

Bench Underwear Ads and the Male Body

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*The essay problematizes the representation of the Male Body in contemporary Philippine urban culture as a simplistic index of sexual relations based on residual notions of patriarchy complicated by hegemonic heterosexism and emergent homoeroticism, as exemplified by the **Bench** underwear billboard ads for men between 2003-2004. This representation is said to be derived from the industrialized mode of image consumption produced in the global capitalist fashion industry that fails to negate the states of its diffracted audience as empowered consumers in either heterosexist, feminine, or queer modalities. Its massified production and display nonetheless question the nature of Philippine sexual culture as homogenous and uncomplicated and reveals relations of power embedded in an eroticized display of male embodiment.*

Male embodiment as a category of visual desire is highly complexed in the cultural milieu of contemporary Philippine urban visual culture. Notions of machismo conflated with the visual erogenization of the body produce highly leveraged trajectories of public gazes that seemingly reproduce the dichotomy between straight and queer, manliness versus femininity. And yet this dichotomy is produced only as a consequence of difference-making, resulting from the political economy of sexual desire, and epistemic closure as defined and imposed upon a heterogeneous matrix by a hegemonic heterosexism, which by traditional fiat has been the exclusive domain of a self-conscious patriarchy. The image of the desirable *lalaki* (male), produced within the closeted confines of Filipino socio-economic and political strictures, becomes a constantly shifting cipher in the determination of the role, display, and sexuality of masculinity that parallels, and reproduces, its global filmic and videotronic discourse. We need only take a look at the production of Philippine film in the contemporary era and note its visual reproduction of masculine identities (via a postcolonial signifier) by surveying the nature of its characterization: from the Johnny Weismüller physique of Armando Goyena in the late 1940s to the short-sleeved, bemoustached pompadour of Erap Estrada in the 1960s, appropriated from working-class bad boy images such as those by Marlon Brando (*A Streetcar Named Desire*) or James Dean (*Rebel Without a Cause*), the leggy, long-

haired boyishness of Christopher de Leon in the 1970s that indigenizes the image of television teen heartthrobs like Edward Albert and Shawn Cassidy; and the suntanned, muscularly lithe bodies of Richard Gomez and Robin Padilla in the late-1980s and early 1990s that parallels the Rob Lowe or Tom Cruise physique. This discourse is disseminated (because consumed as commodity), and appropriated, by the various class and gender-specific publics that desire/defy masculinity as mirror, as shield, and finally, as simulacral weapon (Tolentino 2000).

Operating at a level semantically attached and subaltern to the historical impericity of film, billboard advertising has recently begun to break the straight-jacketed conventions of Filipino masculinity as reliably macho (hence straight and *brusko* [virile]), and increasingly, exploits the phenomenon of eroticizing the *macho*, hegemonizing its/his power within a matrix of trans-public gazes that desires him as an ambiguous sexual position rather than an essentially (homo)social one. Taking as our study the contemporary phenomena of the billboard ads for Bench clothes and underwear from 2003-2004, this essay traces these discordant voices that interpellate the desire of the male body as circumscribed by the fashion industry,¹ and as circumscribed by notions of implied heterosexual force, and yet, is constantly deconstructed by the desire(s) of the other body.

Utilizing Eve Kossofsky Sedgwick's notion of masculinity as a condition that is constantly interrogated by its gendered other,² this study seeks to answer the issue of the increasing fragmentation of the glamorous male image as displayed in photography advertising resulting from the emergence of increasingly empowered Filipino audiences, with their attendant capacities for economic consumption, and their differences in gender and sexual orientation—and also, by dichotomous implication, makes invisible the body that is differentiated from this subject and public dyad: the feminine body; its lesbian butch equivalent; and the effeminate gay body. This homosociality that Kossofsky mentions also points to the relations between players who animate the field, namely, itself (the male body), those of the second body (the feminine) and the third body/ies (queer). As an issue that circumscribes notions of sexuality with popular culture, the study also traverses the contemporary dynamic of relating global capitalism and its attendant system of imagery to the dissemination and transformation of Philippine sexual culture, clarifying the lines of force that connect visibility and economy in the contemporary period, and how this has transformed and brought into focus the socio-cultural dynamic of the Philippine urban context.

Among the anchors that this study is based on is the notion of desire as a theoretical and practisantal category of production. Translated as *gusto* in Filipino, desire operates at many levels of human consciousness, translated across the traditional gaps of both agency and structure (political, economic, social, cultural, ideological, etc.) but its locus is the benefit that is accrued by the desiring for the desirable. Psychoanalysis has brought out a rich body of literature that explains this phenomenon, but the intention of this study is not to essentialize the argument for the psycho-social origins of desire, but rather, to tease out this rubric as an appropriate catalyst for the production and display of homosocialized and homoeroticized imagery, one that is disseminated to a large, differentiated public. Having said so, it must also be added, however, that the dividing line between desire and its Other, abjection (i.e. disgust, repulsion, grossness) is extremely fine, and subject to constant slippage and counter-reinforcement as the stimuli is injected. One's desire, indeed, can also be perceived as another's disgust, needing only the necessary coordinates of the psycho-sexual grid to locate its player-positions.³

One more theoretical foundation is needed, and that is the role of gender and sexuality in this study. Utilizing developments in masculinity studies, this essay analyzes the development of alternicity and ambiguity in the production of the male as gazed, a process of aesthetic fetishization that extends beyond simplistic notions of heterosexual/homosexual essentialism, and argues that, despite the continuing conditions of patriarchal oppression in the institutional production of the "faithful citizen,"⁴ a defined rupture has manifested itself in an area that the Philippine state is vulnerable in, competing mass media conglomerates and capitalist commodification. Coming from a position sympathetic to (because originating from) the feminist experience, masculinity studies cannot remain indifferent to the history of unequal sexual relations wherein the woman's body was subjected to male scanning with impunity, and thus also problematizes this very representation of the male body as fetishized for its still-latent powers of patriarchal domination. Due to the inversion of representational hierarchies (men now becoming objects of desire by women/other bodies), this study thus hopes to contribute to the understanding of the political economy of sexual imagery as it is transcribed and broadcasted from its contemporary site of production.

Because of the overwhelming majority of the Philippine population in the segment of the youth and young adult, as well as the constant carnivalization of the political-religious power structure,⁵

corporate advertising tailored for the youth and young adult has become a powerful tool for the advancement of otherwise taboo sexualized imagery, one that is fundamentally interlinked with notions of sexuality and gender orientation. Among the most effective strategists of this dissemination of youth sex culture in the contemporary Philippine setting is Suyen Corporation, the owner of the Bench line of products.⁶ Since 1988, Suyen has aggressively marketed Bench as a generally youth-inclined, specifically young adult male-oriented category of mass consumption, requiring vast investments in advertising, and in particular, the utilization of handsome, well-built young actors as its image models.

This is where our analysis of Bench billboard ads comes into focus. I have chosen these ads for their repeated production of male imagery in advertising as a category of consumer desire, the primary purpose being the retail of fashion products such as clothes, perfume, and underwear, as worn by selected models, who are often young actors, or otherwise subaltern members of the Philippine showbiz industry. This phenomenon started with Richard Gomez as the exclusive Bench male model through the years 1988-1995, and has continued since then with other male actor-models, such as Jomari Yllana, Diether Ocampo, Jon Hall, Richard Gutierrez, John Pratts, and Wendell Ramos. This tendency to utilize the capital surplus value of fame in the mass culture industry is also reflected in its choice of models arising from prominent political families (Borgy Manotoc), sports celebrities (Rob Duat), and most recently, pop music singers (Jay-R). Although women's clothes and accessories also predominate in Bench ads, necessitating the use of equally well-known female actor-models (Lucy Torres, Assunta da Rossi, Kris Aquino), it is the male clothing and underwear ads that are peculiarly significant. This significance is based on the exchange relations between genders and sexes that are highlighted (and in fact, highly problematized) by the productive conflation of highly homoeroticized and hypermasculinized imagery that is seemingly liberatory from a sexual viewpoint, when in fact it reproduces hegemonic power that relativizes other genders/sexes.

Primary among our considerations for its importance is the manner of their display. The models are often posed with the said product, say men's underwear, without any other element save for the model's body. This singular attention to the product and its wearer is reinforced by blank backgrounds of only one color, forcing the viewer's concentration squarely upon model and product. The photographic

representation of underwear is often placed within a well-established canon of physique enhancement: as the only cover of an otherwise bare muscular male body, it is worn in situations where physical exertion to achieve a defined musculature is the norm, such as an exercise routine, or sports activity. This is the case when we gaze at the 2003 Bench Body ads featuring Marc Nelson and Wendell Ramos. One such ad (see **Figure 1**), reproduced as a billboard along Quirino Avenue in Manila, shows Nelson, wearing black trunks, and backgrounded by a bare blue screen, caught in mid-action as he is about to kick a soccer ball. Here, the emphasis is on the sporty athlete, as his gaze and body language is absorbed in the inevitable collision that his body will make with the ball. The seemingly neutral scene of a man about to fly-kick a soccer ball recalls similar images



Figure 1. 2003 Bench Body ad featuring Marc Nelson as “the soccer player.”

of athletes that are used to advertise products in the sports industry, such as shirts, leggings, shoes, weights, exercisers, and diet foods. The trunks that Nelson wears will find resonance with those ads that sell athletic underwear, such as supporters and *tangga* briefs. It is in the valuation of the model’s depicted body as a vigorous athlete, seen only in the trunks that he wears, that desire begins to conflate and multiply beyond the confines of sports advertising. For if engaging in sports achieves muscular (male) bodies, its display as a desirable item for reproduction is also implicated in the use of that body for other purposes, such as sex.⁷

This simultaneous conflation (good bodies enjoy great sex) and divergence (sports and sex are different but sometimes maddeningly comparable things) can be seen more clearly in the Bench Body ad for Wendell Ramos (see **Figure 2**), reproduced in a billboard along EDSA in Cubao, Quezon City in 2003. Here, the various accoutrements of the modern-day athlete, in the form of digital timers, protective hand bandages, running shoes, sports cap, towel, and an exercise machine, are displayed within the recognizable space of urban socialized athletics, the gym locker room,⁸ along with the main icons of the ad, the black sports briefs and its virile wearer. Posed in the classical Western aesthetic

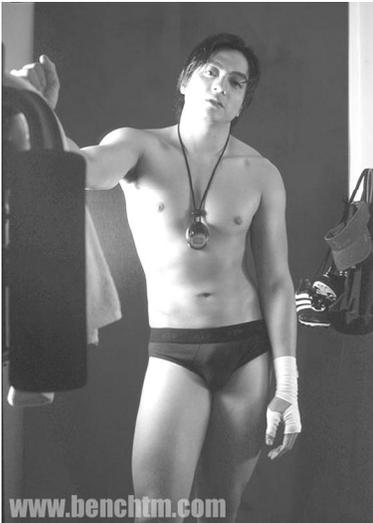


Figure 2. 2003 Bench Body ad featuring Wendell Ramos as “the relaxed athlete.”

body”). The slightly parted lips and faint smile bespeak less of the model’s feeling of a violation of private space, and more of an invitation to partake in more rapt gazing (“*go on...come closer*”). Indeed, the object of the ad is no longer just to sell underwear, but to sell a sexualized object that happens to wear Bench’s black briefs.

In another 2003 Bench Body ad (see **Figure 3**), reproduced as a billboard in the otherwise nondescript but upscale suburb of Talamban in Cebu City, Nelson is now shown standing in front of the same bare blue background found in the first example. Now devoid of all other “props,” he is clad only in the Bench red-gartered black brief that is the direct subject of the ad. Since it is in the lower part of the viewing field (the one physically closest to its viewers), the briefed genitalia is the most prominent aspect of the ad. Not only is the brief the only part of the ad that one can literally buy, it is also the only item that

convention of the *contrapposto*, or the counterpoised body (in which various parts of the body are set in opposing diagonals in order to emphasize the anatomical beauty and harmony of the masculine model), Ramos extends his right hand, letting it rest on the towel and exerciser, in a moment of seeming casualness, his head slightly tilted back, but eyes set level at the viewer, unlike the concentrated athletic attention of Nelson in the previous example. This frontal gaze functions not as an athletic device (“*you and I are competing players in a game*”), but rather, as an interpellating one relative to a voyeur’s (“*I know you are looking at my*



Figure 3. 2003 Bench Body ad featuring Marc Nelson as “the tensed athlete.”

covers the model's body. Moreover, the model is posed as if purposely being caught in a compromising situation: eye contact is established with the viewer, and Nelson's body is tensed to highlight his muscular torso and right arm. The pose again suggests a classical statue, with its contrapposto juxtaposition of upper versus lower torso. Crucially, the sensitive camera lens also captures Nelson's hardened penis as it curves across the brief, captured by it, but suggesting its raw sensuality by its emphasized *chiaroscuro*-ed form. These seemingly disparate semiotic messages (Nelson as Apollonian athlete, Nelson as Dionysian hot stud) can be unified if the psychosexual responses of its audiences are brought out to play in the open: the virile athlete is iconographically ideal, sexually desirable—the latter diffracted into all kinds of positionalities (straight, MSM, gay, bisexual, etc.)—and thoroughly objectified. It is this process, privileging an idealized but objectified masculine body as the site of an economy of desire, that the study is problematizing as a symptom of the production of sexual capital (and thus sexual difference) in the field of mass consumption imagery.

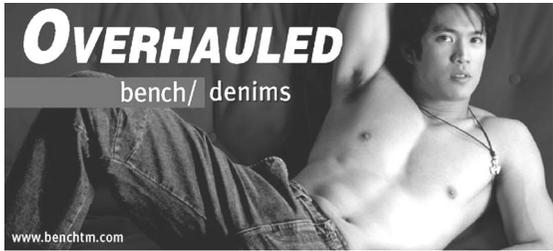


Figure 4. 2003 Bench Body ad featuring Diether Ocampo as "the lounging Oriental hunk."



Figure 5. 2003 Bench Body ad featuring John Hall as "the lounging big brotha hunk."

This intentional (therefore agential) appropriation of athletics imagery resulting in the slide towards (homo)sexuality is not confined to the gym and locker room. More pointedly, a considerable body of Bench ads also convey a more private—if not fantastic—milieu separate from the otherwise publicized urban spaces: scenes that resemble lavishly appointed bedrooms, sitting rooms, or bacchanal boudoirs. We begin by citing two different ad images using a similar posing scenario that I call "the lounging hunk." In **Figures 4-5**, featuring Diether Ocampo in Bench's 2003 Overhauled Denim ad series, and Jon Hall in the 2003 Bench Body ad series,

respectively, the main object is to feature Bench clothing, either denim pants (Ocampo) or black jockstraps (Hall).⁹ However, the manner in which both are posed recalls the 19th Century French Orientalist's canon of the *odalisque*, or reclining nude figure (Lewis: 1996). Both are posed on large sofas or divans that allow the legs to be shown, and their backs are propped up by either soft pillows (Hall), or backgrounded by the flaming red upholstery of the sofa

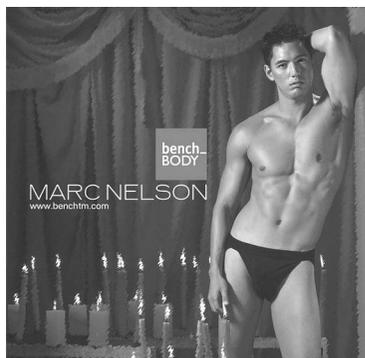


Figure 6. 2003 Bench Body ad featuring Marc Nelson as “the Victorian boy toy.”

itself (Ocampo). Both models are stripped bare save for the respective items they are advertising. The only other sign of clothing is a necklace, simple and Oriental in the case of Ocampo; or elaborately chained and Occidental (that is, American gangsta-style) in the case of Hall.¹⁰ Both models again face the camera and fix their gaze at the viewer, lifting an arm and revealing their armpit hairs which, combined with their muscular abdomens, defined pectorals, obliques, and abs, and rugged unshaven faces, shouts its invitation of masculine-induced privacy, and an open position for sexual invitation. Unlike most odalisque images in which the female hairless nude is often posed with her back against the viewer,¹¹ these hirsuted male versions are frontally posed, back against the cushions, which again signifies their socio-sexual affiliation as genital-oriented—hence, the model's affiliation with phallic pleasure (we giving, he receiving) is preserved. For if the (male) gazer that the odalisque had to contend with was contemplating a rear-end phallic assault, the (poly-valenced) gazers of these men are satiated/grossed out of themselves with torsos, faces, body hair, and proffered (but still covered) phalluses of *totoong lalaki* (“real men”).

Three additional examples (see **Figures 6-8**) show more clearly the (self-Orientalizing?) strategies of Bench in exoticizing and eroticizing (not to mention objectifying) the male body in pursuit of dominance in the underwear mass market. These involve Nelson, a British-Burmese model who has since parlayed his success as an image model into a lucrative career of television hosting. Done as part of the massive 2003-04 Bench Body ad campaign, the examples all glorify his physique and mixed racial identity, and the interiors, which emphasize the hybridized

cultural background of the model. The first shows him in the now-familiar raised arm pose, standing to the right and leaning on a column, while old Victorian-style thick red satin curtains close off the background, the foreground decorated with a mass of lit candles. The second shows him standing in contrapposto, arms at his sides, amidst a pile of apples, while a python is digitally wrapped around his thigh, its head snaking across his right shoulder. The third shows him standing amidst a roomful of Chinese red lanterns, his arms raised above his head and resting against the low ceiling. Utilizing the basic red-versus-black color opposition, these ads also convey a level of material richness and sensuality that borders on decadence. The use of red, in particular, not only ties it with the traditional Chinese notion of red as the color of good luck, but also with the use of red in the West as a traditional signifier of sexual desire (hence, the “red light” district). Allied with the presentation of Nelson’s tanned, muscular body, clad only in black or red briefs, and signaling its progeny from 19th century Orientalism’s visualized obsession with the exoticized, sexualized (but powerless) East, the result is an overdetermined sign that points to the utility of the male body as itself the object of the viewer’s desire: the boy toy at the bordello; the lithe Adam and his fatal serpentine (doubling as phallic) attraction; and the beefcake prize to eat (with) during the Mooncake Festival.

A third point that Bench ads in more recent campaigns involving bared male bodies seem to utilize is the very notion of the economy of material production into a fetishized re-rendition of the human bodies that are at the center of its relations of production. Two ads from the Bench 2004 Understatement Fashion Show emphasize this cooption of

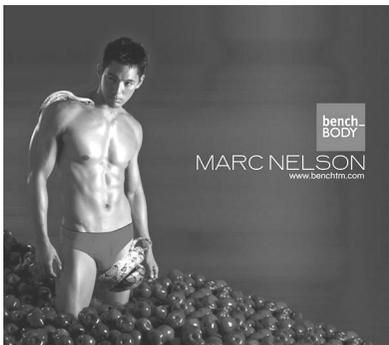


Figure 7. 2003 Bench Body ad featuring Marc Nelson as “the fatal Adam.”

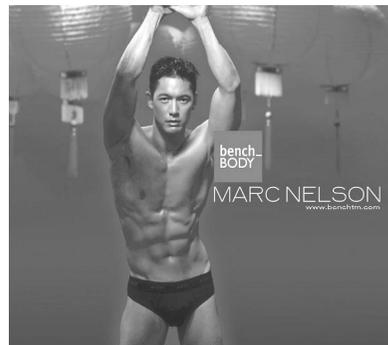


Figure 8. 2003 Bench Body ad featuring Marc Nelson as “the Chinese beefcake prize.”

masculine iconography previously overdetermined as exclusively economic. The first (see **Figure 9**) shows actor-model Antonio Aquitania dressed in a Panama hat, his body cropped at the waist, where the garter of his black Bench brief, Bench Blue Denims, and a heavy-duty cowboy belt can be seen. Clenching a hand-rolled cigarette with his teeth, Aquitania's getup is reminiscent of the image of the provincial *haciennero* or gentleman farmer, whose meta-feudal control of the land and its human resources is iconically interpellated by the hat, the swagger of the pose, and the expensive cigarette. The second (see **Figure 10**) shows pop singer Jay-R wearing only a black Bench brief, but posed to suggest that he is proffering his covered genitalia to a potentially salivating public: arms flexed and pushing against his buttocks, torso tilted back. At the same time, however, this erotic suggestion is negated (or to the minds of others, highlighted) by the grudging stare that the model projects to his viewers, as if playing the unwilling male prostitute that was forced to pose for the money. Appropriated from two sides of the social equation, the ruling class male (Aquitania) and the working class male (Jay-R), the 2004 Bench Understatement ads deftly occlude the unequal relations of economic production by focusing the social gaze at its embodied players instead, and engaging in a simulacral game of content recognition (actors/singers playing models playing competing social classes) that stabilizes its ultimate



Figure 9. 2003 Bench Understatement Fashion Show ad featuring Antonio Aquitania as "the haciennero."

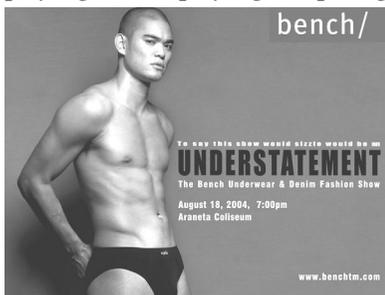


Figure 10. 2003 Bench Understatement Fashion Show ad featuring Jay-R as "the staring worker."

denomination on the image of the (barely covered, and thus sexualized) male body.

All these images have some common denominators. Firstly, the physiques of the models are always often enhanced: muscular bodies of handsome young men, sometimes with armpit hair, indicate a hypervalued index for the male; in other words, the ideal type of male, which is denoted as virile, top, and

macho.¹² Secondly, their racial identification as either Filipino for *mestizo Pinoy* or generally Asian indicates the indigenization of the subject matter, and the valorization of the same as worthy of mass media dissemination, on a par with Caucasian models.¹³ Thirdly, their reproduction as large-format billboard ads (often reaching ten by thirty meters) transforms the model's narcissistic presence from photographic studio intimacy to urban macro-publicity (Mulvey 1988), the camera image becoming the monumental ad that becomes part of the everyday bombardment of images along public thoroughfares in Metro Manila and other regional cities. And lastly, because of this reproduction, these are now seen by a public that is as differentiated, and as large, as one can imagine.

In this arena of play, the Bench billboard ads become part of the everyday visual stimuli of millions of Filipinos going to work, school, or the shopping mall. What desires are disseminated, or reproduced, in these locations? The most obvious one, to sell Bench products, is the primary desire from the locus of the manufacturer/capitalist. The desire of its model is perhaps more interesting: to earn income from modeling fees; and to be recognized by millions of (presumably) adoring fans, that increases one's potential economic capital in subsequent modeling and/or acting transactions.¹⁴ The desire of its public is the most diffracted of all, starting from the level of immediate consumption of the image; and into the retention of that image as desirable. This desire is simultaneously economic (to buy Bench products endorsed by these models) and sexual (to be like these models, or to have lovers like these models) in its impact. Since the identities of its publics range according to various genders and sexualities (straight, heterosexual, queer, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, etc.), its common denominator is the affinity for the image as simple dress ad, or as complex sexual index.

The second becomes the concern for the study due to the hybridity and ambiguity of its actual message. For example, there are no overt homoerotic indicators in these ads, for they are no photographs in which two male models interact as if they were lovers. Indeed, a glance at one such couples' ad, posed by Jon Hall and Assunta da Rossi for the 2003 Bench One Night Only Underwear Show (see **Figure 11**) would indicate a clear preference for heterosexual liaisons. The male models are thus represented as hypermasculinized—and overtly heterosexualized—manifestations, in other words, *lalaking-lalaki* (very manly).¹⁵ Nonetheless, if we are to appropriate notions of Masculinity not as simply reproductive discourses on patriarchy, but as modes of difference, engagement, and

resistance of it, we have to consider the effect of its broadcast upon these variegated audiences, each with their own sexual preferences, modes of sexual engagement, and fetishized fantasies/traumatic nightmares for the physically virile male body. Most of the solo shots present the male model as looking at the photographer/viewer, knowing fully well that he is being watched, both by the camera crew, as well as its eventual public. Thus, the model displays his weaponry (defined muscles, photogenic face, barely covered genitalia), presumably in aid for his/its audience to “salivate over.” Since the context of the photograph outside of its strict role as fashion ad is vague, this visual relationship becomes the source for equally hybrid forms of reproduction, seemingly aimed primarily at the sexual level.

Among heterosexual men, they are the idealized epitomes of the *magandang lalaki* (beautiful male), empowered in his armored suit of muscularity and implied homosociality (Rammaker 2000: 69-83), and unself-conscious of his role as socio-sexual frame of reference of his demonized others. For gay and queer audiences, these male models become overdetermined epitomes—if not objectified indices—of the ideal *lalaki* lover: in other words, utilizing J. Neil Garcia’s notion of swardspike: *jowa, papa* (Garcia 1995: 89-92), the macho male who takes in the effeminate other as his lover, but who is the top entity in the relationship.¹⁶ Among bisexuals, it also becomes the ideal *jowa*, a potential sexual partner and straight-acting male who is co-identified with the other as one in body, outlook, feeling, and butch-ness in character (also, results in an ambiguity as to who is “on top”). This co-valenced site of production locates desire for (same) sex relations within a complex grid of relations that often conflates gay liberation, the capital power of upwardly mobile gay/bisexual men, and the residual effects of patriarchy.

For heterosexual women, they are also the ideal *papa* who one wishes to bed with, to have children with, or to wed (the traditional alpha male/ inseminator/ heterosexual partner role). Also, the image of the “purchasable” male body (virtual or real) should also be considered in the light of the increasing numbers of upwardly mobile Filipino women, and the production of sexual desire on their part as the result of surplus capital value, as well as liberation from traditional patriarchal strictures concerning women’s sexuality. It is among lesbians that such imagery becomes so ambiguous as to come to the point of erasure, for its phallic presence negates the desire for the eloquent crevice (Pineda 2003) and instead, revels in the potential of the top butch—but one that



Figure 11. 2003 Bench One Night Only Underwear Show ad featuring Jon Hall and Assunta de Rossi as “the lovers.”

is never fulfilled as such, for no such resolution towards an androgynous image is made possible in any Bench ad.

What is therefore simultaneously elided by this heterogenous production is two-fold: the targeting of a particular set of desirable customers who can afford Bench products (priced

comparatively upscale in relation to other underwear companies); and its specific task of being consumed by a “desirous” public which is diffracted according to sexual and/or gendered affiliations. If we are to assume that the first output is aimed towards the heterosexual male/bisexual/gay masculine market,¹⁷ the second point is highly leveraged because the kind of desire that is produced is specific to that class of viewers.

Among urban working-class/upwardly mobile heterosexual women, the ads not only refer to the visuality of an idealized male lover catering to the now-burgeoning market of women consumers,¹⁸ but may also bespeak of its darker twin, the potentially oppressing male that circumscribes to patriarchal notions of socio-economic domination, material parasitism, labor inequality, physical brutality, and sexual infidelity. In other words, the ads project themselves vis-à-vis an othered body, in this case the female’s. Although Bench ads (re)present a positive female image, one that is fashion-savvy, successful, sexy, and beautiful (e.g., those featuring Aleck Bovick, da Rossi, Lucy Torres, and Korina Sanchez), one cannot but speculate on the economy of bodily imagery that is produced as a response to the differences that both imagery (male as sexy, female as demurely beautiful) play out in the urban cultural landscape.

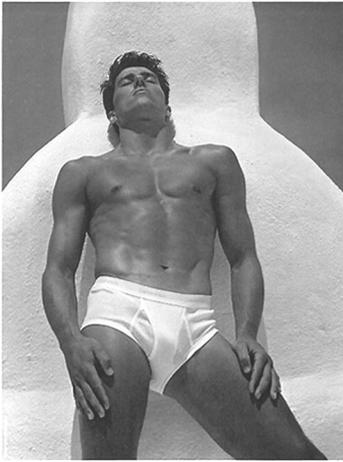
More significantly, the question of “what women really want” along with—and apart from—this explicit heterosexual exchange is something that is only partially fulfilled by the Bench underwear ads, which foreground the (self-promoted) fantasy of a male lover/partner whose idealized body archetype is visually immersed/imposed upon the woman’s world of work, play, office, home, body, and sex. The specifying nature of women’s lives, and their desires/needs other than (heterosexual)

sex, however, remain to be stated. For example, the feminine stance of social and financial equality—if not autonomy—within the domicile, from everyday decisions about what food to prepare, what furniture to buy, who does the household chores, having/not having children; in what way should the children be brought up or what school/future to choose for them, how fat or slim should one be, what “appropriate” clothes/makeup to wear; to fundamental socio-economic issues like the freedom to exclusively enjoy the income she herself generates, individual quality time that specifically *excludes* the male partner’s presence in her social space (i.e., *gimikan* with her female *barkada*), and even the autonomy to explore sexual liaisons with other women/genders, are all rendered as invisible (because prohibited?) desires by these now seemingly hegemonic ads.

These feminine desires, which expand from the purely (hetero)sexual to the social, economic, and political, are only elided when Bench decides to focus on the “glamorous woman” mode (one which capitalizes on the specific mediagenic and personality attributions of famous empowered Filipinas like Korina Sanchez or Kris Aquino), but discriminates this representation by concentrating on a *class* distinction of such virtual feminine empowerment: that only elite, wealthy women can be made to feel “whole” (slimmed up, clothed, hair-styled, made up, pampered and cared for, but still socially dominant) rather than the average lower-income, working-class or unemployed Filipina.

In addition, another body is completely erased in this set of signifiers: the lesbian butch who has apparently no place in the grid of sexualized desires produced by Bench ads—or for that matter, as represented minority in all other underwear company ads in Manila. How this has come to be is a point of critique concerning the inequality of sexual/gender relations of production that privilege heterosexism and emergent homosexuality at the expense of an invisible lesbianism, as constructed by the global-conscious Philippine underwear fashion industry.

The fact of its globality is not only related to this level of contemporary sexual ambiguity. It is also interlinked with the increasing sexualization of the male body in the fashion industry, a trend that began with earnest in the early 1980s. A visual comparison between the ads of Calvin Klein (CK) and Bench shows more than casual similarities, notably CK’s famous 1980 billboard ad in New York City’s Times Square, and subsequently reproduced in major fashion magazines like *Vogue* and *GQ*, featuring a male model clad only in white briefs (see **Figure 12**).



Calvin Klein Underwear

Figure 12. 1980 Calvin Klein Underwear Ad, featuring the first billboard ad featuring a male model clad only in briefs.

Indeed, it is to Calvin Klein that contemporary fashion advertising owes its extreme fetishization of the bared male body as the index for commodity (because sexualized) desire, one that was equally appropriated and shared by other designers like the late Gianni Versace (see **Figure 13**).¹⁹ Crucially, the 1990s utilization by Calvin Klein of then-struggling actors as models, like Mark Wahlberg a.k.a. Marky Mark, and Antonio Sabato (see **Figures 14-15**), is also a practisanal and interpellated modality that Ben Chan, CEO of Suyen Corporation, appropriates from the global fashion industry. Bench is a Filipino player in such a system, one that has developed strategies of enhanced

commodification through the use of sexuality as the locus of desire. That its playing field is generally accepted to be the public spaces of the urban environment (New York and Milan come into focus as fashion centers for the dissemination of Calvin Klein and Versace ads, respectively) also indicates the centrality of urban-ness as the point of origin, and hence the locus of its preliminary publics. It is in cities that the largest concentration of publics can be found, as well as its most hybrid sexual/gender communities. It is also in cities that the largest population of income-generating youths from middle and upper-income families, and young professional adults are present, and are the primary subjects, no doubt, of these ads. With a current population of 12 million, plus an additional 10 million within the 4

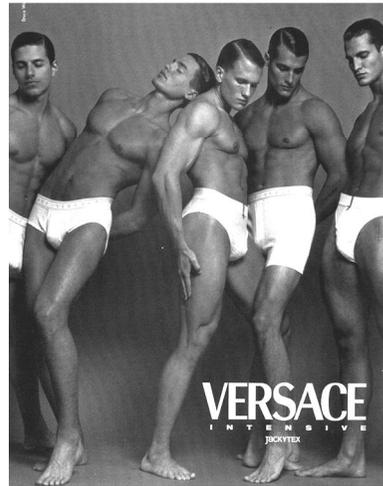


Figure 13. 1990s Gianni Versace Intensive briefs ad.

neighboring provinces, Metropolitan Manila is a vast (though unevenly developed) public space upon which advertising, through the use of the outdoor billboard, can fully disseminate the subject (Bench fashion) and object (sexualized males) of its economic. The emphasis of this enormous, youthful, consuming public as the target audience of the ad may help explain the mediagenic nature of other Bench ad campaigns, such as those modeled by the Taiwanese pop star Jerry Yan (see **Figure 16**), or for that matter, by the Filipino-American runner-up to the *American Idol* contest, Jasmine Trias.

It is also in cities where alternate forms of sexual culture are most prevalent, not only due to population density, but also in the conflated urban space that blurs individual barriers and promotes consumption as a form of reproductive economy. Occurring within a condition of macro-economic distress and drift as a consequence of state collusion with international lending organizations and global power producers, as well as traditional structural ailments like corruption and excessive bureaucratism, this virtual economy of sexualized consumption is perhaps one avenue where economic growth may still be located, based, as it is, on the ability of a still-burgeoning youth population to absorb the image and reproduce it as a consumption fetish.

It must also be said, however, that the visual economy produced by Bench is located within a material economy often characterized as in the throes of late neo-colonialist drift: its billboard ads tower over blighted urban landscapes filled with squatter shanties; streets filled with gridlocked traffic, uncollected trash, and overflowing sewers; and populated by vagrants, prostitutes, the homeless, and petty thieves whose main reasons for being so is that they are poor. The juxtaposition between the glamorous and unglamorous male body, billboard body imagery versus street body

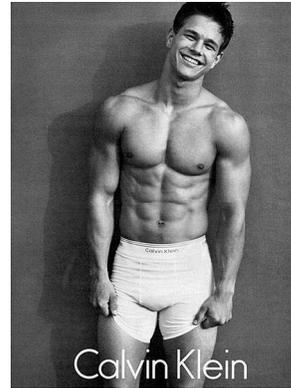


Figure 14. Early 1990s Calvin Klein Underwear ad featuring Mark Wahlberg (a.k.a. Marky Mark).

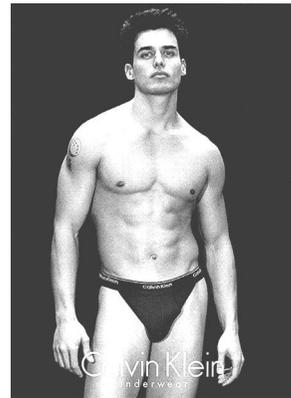


Figure 15. Early 1990s Calvin Klein ad featuring Antonio Sabato.

politics, exemplify a problematique concerning the appropriateness of billboard advertising in occluding the concrete material existences of millions of urbanites who cannot afford Bench underwear or its image, while at the same time hypnotizing them as well as its moneyed clientele into accepting the imagery as part of a prevalent (but still purchasable) sexual identification in urban visual culture. Furthermore, its siting within this teeming urban conflation also serves to visually redirect our focus towards these clean, well-lit ads, and ignore the disheveled, darkened mass of poverty that live underneath/behind the very billboards that are so fetishized. One must also not forget that the process of producing such an idealized body in the Bench ad results from considerable capital expenditures in gym fees, sports club & spa services, vitamins and physique-enhancing drugs, and surplus leisure time devoted to exercise and facial/skin/body conditioning, a lifestyle of devotional exercise, body care, and personal grooming that many Filipinos can ill-afford.

Its intended market, though possibly locatable within this very grid of material despair,²⁰ is more often aimed at slightly higher ground: the commuters who cram buses, jeepneys, trains, and especially private vehicles, that clog Manila's main thoroughfares every morning and evening during rush hour. That the strategy of placing these billboards along such thoroughfares as EDSA—taking advantage of its perch to mercilessly bombard the gridlocked unwary/desirous of its sexualized imagery—has been noted by no less a personality than Senator Miriam Defensor-Santiago, who had publicly called on the police in late-2004 to destroy these billboards because they provide “unwanted distractions” to drivers. That it was said in the context of potential sexual/class differentiation is also revealing: Manila drivers, who are most often working-class males, are either customers of Bench underwear products, or co-identified with its *lalaking-lalaki* imagery, and it is this class that is now put under the rubric from a higher employed class (in this case, conservative elite female politician) for being “distracted” from their work.²¹

That public controversy, coming from both conservative and liberal sectors of the ideological divide, and amplified in the media, also hounds this phenomenon in the West is well known. For now, such an adverse institutional backlash has been studiously avoided by Bench in its constant juxtaposition and replenishment of ad imagery with other, more “wholesome” male body images, such as those promoting shirts, jackets, and pants (see **Figures 16-19**), often featuring the same models in the underwear ads.²² The image of the sexually desired male (more appropriately uttered in the fetishistic phrase: “*ang gusto kong lalaki*” [my

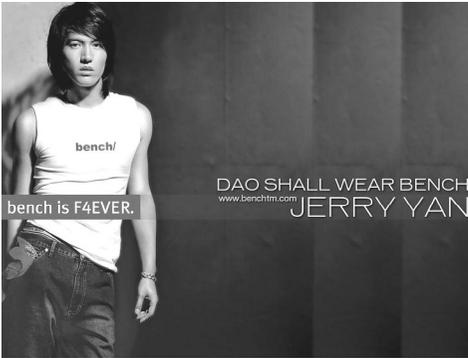


Figure 16. 2004 Bench shirts, Body underwear, and jeans ad featuring Jerry Yan.

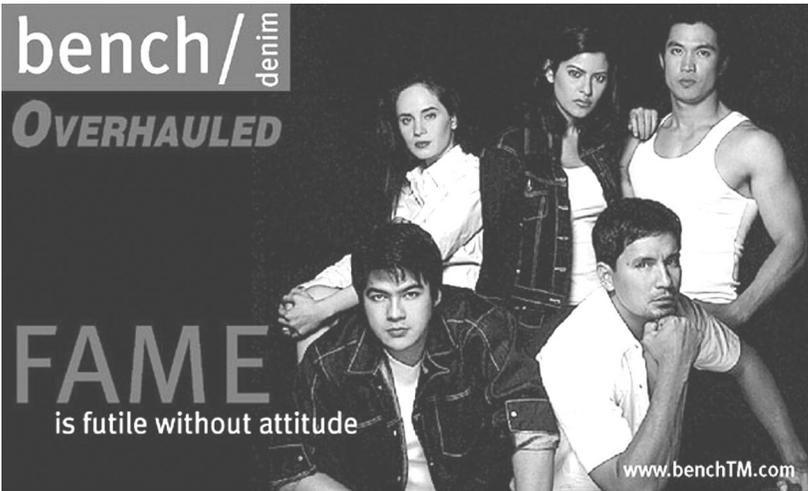


Figure 17. 2003 Bench Overhauled denim jackets and undershirts ad featuring (clockwise from top left) Lucy Torres, Assunta de Rossi, Diether Ocampo, Richard Gomez, and Jomari Yllana.



Figure 18. 2004 Bench Lifestyle+ Clothing ad featuring Diether Ocampo.



Figure 19. 2004 Bench Lifestyle+ Clothing ad featuring Richard Gutierrez.

type of man]), is thus temporary, liable to be sublimated before institutional surveyors can catch on to its revolutionary innuendos, and subject to panoptic (if occasionally rebelled-against) self-regulation.

To conclude, thus, locating the Bench ad within its socio-economic context would be to reiterate its tool as a mode of late capitalist overproduction that flies in the face of urban social realities of the underprivileged masses existing in substandard living conditions that it literally hides or occludes in the sheer massiveness of its framed imagery. Its message of sexual desire for the male body is either accepted by an emergent class of heterosexual/gay men or heterosexual women who (co)identify with, or appropriate the civil libertarian effects of its empowered sexual image; or is rejected/negated by the committed feminist/lesbian whose interests are to deconstruct the remaining strand of patriarchal oppression denoted by the centrality of the empowered male in visual culture.²³ Simultaneously, however, the Bench ads also produce a subversive strain of resisting sexual orthodoxy and body repression that is also at the heart of competing psycho-sexual relations in contemporary Philippine culture, one that is continually re-ignited by conservative groups/personalities like Senator Santiago or Opus Dei, and countered by others like sex therapist Dr. Margarita Holms, gay critic Danton Remoto, and cause-oriented group Pro-Gay Philippines. In such a case, therefore, the Bench underwear ads (sexually/politically) liberate as much as they (sexually/materially) oppress.

This essay identifies the Filipino male as an object of desire, rather than the subject of control in the case of the Bench underwear ads. Its display as a sexual cipher (in aid of commodity capitalism) does not fail to negate its ambiguity as for whom it is ultimately for: patriarchy or heterotopy; emergent homosexuality or hegemonic heterosexism. What it produces in its stead is a slew of counter-valenced messages that reiterate an essential sexual liberation, but one that is ultimately anchored upon global capitalist production and its reliance upon advertising imagery to reinstate a hypermasculine aesthetics (for heterosexual men) that stabilizes sexual discontent (among gay men and heterosexual women), even as it reproduces it (in the form of contra-distinctive social postings, such as anti-feminine, and anti-lesbian). Its context of display within the urban environment places it well within an environment of social and psychosexual possibilities, but also one in which unequal relations of production threaten to deconstruct its message as mass alienating and elite-culture oriented.

In this condition, Philippine sexual culture, though temporarily freed from oppressive strictures of representation in certain junctures, reasserts its praxis within a massively developing youth and young adult phenomena, an inadvertent consequence of global capitalism and cultural hegemony, empowered agents who are now engaged as interpellated players of once-but-future local cultures. What remains to be seen, of course, is its ability to alleviate the long-term material/sexual conditions of its often socio-economically/socio-politically unfulfilled publics, especially when it occludes *these other bodies* at the very point of its celebratory (hypermasculine) representation.

Notes

- ¹ In lesbian studies, Reina Davis has presented a provocative study of fashion photography in advertising as objects of gazing for empowered gender-identified publics, which is then applied to the particularly bereft area of lesbian representations, such as butches and dykes—subjects that are still considered as “too racy” in the conservative environment of Manila’s popular visual imaginary. See “Looking Good: the lesbian gaze and the fashion industry,” in Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), 463-477.
- ² In Sedgwick’s earliest title on the issue, *Between Men: English Literature and Homosocial Desire* (1985), she attempts to investigate the nature of homosocial relations among men by situating women within the intersections of two masculine entities, in effect, becoming a conduit for the production of homosocial desire between two men by appropriating forms of heterosexual “diplomacy.” Considered as a foundational text in gay/queer/lesbian studies, as well as a rethinking of feminist theory at the time, Sedgwick’s study not only reveals the complexity through which homosociality was structured into seemingly normative practices; it also demonstrates the range of play involved in the consideration of gender and sexual roles.
- ³ And in some cases, one’s repulsion can *also* be converted into one’s desire. This act of differential integration, requiring an overpowering stimulus to “enforce” its will upon its overwhelmed subject, is especially fluid when we consider the positionality of the queer, with its constant undermining/fragmentation of normative sexual desires/repulsions (i.e. oral-anal sex, sadomasochism, pedophilia, necrophilia, etc.)
- ⁴ That is, the formation of the Filipino citizen as obedient to the (Philippine) Republic’s laws, and the (Catholic) Church’s dogmas, which both prohibit or demonize sexually liberative representations as a matter of policy—the one (Church) often leading the other (State).

- ⁵ The result, of course, of endless struggles among competing members of the elite to gain control over the neo-colonial enterprise, their positionalities differentiating according to religious conviction, ethnicity, and most crucially, personality affiliation.
- ⁶ In addition, Suyen Corporation has also brought out parallel clothing brands, like Human, whose imaging is more for casual upscale teenagers, and whose models (i.e. Luis Manzano, Geoff Eigenmann, KC Concepcion) are not included in the Bench line of advertising as a matter of differential imaging (Human has a more “teen lifestyle” identity, while Bench is more “adult”). It has also diversified its corporate makeup of Bench by offering separate but mutually reinforcing product lines and separate branches like Bench Body (for underwear), Bench Fashion (for clothes), and Bench Fix (hair and makeup styling).
- ⁷ This “contradiction” between competitive athletics and sex is a direct result of the classical Western configuration of sports as the means of instilling idealism and moral citizenship among its (often, only male) youth, Apollonian qualities which are then set in opposition against the Dionysian implications of sexual revelry and hedonism, which are seen as having negative and dissipating effects for both morality and physique.
- ⁸ Incidentally, the contemporary exercise gym is also known not only as the site of production of contemporary muscularity of both men’s and women’s bodies, but is also a defined site for sexual cruising; customers of such gyms are not infrequently patrons of sexual services that its instructors and other customers potentially provides.
- ⁹ The Diether Ocampo Overhauled Denim ad was reproduced as a billboard at the Ayala Alabang Town Center in Muntinlupa City; while the Jon Hall Bench Body jockstrap ad was reproduced as a billboard along EDSA across SM City North in Quezon City, both in early-mid 2003.
- ¹⁰ Interestingly, the ethnicity or national orientation of the models seem to play a part in this imagery: the *yin-yang* necklace of Diether Ocampo signifying his Chinese-Filipino mixed heritage; and the heavy silver chains and gold cross of Jon Hall (a Filipino-American) that invites comparison with contemporary urban African-American “big brotha” identity—even the hirsuteness, tattoos, and crew-cut look is lifted from this popular image, one that is reproduced in numerous music videos by rappers and hip hop artists.
- ¹¹ The element of hair as an index of power in sexual representation was indicated as far back as John Berger, when he notes that Western conventions of the female nude in visual art are often hairless due to the notion that hair denotes power (and is thus the self-representational prerogative of men), such ideas dating back to early Judean notions of hirsuteness as a source of physical power, in the case of Samson

- (*Way of Seeing*, 1972). Further on, he cites the singularity (and absurdity) of this visual phenomenon if we were to imagine men posing nude in the same way as these women. Apparently, these Bench ads are one step closer to this tantalizing realization.
- ¹² Hence, the range of masculine representation that triggers a sexual response among its publics is highly delimited by this factor of youthfulness, handsomeness, and defined muscularity. How specific this response is could be gauged if the same ads were to employ elderly, ugly, or obese men as underwear models.
 - ¹³ That there is a hierarchy of images that privilege white, young, muscular male models over Asian or *mestizo* men can be traced, in fact, to the origin of the underwear ad as a formerly exclusive metropolitan production praxis during the 1960s to early 1980s, a condition that not only continues nowadays in other male underwear ads (like those of Jockey and Hanford) in Manila, but also influencing, to a great degree, the manner of masculine representation that Asian/*mestizo* men have to measure themselves against in Philippine billboard advertising.
 - ¹⁴ This much is the case for most of the models associated with Bench since 1987: Richard Gomez, Jomari Yllana, Marc Nelson, Jon Hall, and now John Pratts and Richard Gutierrez.
 - ¹⁵ In other words, what Latin Americans would call *macho-macho*, the straight-gendered “top” male figure that is at the center of the sexual economy. Recent studies of Latin American sexuality, notably that by Roger Lancaster in Nicaragua, indicates that this centrality is caused by the *macho-macho*’s stable sign as the “walking phallus” that engages in multiple sexual intercourse with both women and *cochones*, the Nicaraguan term for “bottom” or receiving-end men—what Westerners would often call homosexuals (see Roger Lancaster, “Subject Honor, Object Shame,” in Rachel Adams and David Savran, eds., *The Masculinity Studies Reader*, London: Blackwell, 2002, 41-68).
 - ¹⁶ Sadly, the massification of the image of the *bakla* as equally “butch” as his lover (to utilize swardspeak, MSM, or Men-having-Sex-with-Men), has risen at the expense of the effeminate *bakla* identity, a notion clearly demarcated in contemporary urban Manila’s arbitrary class designations of beauty parlor *badings* as lower-class, and the “gym” *bading* (that is, straight-acting, gym-habited, and often upper-income oriented gay) as upper class.
 - ¹⁷ The affinity of the products offered by the fashion economy to the joint dressing desires of heterosexual/gay/bisexual men can be seen in the kind of clientele that Bench Body ads actually have: ranging from straight urban professionals, to straight-acting gay professionals, male prostitutes and macho dancers, college students, and even working-class men.

- ¹⁸ What “product” this market is consuming is less apparent in the material plane: what is being indicated is the continuous reproduction of an imaginary male that is behaviorally compatible with the goals of a newly-emergent, sexually liberated, career-conscious, independent-income woman: nominally submissive, sexually active, and faithful to his partner.
- ¹⁹ Incidentally, one can also relate this practice of using homoerotic images in fashion retail advertising to the sexualities of its progenitors: both Klein and Versace having had publicly gay identities.
- ²⁰ This is the case especially for those squatter-dwelling working-class urban males whose occupations dictate the high capitalization expenditures required for being self-imagined as *lalaking-lalaki*: dance instructors, call boys, macho dancers, and gym instructors.
- ²¹ At the same time, its effects upon its “real” target audience, upwardly mobile Filipinos being driven by these very same “distracted” chauffeurs, are for the moment ignored.
- ²² A further interjection has to be made here: most often, the models posed in the “clothed” ads are well-known actors and actresses. Hence, a two-tiered class system seems to be afoot: a class of models who are well-known actors (and who, by fiat of publicity and image-making, have to also appear “normal” and image-conscious to their fans), and another class of models and sometime-actors who are more known for their bodies.
- ²³ Another rejecting class, of course, would be the entire spectrum of conservative-values believers who equate this imagery for its liberal promiscuity, “sodomy,” the general weakening of social morals, and the spread of AIDS.

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