

Viagra Selfhood: Pharmaceutical Advertising and the Visual Formation of Swedish Masculinity

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Abstract Using material from the Pfizer sponsored website providing health information on erectile dysfunction to potential Swedish Viagra customers (www.potenslinjen.se), this article explores the public image of masculinity in relation to sexual health and the cultural techniques for creating pharmaceutical appeal. We zoom in on the targeted ideal users of Viagra, and the nationalized, racialized and sexualized identities they are assigned. As part of Pfizer's marketing strategy of adjustments to fit the local consumer base, the ways in which Viagra is promoted for the Swedish setting is telling of what concepts of masculinity are so stable and unassailable that they can withstand the association with a drug that is, in essence, an acknowledgement of 'failed' masculinity and 'dysfunctional' sexuality. With comparative national examples, this study presents an interdisciplinary take on the 'glocalized' cultural imaginary of Viagra, and the masculine subject positions it engenders.

Keywords Viagra · Pharmaceutical culture · Identity formation · Sexual health · Masculinity

Introduction

In this article, we will investigate the visual configuration of what we term a Viagra imaginary, a cultural phantasy landscape that produces and reproduces certain subject

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positions of great interest for feminist and other scholars invested in social change.¹ More precisely, we interrogate here a limited set of key images presented at the Pfizer sponsored web site for potential Swedish Viagra customers in order to explore how this particular Viagra imaginary provides reference points for shared and collective identities. In particular, we explore here the visual formation, and the naturalization, of the nationally shaped masculinity of the potential consumers of Viagra at a Swedish-language site, <http://www.potenslinjen.se/>,² which is produced by the pharmaceutical company Pfizer for the explicit purpose of providing the Swedish public with health information on erectile problems.³ Drawing on feminist science studies, cultural studies, and medical technology studies, we argue that Viagra is a cultural phenomenon, or rather a material-semiotic node for discursive production and identity formation—one inflected by individualized health concerns as well as by the social authority of medicine and the compelling appeal of so-called life-style pharmaceuticals.

Theoretical Framework

Following masculinity theorist and feminist cultural scholar Graham Dawson, a cultural imaginary, as a kind of cultural phantasy landscape, is not monolithic and not hegemonic, but fluid and multiple. It consists of “those vast networks of interlinking discursive themes, images, motifs, and narrative forms that are publicly available within a culture at any one time, and articulate its psychic and social dimensions” [8]. Cultural communities not only mirror but continually reinvent themselves through cultural imaginaries as these are sites of identity negotiation and formation. The reality producing and identity constituting effect of such discursive activities is why it is of the essence to study emerging subjectivities, such as those appearing publicly at Viagra websites.

Moreover, in line with other critical studies of pharmaceutical use and promotion,⁴ we argue that Viagra is a feminist issue. The tendency to divide the psychic, the social and the technoscientific into separate domains of knowledge has been resisted in a rich body of work, including that of feminist cultural studies of technoscience (an interdisciplinary setting in which we feel largely at home) [3, 14]. The effort is here instead one of trying to align and establish cross-disciplinary dialogue between cultural theory, descriptive ethics and gender studies, media ethnography and studies of science, medicine and technology in society. For instance, sexual difference is within such a cultural theory setting understood as the effect of the human subject’s entry into the symbolic systems of its culture. Further, while subjectivity is neither universal nor ahistorical—however always embodied—

¹ This article is based on a paper presented at the Vårdnäs symposia 7–9 May 2008, *Self, Identities and Bioethics*. We wish to thank participants and organizers for their generous feedback, and we would also like to acknowledge the constructive comments of our anonymous reviewers.

² Accessed on October 28th, 2007 and in February and April of 2008.

³ This is in contrast to another Pfizer sponsored website, www.viagra.se, which is framed as an informational site for medical professionals. The differences in readership is constructed to avoid direct to consumer advertising of Viagra.

⁴ See the special issue of sexualities, *Sexualities* vol 9(3), 2006.

it is the product of structuring social relations, shaped by materialities and physical embodiment as much as by social phantasy. Shared and collective, these phantasies organize a screen through which the material world appears and social relations are experienced. As cultural imaginaries, they furnish public forms, organize knowledge of the social world and give shape to both projected and introjected phantasies that are constitutive of, in this case, masculine identities.⁵ Our method is thus one of a materialist kind of cultural psychoanalysis, one that tries to stay clear of both cultural and biological determinisms while approaching material-semiotic phenomena discursively [13]. The target here is however not the lived, sensuous body-self, but the hermeneutic, cultural embodiment of Viagra masculinity.

Our analysis builds upon discussions of the promotion of Viagra (a drug marketed by Pfizer since 1998 for men and couples as a cure for erectile dysfunction),⁶ the construction of masculinities and sexuality as a lifelong duty and health concern of the individual also in other comparative national contexts, such as the US, New Zealand and Japan (see [4, 14, 18–20, 29, 34]. Like other critical readings of Viagra [18, 20, 34, 35]), we are examining the construction of *ideal users* of Viagra and especially the nationalized, classed, racialized and sexualized identities they are assigned. This, however, does not imply that we naïvely aim to reveal any kind of Viagra ideology as a singular site of reality distortion produced by the discursive operations of Big Pharma (ideology critique). The political driving forces of social change are today much more complex and highly individualized which makes us interested in the creation of cultural appeal rather than the creation of (hegemonic) consent. In order to investigate in local detail, for instance how retiring sexually became a sign of pathology through new Viagra discourse, we are aligning slightly different insights from feminist approaches to the creation of cultural appeal, encompassing both complicity and resistance, and to “intersectionality”⁷ (identity as cross-road of intersecting social categories such as gender, age, ethnicity and embodiment) with the notions of the social imaginary and subject positioning (the cultural encouragement for one to take up a specific sense of self) from visual cultural studies,⁸ and further, with previous work within medical

⁵ We are aware of, and regret that, many references to key texts and authors of these fields and areas of study unfortunately have not been mentioned here. The specificities of the field feminist visual studies of technoscience have been elaborated on in other publications [3].

⁶ The term erectile dysfunction was used by Masters and Johnson [22, 24]. However, it was generally not taken up by the medical community until adopted by urologists and popularized by Pfizer. See [4, 17, 21] for a discussion of how this shift occurred and why.

⁷ As something of a buzzword in recent gender studies, intersectionality accounts for how identities are never just sexed and gendered, but also conditioned by nationhood, ethnicity and racialization, class etc. An analytical insistence on intersectionality emerged from within the social sciences and anti-racist feminist theory [7, 13, 23]. In that vein, we argue that the educational advertising of Viagra in Swedish in fact does more than merely provide information, that it generates cultural negotiations over gender and sexuality as these are intersected by issues of, for instance, age and ability, nationhood and ethnicity.

⁸ Related to, but different from, Althusser’s notion of interpellation, psychoanalytic theories of the power of the unconscious and our shared cultural imaginary, subject positioning is a term used within cultural studies that assumes that there is neither anything natural about becoming a subject nor that becoming-subject is a conscious choice. Subject positioning as an ongoing process can be studied through a range of culturally embedded narratives, visual icons and modes of communicating, that provide sign posts for such recognition and identity formation.

sociology and feminist science studies on the ideological processes of medicalization and naturalization.⁹

Interrogating the many cultural dimensions of “the natural” as a rhetorical device at work in the Viagra imaginary, we consult the work that a range of feminist scholars working on (or in) science, medicine and technology have produced since the late 1970s on the powerful (ideological) processes of *naturalization* (cf. [5, 6, 11, 13, 16, 23, 25]). It has, through such research, become clear that authoritative speech of the natural has maintained stereotypical definitions of sex and gender throughout late modernity. In the case we present, Viagra seems—somewhat oxymoronically—to be naturalizing a hegemonic form of masculinity as closely associated with virility, and as determined by erectile capacity for penile penetration of the female body. On the one hand, such masculine subjectivity is about successful ageing and the maintaining of an autonomous and androcentric, well-defined and impenetrable selfhood, one disassociated from health problems and embodiment in general. On the other, Viagra discourse invites also interrogations of *volatile* masculinity and male aging, pharmaceutical incorporation and prosthetic virility, and of commerce in liaison with medical science. These paradoxical Viagra-connections functions in direct opposition to the teleological ethos of science, imagined to rationally and purposefully promote social development. This is evidenced by the narrative of how the drug we know with the product name Viagra, with the active substance sildenafil citrate, came into commercial existence as the accidental result of heart medicine trials in which the male test subjects reported regained capacities for erectile functioning [27], and is an example of how we see Viagra performing ontologically as a curious material-semiotic node [13], an entangled case of meaning and materiality with some unexpected outcomes. Especially so regarding the choreography of selfhood, which we here study as inflected by the formative powers of gender, nationality, sexuality.

In the following, we discuss what we see as the performance of “Swedish” elements of the Viagra-man constructed through the text and images on the site, as this collective identity is imagined as slightly different from that presented in the advertisements that have helped to market Viagra to the US and New Zealand customer base (see www.viagra.com and www.viagra.co.nz). In the US advertising, there has been a conceptual shift from “impotence” to erectile dysfunction (ED), and later to erectile quality (EQ)—as a much more inclusive category of erectile insecurity. These shifts, closely associated to the use of Viagra to maintain masculinity against the threats of aging and other stresses in life, have meant that the potential market for the drug has expanded from older men with serious medical problems (as represented by early Bob Dole endorsements) to aging but active, sporty types (presented through endorsements by football stars like Pele and baseball stars in the US), to ‘every man’ as in the ads with non-famous, regular Joes (called ‘Svenssons’ in Swedish) in their 30s. Much of the critical research about Viagra has so far come from the US and New Zealand, two

⁹ We lean here on a wide range of scholars, such as Londa Schiebinger, Ludmila Jordanova, Donna Haraway, Adèle E. Clarke, Maureen McNeil, Sarah Franklin, Annemarie Mol, and others, in order to define how these concepts have been discussed within feminist science studies.

countries which allow direct to consumer advertising of prescription medicine (see [9, 17, 18, 26]). Direct to consumer advertising of pharmaceuticals creates a media climate that allows drug companies like Pfizer to deliver information about their products to the general population through billboards, television adds, infomercials, magazines, newspapers, radio, etc., pumping out a Viagra message and producing a Viagra primed, ED aware audience [28]. The messages about Viagra are also mirrored in jokes, television programmes and movies, documentaries and news reports, reflecting the fact that the line between paid advertising and media coverage is often blurry. This has bearing on our case study as well. Medical and popular imagery (with an almost global scope) all take part in co-shaping a Viagra-imaginary that provides a backdrop onto which virility can be measured and masculine subjectivities positioned. Because of the ban on direct to consumer advertising of prescription medicine, the Swedish situation is slightly different¹⁰ (though this ban is not always easy to enforce. Pfizer ran an ad campaign for Viagra on bus stop billboards in 2004 and satellite television broadcasts from abroad have created a loophole for television ads as well). Viagra has also figured largely in the “collective psyche” both as a subject of newspaper articles (some reading as if they have been taken directly from drug company PR sheets) and of debate, thanks in large part to the drawn out discussions and court cases about whether or not Viagra would be subsidized by the Swedish health care system.

Concerned with the co-constitutive work of national and global imagination [1, 2], and with what has been theorized as the unfinished and open-ended “new universalisms of global culture” [32], we study in particular how digital imagery employed within pharmaceutical marketing positions embodied subjects through appeals to both “the national” and “the natural”. Appeals to the national and the natural are after all both highly potent cultural tropes through which identity formation can take place [11, 36]. National differences, understood in line with Benedict Anderson’s [1] anthropological notion of nationhood as non-essential “imagined communities”,¹¹ are here comparative indicators of the “glocal” dimensions of the Viagra imaginary. While Anderson assumed that national media, like everyday print press or museums, maintained such a collective imaginary, we propose to investigate how such national imagery today also is co-constituted by commercial, sometimes conflicting, global flows of imagery in general, and by the pharmaceutical industry on the internet in particular. It is in that vein we here try to closely read the cultural processes that produce the subject position of a specific type of Swedish man as a potential consumer of Viagra. This ideal consumer, as he

¹⁰ Of note is that on the Swedish site there is a page explaining what sex therapy can offer men suffering from impotence, in addition to pharmaceutical solutions to ED, and listing the telephone number to a sexual medicine center at a large hospital in Stockholm that receives undirected funds from Pfizer. We assume that this page is included on the informational website about ED because Pfizer is not legally allowed to advertise Viagra in Sweden and must therefore include some information about alternative treatments on the webpage.

¹¹ Characterized by Anderson as a set of recognizable symbols and cultural attachments, the imagined community of, say, Sweden supports a national phantasy of horizontal camaraderie in spite of historically shifting geographical borders, power differentials, language-use and that not all Swedes ever will know each other [1].

is addressed in the web text and imagined in the selected photos, is a cultural figuration we refer to as the Swedish Viagra Man.

Naturalizing the Swedish Viagra Man

An example of how Pfizer's Swedish Viagra site takes an active part in the public negotiation of the meaning of masculinity as related to penetrative sex is a list published on the site of the top ten characteristics of "a manly man". This list is based on a public poll. It might be related to a rather large interest in issues of gender, in what constitutes "manliness" and "womanliness", in Swedish public debate. Gender is a positive notion in Sweden, while the content of such national awareness, informed as it is by decades of gender equality policy work, might sometimes amount to no more than an uncritical celebration of bipolar difference [10]. However, in the summer of 2003, Pfizer hired a nationally renowned polling company to create a top ten list of what Swedish people associated with manliness, and the result reads as follows (our translation):

1. To be practical and handy (a handy-man of sorts)
2. To have good potency
3. To have a well-paying job
4. To have an attractive partner
5. To have a physically fit, muscular body
6. To have an attractive outer appearance
7. To be interested in sports
8. To be always ready for sex
9. To own technical gadgets
10. To have a cool car¹²

The desire to perform an all-around able-bodied, and even enhanced (with cars, gadgets or other status raising attributes) form of masculinity, is clearly a defining feature of the potential Viagra consumer. As an underlying, and unarticulated assumption, such a notion can, in a commercial, yet serious health informational setting like this, only be spoken of in terms of "good potency" and visualized through imagery of active men appearing in non-erotic, everyday life settings as to not risk "indecent", or even homoerotic, associations. This might be regarded as somewhat surprisingly prudish in a national setting famous for its high level sexual education. Viagra has, however, been promoted in accordance with a class-related sense of "respectability", and such a legitimating mode of address is achieved at this site through the setting of health information and references to medical professionals.

Next to the list, the visitor is given the opportunity to vote on-line for which of the top four points s/he finds most manly. The results from that direct online poll name, unsurprisingly, potency as the number one characteristic and handy-ness as number two. This poll indicates also how Viagra, while in a limited and framed

¹² <http://www.potenslinjen.se> (accessed 28 October 2007).

manner on this site, actually is very effective in how it invites the addressed web visitor to contemplate the meaning of masculinity as strongly linked to, or even framed by, erectile capacity. Possible anxieties around potency are also in such a benevolent manner (as an open poll) simultaneously both alleviated (in how it becomes a collective issue), and enforced (by the underlining of potency as the most important manly feature). The solution to any private feelings of inadequacy is placed in the hands of the individual, as he (or a female partner) on the website is encouraged to ask a medical professional for a Viagra prescription. This echoes the recurring slogan of US television commercials for pharmaceutical products where the viewer, at the end of the ad, always is prompted to ask his or her physician about the new drug marketed. We read this as part of a larger transnational discourse of “biological citizenship” [30], where the multi-national company is positioned as a benevolent assister to the good and healthy sex life that, in the website rhetoric, becomes the duty of the individual consumer.

This able-bodied and individualized, ideal masculinity, as it emerges in the list, is to a large part construed in antagonist relation to common associations to lived femininity (soft embodiment, a low paid job, dependency, not always ready for sex, and less interested in male sports, cars and technical gadgets). In turn, this points to a phantasy masculinity inflected by class, sexual orientation and age, as some of the gendered ideals (owning a cool car) seems formatted already within teenage boyhood, though usually only attainable in adult life. Of note is that, this list is framed and presented at the blue-tinted Viagra website along with a picture of a man in a Viagra-blue overall changing a tyre (see Fig. 1). By analogue, Viagra seems an easy solution, as a technical quick fix, to any kind of common feelings of insufficient manhood related to being able-bodied overall. The image manages here to displace a commonplace cultural fetish of ability were almost everything mundane and less than erotic (like changing tires) that defines such masculinity seems hinged on erectile capacities. While clean in design, the website imagery is perhaps, however, not completely devoid of any hints or visual reference to intercourse as a forceful male accomplishment, as the image presents a man, prosthetically enforced by his phallic jack and tire iron, screwing wheel lugs on an equally Viagra-blue car.

Many of the images on the site, however, portray romantic couples. The Swedish Viagra man seems to predominately appear, whether alone and able-bodied or in a relationship, through the discourses of heteronormativity [6].



Fig. 1 “What is Manly?”, from www.potenslinjen.se



Fig. 2 “Myths and Facts”, from www.potenslinjen.se

Nonetheless, there is a quality of “undecidability” of certain imagery that opens up for slightly different interpretations. We found one photo on the Swedish website where a couple’s sunlit feet are flirtatiously entangled on a bed with white bed sheets, where the gender of the couple is hard to decipher. It could be the feet of two men, or even two women, just as well as the feet of a heterosexual couple. Erectile desires not being confined to heterosexual men, this picture could in fact lend itself to the possibility of portraying a male homosexual couple (Fig. 2). Aligning the erectile function of the drug with sensuous imagery of couples or active men sustains, however, a reductive idea where penetration becomes the sole means through which relationships can be confirmed and a sexual act manifested. Also, it becomes clear that Viagra is not intended as a drug for the single man, wishing to enjoy masturbatory sex on his own.

The masculine identity on the Swedish website is in fact marked with nationalized signifiers of socioeconomic class in several ways. For example, under one of the information pages on facts and myths about impotence, there is the myth that “Wet dreams give early morning erections”. Nocturnal erections are then explained by the assertion that, “When a man is sleeping his penis exercises to keep in shape. A healthy man will have an erection approximately every 70th to 100th minute when he is sleeping, regardless of whether he is thinking about sex or tax deductibles.”¹³ This reference to tax deductibles, in a country of progressive income taxes and, until recently, high capital gains taxes, could be interpreted as an appeal to the interests of the middle and upper middle classes, or, at least, to the desire to be associated with financially savvy methods of avoiding taxes. Thus, it becomes part of respectable middle-class life to consume Viagra.

Perhaps most clearly indicative of Swedishness and its association with healthy, physical activity in the outdoors is the dominant imagery of people (men and couples) in wilderness settings. As a collective phantasy of national belonging and camaraderie, the overall use of this imagery can be seen in many commercials for a wide range of products in Sweden. We feel that one image, in particular, on the site draws on a widely viewed beer commercial from the 1990s. This commercial, with a distinguishable aesthetic reproduced in several versions over the last decennia, has come to represent the much sought-after, idealized Swedish summer.

¹³ <http://www.potenslinjen.se> (accessed 28 October 2007).



Fig. 3 “Talk and Encourage”, from www.potenslinjen.se

This commercial for Pripp’s Blue beer, showed mixed-sex groups of white Swedes in their late 20s-early 30s gathering on the cliffs of the Swedish coast on what is obviously a crisp, yet warm and salty afternoon during summer holidays. This group of Swedes, with their well-trained, muscular bodies and attractive and slender partners, all wearing swimwear and seemingly without make-up, brings with them a large case of Pripps Blue beer and spends the duration of the commercial barbequing, sailing or jumping in and out of the water while laughing to the background sounds of a then-popular Swedish pop-song “Blue, blue winds and water”.¹⁴ After more than a decade, this advertisement is still running on Swedish television, and the imagery from the commercial has fastened in the cultural imaginary of what constitutes Swedishness; namely, naturalness and freedom merged with an aestheticized form of summer night melancholia. Serendipitously for Viagra, ‘Blue’ is the iconic brand name of a particular Pripps beer and, for millions of Swedes tuned into popular culture, it represents blue water, blue skies and a laid-back, yet youthful attitude of sexual yearning (blue as in nostalgic, yet not unhappy, feelings)—all staged within a coastal setting (very much like in Fig. 3 from the Viagra website).

The www.potenslinjen.se site taps into this Swedish imagery of the outdoor life, where several pictures feature men and couples by the sea side. A rather simple yet highly effective aesthetic works thus to naturalize Swedish masculinity and connect it to Viagra. We would like to emphasize the central role of scenic landscapes and visualized Swedish nature as photographic backdrop in this process of naturalizing the nationalized Viagra man. At the same time, class also plays in the background. Access to the sea side, to a private sail boat that enables access to unpopulated islands, cliffs and bathing areas during the short summer, is a privilege that is somewhat restricted to members of the capital-owning classes. Such an upper and

¹⁴ “Blå, blå vindar och vatten” The chorus of this well-known song underlines an atmosphere of Swedish summer nights as connected to feelings of desire. (Here translated) “Blue, blue winds and water. Blue, blue skies and sea. Blue, blue feelings at night. ‘Cause it’s a feast with Stillness as guest” (lyrics and song by artist Thomas Ledin.).

middle class summer life style is thus the iconic ideal and unique selling point for both this rather widely accessible beer and the slightly less accessible pharmaceutical. It is a national phantasy of Swedish nature and the yearning nature of Swedes as they long for that “blue” summer feeling. We content that the Viagra illustrations on potenslinjen.se effectively make use of such a blue and youthfully sexual, class-coded and nature-loving, national imaginary of white Swedish masculinity.

This nationalized construction of a middle class Viagra-man in Sweden should be seen in light of the prolonged court deliberations over subsidizing Viagra for the general public, which was only finally decided in March 2008. Viagra is not subsidized on the National health care insurance, so individuals will have to cover the full cost of prescriptions. In a country in which all people are covered by state health care which substantially subsidizes most pharmaceutical products, the idea of paying for a drug, particularly a lifestyle drug, is relatively foreign. Many people would probably think twice before purchasing Viagra with their own money when they are accustomed to receiving medication much cheaper. Thus, the fact that Viagra is not subsidized means that the market for the drug is probably smaller than it would otherwise be (at least for Viagra received through a doctor’s prescription, which is the method of procurement promoted by www.potenslinjen.se). It is uncertain how many people purchase Viagra illegally over the Internet or through other unregulated market channels) and Pfizer has probably therefore consciously chosen to market the drug to those social groups with more expendable income.

The image construction of Viagra on the site is also involved in at this official website—presenting the legitimate need of Viagra for middle-aged men positioned as sufferers of potency problems, thus avoiding connotations to Viagra as a recreational sex drug for party-happy youngsters. The target group is instead the respectable, yet mundane, middle aged, Swedish middle class man, perhaps residing in the northern countryside. The images on www.potenslinjen.se, differing drastically from other national Viagra sites, all depict a very traditional and a very white, Scandinavian man. This, despite the fact that Sweden is, today, a multi-ethnic country with a significant urban population.

Among the photos illustrating the claims about potency, health and Viagra, there are, besides an initial photo portrait of a medical expert (a white, slightly balding, middle aged yet vital-looking man in glasses and blue scrubs), relatively few full face shots of men. One example is Fig. 4. Here we see the face of the targeted, normal and naturalized, Swedish Viagra man. Most photographed people are otherwise depicted with their backs to the camera, from afar so their faces cannot be



Fig. 4 “Different Treatment Options” “, from www.potenslinjen.se

discerned, or metonymically represented through parts of their (tanned, yet white-skinned) bodies, like the entangled feet belonging to the couple in bed. Conversely, in Fig. 4, the somewhat older man looks confidently back at the audience with cheeks blushed by the cold. He is warmly dressed as for winter, with an untamed shoreline in a frosty landscape as backdrop which associates to wilderness rather than cosmopolitan life. It links directly to notions of nature and the natural.

Ideas of ‘the natural’ are often working through a cultural imperative of preservation, of safe-guarding the natural as if God-given, and it is probably the most powerful trope through which subject positioning and identity formation works [11, 36]. The drug Viagra can for instance be conceptualized as natural, as it is presented in Pfizer marketing material, since it enables men an assumed “normal” control over their bodily functions, *it makes naturalized masculinity possible*. Taking the pill merely enables “nature to take its course” [18]. So at the Pfizer website, the task of the biomedical drug industry seems, somewhat oxymoronicly, to be one of “seconding nature” ([11], 21f). In other words, it is one of preserving naturalized masculinity through the prosthetic virility Viagra can provide.

The imagery online conceptualizes both “Swedish nature”, and Viagra as a drug “seconding” such nature, as a quality of both the inner personal and outer, physical, landscapes of the people depicted. From summery sceneries by the sea in the southern coastal areas or winters up north, “Swedish nature” sustains notions of Viagra as a normal and natural ingredient through the idea of ‘letting nature take its course’. The Swedish man becomes one with the enhanced natural surrounding, as Viagra becomes one with the “natural” Swedish man. It is with surprising ease the marketing of a pharmacological product can associate aging Northern manhood to harsh and untamed landscapes as it seems sustained by gendered national demographics where women move south to work in the urban areas and men stay in the north for the fishing and hunting. Such a phantasy of seconded nature remains by implication un-subdued by civilization (gender equality discourse or multiculturalism) as it takes on the oppositional characteristic of feminized and multicultural cosmopolitanism. Interestingly, Swedish masculinity works here thus not in opposition to nature and wildlife, but quite to the contrary. Viagra, as the informational imagery suggest, re-aligns the man to his natural virility. It seems almost as if the defeminization of the North requires the enforcement of heterosexual masculinity. Viagra virility, also as the commodification of men’s sexual health, presents itself thus as a striking and counter-intuitive account of white masculinity as coupled with a national phantasy of uncompromised, and uncompromising, nature.

Concluding Remarks

In this investigation of the Viagra imaginary, we dealt predominately with identity forming intersections such as a nationalized (Swedish), middle class sexuality and naturalized, white masculinity. This is a masculinity which nonetheless is conspicuously malleable, vulnerable and a target for a virility enhancing drug like Viagra. Importantly, we dealt with a visual and spectacular kind of *embodied*

subjectivation to both public and medical scrutiny, a subjectivity creating process otherwise historically preserved for the female body [15, 23]. In fact, Pfizer has positioned the drug as important to ‘every’ man through discourses that present masculinity as the opposite of sexual impotence. Masculinity is equated with ‘successful’ sex, a very specific, narrowly defined act of penetration in (usually heterosexual) intercourse. Being able to perform with an erect penis in this specific way is equated with manhood. By aligning masculinity with physiological sexual performance and promising reliable performance with the assistance of a pill, this discourse asserts that a man can maintain his masculinity regardless of age. Inflected by a strong sense of constant vigilance or disciplining of the male body, Viagra discourse demands individual responsibility so to manage the risk of losing such a virile masculinity even before one enters ‘old age’ [20]. As the consumption of Viagra promises a youthful sexuality long into ‘old age’, it also becomes, we contend, another building block in the construction of a compelling imaginary around ‘successful aging’ as the responsibility of the individual as s/he is becoming framed within a liberal discourse of individualized self-care and biological citizenship [3, 30–33].

Our observations about the images of the Swedish Viagra man can be read in line with previous research which has already shown that Pfizer adjusts its marketing strategy to appeal to local consumers. For example, whereas in the US advertisements for Viagra have used baseball stars to promote Viagra, in New Zealand Pfizer enrolled sports heroes from rugby [35]. Likewise, a television ad in New Zealand has featured a couple riding a motorbike on a sheep farm with the woman driving [35]. How this advertising has been localized for the Swedish context says much both about how and to whom Viagra is marketing itself in Sweden, and about what stereotypical images of masculinity and gender relations it feels are legitimate to base such a campaign upon. Perhaps our results are surprising for a nation that prides itself of gender equality. These images can also be read as suggestions of what concepts of masculinity are so stable and unassailable that they can withstand association with a drug that is, in essence, an acknowledgement of ‘failed’ masculinity and ‘dysfunctional’ sexuality. Or, as Vares and Braun call it, “a pill not only to repair, but also to enhance or improve, both erectile functioning and masculinity” [35]. As such, the online imagery of the Viagra man provide a telling account of naturalized Swedish masculinity as intersected by sexual orientation, ethnicity, age and class. And, like the work of Mamo and Fishman, our analysis has shown that Viagra is a gendered drug, “transmitting cultural scripts which serve as enforcers of normatively gendered expressions of sex and sexuality” [18]. According to the international Viagra script, male sexuality is always active and desirous, the on-demand erected penis is central in its penetrative function [28, pp. 268–269], and according to the Swedish site, the Viagra-man can easily be transposed into a different national context sustaining its hegemonic, naturalized and nationalized, image of the common (or, rather “common-ized”) “Svensson” who in effect is not so anonymous or un-marked but visibly heterosexual and white, while haunted by his blue and yearning feelings of sexual un-fulfilment. He is associated with a wide middle class socio-economic group, one which has the capital to access the

seaside and takes his holiday in the Swedish archipelago, perhaps using his peaceful nights there to dream about tax deductions.

In spite of the mythical figure created online of the ordinary Swedish Viagra man, users of Viagra come in many shapes, sizes, ages, classes, and genders—as the fact that it is currently a popular party-drug in Sweden shows. In addition, internationally, there are less than positive stories about using Viagra [12], something that is reflected in the fact that half of Viagra customers do not refill their prescriptions—which is a statistic also found in Swedish studies of Viagra users [33]. Further, an interview study by psychologists Potts et al. [29] suggests instead that the importance of bodily experience of both erection and impotence is far more complex. Interviewees in that study challenged medical definitions of the meaning of sexual function as well as the straight-forward link between Viagra and a satisfying sexual life. Instead, reports were given of how erectile difficulties led to more gratifying intimate relations by expanding the sexual repertoire. Some reported even how the use of Viagra, contrary to being a quick-fix for relationships, affected sexual relationships for the worse.

At the same time, alternative uses of Viagra, not least of all by women, have come to light, suggesting that as Viagra is integrated into our understandings of sexual practice, it becomes a flexible medical technology that means different things to different people. Viagra discourse is symptomatic of sociocultural imaginaries that are “glocally” situated, as these involve branding techniques and marketing strategies that breach distinctions between public and private (even intimate), between health and commerce. While widely promoted as a pharmaceutical success and a scientific breakthrough, Viagra is also a symbolic materialization of the commodification of sexuality and gender, health and old age. It is in this sense that the Viagra imaginary is important to study (and by implication then take part in and intervene into) as it provides an indicator of embodied subjectivities as they are about to take shape.

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