructed certitude, providing a sense of reassurance amid all of men's contemporary uncertainties and anxieties" (Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks 2001: 146).

The act of reading problem columns in these lifestyle magazines may be conceived of as providing male readers with access to masculine subject positions with a certain referential value for their masculine identities, no matter whether they are taken up or resisted. McLoughlin underlines that "magazines are a means of presenting ideal-reader images to which the purchaser can aspire" (2000: 95), so that, in reading problem pages in these publications, magazines consumers are placed in a position where they are challenged to temporarily identify with the discursive repertoires of the new man, the new lad and their borderline tensions. Problem pages consumers are treated as ideal readers sharing the concerns of the men enquiring about looks, relations within the couple, emotional dilemmas, fathering anxieties, sex, drinking, and so on. Focusing on the sister-genre of women's magazines, Caldas-Coulthard highlights that ideal readers are "at the same time both produced and in a sense imprisoned by the text" (1996: 250). As the samples above reveal, the readers of problem columns in men's magazines are similarly located across shifting subject positions. Through intermediate spaces, these range from identification with newmannist concerns about personal appearance and emotional issues to playful mockery of the genre concealing sexist, homophobic and loutish attitudes typical of laddish ideological constructs. In assuming that actual readers partake of the lifestyle issues raised by the men drawing upon these counselling sections, men's magazines "invite readers to take up identity positions which may change from page to page, and which often conflict" (Matheson 2005: 59). There is plenty of scope, beyond the remit of this paper, for detailed sociological and ethnographic research on the impact of these publications upon the perceived personal identities of their male consumers in Britain.

Notes

1. Further titles in the men's magazines' sector (e.g. *Arena*, *Esquire*, *Loaded* or *Stuff for Men*) have not been taken into consideration on the grounds of their lack of problem columns —at least during the specified period when this type of publications was examined.

2. Hall (1997: 2) maintains that "primarily, culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings — the 'giving and taking of meaning'— between the members of a society or group". As du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay and Negus put it, objects become cultural artefacts as soon as they acquire meaning and can be made sense of; so that "this bringing of the object *into* meaning is what constitutes it as a *cultural artefact*" (1997: 10). Thus, the problem page has a 'textual' nature not only *qua* written-language message, but also —similarly to other 'texts' (e.g. images, sounds, objects and activities) conceived of from a cultural studies perspective— because it is a genre that "generates meaning through signifying practices" (Barker 2004: 199).

3. For general overviews of the field, including different approaches, see, for example, Grossberg, Nelson and Treichler (1992), During (1993), Inglis (1993), Munns and Rajan (1995), Hall (1996), Storey (1996), Baldwin, Longhurst, Smith, McCracken and Ogborn (1999), Barker (2000, 2002), Lewis (2002), Sardar and van Loon (2004) or McRobbie (2005).

4. Recent work on identity within cultural studies includes Wetherell (1996), Hall and du Gay (1996), Woodward (1997), Weedon (2004), etc.

5. Grossberg is quoting forthcoming work by John Frow and Meaghan Morris here.

6. A number of supposedly more specific magazines regularly include features to do with the masculine lifestyle; that is the case of men's fashion magazines like *i-D*, or health and sports magazines such as *Men's Health*.

7. Ideal readers are constructed by media discourse genres that "assume the existence of groups that may not actually exist as groups within society and, by addressing themselves to these groups, create a shared ideology" (Reah 1998: 35).

8. Connell offers this definition of the term: "'masculinity', to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture" (1995: 71). Together with other variables like age, class or ethnicity, gender identity in general, and masculinity in particular, may be regarded as "given parameters and boundaries within which we create our own identities" (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 1982: 1).

9. As discussed below in this section, according to Edwards (1997), most of these titles adopted a laddish personality in the nineties. However, this study will demonstrate that, at the end of the nineties, many of these magazines —and new titles like *Later* or *ZM*— incorporated *both* ideological repertoires on masculinity.

10. As happens with 'new lad' and 'laddishness', 'new man' and 'newmannism' are terms interchangeably used in the literature on masculinity (cf. Nixon 1996; Edwards 1997, Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks 2001). Strictly speaking, the so-called new man and new lad are to be taken as mere images of masculinity represented in various cultural artefacts in the UK. Newmannism and laddishness —or laddism— may be regarded as wider subject positions articulated around such images in the

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discourses on masculinity constructed in contemporary British popular-culture genres. As explored by Nixon (1996: 202; 1997: 327), images like the new man or the new lad designate 'regimes of representation', whereas the corresponding subject positions (i.e. newmannism, laddishness) involve further ideological repertoires positioning individuals as social subjects when they participate in the discourses where such subject positions are constituted. With regard to du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay and Negus's (1997: 3-5) 'circuit of culture', the new man or the new lad may be best associated with the practices of cultural representation in society, and newmannism or laddishness with those of identity construction.

11. Given the length of the samples from the problem pages, including a larger number of illustrative examples would have resulted in an exceedingly long paper. Moreover, clipping the texts or incorporating questions would have only meant missing a full appreciation of how reader-counsellor interactions contribute to projecting identity models amongst readers.

12. Further comments could be made in samples like this concerning the competitiveness of capitalist exchange relations in fields like the workplace, and the 'stresses and strains' (Giddens 1991: 185-186) consequently undergone by individuals.

13. As Edwards highlights describing this shift in the nineties, "in particular, *GQ* and *Arena*, as previously the least gratuitously sexist of all the titles, now endlessly splash topless models amongst the advertising for designer suits; whilst *For Him Magazine*, desperately seeking increased circulation, sells free glimpses of the new Pirelli calendar and incorporates a separate letters page specifically for stories of lager-induced urinating incidents!" (1996: 81).

14. Problem pages in men's magazines may be expected to be subject to the same editorial practice echoed by McCracken (1993: 57) with regard to the sister genre of women's magazines, whereby original questions are often manipulated — even artificially created— to be consistent with the magazines' ideological policy.

15. For detailed quantitative analyses and individual case studies, see de Gregorio-Godeo (2003, 2006).

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