



# Exploring Representations of Masculinity in the Media

## Resources

- Watch the video, 'Naked Objectification with Liesbet van Zoonen', based on 'The Theory Drop: Liesbet van Zoonen' by Mark Dixon.

<https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/video-clips/mediamag-bonus-naked-objectification-with-liesbet-van-zoonen/>

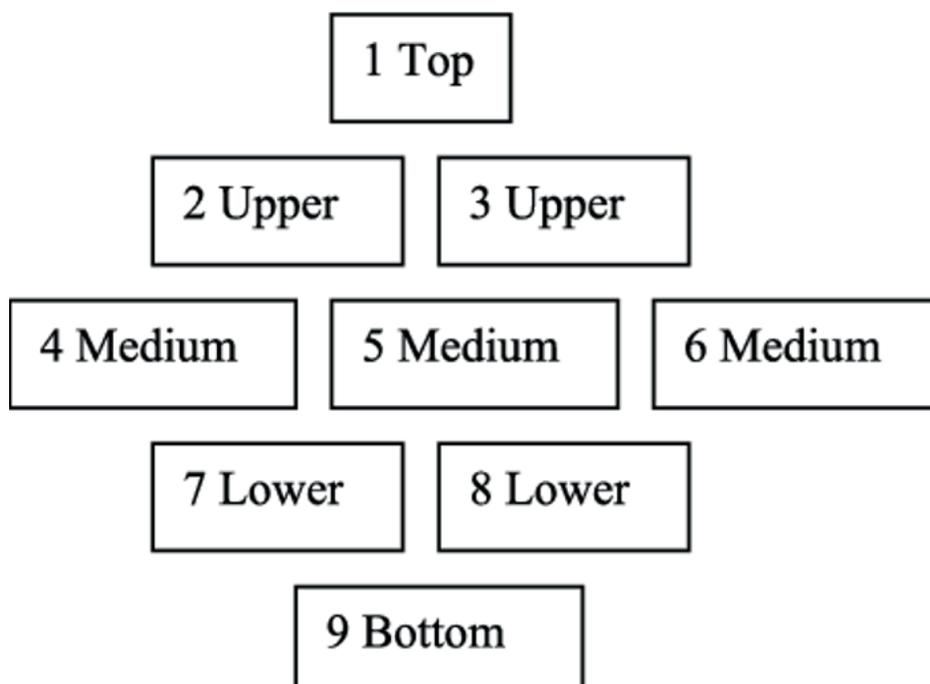
## Questions

1. According to van Zoonen, how are the men in these TV shows represented?
2. Why is the romantic storyline so important for our understanding of representation in Bridgerton?
3. According to van Zoonen, why are the male cast members of Love Island not sexually objectified in the same way as their female counterparts?
4. How might you argue against van Zoonen's ideas?
5. How might you apply this idea to other examples in the media?

## Discussion

- Task: In pairs, sort Liesbet van Zoonen's ideas about masculinity in the media into a diamond 9 (top = I most agree, bottom = I least agree).

A diamond 9 is a way of identifying the most important ideas, the ideas of medium importance and the least important ideas. It should look something like this:



## Liesbet van Zoonen's Ideas

<p>The male subject usually shows 'harder' body language, offering a confrontational mode of address or demonstrating their strength.</p>	<p>Masculine ideals in the media are associated with bodily strength, sporting ability and power which reinforce the idea of male dominance in society.</p>	<p>The media is run by males for the pleasure of male viewers, and, as a result, patriarchal power is the power granted to men to 'look'. The female gaze is therefore carefully controlled.</p>
<p>Male subjects rarely ever appeal to the viewer using the same submissive or invitational gestures female subjects do.</p>	<p>When men are eroticised for a female audience, they are often described in terms of their potential as husbands, fathers or partners.</p>	<p>Showing a male body within a purely erotic context prompts controversy, shock and awe because it is a subversive representation.</p>
<p>Men are normally encoded as 'active participants' within media texts.</p>	<p>The male form is presented in ways that allow the male subject to retain authority over the spectator.</p>	<p>Male eroticisation is often framed within a romance-oriented context. When a male character gets undressed in a storyline, it is usually underpinned by bigger relationship-based themes.</p>

## Creative tasks

1. Create your own 6 frame cartoon where Liesbet van Zoonen examines the representation of men in a different media form (e.g. magazines, news, advertising, film marketing or online) in the next episode of her game show.
2. Write your own pitch for a new reality dating show. Consider the following question:
  - How would you ensure you represent men and women as equally 'active' participants in the show?

The Theory Drop  
The Theory Drop

## Liesbet van Zoonen

Ever wondered how Liesbet van Zoonen would get on hosting Channel 4's *Naked Attraction*? Or what she would make of *Bridgerton*? Mark Dixon has some answers.

At best, one might describe *Naked Attraction* as a cringe-inducing 'must avoid' televisual experience, a show that induces its fair share of slack-jawed incredulity. Once you've seen it, sadly you can't un-see it but for those lucky enough not to have seen Channel 4's latest take on the dating show format, let me explain: *Naked Attraction* is hosted by Channel 4 sex-guru-in-chief, Anna Richardson, who gently prods one 'lucky' contestant (clothed,

initially) to select a partner from a naked line-up of romantic hopefuls.

Needless to say, this unashamedly voyeuristic approach to finding a partner effects limited success in terms of forging meaningful, life-changing, romantic bonds. The show's contestants shuffle nervously in their seats during their post-date interviews, realising only then that almost all their relatives, work colleagues, university friends and so on will have borne witness to the private things that lurk beneath.

This sounds strange, but I wonder – I mean I really wonder – what would happen if Channel 4 managed to dupe Liesbet van Zoonen into hosting the show. 'Let's have the first reveal' Liesbet would read from the teleprompter – the set lights dimming, the show's music booming, while the cubicle screens that protect the modesty of the naked contestants shimmy upwards to reveal their birthday-suit splendour.

I'm almost definitely positive that the show's screen shimmying wouldn't make it beyond the first contestant's badly inked yin-yang ankle tattoo before Liesbet would call a halt to proceedings. 'No,' she would cry, 'for the love of female objectification, no!'

Certainly, *Naked Attraction* provides much evidence to support van Zoonen's assertion that the media readily displays the female body as an object to be gazed at. The show actively invites contestants, and therefore the viewer, to unashamedly appraise potential partners in terms of visual appeal alone, so it constructs a concentrated and objectifying form of spectatorship. *Naked Attraction*, too, bestows power to those who affect the voyeuristic gaze in that the clothed 'choosers' are granted the power to direct the stripped contestants in whatever way they please.

Objectifying representations of femininity such as those found within *Naked Attraction* aren't new. After all, sex sells, but van Zoonen tells us that the impulse to frame femininity as something to be looked at plays a pivotal role in maintaining the patriarchal oversight of society: the media, van Zoonen tells us, is run by males for the pleasure of male

The media, van Zoonen tells us, is run by males for the pleasure of male viewers, and, as a result, patriarchal power – the power granted to men to look – is internalised as a social norm by male and female viewers alike.

CHOOSING WHAT TO WATCH HAS BECOME A COMPLICATED BUSINESS...



BUT WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF THE PATRIARCHAL POWER STRUCTURE BEHIND YOUR FAVOURITE TV SHOWS WAS LAID BARE?



WELCOME TO... **NAKED OBJECTIFICATION**



LET'S TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT THE FIRST SHOW COMPETING FOR YOUR ATTENTION...

AT FIRST GLANCE, **BRIDGERTON** SEEMS TO OFFER A REFRESHING REVERSAL OF THE MALE GAZE

BUT IF WE PEEK BENEATH THE SURFACE, WE SEE THAT THE MALE BODY AS A SPECTACLE IS SOFTENED BY THE ROMANTIC STORYLINE AND ASSOCIATED WITH STRENGTH AND GRIT



INVITING US TO ENJOY THE MALE PHYSIQUE AS EROTIC SPECTACLE

THESE MALE CHARACTERS ARE FAR FROM OBJECTIFIED...

NEXT, HOW ABOUT A TRIP TO **LOVE ISLAND**? OR MAYBE **MAFSA** TAKES YOUR FANCY?

THERE'S CERTAINLY NO SHORTAGE OF MALE FLESH ON DISPLAY...

BUT BEFORE WE APPLAUD THEIR FEMINIST CREDENTIALS, LET'S DIG DEEPER AND NOTE THAT THE OILED-UP MALE CASTS ARE HARDLY EROTICISED



RATHER, THEY ARE BEING EVALUATED IN TERMS OF THEIR POTENTIAL AS HUSBANDS, PARTNERS OR FATHERS!

FINALLY, FEAST YOUR EYES ON... **NAKED ATTRACTION!**

WHAT COULD BE MORE RADICAL THAN A SHOW IN WHICH WOMEN ARE FINALLY GRANTED THE POWER TO VOYEURISTICALLY **SIZE UP** MEN BASED ON PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES ALONE?

SO, WHAT'S IT GOING TO BE? HAVE YOU MADE YOUR CHOICE?



DON'T GET TOO CARRIED AWAY THOUGH, THERE ARE CRUCIAL DIFFERENCES IN THE WAYS THAT THE FEMALE AND MALE PHYSIQUE ARE PRESENTED...

THE LATTER AS SOMETHING TO WITNESS WITH AWE OR EVEN FEAR!



I THINK I'LL JUST READ A BOOK

viewers, and, as a result, patriarchal power – the power granted to men to look – is internalised as a social norm by male and female viewers alike.

Of course, we could argue that *Naked Attraction's* saving grace is that female contestants get to turn the tables on the male gaze. They too get to evaluate and objectify the male bodies that are presented to them, and, in so doing, are gifted the power of looking. Indeed, Anna has a ruler handy for the purposes of such occasions. What's especially interesting is that the returned female gaze in *Naked Attraction* tends to be accompanied by discussion that evaluates the strength and athleticism of the show's naked male participants. Male contestants, for example, are prompted to flex muscles or to demonstrate their agility while the host prompts the show's female voyeurs to stand in awe at what they see.

*Naked Attraction*, like so much other media, presents the male physique in wholly different ways to that of the female body. 'In a society which has defined masculinity as strong, active, [and] in possession of the gaze,' van Zoonen writes, '...it is of course utterly problematic if not impossible for the male body to submit itself to the control of the gaze' (van Zoonen, 1994). As such, male bodies in patriarchal cultures are presented and discussed in ways that invoke awe or fear on the part of the spectator, and in so doing associate masculinity with power or prowess. So even when, in *Naked Attraction*, the gaze is turned upon the male body, it does so in a way that continues to reinforce ideas of male dominance and female submissiveness.

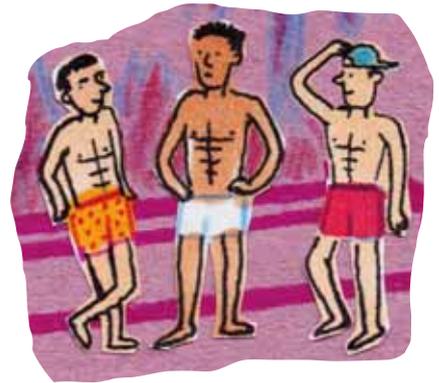
Male sports imagery, van Zoonen tells us, exemplifies this propensity of the media to celebrate empowered masculinity, with photographs of male footballers, rugby players or athletes traditionally constructed to suggest skill or mastery, while qualities such as 'grit' or 'determination' are readily played as natural markers of manliness.

Of course, van Zoonen acknowledges that men can also be constructed as erotic spectacles for the female gaze. Certainly, *Naked Attraction's* bawdy ruler-measuring moments readily supply a female

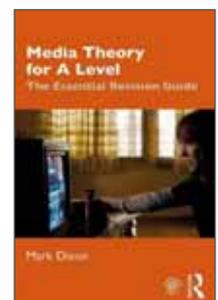
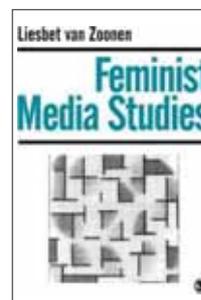
audience with a jiggling excess of objectified masculinity. Arguably, the presence of male flesh as erotic spectacle is also emerging as an on-trend feature of contemporary television drama. The Duke of Hasting's dimple-dented tush in *Bridgerton*, for example, provided Netflix viewers the world over with a particular highlight at the start of 2021, while who could forget Sam's shower scene in *Married at First Sight Australia* (MAFSA) or the smorgasbord of sun-oiled masculinity that makes for *Love Island*. Of course, van Zoonen argues, male objectification exists, but the male body as an erotic spectacle, she tells us, is usually framed within romance-oriented contexts. In plain English, she points to the fact that when men get their kit off, they usually do so within storylines that are underpinned by bigger relationship-based themes, wherein males are evaluated in terms of their potential as husbands, partners, or fathers. Female nudity however occurs repeatedly out of context.

Arguably, *Bridgerton*, MAFSA and *Love Island* provide perfect examples of this softened form of objectification. Hasting's tush exposure in *Bridgerton*, for example, is safely packaged within a fairly conventional romance-based story arc, while *Love Island* and MAFSA's male-based objectification too are presented within stories that pursue relationship and romance outcomes as their narrative end goals. *Naked Attraction*, conversely, perhaps prompts controversy and shock because it dares to show the male body within an erotic rather than romantic context. Certainly, *Naked Attraction's* stripped-down treatment of both men and women is a rarity, even in terms of contemporary television broadcasting.

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   from the MM vaults

Fighting Fit or Bad Medicine: *Men's Health* – Georgia Platman, MM72