Estonian men’s lifestyle magazine ‘Mees’: a manual of masculine identity in a transition society

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Introduction

In the contemporary mediatised society, both individual and group identities can be seen as mediated. Lifestyle journals are one of the places where gender identities in a particular culture and era are most intensely constructed. Instability of hegemonic masculinities – even crisis of traditional masculinity – following the development of technology, environmental issues, changes in the concept of work and emancipation of women in the global perspective makes the question of media’s role in constructing masculinities actual. According to Craig (1992, 1) the analysis of men and masculinities provide valuable insight into social relationships, to lend a broader understanding to the social forces involved in patriarchy.

As Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks (2001) have shown, men’s magazines have an interesting position in the media scene and also in the society in general, in discussing and promoting certain ways of being a man. The first men’s lifestyle magazine in Estonia ‘Mees’ (1995-1997, 13 issues) was an attempt to offer male readers an opportunity to consciously contemplate, or construct, a gender identity through readership of a specialist men’s magazine. Published in an era where masculine identity changed rapidly (since Estonia gained independence and entered market economy and consumer society in the 1990s), ‘Mees’ provides remarkable documentation, and can be seen as a milestone, representing a changing gender order in a transition society. ‘Mees’ is worth of analyse, as many of the trends of the following years in gender ideologies in Estonia are presented in this magazine in a concentrated form.

The transition from socialism to capitalism and reconstruction of a national state brought along changes in gender order in all of the former socialist countries (Watson 1993, Novikova 2000): neotraditionalism and masculinisation of the culture have been mentioned as main trends. Success, strength, harsh competition were glorified; while care and emotional spheres were marginalised. Neoliberal ideologies and U.S. corporate culture spread in post-socialist cultural space and according to Connell (2005/2007) became a main venue for constructing masculine identity in former socialist, postcolonial states. George Bush-spirited mixtures of masculine identities can be found everywhere in those countries, consisting of nationalist, religious, corporate
interests that readily ignore alternative points of view. Despite controversies and intellectually interesting clashes from the point of view of Western gender researchers, masculinities in the postsocialist transition have only seldom been chosen as the object of social research by either Eastern or Central European academics (Kolga 2000, Gapova 2002, Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2002, Oushakin 2002; Novikova & Kambourova 2003; see also Hearn & Pringle 2006). In social studies, sex has been a variable in gathering social statistics and masculinity has been generally accepted as an invisible norm in the whole postsocialist culture-room, including Estonia. As gender studies as a discipline was missing in Soviet academy, gender ideologies weren’t theoreticised in an academic sense. Developing gender research throughout the 1990s and first decade of the twenty first century, has tackled mostly issues related to women. Thus, men and masculine identities in a transition society is still an innovative choice of research objective today, which is also a justification for this analysis.

Despite the availability of factual information and sociological data that showed a crisis of Soviet and postsocialist masculinities, other ideals, including ideal gender order, found their place and blossomed in the cultural sphere. In Estonia, reconstruction of a national state in 1990s gave birth to the idealisation of gender order similar to that of the 1930s, accordingly promoting conservative values and neotraditional gender identities in the public debate. Hegemonic masculine identity, the ideal goal of male identity in the last several decades in Estonia, can be hence described as a hybrid of corporate masculinities and nationalist strives (Pilvre 2011).

The content of the magazine has to be seen as the presentation of ideal hegemonic masculinity of the time. By design, the male role models were portrayed within a particular lifestyle and instructions provided in relation to: knowledge of good old school habits, weapons, history, alcoholic drinks, women’s psychology, and so forth. Influenced by Anglo-American fashionable new men’s magazines of the decade (‘Arena’, ‘GQ’ ‘Men’s Health’, etc.), new themes such as health and fitness and other lifestyle choices can also be traced, making the journal ‘Mees’ an interesting and controversial lifestyle manual of an era that paved the way for other men’s lifestyle magazines produced in Estonia later (‘Meeste elu’, ‘EE Mees’, different internet portals) and prepared the market for Estonian versions of foreign men’s lifestyle magazines, ‘Playboy’ and ‘FHM’ among others.

In the chapter, content analysis and thematic analysis are used as a combined method. The chapter is aiming to outline main discourses of masculinities in a sample consisting of magazine texts (229) and advertisements (116) of all 13 issues 1995-1997 and to interpret the discourses discovered within the Estonian postsocialist transition context. No studies on consumption
of the magazine texts (readership, auditorium analyses) have been made on the
magazine, and questions of how the representations were read, negotiated or
contested in their era, is not considered in the following analysis.

In relation to the researcher’s point of view, it has to be mentioned that I
have worked as a journalist in the mid-1990s, when ‘Mees’ was launched, and
was also active as one of the first gender researchers with an interest in the
construction of gender identity in the media, including men’s and masculinities’
representations. In the first half of 1990s, I had published several essays
on masculinity in the literature journals ‘Looming’ (‘Alistatud mees’/‘The
Supressed Man’, ‘Pehme mees’/ ‘The Soft Man’) and reflected on the appearing
new corporate-style masculinities in the daily ‘Hommikuleht’ (‘Uued mehed’ –
‘The New Men’). Problematising masculinities was not common in Estonian
public discussion then. The emergence of the magazine ‘Mees’ on the market
excited me as a gender researcher professionally.

Theoretical framework

Gender identity, masculinity and media

Media, including advertisements have been regarded one of the main tools for
people which help to model their own identity (Goffman 1979, Gauntlett 2002)
and they are among the key institutions in gender socialisation. According to
Goffman (1979) the performance of gender in social situations is analogous
to the gender in media texts (advertisements). Saco (1992: 27) interpreting
Goffman concludes that as particular displays of – for instance men – become
ritualised, we learn to read them as displays of masculinity.

In relation to the concept of masculinity, Craig (1992: 3) has put it
briefly: ‘Masculinity is what a culture expects of its men’. Masculinity seen
as a social construction (Kimmel 1987, Connell 1995) means that biology
determines whether we are male or female and culture determines what it means
to be male or female, and what sorts of behaviours and personality attributes
are appropriate for genders. It is obvious that masculine identity has never been
one single hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987, 2000) and we can speak of
different masculinities. In the last decades of the twentieth century, along with
changing fashion, musical movements and globalisation ‘a more fluid, bricolage
masculinity’ (Beynon 2002: 6) has emerged.

The assumption that media help to consitute gender difference, rather than
reflect or represent that difference, is a widely shared understanding of media’s
role in gender construction nowadays.
Gender representations in the media construct idealised visions of men and women or as Kimmel has put it: ‘The media portray a wide variety of masculine images, informing us about the positive characteristics toward which we should aspire and warning against the negative facets of personality that we must avoid. Media representations tell us who we are, who we should be, and who we should avoid.’ (Kimmel 1992: xii). Also in recent theoretical literature, the media is seen as presenting models of masculinity (Moss 2011).

Lifestyle magazines, especially through their visual imagery, present myths, which according to semiotical tradition (Barthes 1956/1972) are seen as uncontested and generally unconscious assumptions that are so widely shared in a culture that they are considered natural, instead of being recognised as products of unique historical circumstances. Following semiotical tradition, Saco (1992: 25) argues that masculinity in the media has to be seen as signs, masculinity is constructed in the media through sign systems and signs refer to the style of clothing, behavioural mannerisms, and so forth.

Strate (1992), analysing beer commercials, has argued that the myth of masculinity answers the question: ‘What does it mean to be a man?’ And that the question can be broken into five separate questions: ‘What kind of things do men do?’ ‘What kind of settings do men prefer?’ ‘How do boys become men?’ ‘How do men relate to each other?’ ‘How do men relate to women?’ (Strate 1992: 79). It can be assumed that those questions are relevant in problematising men’s media representation not only in advertisements, but also other media texts of popular culture.

According to Hearn and Pringle (2006: 96-97) it could be important to examine, in which kinds of journalistic and other media contexts, men are given meaning as a gender or as gender. Those contexts could, according to the authors, change the typical man-woman segregation and apparent gender-neutrality, what is prevalent and taken for granted in mainstream journalism (dailies). In the following article, obviously, the magazine ‘Mees’ as a journal for men is regarded a context where men are given meaning as a gender, that men are presented as ‘men’, as gendered beings, not neutral, unquestioned norm for human beings, as in dailies.

**Role of magazines in consumer society**

Consumer society is definitely the context which has to be considered studying men’s magazines (Jackson, Stevenson, Brooks 2001). Traditionally, male identity has been associated with production and female identity with consumption, but by the development of consumer society also relations between consuming and masculinity have progressively deepened over the
twentieth century, and simultaneously masculine identity has fragmented.

Glossy magazines do not emerge from the initiative of the newsrooms and journalist ambition but as collaborative initiatives of advertising departments and journalists; with the main purpose of the production of popular magazines to sell advertisements to an audience. Gill, in the overview of gender in magazines (Gill 2007) defines magazines as ‘simultaneously cultural texts, parts of increasingly concentrated media empires and a means of selling highly specific blocks of consumers to advertisers’ (ibid.: 181). Also Edwards (1997) has interpreted the emergence of British men’s magazines in the 1980s and 1990s as overt legitimisation of consumption; they were not about sexual politics but had more to do with new markets for the constant reconstruction of masculinity through consumption.

Gill (2007: 204-217) describes the development of British men’s magazines, which have set men’s magazine trends for the following decades in the Western world. Since then, the main dilemma for men’s magazines has been how to openly address men as gendered persons and not provoke suspicions of homosexuality. This question has been resolved firstly by abundant irony and secondly, through an almost hysterical emphasis on women’s bodies and heterosexual sex. According to Gill (2007: 217) men’s lifestyle magazines aimed at heterosexual men typically ‘construct masculinity in terms of playfulness, flight from responsibility, detached and uninhibited pleasure-seeking and the consumption of women’s bodies.’ Although the language is ironic and the tone self-deprecating, the representations of men’s magazines are profoundly ideological, designed to naturalise gender difference and male power. In the 1990s, Western glossy magazines were already available in Estonia, especially in the media circles who actively read and also eagerly copied formats of Western journalism. Coming from a very different but idealised world, influence of those on the journalists should not be underestimated.

The magazine is a specific journalist format with its own history and generic peculiarities. Analysing any media representation, genre as one of the main discursive agent has to be always considered (Fairclough 1995) and hence direct conclusions based on media representations should not be drawn with society on the whole, without taking generic framing into accountance. It has to be kept in mind that popular culture, including popular media, often carries strong traditional values and and promotes stereotypical gender order and representations (Gill 2007). Popular cultural images are to be seen more as signs than simple depictions of reality, but they still appear in a certain social-cultural context and are not arbitrary.
Estonian post-socialist context - illusion of female supremacy

Gender researchers generally share Connell’s idea that despite universalities in gender order there exists a ‘vast diversity of gender patterns across cultures and down history’ (Connell 2009: IX). Estonia, like all the countries in Central and Eastern Europe, has been shaped by a transition process that covers all areas of life and it has been viewed as a ‘civilization shift’ or process of Westernisation, where attitudes and values of a post-socialist country are transferred to new societal structures (Lauristin and Vihalemm 1997). Strömpl (2000) has described a conflict between the Western values, beliefs and ideologies and actual attitudes, habits, lifestyle and knowledge inherited from Soviet Union. Theorising gender in this context has been complicated as there existed a formal gender equality in work-life and formally also in public sphere in general in the Soviet Union, including Estonia. Both men and women were by law obliged to participate in the labour market and children were taken care by state-organised care facilities. Generally, at the same time, in the public discussions in Soviet cultural space at large, masculinity was perceived as a problem in connection with alcoholism and other self-destructive practices. Dependence of men on their wives and mothers who were supposed to take care of their grown-up sons and husbands were problematised (Gapova 2002: 652). Zdravomyslova and Temkina (2002: 53) claim that late Soviet liberal discourse considered men to be weaker than women biologically, psychologically, and demographically. They argue that Soviet emancipation of women was looked upon negatively both by women and men as the ‘feminisation’ of men and the ‘masculinisation of women’. Novikova, Pringle et al. (2002: 92) show that ‘victimisation’ and ‘infantilisation’ of men has been a topic since the 1980s in the Soviet territories and following this, the public discourse has condemned women’s occupying men’s places.

In Estonia, weakness, alcholism and self-destructive practices of men and over-emancipation of women at the same time, as described in post-socialist cultural space elsewhere, has been a theme in public discussion since the 1970s. In the beginning, it was inspired by popular literature, by female authors like Aimeé Beekmann, who in her many books, wrote about emancipated and educated women who had problems finding an equal partner. Later, data on men dropping out of school, their lower education level, worse health and social exclusion have been constant points of departure in public and also policy discussions (Kolga 2000; Uljas and Raun 2000; Kutsar 2007). Estonian data on men’s health, education, violence and social exclusion also have been included in European comparisons (Hearn and Pringle 2006). In a way, data about
Estonian men’s weak position, in regard to many indicators, is blocking public discussions about gender equality and women’s weaker position in the society, as it is usually set forth in Western equal rights discussion. As Novikova, Pringle et al. (ibid.) have put it sharply, in Eastern Europe ‘steady ‘cannibalisation’ of gender equality packaged as sexual transgression/perversion’ can be found.

On the other hand, feminist or gender sensitive research has shown that despite the worrying data on men and the illusion of traditional female supremacy in Estonia, patriarchal ideology continued to influence life in different ways. The private sphere remained patriarchal in essence as men were not supposed to take part in domestic unpaid labour, and similarly, men sustained their power hierarchies in public sphere (Narusk 1994, 1996; Pilvre 2000, Kurvinen 2008, Kivimaa 2009, Pilvre 2011). After the new independance, conservative tendencies prevailed and there were pressures towards reinstituting a society with traditional gender roles, bringing along the masculinisation of the public sphere – the tendency described by many Western scholars in research upon postsocialist transition society from gender aspect (Watson 1993, Gal and Kligman 2000, Pascal and Kwak 2005).

According to Zdravomyslova and Temkina (2002: 54) postsoviet gender relations are described also by some Russian scholars as the trend of exclusion of women from the public sphere (the political sphere, highly paid jobs, most profitable business, etc.), or as discrimination against women. The emerging gender order and the process of Russian transition is named by the term ‘male democracy’ and also the term ‘revival of the patriarchy’ is often applied (ibid.). It might be interesting to mention here that Susan Faludi (1991) described a backlash in women’s emancipation movement and rise of antifeminism and conservative values in USA during the same period, in her famous book ‘Backlash. The Undeclared War Against Women’. Also Whitehead (2002) has described reactions towards feminism in the period in question, as women’s emancipation has been accused of fostering male criminality and redundant and dysfunctional forms of masculinity. Perhaps there have been some simultaneous developments in gender orders in different societal and political contexts since the end of the 1980s in late modern era, despite the relative isolation of the East from the West.

In the beginning of 1990s, in Estonia, the male breadwinner model became popular in public discourse. Women were suggested both by public opinion and leading political forces to stay at home again, as women did in the idealised 1930s, before Estonia lost its independence in 1940. In the 1990s, the emancipation of the nation and emancipation of women did not match according to the general opinion, as writer Hasso Krull (1995) has expressed very
precisely. Conservatism in social values and norms concerning gender roles since have been typical in Estonia (Soolise võrdõiguslikkuse monitooring 2009, 2010) and it has to been accentuated that men’s and women’s values differ to a great extent (Kalmus 2009). Men’s identity in Estonian society has in recent period, according to Pajumets and Hearn (2012) largely been constructed in relation to work, in the context of survivalist values. It is interesting to notice how consumerism in 1990s was introduced by media, however, real life was mostly about making both ends meet for most of Estonians. In the 1990s the market economy and developing consumer society brought along new possibilities and also commercial pressures to accentuate gender difference by gendered consumption and home-making (Pilvre 2000). Corporate American-style masculinity, along with the development of market economy, has set the norm of financial success as the essence of being a man, and this type of hegemonic masculinity favoured a certain, economically dependant type of woman. Changes in masculinity could seem remarkable on the surface: new career and consuming habits, but basically the patriarchal rule continued to structure the society as it had been before the new independance, during the Soviet regime.

Stemming from the 1990s, these tendencies still prevail and I dare to claim that they are hardly challenged by the gender equality discourse initiated mainly by European Union policies.

**Heterogeneous spectre of Estonian masculinities**

Along with the development of the capitalist regime, inequalities among men grew and now we can talk about different hegemonic and subordinated masculinities according to Connell’s definitions (1995). Estonian businessmen emerged in the process of privatisation in the 1990s, often earlier members of Estonian Soviet nomenklatura who had access to management of industrial enterprises. In the redistribution process of state-owned industrial enterprises, the basis for further business development was created. Obviously, not all men had access to the redistributed state properties, but it depended on the previous position during the Soviet regime. At the same time, a generation of young ambitious men emerged, who were willing to take advantage of the unregulated entrepreneurship environment of Estonia in the 1990s.

Many men previously hired as a paid labour force by kolhoz and sovhoz-type large farms in the countryside lost their work as the state farming system was dismissed. Dropping out of the society was a typical fate for them as they did not have enough resources to start their own farms as was supposed by the dominant ideology of rebuilding flourishing private farms in the 1990s in
Estonia. Also numerous factories in big cities were closed as they had been part of the Soviet industrial system and the workers, often Russian speaking men, did not find their place in the new system. Social exclusion of middle-aged men; former skilled workers, who had dropped out of the society during economy reorganisations in former socialist Baltic states has been described and theoreticised in recent studies (Tereskinas 2009).

Many male fortune-seekers from the West came to Estonia to start their businesses and take advantage of the missing or just-emerging legislation in Estonia, as well as the cheap costs. As Western origin was an asset in itself during those times, those men often very smoothly joined the local business and political elites. As a result, a heterogenous spectre of masculinities developed in 1990s Estonia, including successful businessmen and political elite as carriers of hegemonic masculinity and several subordinated masculinities of the former industry workers, kolhoz and sovhoz workers in the countryside. Russian or other non-native Estonian men constituted one big group of emerging subordinated masculinities being formulated in the 1990s as they had lost – along losing their work in the closed factories – their position in the political system of the Soviet era (as Soviet Union’s dominant nation was Russians). Russians were also labelled occupants in the context of the restored Estonian Republic’s nation-state ideology as Estonian official history was rewritten during late 1980s and early 1990s. Dominant male actors in the nation- and state-building processes had almost unlimited freedom to create new institutions or shape old institutions according to their will, as this was also expected by the people. New state, political and judiciary systems, as well as a totally different economy, had to be established. The media was mostly reorganised and privatised. Social care and education were partly reorganised and cultural institutions were probably the most untouched area, as they remained in the margins of society during this turbulent era.

Most likely, since then, male domination in the workplace has been typical of the organisational culture in postsocialist Estonia; having its roots in the reorganisation of institutions in the 1990s. The labour market has been gender segregated horizontally and vertically since the Soviet period and the tendency continued during 1990s (Vöörmann 2000) and also later. Today there are gender differences among careers, not only measured by numbers, but also perceived by the employees (Masso 2010). However, male initiative in reforming the society has been seen since 1990s as natural dominance by both men and most women

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1 Especially the unification of Estonia and Soviet Union was reconceptualised and earlier ‘deliberate process’ was, according to the Molotov-Ribbentrop treaty from 1939 made public in the late 1980s, defined now as forced occupation.
and it has only been questioned in recent years along with other gender equality discussions.

There are some specific features in Estonian masculinities connected with new technologies that have to be mentioned. According to Bourdieu (1998) technology is universally one of the main culturally masculine fields and also one of the pillars of masculine identity and male domination. Traditional hegemonic masculinity is associated with production and convenience with means of production. Hence, universally in the media, technology, tool and car stories and advertisements in men’s magazines foster the association of masculinity and production. Also in Estonia, orientation in, and knowledge of, cars and technological goods and also of emerging new technologies that appeared on the market in the 1990s were naturally included as desirable in the every-day and media constructed versions of the desired hegemonic masculine identity.²

**Empirical study: Magazine ‘Mees’ 1995-1997 and its discourses**

The advertising market and, accordingly, the magazine market were developing intensely in the 1990s in Estonia. The number of magazines increased 33% during 1990-1999 (Vihalemm 1997: 37-38). Continued commercialisation changed the media into a market-driven industry and led to the increasing importance of the entertainment function of the media (ibid.: 40). Popular women’s magazines ‘Eesti Naine’, ‘Anne’, ‘Stiil’ were doing financially well and the first society journal ‘Kroonika’ was launched in 1996.

In that developing magazine market, the launch of a special lifestyle magazine for male readers was awaited, if only to look back to the past. Still, for the author as a gender-sensitive journalist and a starting gender researcher, it was a remarkable event when it happened.

The magazine ‘Mees’ was issued in 1995-1997, 13 issues altogether by publishing company AS Esmaspäev and AS Printall, as the initiative of restaurant entrepreneur Tõnu Hellam and chief editor, military historian, Hannes Walter. It reached a distribution of 10 000.³ ‘Mees’ consists mainly of journalistic content, mostly text. The magazine does not look very attractive and photos are of poor quality. It can hardly be called a ‘glossy’, but we have to

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² As Estonia has few remarkable traditional heavy industries, the only one worth mentioning is electricity production from local oil-shale, the economic priorities have been set in developing new technologies, such as ICT and biotechnologies. Top level of virtual services of Estonian state and in banking are subjects of national pride since 1990s as Estonia was the leading country of ICT development, the phenomenon was named Tiger Leap.

³ According to oral information from Tõnu Hellam in March 2012.
consider that it is a product of its era, when layout standards, design know-how and the print industry were only starting to develop in Estonia. Advertisements are few (a total of only 116 in all 13 issues) and very unprofessional from today’s point of view. The concept of the magazine was, however, very ambitious, despite the poor appearance. The slogan of ‘Mees’, articulated in a declaration in October issue 1995 by Walter was: ‘To be a man, who breaks through in life, is able to create something, is respected and at the same time remains healthy and can enjoy being a man.’ The aim of the journal was openly defined by him as pedagogical, not entertaining, and that successful men had to tell others their life-concepts. ‘It is not important whether your tool is a wheel, a wallet or a weapon’. It is obvious that the role of the editor-in-chief has been decisive in compiling the ideology of the magazine. Within the first issue, he appeared in many pictures and wrote many of the interviews himself. The important role of editor-in-chief was not, however, an exclusive phenomenon in Estonian journalism in this era. Many journalist projects were actually one-man projects, as the whole field of journalism was reorganised and new initiatives emerged continuously. It can be assumed however that the special focus on arms, military and political history was Walter’s taste and choice.

In order to have a better picture of the magazine, a rough content analysis has been made. The sample consists of 13 magazine numbers, altogether 116 advertisements and 229 magazine texts. In the following two tables, results of the content analysis by advertising and story themes are presented.

Table 1: Advertisement (N=116) by themes in ‘Mees’ 1995-1997.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of stories</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goods, services</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools, materials</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meubles, machines</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobacco</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phones</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cars</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 1 shows, advertisements of different goods and services compose the biggest group, consisting of advertisements of restaurants, sport clubs,
mobile phone operators, travel and office equipment sellers, security service, etc. Regarding the profile of the magazine, as awaited, fashion advertisements make the second biggest group. Media advertisements (journals, TV programs), tools, cars, etc. make smaller thematic groups of advertisements.

It is obvious that, differently from Western glossy men’s lifestyle magazines of the time, ‘Mees’ can be hardly named a monument to consumer culture. But it can however be considered as one of the first sites where men’s gendered consumption is presented in a distinct form; men are a clear target group of advertisements in which it is discursively articulated that masculinity can be constructed by consuming specific culturally masculine goods. Until ‘Mees’, advertisements had been presented as gendered only for women, in women’s magazines, in women’s sections in newspapers, or as universal and genderless in different magazines and newspapers.

Table 2 shows rough thematic analysis of the sample consisting of 229 stories.4

Table 2: Stories (N=229) by themes in ‘Mees’ 1995-1997

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of stories</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalities</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health, care, psychology</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food, drink, tobacco</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military, security</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cars, traffic</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Games</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History, political history</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 Some smaller technical text units such as cross-words, subscription cards, remarks have been not included in the sample, so the exact number of texts in the 13 magazine numbers is a bit larger. The length of the stories is not taken into accountance in the analysis, news and larger stories are counted as equal units. That makes the comparison problematic, but still gives some measurable empirical data to base the following qualitative analysis of the magazine content.
Fashion and style

Stories and advertisement on fashion make a remarkable part of the content of ‘Mees’. There are altogether 41 stories (18% of the sample) and 21 advertisements (18% of the sample) on men’s fashion and style, although many of the stories are short tips. Clothing and style are thus visible themes in ‘Mees’, largely present also in advertisements, many of them on local Estonian brands. It has to be noticed that the articles on men’s clothing and style are mainly written by female fashion designers. Several of the advertisements show classical business suits and costly accessories: watches, jewelry, glasses. Style connoisseurs such as a famous Estonian fashion designer, Ivo Nikkolo, and also some society gentlemen, are interviewed. What and how to wear; how to choose accessories such as ties, shoes and men’s jewelry, are discussed. In this discourse the tradition of the old-school gentleman who knows how to dress and how to wear a suit; someone with a cared-for appearance, is constructed.

Elsewhere, standards of male beauty over time, with pictures, are discussed by a female fashion designer. It is concluded in a light mocking way: ‘By men women can regard beautiful scars, tattoos, pretty bottom, tight skin pants, big hands, golden heart, talent of presenting poetry, listening and ability to ask questions instead of talking about themselves all the time, kissing skills, skill to play some musical instrument, sun tan or also pale skin’. In the same article fatherhood is described as ‘beautiful’ and sexy fathers Robert De Niro, Anthony Hopkins and Robert Duvall are mentioned.

It is noticeable that longer stories on fashion and bodycare include historical insights and facts about culture or cultural figures and, besides being entertaining, are intended to spur ambition. In this way a man’s care of his body is legitimised in ‘Mees’. For example the cosmetic problem baldness is discussed presenting and interviewing some well-known bald cultural figures in Estonia. Baldness is named ‘sexy’, and a contemporary trend, but also a problem that could be solved and cured. In another story a specific masculine care ritual razoring is presented (‘the whole truth about razoring’) and the historical figure King Camp Gillette, inventor of gilette machine are written about.

In Soviet times men’s appearance was not much discussed, although special issues for men appeared of the only Estonian fashion magazine ‘Siluett’. New consumer possibilities and the developing business culture in the 1990s ushered in the demand for men to take care of their body. It is clear, however, that the Western beauty and health industries were not yet interested in Estonian market in the middle of the 1990s as there are almost no international advertisements of health and beauty products and services in ‘Mees’.
State, nation and military discourses

Taking just a brief look at the magazine, the dominance of military stories is clearly visible, as these are long stories, concise and well illustrated, although the articles on weapons and military technologies do not make the biggest group (24 stories, 11% of the sample). Role of military discourse in nation building, going on in Estonia in the 1990s, is the broader context for such representations. New political forces such as the political party Isamaa (Fatherland) were openly military-minded. Interest in and knowledge of military technologies, hunting and personal weapons, including knives, is represented as obligatory in masculine identity in ‘Mees’. Different weapons are introduced through several issues of the magazine by specialists.

The presence of military discourse is a remarkable difference when comparing this to Western men’s life-style magazines of the 1990s. It is worth mentioning that at the same time trendy glossy magazines such as ‘Arena’ or ‘Gentlemen’s Quarterly’ presented the new man’s ideology. Weapons as an important theme in the magazine ‘Mees’ could be explained by the novelty of the issue. In the Soviet period, weapons – just weapons of Soviet origin, of course – were strictly in the possession of the army and only hunting weapons were allowed to be possessed by private persons under a special licence. Western weapons had been the object of desire and admiration by military-minded male during the whole Soviet period as far as information on these was available. Interest in historical weapons – mainly of the German army – was strictly forbidden by law in Soviet Union, but had cult-status in certain circles. This interest was considered an act of subversion, and can be explained by supressed strivings for independence. Now, as ‘Mees’ shows, there was a possiblity to see and know more of those weapons. The slogan of this whole discourse is explained in a statement by the editor-in-chief: ‘A weapon decorates a man.’ How to keep the weapon, how not to spoil it, how to handle it – those issues are covered extensively. It is intresting to mention that even cars were presented as weapons such as ‘Land-Rover, the war-horse of XX century’.

Discourse on state and nation-building could not be missing in ‘Mees’ as a messenger of its time. Stories on espionage and political history can be seen as parts of the remarkable military discourse in the magazine. There are 12 stories (5% of the sample) on political history, but the length and the expertise level of the content of stories has to be taken into account. Nostalgia towards the ‘real’ or ideal Estonian Republic of the 1930s is pervasive in this discourse. Consistency of Estonian statehood is implicitly present in many theme-presentations. That is to say, the Estonian new currency ‘kroon’, introduced in
1992 is presented as historical, having a 70-year history since, for a period in the 1930s, the Estonian republic also had the kroon as currency. Introduction of the etiquette of diplomacy is presented in several issues of the magazine, including also the history of Estonian diplomacy. As part of the romantic nation-building discourse actor Tõnu Lume is portrayed, as he played a film role of legendary Estonian wrestler of the beginning of XX century, Georg Lurich. The film is representing the nostalgie-driven cultural production which was trendy in the 1990s in Estonia.

In ‘Mees’, religion and church-life also are presented as themes in a couple of stories and portraits. Presentation of religious practices as part of gentlemen’s obligatory knowledge is again a major difference, if to compare the magazine with the Western men’s magazines of the time. Tips for visiting church are given as part of etiquette to be obtained by a gentleman. A priest has given an interview after coming back from USA, in a section ‘Man, who came back’. Lutheran church bishop comments surprisingly on traffic. He refers to his professional expertise and is complaining about missing of charity in Estonian traffic. Presence of church and religion as themes in men’s magazine can be understood in the context of statehood reconstruction discourse and of imagined lifestyle, inspired by the ideal 1930s. Lutheran church itself also had positioned itself in the new independant state as a main actor, being oppressed during Soviet regime.

Security can be seen as a subdiscourse of state and nation building in the context of ‘Mees’. Security companies legitimised the showing-off and usage of physical power in civic society as a new phenomenon emerging in the developing Estonian state of the 1990s. As criminality was blossoming as a result of value crisis and anomia, security business found its large market. A presentation of a well-known in Estonia, security man Urmas Sõõrumaa’s businesses is an example of this discourse.

_Emerging corporate culture_

Obviously, personality stories include several themes and discourses and can not be categorised under one thematic label. In the interviews and portraits of different outstanding men in ‘Mees’ (34 stories, 15% of the sample), sometimes

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5 Estonia has never had a state church and the Estonian nation is the most non-religious in the EU, as statistics show (Eurobarometer 2005). Typically, people in Estonia have not been attending church regularly, except during Christmas, and religion has never been a part of the compulsory school curriculum. However, during the whole Soviet period and especially during the independence movement of the second half of the 1980s, the church had a remarkable role as a carrier of anti-Soviet feelings.
only professional issues such as building business or interior design are tackled, sometimes lifestyle, hobbies and the norms of masculinity are included. As men are represented by their public activities, discourses of the emerging corporate culture and corporate masculinity are the most important feature in the personality stories.

As mentioned above, the new economy of the state was being built up by emerging capitalist entrepreneurs. Portraits and interviews of men who had created, or who were actively creating, something are included in most of the magazine issues. There are stories about well-known architects, building entrepreneurs and interior designers. Also advertisements in ‘Mees’ construct the discourse of rebuilding the country (11 advertisements, 15% of the sample, are categorised as Tools, materials). Creating a new urban physical environment was a real challenge in Estonia in the 1990s. Building entrepreneurs and architects could be seen also as very masculine in this context as building one’s own house was seen as a feature of a ‘real man’ in public discussion. Professional standards are stressed by architects, as the emerging new environment of the first half of the 1990s was quite uneven, since literally every man was urged to start building. In the discourse of corporate culture, building is seen in the context of business. It is not just romantic home-making. A well-known Estonian architect declares that a house is also to be seen as a safe investment, ‘different from a car that can be changed often’. Other emerging young star architects stress professionality and give advice to the imagined reader that before starting to build one’s house, it is wise to consult architects. It is instigated to think big: ‘If you want a castle, there should be also a park’. It also is advised to build winter-gardens instead of warm-houses and not to grow cabbage and potatoes in the city. There are also statements that the period of building over 300 m² houses in Estonia is over and potential clients are advised to think more practically. An idea – novel in Estonia – is launched that one can also change lodging during one’s life-time, according to needs, as it is done in USA many times during one’s lifetime.

At that time it was innovative new philosophy that private property is clearly seen as capital, not just a home. Just recently, in the end of 1980s and early 1990s in Estonia there had been a prevailing ideology in public discussions to return to father’s farmhouse in the country, to get back land in the process of privatisation and bring life back to countryside. New, urban business-minded yuppie ideology can be seen as opposing peasant romanticism and some political forces or general attitudes of earlier years.

There are several stories with interior designers as it was also an emerging and trendy new business. Workplace and the cabinet interior are regarded very important. A journalist in an introduction to an interview with an interior
designer writes: ‘Now, as many men work until late hours, a cabinet could be named even more important than home’. Representations of traditional and creative physical power, as in the story about a young forger, can be seen as legitimising male physical power and craft to create something new and typical of traditionally masculine professions.

Although business in itself can be seen as innovative in the Estonian context, the main pathos of ‘Mees’ is inspired by history and returning to traditions, introducing old forgotten skills, crafts and values and traditional masculine professions. A portrait of a male dentist is one example of innovative changes in the labour market. Men became active in areas of society which had been female-dominated in the Soviet Estonia. As a dentist’s business was seen as promising in the emerging capitalist market, male doctors moved into the field.

Health, care, well-being and hedonism

Generally, themes of health, care, well-being and hedonism in ‘Mees’ are presented as intellectual issues, framed by cultural and historical context. Thus these ‘non-serious’ themes are presented as suitable for ‘noble’ men to be interested in.

Probably in the discourse of health and care in ‘Mees’, the similarity to or influence of Western men’s magazines is obvious, as several texts on men’s health are translated from Western magazines. Altogether 33 texts (14% of the sample) are categorised under the thematic group health, care and psychology, including also stories on well-being and sex.

In men’s magazines in general, constructing this discourse, according to Gill (2007) the key issue is how to avoid accusations of homosexuality; how a man can enjoy his manhood while caring for himself, his clothing and health without being labelled gay. It has to be stressed that homosexuality is a non-issue in ‘Mees’. It was decriminalised in Estonia in 1992, but gay liberation only appeared into public discourse a decade later on.

Surprisingly, heterosexual sex isn’t a dominant theme, but is represented in the context of cultural history and psychology. An ideal gentleman introduced by ‘Mees’ is probably supposed to know about buying sex, as history of brothels is covered in one article. Sexual revolution came in Estonia with delay, only arriving in the 1990s. Prostitution was a new and largely accepted field of entrepreneurship in Estonia in those times. It was not understood as sexual violence generally, and the job of the prostitute was even named, with a certain respect, ‘the oldest profession of the world’. Legalisation of prostitution was an issue from time to time in public discussion and critical voices belonged only to
marginal feminists then. There are also some other stories on sex: a story about having sex for the first time with a new partner and after the birth of a child, for instance.

There is one story on fatherhood in which a Finnish masculinity researcher Jouko Huttunen is referred to by an Estonian author. The ironic heading on the cover of the journal is ‘Is child an investment of a stay-at-home father?’ The author concludes that in Estonia a classical, old-fashioned patriarchal father is the prevailing type of father, but in Finland and in other Nordic countries there has emerged a new type of father, willing to spend more time at home with children.

The issue of care is visible, also discursively, in different stories on other themes. In statements by men in an article on leadership, care is mainly associated with making money and giving family financial security. A managing director of a company says: ‘I find myself thinking sometimes if our children get an impression that we only make efforts to cover material needs. In fact we keep in mind other things – I want a secure home for my family, human relations, which give mentally safe basement for life’. Another director says that earlier he was suffering when his wife was complaining to her friends about their poor living conditions. Now, after building the house he himself has changed and is more and more appreciating home and personal relations. He is coming home earlier now and has noticed with pleasure that also his wife has discovered a homemaker in herself and is making their life more cosier.

Regarding men only as breadwinners and not as emotional beings is thus questioned, but this discourse is not dominant as mostly men are represented by their professional life. Self-destructive behaviour is tackled also in ‘Mees’ as among Estonians, especially men, the number of suicides has been continuously high. Psychotherapy is introduced, referring to Woody Allen’s films – again a cultural framework – and men are called to seek help if life is too difficult. There are some random stories on medical issues concerning cardiovascular diseases and stress. Those were regarded as prestigious in 1990s Estonia and associated with the busy life-style of entrepreneurs. (Sudden death and the prestige of heart disease was an issue tackled in one of my own essays written that time, ‘On sudden death’). Elsewhere, bad side-effects of different drugs are presented in an informative story.

What is remarkable is that even plastic surgery is covered in a couple of stories as a very specific, new field of medicine in Estonia in the 1990s. At that time, most people had never thought about plastic surgery, however, in the public discourse of the 1990s, it was associated with new possibilities and even luxury. Women’s breast enlargement and facelifts were seen as part of an elite lifestyle, affordable to the chosen rich. Plastic surgery for men presented
in the magazine ‘Mees’ could easily be interpreted as revolutionary in the context of the prevailing concept of dedicatedly work-oriented and military, nationalist minded masculinity. But those stories can be explained most likely as demonstrating the influence of advertisement within the content, as the borders of advertising and editorial content were really flexible in these days.

Novel in the 1990s, is the discourse of hedonism in ‘Mees’. Hedonism in ‘Mees’ is vastly associated with enjoying life by means of masculine habits such as consuming alcohol, tobacco and good (not healthy) food, as well as playing games. Hedonist ideals are backed-up with concise cultural-historical materials, presenting enjoying life as an intellectual activity.

Tobacco and alcohol advertisements (13 texts altogether, 15% of the sample) are prevalent in the magazine. Although not many, they are often large and colourful, even with two-page pictures. Connoisseurship of wines and wine culture and other alcoholic drinks and different tobacco products is presented as an important part of gentleman’s identity in texts on alcohol, tobacco and food (25 altogether, 11% of the sample). Hegemonic masculinity in the 1990s also included cooking, if meat was in question. Hence, food in ‘Mees’ is mostly meat. There are instructions by different well-known men on how to prepare different meat and how to serve it in the best way. In addition, some recipes are available. Knowledge of games (18 texts, 8%) such as billiard, horse-racing and hunting skills are also introduced in detail, as part of desirable traditional gentleman’s identity and possibilities to enjoy life in traditionally masculine ways remembered from good old Europe.

Feminism, women and representing gender difference

‘What is your opinion of women, fighting for equal rights?’ one society gentleman, an artist, is asked and the answer is: ‘I am horrified.’ Feminism is commented on critically in some other interviews with men and is mainly identified by sexual harassment and the strange, more gender-equal, etiquette that is seen abroad. Commenting on American society, one interviewee says: ‘Oh yes, it is very interesting that girls greet you first. It is taken as an offence when you open doors for women; it is out of question that you help women to put on a coat.’

Discourse on gender difference and normative femininity are intensely constructed by women portrayed in ‘Mees’. There are only 12 stories on women

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6 It has to be mentioned of course that meat as a product is universally symbolically masculine. This association is widely used in also Estonian advertising industry and it can probably refer to ancient hunting habits, when men really went into the forest to kill animals and bring back food.
(5% of the sample), so we can say that women are secondary in ‘Mees’. Some magazine issues are without any stories and pictures on women. Even the special number of ‘Mees’, dedicated to women, named ‘Naiste-Mees’ (‘Ladies-Man’) does not portray many women.

Editors choose the women to be portrayed in an issue, according to their aims. The women’s function in the magazine ‘Mees’ is to reflect upon men and masculinities and it is worth mentioning that those women are educated professionals. They appear mostly in the column ‘Women on men’, but they also discuss their personal gender identity and femininity. Women in ‘Mees’ are successful professional women, young or middle-aged, among them lawyers, designers, a journalist, artists, and even one of the most well-known feminist artists. There is no awaited exposition of female bodies, except some details in Western-originated advertisements. Visually, we find no nameless models’ pictures as decoration in ‘Mees’, and only modest portraits of the fashion-designers and other experts, who are interviewed or write in ‘Mees’.

In the special number ‘Naiste-Mees’ (‘Ladies-Man’) there are stories on female marine officers and a female priest, presenting women as exceptions in the traditional male and also very masculine professions. Future female helmsmen’s gender identity is ‘checked’ by different framing questions by the journalist and the humourously presented conclusion is that they can not be reproached for anything but being too serious and efficient, they are ‘not even demanding women’s rights’. Surprisingly, normative femininity is constructed even in the interview with a woman priest as getting old is the main theme in the story and also the heading goes: ‘A woman does not want to be old’.

In some cases, women compare Estonian and Western femininities, praise Estonian traditional femininity and gender order and criticise feminism. ‘For me, the whole feminist movement is a struggle against the laws of nature... in European countries feminism is just a fight with wind-mills. Especially in Estonia, where, in fact, women have more rights than men’, says one interviewed journalist. ‘Personally my position in the society is near to ideal. How could I even want to change things that are given me by nature.’ She adds, joking, that if to think it over, she would change one thing that would be her bra size for a bigger one. A TV-star comments: ‘Women are taken as decorative additional elements sometimes, belonging to men’s games. On the other hand, I like to play such additional decoration from time to time.’

Women’s identity talk stresses their traditional femininity, comparing Estonians to foreign women, who have become assumedly gender-neutral, and motherhood is stressed as important. One artist says in an interview: ‘Men and women should have equal rights. But me, I want just to give birth and raise children in peace, without the tiring need to earn money. I want that the society
would value raising children more than now.’ Or elsewhere: ‘Estonian women are feminine and should not lose it. They should give birth to more children and care for the home. Without children, women remain girls forever, unfortunately not young forever.’

Even the famous feminist artist is named ‘man-eater’ on the front cover of the issue and she is giving witty comments on men in her life and also motherhood. However, she argues for her feminist position. Asked about motherhood, she says ‘I think that a child needs a mother who is alive. If I shall be taken away my ambitions and self-realisation, I would commit suicide.’

Discourse on gender difference and men’s negative attitude to women’s emancipation is also presented in stories on cars and traffic, by describing women’s helplessness with cars, in a joking but sexist way. An interviewed car-seller says: ‘Women’s part /in buying a car/ is choosing colour.’

We can conclude that women in ‘Mees’ present dominant positions in the gender equality discussion of the 1990s. Defining and exposing themselves as desirable and desiring sexual persons was expected as a contrast to Soviet women in the context of the past, seemingly sexless culture, and the delayed, but stormy, sexual revolution in the 1990s. Estonian women, also successful, were then mainly opposing the ideas of feminism which were exported among other new Western ideologies to Estonia. Striving to show-off femininity, taking advantage of new gendered consumer possibilities that came with capitalism was dominant then (Pilvre 2000). Gender differences were generally seen as biological, natural, and worth maintaining or striving for.

Hegemonic masculinity presented by ‘Mees’ is thus backed-up by representations of strong, professional women who demonstrate their traditional femininity and claim not to strive for more emancipation and women’s rights. ‘Mees’ is not openly sexist: masculinity is not confirmed by hysterical exposure of heterosexual sex and female bodies in a way we can think about typical men’s magazines as ‘Playboy’ or newer Western formats as ‘Loaded’, ‘FHM’ or others, some of which emerged on the market in Estonian language in the 2000’s. There is no direct objectification in the portrayal of women in ‘Mees’ by the editors. Maybe there was no need as, at the same time, women presented themselves as adjusted to the existing patriarchal order.

Conclusions and discussion

In this chapter, the first Estonian men’s magazine ‘Mees’ (13 issues 1995-1997) is considered a remarkable site of representation of gender ideologies, especially of masculinities, of the post-socialist Estonian society in a
concentrated form. ‘Mees’ is seen as a lifestyle manual of the era, presenting gender ideologies which have been sustained in Estonian public discourse in different developments until the present. In an easily readable format, this novel and popular men’s magazine presented the normative statement of what was required to be a man at that time in Estonia. Military discourse is dominant in ‘Mees’, including military history and weapons as themes, mainly due to the personal interest of the editor-in-chief, historian Hannes Walter. This makes ‘Mees’ very different from Western men’s magazines of the era. Discourse of nation-building is constructed in several texts, demonstrating consistency of Estonian political institutions: diplomacy, church, currency. Discourses of business-life and reconstruction of the country are constructed by representations of different male business professionals, among them several building entrepreneurs, architects and other men, who were creating the new physical environment of a capitalist, new Estonia.

A discourse on hedonism is presented by introducing new possibilities of ‘knowing’ to do with the consumption of alchohol, tobacco and the playing of traditional masculine games as well as paying attention to clothing and style. Hedonism is framed by rich cultural and historical material, presenting the consumption of alcohol and tobacco as intellectual activities. Health and personal care discourse are present, also framed by cultural-and historical context and introducing cultural figures; presenting the issues as appropriate to take interest in and in such a way legitimising men’s care for their bodies and looks. Even plastic surgery for men is a random theme. Translated materials are used in many cases. Discourse of gender difference is presented mainly by the portrayal of women who mirror men’s ideal and desired traits, but who also define feminity in their identity talk, according to the demands of hegemonic masculinity, as anti-feminist. It has to be pointed out, that women portrayed in ‘Mees’ are succesful professionals and not models or beauty-queens. What concerns gender difference and gender equality issues, ‘Mees’ represents ideas that are widespread even today, as many successful women still do not want to be associated with Western feminism. Interestingly ‘Mees’ is not openly sexist compared to Western men’s magazines of the era as women themselves adjust to the subordinate role that hegemonic masculinity gives them.

There is a certain amount of irony and humour in some articles and columns of ‘Mees’ as it is typical to the Anglo-American men’s magazine format. But within the discourses on militarism, state and nation-building and business-life, there is no irony according to my reading. Not surprisingly, the ‘easiest’ discourse is that of gender difference portrayed in stories on women. As those women’s main task is to comment on men, fun and irony is present implicitly. Also articles on style and body care have been written with humour,
as, according to Gill (2007) too serious representation of men taking care of their appearance can lead to accusations of homosexuality, which is excluded in ‘Mees’.

To understand the gender order of contemporary Estonia, ‘Mees’ gives several keys. Gender identities are mediated today as media images influence or even dominate in our everyday practices. Legitimacy of military declination of Estonian cultural figures and politicians is visible in ‘Mees’. It helps to understand the position of military discourse in relation to Estonian hegemonic masculinity today. Seeing the profound dedication to military issues in ‘Mees’, it is maybe easier to grasp, how it is possible that militarism is still so popular among male politicians and public figures, who join military games such as Erna trip, belong to Estonian Union of Defence (Kaitseliit) or serve as Estonian army reserve officers besides their civil profession.

There are some other minor, interesting facts to be mentioned. Concern with current politics is almost missing from ‘Mees’. Probably as politics was one of the main themes in the dailies and television in the 1990s, ‘Mees’ has avoided it consciously. To stress this, one well-known leading academic figure and politician appears only as a car expert, presenting masculine hedonism. The choice of foreign guests and the men portrayed in that context is heterogeneous and random, typical of the journalism of the era, where easy availability of some materials or personal acquaintances could easily produce stories in papers or magazines. Among the few foreign men presented in ‘Mees’ are Polish politician Lech Walesa, boxer Mike Tyson, football player Pele, but also Finnish local lore historian Markku Tanner. The last is probably just a personal acquaintance of the editors.

Why, in the Estonia of the 1990s, was hegemonic ideal masculinity presented in ‘Mees’ like that?

Estonian people’s national identity was in a very intense reconstruction phase in the 1990s and history was naturally a source of knowledge and inspiration. Political history, offered in a readable form, was probably also welcomed by readers. Militarism – being a peculiarity of ‘Mees’ – also could be something new and of interest to broad, especially male, audiences.

Coming out of the social deficit of communist times and early postsocialist years, consuming was just becoming part of a ‘normal person’ in 1990s Estonia. There was definitely a strong urge among Estonian men in the 1990s to become different from the Soviet-type man, who was typically known for lacking style, being badly dressed and, in the worst cases, being unkempt and stinky. Soviet men in those times were easily spotted abroad as being different from natives, which could become disturbing. They did not find their way in the rich variety of alcohol, tobacco and food that was available in free market countries.
The lack of Western everyday knowledge could be a problem in normal communication and building business and political contacts abroad. At the same time, ambitions of Estonia’s elite to ‘return to Europe’ were very strong. ‘Mees’ therefore filled in a gap, being a style-guide. There could be an enormous demand for such information in one’s own language in the mid-1990s.

Gendered consumption for men, defining masculinities through consumption of different goods, is introduced by ‘Mees’ in a concentrated form. Emerging consumerist values in the Estonian society backed up such content-offering and today, obviously, consumerism has become a dominant ideology in mediated gender construction. A lifestyle-manual of its time, ‘Mees’ can thus be seen as a milestone of emerging consumer ideology in mediated form in a post-socialist culture.

The aim of entertainment media is of course to sell dreams and create illusions. Probably for most of male readers of the time, moral, intellectual and consumption ideals presented by ‘Mees’ were unobtainable. Although the magazine’s content is based primarily on the individual choice and fabrication of editors, there has to be some relevance when compared to the real experiences of the readers in magazine content to gain their interest in it. ‘Mees’ circulation was comparably high, which shows that there was a readership, that found something in ‘Mees’, to entertain themselves, to build their own masculine identity, or to hook onto something in turbulent times.

References


