

Men and their groomed body: Understanding personal grooming as both a discursive and embodied practice

Abstract

Purpose – This explorative study seeks to offer insights into the embodied concerns that underpin men’s personal grooming practices through which they (1) experience their body as the “existential ground of culture and self”; and (2) manage their everyday bodily presentation.

Design/methodology/approach – This study analyses 16 interviews with male consumers aged between 20 and 76. The interpretative analysis is informed by both Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the body-subject and the sociology of the body as discursively constituted.

Findings – This study proposes 4 bodily identity positions that link individual personal grooming practices to specific embodied concerns. These bodily identity positions underline the different ways the male body is called upon to carve out a meaningful existence.

Research limitations/implications – The research findings are not intended to generalise or to be exhaustive. Rather, it is hoped that they may stimulate readers to think more deeply about the role of the body in aiding male consumers to seek maximum grip on their life-world.

Practical implications – The study findings provide marketers with rich narratives for brand positioning and image development beyond the traditional sexual and/or alpha male themed marketing and advertising. They also offer preliminary insights for mental health practitioners into how the male body shapes men’s identity development and experiences of wellbeing.

Originality/value – The study identifies the different ways personal grooming can become assimilated into an individual’s system of beliefs and practices. It also offers empirical support for a definition of the body as active and acted upon, especially with respect to male grooming.

Keywords Body-Subject, Merleau-Ponty, Embodied Concerns, Male Grooming, The Discursive Body, Embodied Practice

Introduction

It is often assumed that men are less interested in personal grooming and that they dress for fit and comfort rather than appearance and presentation. Yet, in recent decades, marketers and academics alike have witnessed strong growth in the men's toiletries and fragrances market (Galilee, 2002; Key Note, 2015; Tuncay & Otnes, 2008). In the meantime, it has been argued that male consumers today are equally, if not more concerned about their bodily presentation (Campbell, 2012; Frith & Gleeson, 2004), facilitated by the inversion of the male gaze (Patterson & Elliott, 2002).

Despite these growing phenomena, little research has been devoted to understanding the interconnection of bodily presentation and personal grooming for men and their identity construction. Even less research has been done so far on the embodied aspects of male grooming (Entwistle, 2000). The current research seeks to address these gaps in our knowledge by examining the embodied concerns that underpin men's personal grooming practices through which they (1) experience their body as the "existential ground of culture and self" (Csordas, 1994, p.6); and (2) manage their everyday bodily presentation.

Personal grooming, the practice of caring for one's body and appearance, is part of our "body-language" (Murray, 2002; Rook & Levy, 1999; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). All cultures groom the body in some way through clothing, tattooing and other forms of body adornment such as cosmetics, aftershave and body painting (Entwistle, 2000). In these terms, while human beings have bodies, their bodies are very often groomed bodies (Entwistle, 2000, 2015). However, within consumer culture, there is a

greater tendency to write and speak of women's bodies and their struggles around grooming practices and in light of identity issues. Few of the articles deal specifically with issues of men and male bodies. When they do, these articles tend to be more concerned with critical accounts of men and masculinity, relating the male body to subjects of aggression, dominance, power, and/or heterosexual performances (Duffy, 2012; Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Morgan, 1993; Ostberg, 2012; Rinallo, 2007). Or, they emphasize the importance of body maintenance and appearance for men too, to look good and feel good (Featherstone, 1982; Ourahmoune, 2012; Sturrock & Pioch, 1998). While insightful, these studies typically treat male grooming as a discursive phenomenon, focusing on how male consumers of fashion and grooming products co-opt and appropriate discourses to help with their identity performance and social endeavours (Duffy, 2012; Kimmel & Tissier-Desbordes, 1999; Ostberg, 2012; Rinallo, 2007; Tuncay & Otnes, 2008). As such, the discussion of the body is often left out (Collier, 1998).

Consequently, past literature seems to have construed women as being more embodied than men, especially in discussions pertaining to personal grooming. Women's bodies have, in the main, been more problematized than those of men (Haug, 1987; Morgan, 1993; Szymanski & Henning, 2007). We thus still know little about the links between embodiment and identity issues in men's everyday grooming practices. To this end, following Crossley (1996), this article combines a theoretical approach informed by Merleau-Ponty's (1908-61) concept of body-subject with a sociology of the body as discursively constituted such as that inspired by Foucault (Duffy, 2012; Entwistle, 2015) to gain greater insights into the bodily identity

positions that men undertake when relating their individual personal grooming practices to specific embodied concerns. By identity position, I mean the identity one chooses to attribute to oneself in relation to others. It is through these identity positions that men orient their bodily experiences and construct the relations between self and other(s). The different ways male consumers engage in personal grooming provide a window into how their body is called upon to carve out a meaningful existence, in virtue of their individual perspectives.

In the following sections, a theoretical overview of Merleau-Ponty's (1908-61) body-subject and its relevance to consumer research that mainly focuses on the discursive and representational aspects of male grooming is first outlined to ground the empirical analysis. The study then details the methodological procedures before deliberating the four bodily identity positions identified through my informants' narratives of everyday grooming as lived, as well as their salient dimensions. Implications for theory and practice are then discussed.

Merleau-Ponty's body-subject

The fundamental importance of the body in establishing human experiences has been well acknowledged (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Goffman, 1959; Matthews, 2014; Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Merleau-Ponty is considered by many as the pioneer of some aspects of postmodern thought, especially in regards to the mind/body debates (Thomas, 2005). We are what Merleau-Ponty calls "body-subjects", which takes up "the mechanisms of culture and achieves a (*culturally bound*) awareness of itself (*qua body*) in the process" (Crossley, 1996, p.112). Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of

embodiment endorses that:

Insofar as I have a body and insofar as I act in the world through it, space (*socio-cultural context; added explanation*) and time (*historicity; added explanation*) are not for me a mere summation of juxtaposed points, and no more are they, for that matter, an infinity of relations synthesized by my consciousness in which my body would be implicated. I am not in space and in time, nor do I think space and time; rather, I am space and time, my body fits itself to them and embraces them [...]

The space and time that I inhabit are always surrounded by indeterminate horizons that contain other points of view. (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p.144)

In short, our embodied existence with others forms an intrinsic and vital part of the shared socio-cultural experience (*intersubjectivity*) upon which we develop our own situated perspective against the background of infinite other points of view (Lai, Dermody, & Hanmer-Lloyd, 2007; Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997). Merleau-Ponty spoke of other people as fellow travellers in one's life journey who coexist through a common world (Pollio et al., 1997; Thomas, 2005). He notes that our interaction with others grants us an external view on ourselves (much like *the looking glass self*), such that we become objects for ourselves and can experience ourselves as something or other (e.g., tall, handsome, fat and so forth) (Crossley, 1995).

As such, in contrast to the Cartesian dualist who reduces the subject of experience to a conscious mind that is independent of the world of matter, Merleau-Ponty highlights the pervasive importance of embodiment in framing perceptions and understandings (Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Young, 2001). By embodiment, Merleau-Ponty refers to three ways our bodies interact with the world (Dreyfus, 1996): (1) *innate*

structure, the actual human body that differs in size and certain abilities; (2) *basic general skills*, our skillful responses are solicited by how things show up; and finally (3) *cultural skills*, we learn cultural specific repertoires and resources to construct the identity we choose to assume. When the desired identity cannot be achieved by the body's natural state, the body-subject must build itself an instrument and acquire relevant skills to transform its relation to the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Merleau-Ponty uses the term "habits" interchangeably with "skill", and thus treats "the acquisition of a habit" as "skill acquisition" (Dreyfus, 1996; Reynolds, 2002). Acquired skills/habits can be understood as "the intentional arc". The intentional arc is the knowledge of (bodily) know-how that is steadily enriched and refined and "projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p., 157). The repetitions of habit constitute the corporeal schema. The corporeal schema is the key mediator between the self and the world, enabling one to respond to, and have a 'maximum grip' (*competence*) of synthesizing with the world and accomplishing his life project (Crossley, 1996).

As the following section will demonstrate, the emphasis Merleau-Ponty placed upon our corporeal and perceptual engagement with the world can complement a sociological understanding of the body that discourses on personal grooming shape (Entwistle, 2000). The combination of perspectives (Crossley, 1996), I argue, provides valuable insights into the interpellation of the self, grooming practices, the body and cultural repertoires.

The self-body unity

Merleau-Ponty suggests that, “bodies are both physical structures in the world at the same time as they are lived by the embodied subject” (Robertson, 1997, p.209). He called these two aspects of embodiment, the phenomenal body (i.e., *my body for me; the body as it is experienced by its owner/inhabitant*) and the objective body (i.e., “*my body for others*”; *the ‘real’ body as it is presented*) (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). It is through our awareness and control of our objective body, that our phenomenal body, as a lived, experiential body, is able to act in the context of everyday events (Featherstone, 1982; Robertson, 1997). Within consumer culture, the (objective) body is expressive of one’s intentionality directed towards specific occurrences, persons and/or objects. With help from the cosmetics, beauty, personal care and fitness industries, the body becomes increasingly malleable and plastic rather than something that one must live with as a given (Featherstone, 1982). This is especially true since the introduction of plastic surgery (Askegaard, Gertsen, & Langer, 2002; Kinnunen, 2010; Schouten, 1991), and the ever-growing emphasis popular media places on how one should look to promote the marketable self (Firat, 1992; Firat & Shultz II, 1997).

Both Merleau-Ponty and extant consumer research on personal grooming have been concerned with understanding the self-body unity (Belk & Costa, 1998; Entwistle, 2000, 2015; Kinnunen, 2010; Liu, Keeling, & Hogg, 2016; McAlexander & Schouten, 1989; Ourahmoune, 2012). In terms of male grooming, Rinallo (2007), for example, found that heterosexual men rely on available cultural discourses to determine do’s and don’ts when it comes to fashion and physical appearance. Failing to keep up appearances can result in stigmatization for being untidy, sloppy and not

refined, while using products that are traditionally linked to femininity can be experienced as violating norms of masculinity. Ostberg's (2012) study of masculinity and fashion demonstrated how choosing which sock colour to wear can be a micro-political act that helps with reinforcing power structures among Swedish men. The discourse of power dressing sets out clear parameters of dressing for success (Entwistle, 2000). Engaging Foucauldian theory, Duffy (2012) described how young Irish men exert their agency by delineating discourses of arts and irony against the policing of gender performance with respect to fashion consumption and self-presentation. However, these studies on personal grooming, and male grooming in particular, while accepting the importance of the body in identity construction, tend to emphasize how the body is heavily influenced by culture and thus subject to social regulation. They tend not to talk about embodiment and the ways in which personal grooming constitute part of the experience of the body and identity (Entwistle, 2000).

Approaching personal grooming from a phenomenological framework of Merleau-Ponty means studying the way in which grooming practices work on the body, which in turn works on and mediates self-experience (Entwistle, 2000, 2015). For example, we learn to put on clothes before leaving home and tackling the day's tasks. *Putting on clothes* becomes ready-to-hand by blending into the background of our perceptual apparatus in a taken-for-granted manner. Clothing in this case is no longer experienced as something that is external to the self but part of the self and directly linked to how one experiences oneself/one's body. Failing to put on clothes before leaving the house can be experienced as *body incompleteness*, and leave one feel vulnerable and open to social condemnation (Entwistle, 2000). This explains why

Merleau-Ponty sees our existence as not a matter of ‘I think’ but ‘*I can*’ or ‘*I cannot*’. Our groomed body acts as the point of insertion into the cultural world. Merleau-Ponty used the term “reversibility” to describe the body's presence to itself as both perceiving (the phenomenal body) and perceived (the objective body) (Robertson, 1997). The reciprocity between self and other, according to Merleau-Ponty, is based on the image one has for oneself, mediated by the reflection of the self in the mirror (Steeves, 2004). Grooming practices can thus be seen as cultural artefacts that can be assimilated into one’s everyday experience of living. Successful assimilation of grooming practices can refashion the individual as and when appropriate, modifying his experience of being-in-the-world (cf., Evans & Lawlor, 2000; Lai et al., 2007). Merleau-Ponty’s perspective thus affirms that through habitual practices, non-corporeal objects such as grooming products can be incorporated into the corporeal schema. The corporeal schema once objectified becomes the body image through which one acts on his own surroundings in support of his identity work in situations (Crossley, 1995; Lai et al., 2007; Steeves, 2004). When the corporeal schema fails to materialise, however, a person’s existence may become profoundly shaken (Thomas, 2005).

Taken together, to better capture the relationship between men’s grooming practices and their embodied concerns in the light of identity issues, we need to understand not only the discursive and representational aspects of male grooming, but also the embodied experience of it through which individuals immerse into the world around them. This article considers male consumers’ identity work in terms of their relationships with personal grooming, their groomed body and their webs of social

relations. Men's various forms of personal grooming, I argue, become part of who they are, and are intimately linked to their identity work. The study investigates how men experience their groomed body and manage its presentation to perceived different audiences. The goal of this investigation is to explore the different bodily identity positions that male consumers adopt in their dealings with specific embodied concerns.

Methodology

In line with past consumer research on personal grooming (Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995) and Merleau-Ponty's philosophical thought (Matthews, 2014) that emphasize understanding individuals' experiences from the first person perspective as lived, phenomenology was chosen to guide the data analysis. Sixteen unstructured interviews, ranging in length between 60 and 112 minutes, were conducted with heterosexual, British men aged between 20 and 76 (see table 1). While these informants came from various professions, they all tend to express the self as coming from a working-class background. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim thereafter. The majority of the interviews were conducted face-to-face at the researcher's home, office or the informant's home or preferred coffee shop, with the exception of three interviews that were conducted via video conference at the informants' request (e.g., Skype). Personal contacts and referrals were used for informant recruitment. All of the informants are referred to by pseudonyms throughout the findings.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

In a similar fashion to Thompson et al. (1990), each interview began by one single question: when you think about cosmetics, what comes to your mind? This question serves as a starting point for eliciting narratives about my informants' perceptions of self and others, and how personal grooming is experienced and used to mediate the self-other relationship, and to cope with their embodied concerns. The researcher then followed the course primarily set by each informant. In order to capture informants' embodied experiences as lived prior to rationalisation, all why questions were avoided (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). Informants largely define cosmetics as women's makeup applications and/or skincare (e.g., moisturizer), cologne/perfume/aftershave, deodorant and hairstyling products. Each of the informants then at some point moved on to reflect on other types of personal grooming practices, ranging from clothing styles to haircuts and to shaving.

The ultimate aim of this study is to reveal the embodied concerns embedded in my informants' everyday personal grooming practices. These practices are habitual actions that often do not come to the forefront of our perceptual field, allowing us to concentrate on engaging with the world (Lai et al., 2007). Merleau-Ponty believes that deep meanings of human actions are ambiguous and lie buried in darkness in such a way that they cannot be brought to light but we can always erect pointers in the darkness (Thomas, 2005). The task of this study is to erect these pointers. As such, the hermeneutic circle (the iterating between considering the interdependent meaning of the parts and the whole, and the open coding and axial coding) (Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994) is used as an interpretation tool. It helps the researcher identify the

most recurrent and robust patterns of informants' descriptions that underline the ways their bodies are called upon for identity construction and in response to specific embodied concerns. Literature relating to the role of the body in identity projects and consumer culture is also drawn upon to illuminate interpretations.

Findings

Interpreting and analysing the ways in which my male informants described their experiences of, and intentions embedded in, their everyday personal grooming practices identified four bodily identity positions: *the compensator*, *the carer*, *the antagonist* and *the social acknowledger*. With illustrative examples, table 2 presents a summary of the four bodily identity positions and their salient dimensions. It also shows how consumption orientations may be revised according to the bodily identity position that becomes salient when coping with specific embodied concerns. These bodily identity positions help to orient bodily experiences and construct differing relations between self and the socialising other(s). They give a dynamic picture of how the groomed body and its external image can interact with the internal sensation within the self in various ways.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Below, the study findings are organised by the 4 bodily identity positions identified. In the review process, it was determined that detailed individual case studies were needed to demonstrate the influential role of individual conception of needs *or* embodied concerns in framing the ways that the body is lived and acts

on/acted upon by its social environment (Crossley, 1996). As such, in reporting the findings and taking into consideration the space allowed, I focused on the lived experiences of Ian, Jimmy, Sam and Dean. Importantly, I show how Sam (table 2) and Dean's everyday personal grooming practices may be mapped across all 4 bodily identity positions, reflecting the dynamicity and plasticity of our groomed body. Table 3 details the personal background of each individual case and the frequencies that a bodily identity position is identified within a case. This acknowledges Merleau-Ponty's (2012) perspective that the individual corporeal schema emerges during childhood (Purser, 2011) and the sociological tradition that emphasizes the importance of personal history in understanding the socialized body (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). The four individual case studies were selected because they were representative of the interviews as a whole and offered rich illustrations of key research findings.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

The compensator

The bodily identity position of *the compensator* surfaces when informants experience their body as a source of anxiety and/or insecurity, and become pre-occupied with personal grooming to increase their sense of self-worth in social interactions. These men's personal grooming practices, in this case, are marked as *other-directed*, concentrating on presenting a body that elicits positive responses from audiences. It is through these positive responses that these men attempt to compensate for the perceived inadequate, lesser and/or negative self in situations. In the excerpt below, we can see how the practical usage of a comb helps Ian attain a sense of equilibrium

between his body and the external social world:

I carry around a comb. If I didn't comb my hair, I'd feel like an idiot, the afro hair gets undone and forms bobs in your hair so you need to comb it, so my hair is smooth and nice [...] Sometimes in the classroom, I feel "oh God, I'm looking rough again. My hair's looking rough." I rush to the bathroom and get my comb out and comb my hair and I rush back in and I just feel, "bring it on" [...] if they (the kids) don't like the personality, they'll find it hard to relate to the subject matter [...] I remember one time a couple of the boys, they were 14, 15, and they told me off, they gave me beauty tips, they said, "have you got a comb? [...] I felt awful [...] I did comb my hair. It's just that my hair gets rough [...] I can feel it, I scratch my hair, it's a relax thing [...] it's not great. I just do it when I feel uncomfortable or when I feel insecure, scratch my head or something... It's all down to insecurity and lack of self-confidence, I think.

Here, it is clear that Ian not only experiences his body; rather, he experiences through his body. Ian's body, *or* his hair in particular, serves as the perceptual centre of his sense of insecurity, which requires ongoing management. It seems that for Ian, combing helps to improve the manageability of his *rough hair* and stop him from "scratching" his head, thus transforming the perceived negative body/self-experience. As such, a comb became assimilated into Ian's corporeal schema that seeks to endorse his embodied being as a good-natured, likeable sort which he perceived as essential to being in the classroom environment. As Ian continued to reflect on the critical role his comb plays in increasing his self-confidence and readiness to tackle the world: "there was one time I was rushing to work, and I forgot the comb, so I had to wait until about

8am when the shop opened so I could buy myself a comb [...] I couldn't go into work without combing my hair because I would feel like something's missing [...] my hair was feeling rough, I needed to get it feeling nice and smooth again.” In short, for Ian, having rough hair is perceived as an innate self-flaw that violates the relationship to his body, his perceived social environment and life project.

Importantly and perhaps unsurprisingly, culturally endorsed positive body discourses (Featherstone, 1982, 2010) often provide the compensator with a framework to justify the bodily discomfort that comes as a result of grooming to improve their bodily presentation. It is through portraying a culturally approved positive body image the compensator experiences a boost in his sense of self-worth, which in turn could increase his willingness to be physically closer to the socialising other(s). In a similar vein, we can see this in Dean's dialogue below about men wearing a suit in the context of dating:

You feel more attractive wearing a suit and people treat you nicer [...] wearing it can be a pain though, the fabric is less comfortable and it gives a tighter feeling around arms and chest, especially when you sit down [...] but you're taught to believe people in suits are wealthy, more important and more intelligent [...] it's ridiculous but it's a very simple, short-term kind of ego boost [...] You become more inclined to approach people (less fear of rejection).

A compensator generally acknowledges that such ego boost in “approaching people” is transient, because people's positive recognitions are based on the presented body image (Steeves, 2004), as Dean states: “women look at you more and smile at you if you are wearing a suit [...] obviously, it's a positive thing (laughter), it can't be

denied but it does make you think, “if I were wearing normal clothes, wouldn’t you like me then?” (laughter).” Such embodied awareness of the perceiver demonstrated in Dean’s narrative also highlights the importance of embodiment in the understanding of identity and agency as an ‘I can’ *or* ‘I cannot’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2012).

The carer

The carer emerges as a bodily identity position when the body is experienced as a collective/communal project and the focus of the groomed body is on bonding and relationship building. The carer’s consumption orientation is characterised as *inner-directed*, because their bodily presentation is interweaved with intrinsic pursuits such as intimacy, group affiliation and community involvement. When adopting the bodily identity position of the carer, we can see Jimmy’s experiences of personal grooming practices are largely underpinned by a caring orientation:

If I put that aftershave on, [my wife would think] “oh, you’ve got Bev’s aftershave on (laughter).” That did raise an eyebrow, because she looks upon it as a highly personal gift (laughter), it is intimate to the body and you feel it on you [...] I wouldn’t wear anything else other than her (my wife’s) favourite one (aftershave) [...] I just splash it on to use it really [...] I’m not there to wear one of the ones that Bev gets me (laughter) [...] Especially at that time Bev was single [...] [if three of us go out together, I would wear the aftershave Bev got me], She (my wife) would understand why I was wearing it.

Embodiment has ‘moral dimensions’, with the idea of ‘moral’ being drawn from individual knowledge around inter-subjective and relational conceptions of selves and

others (Doucet, 2006). The above quote underlines how different social events solicit Jimmy to reflect on the *moral* dimensions of personal relationships, expanding Jimmy's corporeal schema and guiding which aftershave Jimmy puts on to act upon his social environment. Here, the "highly personal gift" of aftershave can be construed as taking on added bodily meanings because "it is intimate to the body and you feel it on you", encouraging a perceptual 'merging' of self and the gift giver. Jimmy's bodily experience and its presentation as the carer are at the same time acted on and observed by others who also care. This is evident in the way Jimmy sets clear boundaries between the types of aftershave he should wear to maintain a harmonious relationship between himself, his wife and his female friend, Bev.

Moreover, it is often found in my dataset that central to these relationship concerns is the desire to not embarrass and/or inconvenience others, especially when it comes to significant others:

Dean: If it was the kind of place where everyone was wearing a suit [...] To not embarrass my wife I would wear a suit. I wouldn't wear it for myself, but I'd wear it to not embarrass my wife [...] I would always prefer to wear a t-shirt and jeans if I can get away with it, you (*your body*) can feel more relaxed and a bit sloppy [...] I'd feel closer to her, accepted and not restricted (if it was just me and her in the house).

Ian: When you groom you show that [...] you're not trying to inconvenience people around you with your body odour or smell [...] when I have a shower and aftershave it makes me feel fresh and brand new, and I think I smell, my body smells better [...] you genuinely care because you don't want to embarrass your

friends by looking like a tramp or something [...] like my body odour, Nelly the Smelly. I (*my body*) keep a distance from people then.

Here, how the body is groomed, experienced and presented matters in that it signals a collective sense of '*who we are*', and regulates the space between 'my body' and 'your body' and between a sense of self and that of others. As the carer, Dean and Ian speak of their personal grooming practices as intended beyond self-interests, focusing on cultivating the collective/communal body. The collective/communal body in this case not only represents a merging of self and others but also a priority concern for the wellbeing of other members in the same social network.

The antagonist

The bodily identity position of *the antagonist* experiences the body as a source to aid self-expression. The antagonist perceives his general social surroundings as constraining his individuality and believes that the self is inherently different from the masses to whom conformity to popular consumer culture/salient social norms is privileged. As such, the consumption practice of the antagonist is identified as *inner-directed*, emphasizing authenticity, personal growth and self-actualisation. Sam's embodied account below closely resembles what Thompson and Haytko (1997) call "distinctions never go out of style" and highlights the role of his body in making the distinction:

It (Doc Martens) feels heavy and clunky (on your feet), it makes you stride more [...] you feel more involved in the hard rock, heavy metal music scene [...] I liked Doc Martens and it was never really a fashion thing at school. Like, I know now

people seem to be wearing Doc Martens loads, but they're all like, "Oh, yeah, have you got a pair of Doc Martens?" I'm like, "Yeah, I've had the same pair of Doc Martens for 12 years." And everyone's like, "Have you got some new ones?" I'm like, "No, I've got the same ones that you were laughing at me that I had when I was at school", that now, because some famous model's worn them in a magazine, now everybody wants a pair. I've got an original pair from 2004 and when it wasn't trendy and these are the people who were laughing at me because of the way I dressed at school who now have the exact same things that they were laughing at me for [...] but they don't feel comfortable in Doc Martins, they just wanted that image.

It seems that for Sam, wearing a pair of "Doc Martens" attains existential and political meanings (feelings of heaviness and chunkiness fit the hard rock, heavy metal music scene vs. feelings of bodily discomfort were equated with an image of inauthenticity/trend followers). It becomes part of Sam's very own way of asserting his perceived unique, authentic self. Yet, being authentic can be awkward and takes effort. In the above excerpt, it is clear that by choosing not to follow the trend and fulfil expectations of *'how one should look'*, Sam often faced ridicule and interpersonal rejection. That said, according to Wan, Xu and Ding's (2014) findings, "when excluded individuals infer that reaffiliation is unlikely to be successful, they will have low motivation to seek reconnection. Instead, they will be more likely to attribute the exclusion to their unique self and seek uniqueness to strengthen this belief" (p.1110). As Sam copes with the social stigma attached to his Mohican:

One of the hairsprays I use [to put up my Mohican] has got a reputation for being

like an old lady's style [...] after years of having to put your own hair up and practising, I prefer to just use the cheap stuff. (My Mohican) Stays up, doesn't go anywhere, I can sleep on it, get drunk on it and run around at gigs [...] I feel 'alternative', not boring [...] so, if you buy it in like Boots and stuff you tend to get a few funny looks. Personally, it doesn't bother me [...] everyone thinks you're a drug addict, because you've got a Mohican [...] everyone needs to be in a little group and I didn't buy into that.

Sam as the antagonist offsets a sense of social exclusion by positioning his body and bodily experience as unique and distinctive. Nevertheless, looking at the entire dataset, it seems that the antagonist is more often than not a bodily identity position that one aspires to but struggles to achieve, as Dean concludes: "Society is forcing men to wear suits, if you wear one you are good. You'll be an important man. If you can get above that even, you don't even have to care. That's really good, the freedom because nobody gets freedom really. I've been struggling to get freedom but I'm 50% there I think now, which makes me very happy". As previously demonstrated, Dean from time to time in his interview talked about how he felt restrictions of movement when wearing a suit. The term "freedom" Dean described here can thus be interpreted as depicting not only a portrayal of desirable lifestyle but also a bodily experience that is free of restrictions. The portrayal of desirable lifestyle and a bodily experience free of restrictions can be seen as two sides of the same coin that together constitute what Dean calls "freedom".

The social acknowledger

In contrast to the antagonist, the social acknowledger is a bodily identity position that experiences the body as a social product, and focuses on fitting in with others and/or signalling suitable affiliation by satisfying perceived appropriate socio-cultural scripts in situations. The social acknowledger experiences his embodiment as other-directed, seeking to achieve specific social/interpersonal rewards such as wealth, personal security and social status. Importantly, while the compensator focuses more on embodied issues relating to internal sense of self-worth, the social acknowledger is more concerned with managing the types of external relation he has with (specific) others. Dean talks about the necessity of managing his groomed body in satisfying perceived social demands:

I use electric razor, shaving makes me feel good, fresh like brand new but I feel too baby face like, I don't like it, I think I look better with a bit of a beard on, although my beard itches [...] but scratching it makes you feel good, it's like scratching the side of a match box [...] you're leaning on your hand and you can feel the roughness, I like it [...] But society expects you to do it (shaving), so you do it. I don't like being clean-shaven. It's just a way of signalling. I'm not going to do something rude (in certain settings) [...] it's almost like I'm signalling that I made an effort to present myself nicely [...] You'll be able to do more. You'll be more welcome.

The groomed body embodies how one negotiates existential tensions between personal autonomy and social dependencies (Murray, 2002). Dean's comments here signal his understanding of the interconnections between being clean-shaven and having positive relationship outcomes in a professional setting. It also seems that an

unshaven face has the potential to orient Dean/Dean's body to act in ways that might compromise preferred social meanings. Having a beard can be itchy and cause Dean to "scratch" it and "lean on" his hand – body language that may be considered not professional – despite this Dean's lived body is somehow craving for it.

In personal grooming practices, the body 'understands' as it is our active means of relating to the world (cf., Reynolds, 2002). Below, we see how informed by his embodied need for discipline and stability, Jimmy learned to accommodate the smell of "aftershave" and the physical sensation of applying it:

I started to use aftershave because I saw other people doing it. I need to follow the trend (laughter) [...] first time I wore it (aftershave) I was like OHHHH! It felt a bit wet. Would people like it (the smell)? [...] It ran through my mind that this is what people thought I should be doing. I suppose it's just to conform to society [...] I'm sort of steady, I don't take chances [...] I don't think about it now, just splash it on.

We are engaged 'receptors' of stimuli, guided by our own intentionality, our individual conceptions of need (Thomas, 2005). Jimmy in this case leads a disciplined life through the merging of "aftershave" into his corporeal scheme – when successful, his body is rendered invisible and often taken for granted ("I don't think about it now, just splash it on") to attain maximal grip of synthesizing with the world in which fitting in to Jimmy is of the utmost importance.

Discussion

Using a theoretical framework informed by both Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body-subject and the sociology of the body as discursively constituted, this study has sought to capture and systematically examine the links between embodiment and identity issues in men's everyday personal grooming practices. The research findings demonstrate the different ways personal grooming can become assimilated into an individual's system of beliefs and practices. It was found that the regular, habitual practices of personal grooming are intertwined with four bodily identity positions that individuals take up to orient their bodily experiences and construct relations between self and other(s). The four bodily identity positions were identified as *the compensator*, *the carer*, *the antagonist* and *the social acknowledger*, and solicited by a range of embodied concerns in situations: *self-worth*, *relationship building*, *felt authenticity* and *external approval/rewards* (see table 2). It can be said that it is through these bodily identity positions that consumers as embodied agents enter the subject-object dialogue and determine the latent sense of the surrounding objects. For example, guided by the concern of self-worth, the compensator experiences his body as a source of anxiety and/or insecurity that requires ongoing management. The consumption of personal grooming products for the compensator is thus marked as other-directed, focusing on the need of eliciting people's positive responses to compensate for a perceived lesser, inferior and/or negative self in situations. While the social acknowledger's consumption is also guided by an other-directed orientation, this bodily identity position is more concerned with satisfying perceived situational demands in order to obtain the concomitant social/interpersonal benefits and rewards. The body in this case is experienced as a social product that is a subject of surveillance

and discipline. In contrast, the practical usage of grooming products for both the carer and the antagonist is interpreted as inner directed. Yet, while the carer's bodily experiences are focused on relationship/communal building, the antagonist experiences his body as a source to aid self-expression through which he derives a sense of felt authenticity. In sum, these findings extend and contribute to past research that has paid relatively more attention to women's bodies as lived, as well as the discursive and representational aspects of male grooming. They highlight not only how the body is presented but also how the (groomed) body is experienced and manifested in the different ways that male consumers seek maximum grip on the world in a range of social and/or interpersonal situations.

The study also suggests how influenced by personal background and characteristics developed during childhood, the consumer might become more prone to take up one bodily identity position and not another to guide his bodily orientation and presentation when relating the self to others (see table 3). This is because individual consumers perceive objects and events as having a certain figure or form against a background (Thomas, 2005). It is against this background that they develop a stable (bodily) know-how, 'corporeal schema', to actively engage with their world, which in turn renders them with diverse lived experiences of being-in-the-world. For instance, in the interview conversations, it was identified that having been through childhood turbulences, Ian was most concerned about bodily issues relating to sense of self-worth when engaging in personal grooming practices. Consequently, Ian often understands his social environment through the lens of the compensator and copes with it as such. Therefore, these findings also offer empirical support for a definition

of the body as active and acted upon (Crossley, 1996) and acknowledge the dialectical interplay between agency and structure (Lai et al., 2007; Murray, 2002), especially with respect to male grooming.

Moreover, the research analysis adds to the emerging literature on men, their subjectivities and experiences of wellbeing (Ridge, Emslie, & White, 2011; Roberts, 2013). It reveals the ways in which the male body plays an important role in connecting the self to others and achieving an existentially fulfilling experience in everyday lives. Wellbeing in this case is understood to be dynamic and can be differentially defined based on which concern becomes salient at the time and the identity one chooses to attribute to oneself in relation to others. For example, it would be by no means correct to say that one is only concerned about self-worth, relationship building, felt authenticity or perceived situational demands. More than one bodily identity position may shape how the consumer engages with his body and the external social surroundings. In other words, much like Fischer, Otnes, and Tuncay's (2007) work on the discourses that may affect the pursuit of parenthood, a number of bodily identity positions may simultaneously or sequentially influence the consumer's dealings with the self and other, as his embodied concerns may shift multiple times in a day. The range of embodied concerns I identified go beyond issues relating to social acceptability as noted in earlier studies (Duffy, 2012; Rinallo, 2007; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995, 1998), and reveal a more dynamic and intricate picture of how men live and cope with their world to achieve a sense of wellbeing through their (groomed) bodies.

Finally, what also emerged strongly from the analysis was the centrality of men's body-image concerns to managing the different types of self-in-relation. While past research has in the main focused on understanding women's mental health (Ridge et al., 2011) and through the lens of the relational self (Kaplan, 1986), it can be suggested tentatively that a self-in-relation perspective of embodiment as advocated by Merleau-Ponty (2012) may be equally useful in understanding men's passages and how they define and achieve wellbeing in various consumption settings. It is also important to note that the research findings are not intended to generalise or to be exhaustive. Rather, it is hoped that they may stimulate readers to think more deeply about how the body matters in contributing to individuals' chosen ways of being and their senses of being-in-the-world, especially from the perspective of male consumers.

Implications for practitioners and future research

In addition to the theoretical contributions, the research findings also yield important implications for practitioners. With an increasing contemporary focus on the marketable self (Fuat Firat, Dholakia, & Venkatesh, 1995), the multi-billion pound beauty and personal care industry has been thriving for decades, at least in the Western context. While the female market remains highly competitive and established, the men's grooming market is witnessing strong growth (Key Note 2015). Global sales of men's grooming products is expected to garner US\$166 billion by 2022 (Euromonitor, 2014). Like the sociological study of the body (Crossley, 1996, 2001; Entwistle, 2015), Merleau-Ponty's thesis of body-subject is concerned with self-body

unities and as such it could be argued that it is also conceptually appealing to markets pertaining to personal care and fashion (Evans, 1989; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Such markets are to help consumers express both physical and experiential aspects of the self and within the fashion system. With more men becoming more interested in physical appearance and starting to purchase personal care products for themselves rather than women buying them gifts, the markets have not matched such changing roles and attitudes (Euromonitor, 2014). The preliminary study findings on the links between personal grooming practices and embodied concerns shed some light on these changing roles and attitudes. These findings I argue provide marketers with rich narratives and food for thought to go beyond the traditional sexual and/or alpha male themed marketing and advertising. More importantly, these findings may help practitioners better understand the preferences and needs of specific male consumer segments and tailor products and marketing communications to each segment. For example, the compensator may prefer product/brand narrative that emphasizes improved self-esteem; the carer may be more receptive to narrative that promotes an image of intimacy and community building; the antagonist may appreciate more distinctive product/brand messages; and the social acknowledger may respond better to messages that endorse assorted ways of meeting situational demands for social/interpersonal successes.

Moreover, we are in a time in which men, not only women, are increasingly subject to the objectification gaze (Moradi & Huang, 2008; Ostberg, 2012; Patterson & Elliott, 2002) and body image anxieties (Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Thompson & Hirschman, 1998). It is thus timely to recognise men's embodied concerns (e.g.,

increasing difficulty to obtain sense of self-worth, relationship building, felt authenticity or external approval/rewards), how they emerge and the ways in which men attend to these concerns to accomplish their life projects. As increasingly more boys today struggle with body image issues and eating disorders and with higher suicide and substance abuse rates among men (Ridge et al., 2011; Witz & Marshall, 2003), the research findings offer preliminary insights for mental health practitioners into how the male body shapes men's identity development and experiences of wellbeing.

In closing, the present research was conducted in the UK, a cultural context that is highly individualistic and with the majority of the informants proclaiming a working-class background. Findings may therefore vary across social classes and other parts of the world such as East Asia (e.g., China, Japan) where a more collectivistic cultural norm exists (Ahuvia 2002). Further, it is worth emphasizing that rather than adopting a gender approach that is more concerned with power relations and legitimacy, as per much previous research (e.g., Duffy, 2012; Holt & Thompson, 2004; Moisio, Arnould, & Gentry, 2013; Ostberg, 2012; Ourahmoune, 2012; Rinallo, 2007), this study adopted a phenomenological approach in the consumption setting that focused on studying men's lived experiences in their own right and letting these lived experiences refine our understanding of what they find meaningful.

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