MO BROS: MASCULINITY, IRONY AND THE RISE OF MOVEMBER

by

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Abstract

Movember, the annual month-long charitable event in which men grow moustaches to raise funds and awareness for various “men’s health” causes, originated in 2003 as a challenge between a group of Australian friends to “bring back the moustache” as a fashionable grooming practice. Since its humble beginnings, Movember has grown as a charitable initiative, boasting over 4.5 million participants and raising $677 million. With participants coming from as many as 21 countries worldwide, Movember is a global phenomenon closely articulated with contemporary fashion and popular culture trends. By examining the 2012 and 2013 campaigns, I consider what social and historical forces have contributed to the popularity of Movember and the resurgence of the moustache as a trendy grooming practice for men. I investigate how the movement’s fun-loving approach to charity shapes, and is shaped by, dominant ideas about masculinity and gender more broadly. I conceive of Movember as a global brand and explore how the campaign is situated within consumer culture and how it influences contemporary philanthropic practices.

Informed by the theoretical perspectives of Michel Foucault, I conduct extensive discourse analyses of online resources related to Movember including the campaign website, blogs and social media. I also examine media coverage about the movement, moustache-related popular culture, and promotional materials distributed by the campaign and its sponsors. My findings reveal how Movember is constructed as a post-political movement. The campaign’s use of irony as a discursive strategy and promotion of universal values concerning health and social progress actively depoliticizes conversations about “men’s health.” Throughout my dissertation, I develop two ideas – *brand(ed) activism* and *ironic masculinity* – to conceptualize how Movember enables
problematic understandings of gender and philanthropy while constraining the space for politicized discussions about health and masculinity. Through these concepts, I explore the relationship of Movember to broader cultural trends including shaving and grooming rituals, hipster culture, kitsch and retro commodities, the politics of selfies, and hockey’s playoff beard. I argue that Movember’s mission to “change the face of men’s health” is limited because it preserves normative definitions of gender and activism within the confines of neoliberalism and commercialized popular culture.
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Chapter 1

Introduction: A Moustache in Search of a Cause

It all began in a northeast suburb of Melbourne, Australia in 2003. Two friends were hanging out at a local pub drinking beer and talking about some of the formerly popular fashion trends that had suddenly re-appeared after years of obsolescence. After recounting the numerous outdated styles and products that had recently made comebacks, the pair wondered why the moustache had yet to enjoy a similar renaissance (Movember Canada, 2013a). They continued, as the story goes, to laugh about the disappearance of the moustache from modern fashion and jokingly began to hatch plans to bring the moustache back.

The conversation culminated in the two men, Travis Garone and Luke Slattery, challenging each other to spend the forthcoming month of November seeing who could grow the better moustache. Slattery, at the time working in the marketing industry, suggested they call their friendly competition “Movember,” a linguistic blend of “Mo” (the Australian nickname for moustache) and the name of the month in which the contest would take place (MadeManDotCom, 2011a; Movember Canada, 2013a; Paine, 2012; Webb, 2013). The duo then sent an email to a number of friends and family looking to recruit others to take up their challenge. The message was titled “Are you man enough to be my man?” and included a stylish logo for the contest, as well as a detailed set of instructions for participating. Twenty-eight men responded to this call and, alongside Garone and Slattery, signed up for the inaugural edition of Movember (Movember Canada, 2013a).
What began in 2003 as a silly barroom bet between friends has since grown to be a global brand at the forefront of discussions about “men’s health” and one of the most widely celebrated non-profit organizations in the world. The thirty friends who participated in the first Movember have been joined by millions of other men, now collectively known as “Mo Bros,” who have grown moustaches every November since 2003 to raise funds and “awareness” for a variety of “men’s health” causes. In addition to its rapid growth as a charitable organization, Movember has emerged as a bona fide cultural phenomenon, infiltrating various domains of popular culture and contributing to a lucrative industry of moustache-related consumer products. The campaign is endorsed by countless renowned celebrities and invokes images of famous moustaches from the past to fuel jokes about how to grow proper facial hair and what it means to be a “real man.” Yet the Movember campaign is also branded as a movement looking to bring about meaningful changes to how men take care of their bodies and think about their health. The witty slogan, “changing the face of men’s health,” is the campaign’s broad rallying cry and encompasses a number of goals including funding scientific research programs, establishing health-related educational initiatives and encouraging men to have more conversations about health and illness.

The Movember phenomenon covers some diverse cultural terrain, from health and science to fashion and popular culture to ideas about facial hair and manhood. Despite the widespread celebration of the campaign’s fundraising and “awareness” goals, however, the popularity of Movember is very much contingent on the contemporary allure of the moustache as a cultural symbol and practice. Movember is organized first and foremost around a recognizable image that positions the moustache as the centrepiece of the
brand’s fun and ironic take on masculinity. The very origins of the campaign reveal how
the moustache was indeed the sole inspiration for the Movember concept. Accounts
detailing the history of Movember explain how the campaign’s inaugural year had little
to do with health or philanthropy. As frankly summarized in a 2012 article from New
York Magazine, “Movember’s origins had nothing to do with health or charity” (Cowles,
2012). Travis Garone similarly described the founding of Movember by saying, “We
were having beers and we stumbled across this idea [Movember], it was a joke and going
to be fun” (Garone as cited in Paine, 2012).

Travis’s older brother Adam, one of the original Movember participants who now
serves as the campaign’s CEO, recalls in a 2012 TED Talk how he recognized early on
that to have any sort of staying power the Movember concept needed to “legitimate the
fun with a cause” (Garone, 2011). In one of the few academic analyses of Movember,
Jenna Jacobson (2010) similarly highlights how the campaign’s official history
acknowledges how important it was for the movement’s founders to justify their annual
moustache antics by tying the joke to a worthy cause (Jacobson, 2010). The idea that the
moustache supercedes any fundraising or “awareness” goals has very much persisted
even as the campaign has evolved as an established charitable organization. In a 2011
video for MadeMan.com, Adam Garone explains, “a lot of men do Movember to annoy
their girlfriends, to annoy their bosses – but they can get away with it because it’s for a
good cause” (MadeManDotCom, 2011a). By tapping into the (ironic) value of the
moustache, Movember’s founders had stumbled upon the makings of a global brand. But
to endure as annual tradition, the campaign required a connection to something that could
be perceived as more consequential; indeed, these were moustaches in search of a cause.
The charitable arm of the movement, the Movember Foundation, was not established until the campaign’s second year. In 2004, Adam Garone and Justin Coghlan (another member of the original thirty participants) organized the event as a fundraising effort in support of prostate cancer research (Movember Canada, 2013a). Four hundred and fifty participants raised $54,000 that year, which was donated to the Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia (PCFA). This contribution, the Movember website proudly proclaims, was at the time the largest single donation the PCFA had ever received. Adam Garone explains his and Coghlan’s choice in his 2011 Ted Talk, stating that the campaign founders were inspired by what women around them were doing to support breast cancer charities, and were puzzled that there were not similar fundraising efforts for “men’s health” causes (Garone, 2011). The Movember brand is, in fact, commonly portrayed in relation (and opposition) to the popular pink ribbon campaigns in support of breast cancer charities. This comparison has allowed Movember to carve out a distinct and lucrative space within the contemporary landscape of philanthropic marketing, but has also very much shaped the campaign’s approach to its health-related initiatives.

Movember obtained official charitable status in Australia in 2006, and established the Canadian, American and UK campaigns the following year (Movember Canada, 2013a). Movember has raised over $677 million since its founding and supported over 700 “men’s health” projects worldwide (Movember Canada, 2013a). The Movember Foundation funds a great number of scientific research programs investigating risk factors and treatments of prostate cancer, but also testicular cancer and, increasingly, men’s mental health. The foundation encourages international collaborations between scientists and has looked to social media as an innovative way to connect “men’s health”
researchers. Many of these projects, however, are “awareness” initiatives including educational events, online videos, and other resources concerning specific illnesses and other health behaviours. The annual Movember campaign itself is also considered to be a crucial part of the organization’s “awareness” activities. According to the Movember website, a moustache can be the catalyst for changes to problematic attitudes men have regarding their health (Movember Canada, 2013c). The campaign’s emphasis on the importance of “conversations” has allowed Movember to brand itself as doing more than raising money. The Movember phenomenon is indeed promoted as having the power to initiate cultural changes about health and its connections to contemporary understandings of manhood. This collection of health-related endeavours, combined with the cultural cachet of the moustache, has helped forge Movember’s image as a trendy, cutting edge charity. This is a reputation the campaign’s administration has readily embraced; as Adam Garone proudly proclaimed in 2011 regarding Movember’s success, “we’ve redefined charity” (Garone, 2011).

The popularity of Movember is based on a unique fusion of health-related advocacy and the current marketability of the moustache as a cultural symbol and practice. Health and self-care are commonly understood as feminized domains, with men being categorized as macho, negligent risk-takers who don’t take care of themselves and are reluctant to seek out medical services (Courtenay, 2011). Within this context, Movember is constructed as a brand linking health promotion messaging with an image of the moustache as both a traditional symbol of masculinity and a fun way to encourage male bonding. As Travis Garone explained in 2012, “There are two sides to every moustache. There’s the fun, crazy side - growing mo’s and having beers with your
buddies; then there’s the serious men’s health side. We always wanted to make it fun while being serious so we thought: let’s laugh in the face of danger” (Garone as cited in Paine, 2012). In 2013, Adam Garone described how Movember seeks to use fun and enjoyment as way to attract the attention of a population that is often resistant to health messages, “Fun is the Trojan horse to get guys engaged. We package this up in a fun way, but then we arm our supporters with information on health and turn them into walking, talking billboards” (Garone as cited in Vizard, 2013).

At first glance, the premise appears simple: use the moustache and the promise of fun, male bonding to encourage men to engage with health-related materials while still providing space for them to publically assert their manliness. Moreover, the movement’s emphasis on the lack of health campaigns specifically targeting men, as well as its overarching philosophy of “having fun while doing good,” positions Movember as a commendable and universal cause that everyone should be able to support. Yet despite the apparent simplicity and universality that underlies Movember’s promotional messages, the movement represents a complex set of meanings, images and practices that is worthy of detailed and critical analysis. This dissertation comprises a cultural history of Movember that seeks to explore the complexity of the Movember phenomenon while shedding light on the challenges and contradictions that emerge through the campaign.

Figure 1 (Movember Canada, 2013q)
Studying Movember: Contexts, Questions, Contradictions

Although Travis Garone declared that there are “two sides” to every Movember moustache, the meanings associated with the movement are far more complicated than that dichotomy would suggest. In this dissertation, I consider Movember as comprising a complex constellation of ideas, physical practices, technologies, consumer products and media discourses. Movember is certainly organized around promoting health and fundraising programs through fun and humourous activities involving the moustache. Yet these overarching principles are supported by several key cultural themes and values that make up the context in which Movember has flourished: The campaign’s health promotion messages are founded upon the necessity for individuals to improve their wellbeing by making better choices and changing their behaviours. Similarly, the fundraising initiatives undertaken by the Movember Foundation rest on faith in biomedicine and scientific research as providing the best solutions to societal health problems. The Movember moustache is constructed according to ideas about how gender and masculinity should be performed through facial hair and how these understandings are related to assumptions about the biological capacities of male and female bodies. The Movember brand is very much marketed through a distinct relationship with both contemporary and retro popular culture, further cultivating an image of the moustache as an outdated, but hilariously ironic, performance of masculinity. Movember is also praised for harnessing the power of social media to encourage the exchange of ideas and connect people around a common goal. These elements materialize through the supposedly natural relationship between charity and consumer culture.
This diverse collection of ideas and assumptions about “men’s health,” masculinity and philanthropy is packaged as Movember’s unmistakeable brand identity. As I will explain in what follows, the campaign is organized according to the capitalist logics of production, consumption and competition, and is situated alongside other brands (charitable and otherwise) all looking to resonate most meaningfully with the everyday experiences of consumers. Movember is a branded thirty-day event that stretches beyond the realm of formal charitable activities into the mundane physical, social and mediated aspects of everyday life. Thus, to thoroughly understand the “brand culture” of Movember, it is crucial to unpack how these multiple domains of social life come together through the movement and shape everyday practices, identities and relationships (Arvidsson, 2005; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Lury, 2004). As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) argues, brands do more than simply facilitate the circulation of objects, logos or advertisements; brands cultivate perceptions and experiences encompassing a broad range of themes, morals, values and feelings. Following Banet-Weiser and a collection of other key works concerning branding and brand cultures, I consider the process of branding Movember as more than just an economic strategy to attract more participants, raise more funds or even sell more products. I conceive of Movember, rather, as a widespread cultural phenomenon that encourages the transformation of everyday, lived experiences into the makings of a brand culture.

Understanding the brand culture of Movember does not require identifying a coherent or all-encompassing discourse produced by the campaign. Instead, I assert that a thorough and nuanced examination of Movember should actively seek out and embrace contradictions or ambiguities as they emerge within the campaign’s promotional
narratives. This type of approach is important because brand cultures are not always
distinct entities, but overlap and compete with each other (Banet-Weiser, 2012).
Movember is part of philanthropic landscape comprising a huge number of other popular
and lucrative non-profit organizations, including some directly related to “men’s health”
and others specifically organized around facial hair-themed events. The Movember brand
also contributes to, and is informed by, the images and meanings associated with its
corporate sponsors, while competing with other renowned brands, viral media and
fashion fads for media attention and trendsetter status. Yet, as Banet-Weiser (2012)
reminds us, brands also become the setting through which consumers can weave their
own stories and adapt meanings or practices associated with brands to fit their own
personal experiences. Movember constitutes a vast and interactive brand environment
that spans different types of media, consumer objects and physical practices, and offers a
site for participants to playfully engage with the campaign’s images and values. The
movement reflects the tendency for brands, especially in the digital age of social media
and user-generated content, to “spin out of the control of their makers” and be translated
or transposed to coalesce with the contexts in which they emerge (Lash & Lury, 2007, p. 5). My approach to Movember, then, involves identifying key themes that materialize
through official campaign narratives, while accounting for the fluidity and interactivity of
brand cultures.

My analysis is guided by three interrelated research questions that put the
Movember brand in conversation with broader social and political issues. These questions
are ongoing and evolved substantially throughout the research process as I explored new
theoretical and empirical directions. My research questions (and sub-questions) support
an interdisciplinary approach to this project and contribute to a more robust analysis of Movember than has been offered by academics to date:

1) What social and historical forces have contributed to the popularity of Movember?

   a) What meanings and practices does the movement enable and constrain?
   b) How does Movember reproduce and contribute to contemporary understandings of politics and social change under neoliberalism?

2) How is Movember situated within contemporary consumer cultures?

   a) How does the Movember brand circulate across different cultural environments and modalities?
   b) How does Movember reinforce and/or resist conventional branding strategies and philanthropic practices?

3) How does the Movember brand reflect and influence ideas about gender and masculinity?

   a) How is the campaign’s approach to masculinity intertwined with social relations of power?
   b) How do irony and humour function through Movember as a way to understand identities and social change?

As I will discuss in the outline of my dissertation presented at the conclusion of this introduction, some of these questions are addressed most directly in one or two specific chapters. Yet most of these questions support major threads of analysis that stretch across several chapters and are explored along multiple trajectories.

The overarching goal of my dissertation is to contextualize and historicize the conditions that led to the emergence of Movember as a cultural phenomenon. By conducting discourse analyses of a variety of online content related to Movember, I construct a critical genealogy of the campaign and how it is intertwined with broader social trends around masculinity, philanthropy and consumer culture. I seek to avoid taking Movember for granted as inherently and universally good, while also
acknowledging how the movement has presented opportunities for dialogue regarding the intersections of health and gender. To summarize, this dissertation explores the “ambivalence” of the Movember brand (Banet-Weiser, 2012). I recognize that Movember offers both possibilities and limitations in shaping cultural understandings of health, gender and social change. This work constitutes my attempt to navigate what participants have to gain and lose through Movember’s brand culture.

Movember and Neoliberalism: A Hairy Situation

Like much critical academic work on contemporary cultural phenomena, I contextualize Movember’s popularity in relation to the dominance of neoliberalism as the defining political and economic philosophy of the last several decades. Although the exact definition of the term is often contested, I use “neoliberalism” to refer to a set of economic principles, governing policies and cultural perspectives that rose to prominence in a number of Western democracies throughout the 1980s (Wendy Brown, 2006; S. King, 2006; N. Rose, 1999b). The “neoliberal moment” has been characterized by wide-ranging political projects seeking to reduce the size of governments and dictate the role of the state according to the logics of the free market. The dominance of neoliberalism has led to a widespread tolerance of privatization and cuts to social services such as healthcare and welfare programs. This dominance has come with an acceptance of inequality as a natural and necessary by-product of our economic system. The cultural impact of neoliberalism can be observed in how individualism and self-reliance (among other moral values) have become further entrenched as the paths to proper and virtuous citizenship. In this way, the logics of neoliberalism extend far beyond the realm of top-
down political ideologies. As Wendy Brown (2006) explains, neoliberal rationalities govern “the sayable,” the intelligible and what can be considered “the Truth” about many spheres of social existence (p. 693). These domains of social life include, but are not limited to, health and the widely celebrated culture of philanthropy and volunteerism.

Health is commonly constructed as a modern day “super value” under neoliberalism (Crawford, 2006). In concert with the emphasis on individualism under neoliberal regimes, taking responsibility for one’s health and fitness is celebrated as a marker of hard work and upstanding moral values. This connection between good health and righteous citizenship is vividly enacted within the realm of philanthropy. In her extensive work on breast cancer marketing campaigns, Samantha King (2006, 2012) describes how physical activity fundraisers are powerful metaphors for neoliberal values.

These charitable events, including recreational and competitive races, as well as a variety of “thons” (walk-a-thons, skip-a-thons etc.), are sites for the performance of the work ethic and character traits thought to support healthy behaviours. Yet, as King explains, the vision of exercise as a symbol of healthy citizenship also privileges a form of active philanthropy that is conceived as a way to combat rampant apathy and laziness. Such events are also promoted as capturing a “traditional” spirit of plucky individualism and the generosity of private citizens that is positioned in contrast to the social services and “handouts” administered by the welfare state.

I did encounter some promotion of physical activity fundraisers in support of Movember, but these events were not the focal point of the campaign in the same way that “Races for the Cure” are commonly associated with breast cancer fundraising and similar health causes. Yet through Movember’s educational material and “awareness”
activities, the campaign still promotes health as a contemporary super-value for which individuals assume personal responsibility. As I discuss in more detail in upcoming chapters, Movember’s mission to “make men healthier, one moustache at a time” (Garone, 2011) is actualized through a series of programs designed to encourage individual men to change their health behaviours and make better choices. As the campaign’s promotional material affirms, these smart decisions can include a greater willingness to seek out medical services such as going to a doctor when feeling unwell or adhering to prescribed health testing protocols (including routine screening and self-checking for male cancers). These health promotion messages also admonish men to make changes to everyday behaviours such as adopting a healthy diet, exercising and having more conversations about health and wellness. The tendency for Movember’s “awareness” initiatives to reproduce neoliberal ideas about health and illness are encapsulated by a graphic reading “The quality of your health starts with you!” that was prominently displayed on the front page of the Movember 2012 and 2013 websites. The take home message from Movember’s health promotion materials appears to be that good health is primarily a matter of individual responsibility rather than a product of complex connections between a person’s social and physical environment and the actions of powerful institutions, governments and corporations.

This emphasis on individualism is similarly enacted through the campaign’s embrace of consumer-based solutions to social problems. The success of Movember depends on an economy of donations from corporations and private citizens, but also the production and consumption of commodities and media related to the campaign. King (2006) has detailed at length the ways in which pink ribbon campaigns actively frame
consumer-based philanthropy as the most effective way to battle breast cancer. King demonstrates how these marketing campaigns are informed by larger conceptions of health and civic engagement as determined by the actions of individuals within a consumer marketplace. These practices, as King describes, have also worked to formulate a culture of breast cancer philanthropy defined by the feminine symbols and style associated with pink ribbon brands. Following the spirit of this and related work, I seek to consider how Movember is an example of commercialized philanthropy that facilitates the production of consumer-citizens whose identities and political actions are increasingly formed through the logics of consumer culture (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012; S. King, 2006; Richey & Ponte, 2011). Yet I also explore how the philanthropic and consumer practices around which the campaign is organized are distinctly stylized according to Movember’s fun-loving and masculine brand culture.

The prominence of commercialized philanthropy has induced concerns regarding the widespread commodification of activism and cultural identities. Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee (2012), however, encourage scholars to move away from an either/or dichotomy of profit versus activism. They assert that, while reproducing neoliberal ideas about health, individualism and the logic of the free market, modes of consumer citizenship are not entirely based on exploitation and cultural co-optation. With this in mind, much of my analysis responds to a key question posed by Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee: “What account can we make of the political consequences of civic engagement and action being increasingly defined by the logics of the marketplace?” (p. 2). I engage with this question while also accounting for the well-documented trend that the ubiquity of commercialized philanthropy makes it more and more difficult to
distinguish social change from that which simply reproduces the status quo (Banet-Weiser, 2012; S. King, 2006).

By interrogating how Movember claims to be “changing the face of men’s health,” I seek to investigate how these types of changes are articulated through consumer cultures. I examine how changes to individual health behaviours, improvements to health research agendas and cultural transformations regarding health and masculinity are enacted through a brand culture that is promoted through trendy consumption, facial hair and irony as a mode of (self-)representation. These aspects are by no means mutually exclusive; indeed, they overlap and continuously compete for attention within Movember’s brand environment. Yet these complexities are co-constructed with the gaps and silences within this promotional discourse. I am explicitly concerned with what conversations are not happening through Movember brand platforms, as well as the movement’s capacity to carve out space for politicized discussions of health and gender norms. As my conception of better health and social change is directly tied to the eradication of social inequalities, this dissertation represents an opportunity to explore what types of progress and limitations might emerge through Movember’s ironic masculine ethos.

**Movember and the Post-Political: Depoliticized Ways of Speaking**

The jumping off point for this dissertation is my concern with the potential depoliticizing effects of Movember’s brand culture. As I sifted through the vast amounts of online promotional material and social media activity related to Movember, I was struck by the degree to which the campaign’s narratives downplayed and stifled
connections between health and masculinity on the one hand and power and social inequality on the other. Health, as I outlined in the previous section, is constructed through Movember’s official discourses as an outcome of individual choices and somehow detached from larger power structures and institutions. The Movember moustache, moreover, is commonly taken up as a fun way to do some good to address an important social issue. “Masculinity” is subsequently enacted through the moustache as something that can be put to good use in the name of positive change and better health for men. I similarly observed that irony is deployed through Movember as a discursive strategy to ensure that no one takes the moustache or the campaign’s representation of masculinity too seriously. Most importantly, however, my research led me to encounter countless examples of instances in which Movember was portrayed as supporting a universal cause championed by a benevolent group of fun-loving, well-meaning young men. While health, masculinity and even facial hair can be subjects of politicized and polarizing conversations in the media and elsewhere, it made little sense to me that these often controversial spheres of social life could be readily combined in a popular marketing campaign without provoking substantial debates about the contradictions that might pervade these charitable discourses.

These concerns drew me to an extensive body of scholarship that describes the emergence of a “post-political condition” within contemporary Western democracies (Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 2004; Žižek, 1999a, 1999b). There are multiple and competing accounts of how this post-political sensibility has emerged under neoliberal capitalism, but these theories often share apprehension over the collapse of meaningful political debate between contrary ideological positions. These writers lament how antagonistic
clashes between the political left and right, or socialism and liberalism, have been replaced by a politics of consensus through which the mechanisms of neoliberal governance are accepted as providing solutions to social problems. Controversial or oppressive changes to public policy or social programs are justified as based on “objective” evidence and “rational” decision making. The post-political condition is additionally characterized by a diminishing of the public sphere and a suppression of views that question the inevitability of neoliberal capitalism. Issues around the environment and climate change are commonly cited as examples whereby urgent social and political issues are addressed via rational administrative policies, best practices and “good governance” rather than through radical social transformation (Imrie, 2013; MacGregor, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2010).

Several big name thinkers, from Jacques Rancière to Chantal Mouffe to Slavoj Žižek, have produced influential theories of the post-political. Yet as this project developed, I became confident that what I was observing in my analysis of Movember was best explained through reference to Chantal Mouffe’s book On the Political (2005). Mouffe’s approach to the post-political emphasizes how attempts to solve social problems through neoliberal government policies are justified by a belief in the inherent goodness of human beings and inevitable triumph of social progress. This “rational consensus” is mobilized as if it serves a universal good, while, in fact, these best practices ignore social inequalities and the need to challenge the dominance of neoliberal capitalism. The supposedly universal acceptance of these practices, according to Mouffe, allows the domain of “the political” to be conceptualized through the language of morality. Rather than encouraging debates between the left and right, confrontations over
political or social issues are framed as moral battles between right and wrong. Thus, Mouffe writes that being antagonistic, expressing anger or challenging dominant ways of thinking can be construed as unnecessarily radical and posing a threat to democracy.

I was initially drawn to Mouffe’s work because, unlike Rancière and Žižek, her conceptualization of power and politics often recognizes the utility of post-structuralism as a theoretical tradition (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). In her work with Ernesto Laclau, she argues against reductionist or pre-determined political identities and instead advocates for political solidarities constructed around historically specific goals for social change. Laclau and Mouffe refute a notion of politics as reducible to political economy or the Truth of class struggle, and envision a politics around the struggle to reconfigure relations of power that produce multiple, overlapping forms of subordination. Yet in On the Political, Mouffe proposes a simplistic binary of antagonisms between left and right as the means to combat post-political sensibilities. While she asserts that post-politics reflects how the state of Western democracy is plagued by the inability to “adequately grasp the pluralistic nature of the social world” (p.10), the alternatives she proposes rely on pre-determined political positions. Her response to the dominance of post-politics doesn’t appear to account for the contextual specificities of political identities and the ways in which traditions of post-structuralist thought have largely rejected the existence of fixed binaries or pre-determined political identities.

Thus, following Antke Engel’s (2006) review of On the Political, I think it is useful to expand Mouffe’s concept of politicized debate beyond the dichotomy of left and right to include a variety of political alternatives that account for intersecting and contradictory power relations. Engel advocates for strengthening challenges to the post-
political zeitgeist by recognizing how the multiple identifications of one person or social group might adapt to the historical context and incite contradictory political preferences. This conception of the post-political offers a more intersectional lens through which I can examine how identities, difference and inequalities materialize within Movember’s universal message of better health for all men.

This approach to post-politics helps reveal how the discourse of “men’s health” privileges and essentializes the category of “men” and furthers the notion that all men benefit equally from how Movember is organized. The way I write “men’s health” in scare quotes is meant to illustrate how this concept is a social construct that glosses over social differences that influence health behaviours and outcomes, while making it appear as though all men experience health in the same way irrespective of varying social contexts and inequalities. I similarly employ this terminology to draw attention to the contradiction between Movember’s use of the essentializing phrase “men’s health” and how the campaign tends to be most popular among young white, middle class, heterosexual men (Jacobson, 2010; Robert, 2013). My argument rests, then, on the idea that Movember’s conception of “men’s health” gives little attention to inequalities based on gender, sexuality, race, nationality, age and ability and how these relations vary based on historical conditions. The monolithic “men’s health” category furthers a post-political narrative of health that stifles the formation of the “multi-polar world” that Mouffe envisions as contributing to meaningful social change.

My biggest departure from Mouffe might be how I envision the post-political as affecting people’s everyday lives. The crux of Mouffe’s book involves highlighting flaws in the current arrangement of democratic processes and the incapacity of governments
and other political institutions to facilitate debate between conflicting alternatives. Yet, in
the context of this project, I am less interested in the actions (or inactions) of
governments and politicians, and more concerned with how the idea of a post-political
world influences everyday meanings and practices. I conceptualize Movember as a site
through which a “universal rational consensus” and the moralization of political issues
affects how consumer-citizens engage with social problems. I consider the post-political
as meaningful beyond the actions of governments and to include the realm of
governmentality (Foucault, 1988; N. Rose, 1999a). I envision post-politics as forming a
type of knowledge that produces modes of self-reflexive conduct and self-regulation
within a given population. Post-politics, as I have outlined it here, constitutes a way of
speaking through which power is exercised and the social world can be interpreted.
Mouffe’s assertion that the post-political reflects “our inability to think in a political
way” (p. 9) begs questions concerning what knowledges can materialize through the post-
political and how these ideas are mobilized by different types of actors within different
contexts.

Whereas a belief in the triumph of social progress has produced a flawed
perception of society as post-feminist, colour blind and multicultural, “middle class” and
altogether tolerant of different ways of living, I offer the post-political as a useful way to
encapsulate the meanings and tensions that materialize across these worldviews. The
universalizing, moralizing and depoliticizing effects of the post-political condition shape
the ways in which social issues are defined and taken up by political actors, as well as the
facilitate the (de)legitimization of certain modes of thinking and resistance. Banet-Weiser
and Mukherjee (2012) issue a warning that we should avoid indulging what they call the
“fatalism of the post-political” and the accompanying idea that resistance has been so co-opted by capitalism that it has been rendered meaningless (p. 3). I respond to this critique by eschewing conceptualizations of the post-political as delineating all-or-nothing binaries of consumption/politics and capital/resistance. Such an approach would risk reproducing the moralistic dichotomies of right and wrong or good and evil that Mouffe’s work on the post-political seeks to disturb. Instead, I aim to identify how Movember is informed by discourses of post-politics. I describe and challenge these discourses, not to write off commercialized philanthropy or resistance as meaningless, but to explore how specific understandings of health, masculinity and consumption enable some conversations while closing off a variety of others.

**Mo Bros: Mapping the Dissertation**

In this dissertation, I conceptualize Movember as a post-political movement. Movember is constituted through discourses that actively depoliticize the campaign and make it appear detached from broader social issues. Movember has emerged within the public consciousness as a campaign supporting a universal goal of improving “men’s health” and somehow existing outside the realm of politics and inequalities. I argue that this perception has not happened by chance, but has materialized through Movember’s strategic approach to branding and philanthropy, as well as how facial hair, masculinity and irony are performed by the campaign’s participants. This dissertation shows how aspects of Movember’s promotional narratives, from the campaign’s trendy style and popular culture references to its social media presence and health promotion programs, are connected to broader power structures in ways that place careful boundaries on the
types of discussions that can be had about health, masculinity and social change. By conducting discourse analyses of online content and media coverage related to the movement, I describe how Movember’s message to “change the face of men’s health” is limited because the campaign fails to connect its goal to broader social issues and inequalities. While the movement’s fundraising successes are well documented and its educational initiatives have opened up space for some progressive discussions of health and masculinity, the campaign’s post-political message of change preserves narrow and normative definitions of gender and activism within the confines of neoliberalism and commercialized popular culture.

This dissertation is not necessarily an assessment of whether Movember “works” to improve the health of men worldwide. I do not seek to ascertain how many men visit their doctor and make health-related changes during or after Movember. Nor do I measure the quality of scientific research programs funded by Movember or track the dissemination of this research and how it is taken up in the medical community. I also do not make pronouncements about whether or not social media is a truly effective way to affect progressive change. Instead, I examine how Movember is implicated within broader societal trends in ways that allow the campaign to “make sense” as a movement to improve the health of men. By contextualizing the emergence and popularity of Movember, I demonstrate how the campaign’s promotional discourses circulate contradictory and problematic ideas regarding gender, consumption and social change.

I also recognize that the fun-loving approach to philanthropy adopted by Movember makes the campaign appear undeserving of critical scrutiny or academic analysis. Indeed, it seems needless to spend much time contemplating the political import
of a group of men growing funny and ridiculous moustaches for charity. I argue, however, that these common sense reactions to the playfulness and good intentions of Movember participants illustrate the power of the campaign’s post-political narratives. The ironic brand of masculinity enacted through the Movember moustache encourages us to avoid taking the moustache too seriously, but simultaneously thwarts attempts to ask critical questions about the movement and its social and political consequences. Thus, I seek to demystify the moustache and develop the idea that just because something is playful, witty or ironic, doesn’t mean that it is without political repercussions. In fact, following Lauren Berlant (1997), I affirm that the moustache’s “very ordinariness requires an intensified critical engagement with what [is] merely undramatically explicit” (p.12, emphasis mine). In my dissertation, I construct a “counter-politics of the silly object” (Berlant, 1997, p. 12) that recognizes how the silliest, most banal expressions can be mobilized to constitute crucial domains of citizenship and everyday life.

This dissertation is organized into the following sections. In Chapters Two and Three, I outline my theoretical and methodological frameworks for this project, while also contextualizing key components of Movember’s promotional narratives. It should be noted that my dissertation does not include a formal literature review; rather, I identify relevant scholarship and gaps in this literature as I conduct my analysis and develop key concepts. In Chapter Two, I describe my cultural studies approach to theory and methodology, while explaining how I employ Foucauldian genealogy and discourse analysis as the foundations of my research. I also provide a brief summary of my research sample and use of online methods, then detail contemporary debates concerning the logistics and ethics of internet research. In Chapter Three, I explore the three key
components of the Movember brand: masculinity, facial hair and health. I first advocate for discursive approaches to theorizing masculinity, and review scholarly research concerning the connections between masculinity and the domains of health and fashion. I then delineate some of the key arguments that have emerged from critical academic work on hair and facial hair, more specifically. I provide a short cultural history of shaving and related grooming practices, while also describing how women are positioned within Movember and broader discourses regarding grooming or facial hair. Chapter Three concludes with a discussion of the health programs made possible by Movember and how these well-publicized successes fit into my analysis.

In Chapter Four, I examine Movember’s branding strategies and introduce brand(ed) activism as a way to think through how the movement is situated within consumer culture. After providing a short review of some critical academic work on brands and consumer culture, I define brand(ed) activism and explain why I think the Movember phenomenon represents something different than types of commercialized philanthropy that have been subjects of past scholarship. In the remainder of the chapter, I interrogate the makings of the Movember brand, including the mobilization of the body as a promotional tool, the development of a kitsch industry around the moustache and the campaign’s use of social media.

Chapters Five and Six delve further into Movember’s use of irony as a discursive strategy. Chapter Five explores the complex meanings around which some of Movember’s most fundamental characteristics, including the campaign’s trademark popular cultural references and unmistakeable sense of style, are based. I argue that Movember’s ironic ethos is predicated on the existence of discursive communities that are
formed around shared assumptions about masculinity and facial hair, but also ideas about race, sexuality and social class. Throughout Chapter Five, I demonstrate how these assumptions are the foundation for the moustache-related antics for which Movember is known, but also draw boundaries around who can be “in on the joke” and show that they belong to the campaign’s fraternity of “real men.” Chapter Six introduces my concept of ironic masculinity as a way of speaking about the complexities and contradictions of gender norms. I explain how discourses of ironic masculinity work to exaggerate masculine characteristics while still revelling in their stability and familiarity. These gender performances resist essentialized understandings of masculinity, but place strict limits on the types of legitimate changes or variations to what is considered “manly.” I use the concept of ironic masculinity to consider how the Movember moustache allows for playful and reflexive gender performances that laugh in the face of rigid definitions of “traditional” or hyper-masculinity; yet this playful engagement with cultural stereotypes about what it means to be a “real man” stops short of subverting the privileges that come with these traditional conceptions of manliness. The Movember moustache is an ironic masculine performance that illustrates how some gender norms are flexible and change over time, but does not challenge broader ideas that portray facial hair as a symbol of men’s “natural” strength, power and leadership.

Chapter Seven is organized as a series of case studies that seek to highlight the connections between the themes outlined through the previous three chapters. This chapter is divided into five sections. First, I use a brief foray into Lacanian psychoanalysis to consider the presence of “the mirror” within Movember’s promotional narratives and how this image might articulate normative ideas about facial hair, irony
and masculinity. Second, I provide a brief textual analysis of *Mansome* (2012), a film about male grooming practices directed by acclaimed documentarian Morgan Spurlock. I explain how the documentary epitomizes my sense of the perils of ironic masculinity as a discursive formation. Third, I describe the role of actor Nick Offerman as a celebrity endorser for the campaign and how his image as an over-the-top “man’s man” further entrenches Movember’s post-political sensibilities. Fourth, I examine a Movember-themed advertising campaign for Chunky Soup and its bizarre and problematic references to pregnancy and childbirth. Fifth, I discuss the promotional partnership between Movember and the National Hockey League. I detail how this post-political narrative of corporate social responsibility conceals the league’s inability to make adequate connections between its masculine brand and the health of its players.

In Chapter Eight, I delve further into the “serious side of the Mo.” I begin by cataloguing other charitable campaigns that are often associated with Movember, including its November rival No Shave November and the ubiquitous pink ribbon campaigns. I explore the balance between irony and sincerity that Movember seeks to strike through its promotional narratives. I highlight the types of more emotional or serious content I encountered while undertaking my research, and demonstrate how these stories construct distance between the sincere aspects of Movember and the playful antics that dominate the campaign. I then recount some controversies and public resistance the campaign has faced, and detail the nature of the response and backlash received by Movember’s most notable detractors (I do not include myself on this list). Here, I return most directly to ideas around post-politics and social change. I explain that the public discourse that emerged around these controversies grows out of Movember’s
depoliticized and moralistic conception of health and social change. I conclude this analysis by outlining how the discourses of post-politics that constitute the Movember campaign have problematic ramifications for broader conceptions of social change and the fate of contemporary social movements.

In my conclusion, I revisit the arguments I made throughout my analysis and suggest some potential directions for future research. My dissertation culminates with ruminations on the future of Movember, as well as some concluding thoughts on the connections between philanthropy and consumer culture. This final section returns to some key concepts from this introduction, but my dissertation ends still grappling with this project’s defining question: Is a brand capable of bringing about progressive social change?
Chapter 2

Combing Through Movember: Theory and Method

There are unmistakable challenges involved in studying a cultural phenomenon like Movember. Movember is an ongoing cultural movement that is constituted in multiple spaces at multiple times. The campaign brands itself as an online movement, yet receives substantial coverage across more traditional media platforms and is perhaps most visible in public spaces such as university campuses and stereotypically masculine workplaces. The Movember brand is circulated online through “official” venues, but also relies heavily on user-generated content to spread the campaign’s messages. What constitutes the brand’s message is at times clearly articulated in official promotional materials, but is more open-ended and ambiguous in online contexts constructed through the contributions of Movember participants. A great deal of Movember’s fundraising and “awareness” initiatives take place in the virtual world of “selfies,” memes and e-commerce, yet the campaign fundamentally requires men to undertake the material and bodily practice of growing facial hair for 30 days. The Movember brand is not confined to one cultural domain, but reaches into and draws upon multiple spheres of social life. Movember is often lauded as trendy and cutting edge, but also invokes retro styles and the images of popular culture icons of years past. The campaign engages controversial issues about masculinity, health and commercialism, yet has gained almost universal acceptance as a fun, worthwhile and successful philanthropic endeavour. The multiplicities of Movember offer theoretical and methodological challenges in determining an appropriate scope and the relevant analytical tools; these complexities, however, are also what make Movember a worthy site of investigation.
Given the multiplicities and intricacies of the Movember movement, the purpose of my analysis is not to search out particular “truths” about the effectiveness of the campaign or to reveal the “true” motivations of Movember participants. Rather, the goal of my dissertation is to construct the historical, social and political context in which Movember has risen to prominence, while, in turn, considering how the campaign shapes the cultural milieus in which it operates. My analysis follows a cultural studies approach that seeks to critically interrogate how the social and political dynamics of an historical moment influence how cultural phenomena develop and influence how people understand the world in which they live (Saukko, 2003). My approach to studying Movember is distinguished by my theoretical and methodological commitments to “radical contextualization,” a process involving a rigorous attempt to explain how cultural phenomena are defined by the ever-changing set of social relations that surround, permeate and shape them (Grossberg, 2010, p. 20). Yet these commitments to representing the open-ness and contingency of complex social realities are also guided by an obligation to explore dominant configurations of power and imagine the ways they can be changed (Grossberg, 2010; S. King, 2005). I conduct my analysis of Movember, therefore, following the assumption that the ways in which cultural movements are conceived and perceived are specific to the historical and geographical contexts from which they emerge.

In crafting my methodological approach, I sought to do more than describe the social and political connections that constitute Movember, but I also pursued strategies that enabled me to rigorously evaluate the implications of how the brand is spoken about, circulated and portrayed. My research is primarily concerned with how language is
connected to power through *discourse*. My analysis, therefore, interrogates how power is exercised and maintained through the discursive formations that comprise and surround Movember, and emerge via journalistic accounts, online images and social media content. My understanding of the relationship between power and discourse is firmly grounded in the work of Michel Foucault (1972; 1977; 1990). I do not conceive of discourses as vehicles for pre-existing ideologies, but am concerned with how discourses are constituted by “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). Discourses do not set into motion predetermined power relations, but are a set of ever-changing practices that produce dominant (and subordinate) understandings of the world. Indeed, my analysis is not designed to reveal how the will of the most powerful institutions and social groups is transmitted through language; rather, I am interested in explaining how power is enacted, shifted and transformed through the everyday cultural interactions and discursive relationships that Movember fosters.

My definition of discourse is informed by the foundational writings of Foucault and post-structural methodologies that seek to account for multiple, co-existing discourses within specific historical contexts (Foucault, 1990). Following Foucault, I conceptualize discourses as encompassing the multiple and sometimes contradictory practices through which knowledge is produced and circulated. Discourses operate as the mechanisms through which certain types of knowledge are granted authority over others, but also how these dominant ideas are subverted and resisted. The discourses through which Movember is promoted and discussed, therefore, work to produce particular ideas about the brand and its participants that carve out space for the movement within a complex set of social relations. In sum, discourses are *ways of knowing* that operate
through mundane, everyday practices, but contribute to how power is distributed and maintained in societies. The ways in which knowledge is produced through language, visual images and bodily practices powerfully structure relationships between individuals and the social world, while enabling certain knowledges to be perceived as more legitimate or “true” than their alternatives.

My commitments to cultural studies theories of articulation and Foucauldian conceptions of power converge in my engagement with genealogy as an historical method. Foucault wrote sparingly about questions directly pertaining to method and was critiqued for not providing specific techniques with which researchers should analyze discourses. Yet in this dissertation I follow scholarly traditions that consider the tenets of Foucault’s genealogy as indeed providing rigorous strategies for the analysis of relevant discourses (Markula & Silk, 2011; Prado, 2000; Saukko, 2003). For Foucault, undertaking a genealogy requires extensive historical analysis of the processes through which a certain way of thinking develops over time and in different contexts. This type of analysis is motivated by the assumption that discourses are not timeless truths, but products of specific social and political conditions that are subject to change and variation. Genealogical analysis does not require investigations into monumental events or large-scale historical developments, but entails the examination of contemporary cultural formations that can appear routine and commonplace. Movember is an ongoing movement that is still experiencing steady growth in many places; a genealogical approach has enabled me to investigate the campaign even as it has evolved throughout the course of my research. This methodological process requires writing “histories of the present” that map the often shifting terrain of what counts as “self-evident, universal and
necessary” within a particular cultural moment (Foucault, 1981, p. 5). My genealogy of Movember, therefore, seeks to reveal the historical conditions and social connections that currently give the movement its universally-accepted status as a trendy and well-intentioned brand supporting an undeniably worthy cause.

For the purposes of my dissertation, “doing” genealogy requires a particular approach to discourse analysis that explores how power is exercised through identifiable groups of statements about Movember. My approach to discourse analysis, then, seeks to understand how some discourses become acknowledged as the dominant ways of thinking about Movember while others are marginalized or made to appear less important. My analysis is guided by the question: how is it that one particular statement about Movember appears rather than another (Foucault, 1972, p. 27)? The process of answering this question involves interrogating the dominant narratives that connect Movember to broader understandings of masculinity, health, hair and popular culture, but also consists of drawing attention to the silences and inconsistencies within the prevailing discourses (Foucault, 1990). My use of discourse analysis throughout this project requires my interpretation of pre-existing “cultural texts” that emerge through a variety of media and are almost exclusively created by the Movember organization, its participants or various authors of online content (professional journalists, bloggers, social media users etc.). Despite the tendency for discourse analysts to privilege written or spoken words and given the great amount of variation that characterizes online content, I define “texts” more broadly to include visual images, auditory and audio-visual content, and the structural composition of websites themselves. I will discuss the intricacies of online research and describe the process through which texts were analyzed later in this chapter.
Yet the underlying assumption that motivates my approach to genealogy and discourse analysis should be made clear: media representations and popular culture remain important sites for the production of social meaning and relations of power (S. O’Brien & Szeman, 2010; Saukko, 2003).

My analysis, therefore, presupposes that media discourses are primary sites through which we come to know cultural phenomena, but also are mechanisms through which divisions between groups of people are produced and reinforced. The campaign’s focus on “men’s health” is founded upon supposedly natural distinctions between men and women, and masculinity and femininity. As I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter Three, one of the primary goals of my analysis is to work beyond these seemingly self-evident gender binaries. Moreover, I will argue that the discourses through which Movember is made known do not represent coherent or stable narratives about masculinity. This is, in part, because the campaign invokes meanings that are ambiguous and vary according to the given context; but the complexity with which masculinity is portrayed through Movember is also due to the ways in which gender is co-articulated with other subject positions that influence perceptions of the movement and its participants. The gendered discourses that drive Movember are connected to taken-for-granted assumptions about consumption, hair and fashion norms, irony, and gentlemanly behaviour that are informed by notions of class, race, sexuality, ability and nationality. Moreover, within the Canadian context in which my analysis was primarily conducted, these connections produce social and political implications that are distinct to this cultural and historical milieu.
My investigation into the ways in which Movember (re)produces a number of overlapping cultural hierarchies is informed by intersectional approaches to identity (Bannerji, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Hill-Collins, 1998) that interrogate how articulations of gender, race, class, sexuality, age and nation are interconnected and shape everyday experience. In this way, the movement’s promotional discourses construct Movember participants explicitly as men (and women), but the branded image of the Mo Bro and Mo Sista on which the campaign is based also makes multiple subjectivities simultaneously intelligible. As I will argue throughout this dissertation, the discourses that constitute Movember make it appear that Mo Bros are exclusively defined by how well their public performance of masculinity embodies the campaign’s ironic ethos. Yet this essentialized portrayal obscures how other cultural processes inform these discourses and make some masculine displays appear more legitimate or “natural” than others. Thus, I will employ an intersectional approach to illustrate how seemingly straightforward or unified discourses about gender are in fact complex articulations of multiple subjectivities that draw attention to overlapping cultural boundaries.
This process of mapping the multiple and complex set of relations in which Movember has materialized in the popular consciousness requires a nuanced approach to discourse analysis that takes into account multiple ways of knowing. Most notably, I apply the tools of discourse analysis to the abundance of visual content circulated through Movember’s online platforms and pay careful attention to the production of digital images related to the movement. To do this, I follow the substantial body of scholarly work that puts Foucauldian discourse analysis in conversation with visual methodologies (Pink, 2013; J. Rose, 2001). I consider the images that drive the Movember brand more than accessories to the “words” used to describe and interpret the movement; rather, these images are central aspects of the brand and, like the verbal discourses through which Movember is also constituted, have complex social and political implications. Moreover, I analyse these images beyond their aesthetic dimensions, and consider how social
relations and cultural hierarchies are reproduced through these visual texts (J. Rose, 2001; Saukko, 2003). In a Foucauldian sense, the discursive formations I examine throughout my analysis (comprised of both verbal and visual texts) act as mechanisms or technologies through which individuals are encouraged to regulate their bodies, conduct, and thoughts according to broader social norms and practices (Foucault, 1990). Yet my methodology takes great care to consider how these discourses materialize in specific online contexts, entailing the interplay of “technologies” of more than one sort.

**Online Movement, Online Methods**

Discourse analyses require distinct methodological guidelines when conducted in online contexts. In online and digital media environments, the researcher analyses texts that are not static or discrete objects, but are hyper-connected phenomena that continuously evolve in user-generated and ever-changing contexts. Thus, analyses of discourses that materialize online should examine specific content (words, images, videos, for instance), but also how the links and connections built into most websites contribute to the discourse and facilitate new ways of knowing (Hine, 2005, 2013). Through the vast network of hyper-links that transport users from website to website, internet content does not occupy a fixed space in the online universe. Rather, this content is always in conversation with other online texts and contexts (McKay, 2005). Depending on how the user arrived at a particular website (via another site, search engine or a personal internet bookmark) or where the user clicks next, the site’s content is re-articulated and re-framed in this distinct context.
As I will discuss further in Chapter Three, the Movember campaign relies on processes of intertextuality to disseminate its brand throughout the internet (Jacobson, 2010). The discourses that comprise Movember continuously make both direct and indirect reference to other cultural texts and discourses through which participants can make sense of the campaign’s moustache-related imagery. Through this intertextual relationship, the meanings communicated through the Movember brand can be interpreted via reference to styles, images and icons of the past (Kristeva, 1980). Yet instead of simply alluding to these cultural references, the Movember campaign is continuously connected to a virtual archive of countless examples of the artefacts being cited. A Movember participant can watch a promotional video for Movember starring actor Nick Offerman on YouTube and is immediately linked to a series of “recommended” videos showcasing Offerman’s most noteworthy television roles and stand-up comedy. The same user can then proceed to a video featuring Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield promoting Movember’s “Big Moustache on Campus Challenge” and, by following the links conveniently provided by YouTube, watch Hadfield’s viral performance of David Bowie’s song “Space Oddity.” These types of intertextual relationships, facilitated within a hyper-linked online milieu, enable the user to amass cultural knowledge that provides context to the images, styles, and histories that define the Movember ethos. The connectivity and share-ability of online content creates a context in which Movember’s witty cultural references are often made in conversation with a virtual archive of popular culture knowledge.

Throughout this dissertation, I conduct my analysis of online discourses while considering the internet as both cultural artefact and cultural context (Hine, 2013; Jensen,
2011). My examination of how the Movember brand materializes online primarily entails the careful analysis of web objects: the words, visual and auditory material, hyper-links and networked structures that together work to constitute the campaign’s substantial online presence. Yet my methodological framework is also guided by an understanding that the content and structures a user encounters on the internet are contextually contingent. Each user enters the internet as a spatially and culturally located being, while creating and experiencing online contexts differently than any other user (Hine, 2005, 2013). Given the colossal volume of information on the internet and the numerous ways to find it, users (and researchers) have no choice but to navigate the internet by selectively looking at some data and disregarding others. Thus, the content that constitutes “the internet” is different for each user and how each person traverses and makes sense of this vast amount of information shapes the context in which their online practices are produced (Hine, 2013).

As a researcher, the content related to Movember that I encounter online is produced by the decisions I make as to what links to follow or search terms to enter, but also by my previous search histories and software algorithms that manufacture “recommended” online pathways to explore. These indexing algorithms are built into the websites, search engines and social media platforms through which I collected my data, and are therefore built into the methods I employed to undertake my analysis (Hine, 2013). As Jensen (2011) writes, when conducting research online, the system is the method (p. 52). The methods of data collection and analysis are closely tied to the ways in which the hyper-connected structures of the internet shape the individual experience of the researcher. It is difficult (if not impossible) to study online practices “objectively” or
even systematically given the radically dispersed, contextual and unpredictable nature of the internet. Very little about the methodological process can be determined or documented in advance; the online context constructed by the researcher is contingent on sometimes arbitrary (albeit informed) decisions influenced by the underlying computer programs that structure digital environments (Jensen, 2011). My methods, therefore, produce an archive that reflects my own online practices and how I navigated the context these practices created.

The radically contextual and unpredictable nature of the internet calls for different understandings of what counts as “evidence” in online research (Jensen, 2011). With this in mind, scholars such as Christine Hine (2005, 2013) and Nancy Baym (2006) have looked to the principles of ethnography to outline a methodological approach best-suited for online phenomena. Hine argues that claiming the internet as an ethnographic space was crucial for legitimizing internet communication as a site through which social relations of power are enacted. The acceptance of an ethnographic approach to internet research also allows scholars to theorize how the internet is part of everyday cultural activities and to blur the boundaries between online and offline identities (Jensen, 2011; McKay, 2005; D. Miller & Slater, 2000). There are multiple methodological strategies, however, that draw on the tenets of ethnography in this way. Some researchers build their approach in ways that apply the techniques of traditional ethnographies, such as participant-observation or one-on-one interviews, in online contexts (Baym, 2006; Hine, 2005; Schneider & Foot, 2005). Yet other scholars have sought to avoid direct interactions with internet users and instead analyze how websites (including user-generated content) are situated within larger discourses and cultural contexts (Jensen,
These more discursive approaches still largely draw upon ethnographic principles by encouraging reflexivity on the part of the researcher and emphasizing how the internet is an interpretatively flexible context that is co-produced throughout the research process (McKay, 2005; D. Miller & Slater, 2000; Schneider & Foot, 2005). Even though the researcher is not taking on the role of participant-observer and rather considering these online activities as discourses for analysis, the researcher is still an agent in constructing and navigating the context in question. While discourse analysis requires processes of selection and interpretation of textual material that shape the narratives to which a researcher has access, concerns about reflexivity are heightened when conducting research in online contexts because the scope or directions of the analysis cannot be easily pre-determined.

**Research Sample and Data Collection Techniques**

The ways in which researchers describe the challenges of navigating the vast universe of online content is reminiscent of a famous scene from the blockbuster film, *Armageddon* (Bay, 1998). The scene portrays an exchange between the President of the United States (played by Stanley Anderson) and NASA director Dan Truman (played by Billy Bob Thornton) about how the space agency’s tracking systems were unable to detect the massive asteroid on the verge of colliding with Earth. Truman explains the oversight by clarifying for the President, “Well, our object collision budget is a million dollars. That allows us to track about 3% of the sky, and begging your pardon, sir, but it’s a big ass sky.” Truman’s honest reply mirrors the immense challenges that I encountered while sifting through the enormous amount of material related to Movember. The
campaign’s rapid growth as an online movement translates into a proliferation of different kinds of content created by numerous and often overlapping sources. The Movember foundation operates multiple “official” online platforms including a promotional website, as well as an interlinked group of social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google+ etc.). These official networks are structured to encourage the production of a massive collection of user-generated content from the campaign’s staff, corporate sponsors and participants. Movember’s popularity is also reflected in a growing amount of mainstream and online media coverage that often contains links to official promotional material or notable tweets, memes or images posted by participants. Positive or supportive media accounts of the movement are often circulated through Movember’s official channels, whereas (as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Eight) less encouraging or critical representations prompt responses from advocates for the campaign. Of course, internet or social media users can act as prolific content generators as online material gets shared, modified or becomes the subject of a limitless stream of commentary and discussion (Couldry, 2012; Hine, 2013).

It is not possible for any researcher to examine all, or even the majority of Movember-related content, even if the investigation was limited to official promotional material or a specific social media platform. I conduct my research, therefore, operating under the foundational cultural studies principle that the knowledge produced through scholarly analysis is always partial and incomplete (Grossberg, 2010; S. King, 2005; Saukko, 2003). The arguments I make throughout this dissertation are not intended to be representative of every online discussion about Movember or generalizable across all aspects of and ideas about the movement. There are inevitable exceptions and
complexities to the ways in which I represent Movember throughout my analysis, as well as some media accounts and personal narratives that were outside the scope of my online data collection. My goal, however, is not to strive for completeness or indisputable proof that the Movember movement is a certain way. Rather, I seek to thoroughly interrogate the dominant trends and most powerful narratives that emerged as I navigated a limited, yet substantial, part of Movember’s online universe.

As I have argued, my approach to collecting data was not rigidly defined by predetermined assumptions about how I should navigate the online contexts that emerged as I conducted my research. Yet the online pathways I traversed were also not selected at random. I did not confine my analysis to the boundaries of particular websites or pre-selected search terms, but still made deliberate choices regarding the sites from which I began my explorations and how far I would follow particular directions. Scholars have articulated particular strategies for undertaking research that reflects how online practices are woven into mundane, everyday activities, while still remaining committed to notions of rigor and reflexivity (Hine, 2013; D. Miller & Slater, 2000; Schneider & Foot, 2005). My approach to this methodological challenge is largely built upon some of the key principles of web sphere analysis (Schneider & Foot, 2005). By making web spheres, rather than websites or specific web objects my primary unit of analysis, I envisioned my methods of data collection as closely resembling how I use the internet as an everyday practice.

As Schneider and Foot (2005) suggest, my analysis is not organized around pre-defined or self-contained website or web objects, but around loose collections of dynamically defined digital resources called web spheres. Web spheres commonly span
multiple websites deemed relevant to a particular event, topic or theme. The boundaries of a web sphere are not determined in advance, but delineated by the researcher according to perceived thematic, spatial and temporal relationships between the content and the topic being investigated. This type of analysis accounts for the flexible and ephemeral nature of online content, but also requires reflexivity on the part of the researcher regarding how notions of “relevance” are determined. Notions of rigor, then, need to be adapted to dynamic online contexts and go beyond an ability to count every unit of data analyzed or employ a systematic procedure that can be easily replicated. The “quality” of this type of online research is not based upon a perceived need to triangulate results or produce generalizable conclusions. Rather, my conception of rigorous research involves purposeful and ongoing selection of an amount of relevant materials that enable me to thoroughly and persuasively answer my research questions while also creating space for emerging and unexpected areas of inquiry (Baym, 2006; Markula & Silk, 2011).

The boundaries of the web spheres around which I structured my analysis are defined in multiple ways. First and most importantly, I examined digital content that I deemed part of the context in which Movember emerged and gained popularity. This content includes official promotional material distributed by Movember, online press coverage encountered through search engines or Movember-related social media, user-generated content that was linked to the campaign’s official networks and social media interactions organized around Movember content. As I will discuss in subsequent chapters, this context is built around material directly related to the Movember movement but also consumer and popular culture trends that indirectly validate the campaign’s
image and values. Second, I mostly confined my primary data analysis to an eight-week period spanning the last two weeks of October, the month of November, and the first two weeks of December for the 2012 and 2013 editions of Movember. Yet, again, when contextualizing a movement that draws on numerous past and current popular culture trends, some content from outside these temporal boundaries was connected to my primary data and expanded the scope of a web sphere. Third, each web sphere had a purposively chosen starting point that served as the central nucleus or touchstone around which the context was assembled. These were most commonly main hubs of official Movember material (the front page of the Movember Canada website, the Movember Canada Facebook page, or the Movember YouTube channel), strategic website or image searches, or Google Alert lists or database entries. I deliberately used Canadian websites as my starting points for each web sphere, but given the global reach of the Movember campaign, I included international sources when they emerged within these online networks. These were the tenets, borrowed from Schneider and Foot’s conception of web sphere analysis that informed how I navigated the massive amounts of online content related to Movember. Yet I did not seek to rigidly or dogmatically structure my research according to these guiding principles; instead, I made decisions based on how each piece of content could enhance the depth or breadth of a web sphere and enable me to answer my research questions.

**Real Conversations? Considering the Politics of Online Research**

One of the key questions that drives many debates regarding online methods concerns the extent to which researchers can rely on data collection techniques that do
not involve internet users as participants (Hine, 2013). As Hine (2013) writes, internet researchers are required to walk a fine line between careful analysis of online content and speculation about how this material is taken up by internet users. This dilemma is especially applicable across social media platforms built around an expectation that users will be both consumers and producers (i.e. “prosumers”) of content (Rooke, 2013; Zimmer, 2010). Many scholars who research online phenomena, including those who do forms of web sphere analysis, recommend conducting interviews or focus groups with producers and/or consumers of online content to verify or “triangulate” the researcher’s interpretations (Hine, 2013; Kleinman, 2004; Schneider & Foot, 2005). The interactive and “social” nature of much online media means that internet-related practices are seldom self-explanatory and emerge from contexts often easily visible to a researcher. Thus, researchers of internet-based phenomena should exercise great caution in making claims about how online contexts are “understood” or “experienced” by different types of users (Baym, 2006; Jensen, 2011).

While I did examine social media content throughout my online research, I purposely avoided interactions with users on these platforms and chose not to involve any users as participants to clarify my own interpretations. My primary justification for these decisions involves the research objectives and the nature of my research questions. As I stated at the outset of this chapter, my research questions are not meant to uncover how individual Movember participants and supporters interpret or value their participation in the campaign. Rather, my analysis enables me to construct a critical history of Movember that contextualizes the movement within broader consumer trends and relations of power. With this in mind, I follow Baym’s (2006) assertion that research into online phenomena
can be conducted without interacting directly with internet users as long as researchers reflexively frame their results and conclusions. Thus, instead of making claims about the understandings and experiences of Movember participants, I am careful to limit my discussions to considering the discursive possibilities enabled and constrained by online material. I argue that this approach resonates with my histories of the present framework and Foucauldian conceptions of how discourses enact specific “conditions of possibility” (Foucault, 1972, 2002). My methods of data collection allow me to assemble an archive of a variety of online materials and my research questions are designed to interrogate the historical conditions under which this knowledge was produced.

These debates about the nature of online methods also extend into the realm of research ethics. Concerns about participant confidentiality and potential vulnerability are at issue even when employing “passive” online methods that are not designed to engage internet users throughout the research process (Rooke, 2013). Yet despite assertions that the internet lends itself to covert or unobtrusive methods, scholars have drawn attention to the ethical implications of this type of “lurking” or “electronic eavesdropping” (Clegg Smith, 2004; Hine, 2013; Jensen, 2011). These scholars assert most importantly that just because something happens in an online environment does not mean it is fair game for analysis or dissemination. The producers and consumers of online material are not disembodied or decontextualized subjects despite their “virtual” presence. These users are situated within a complex set of power relations and their wellbeing needs to be taken into account. My research practices were designed with notions of dignity and safety in mind, even though at first glance the groups of young, white, middle class men who make up Movember’s primary demographic do not necessarily appear “at risk.”
The key principle in considering the ethical implications of online research involves identifying and respecting expectations of privacy on websites or social media platforms (Hine, 2013; Madge, 2007; Rooke, 2013; Zimmer, 2010). Personal information or user-generated content is not automatically available for collection and distribution simply because it is available online (Zimmer, 2010). Much like other forms of ethnography or participant-driven research, online studies that call the privacy of internet users into question should strive to protect confidentiality, remove any identifying information and obtain informed consent whenever possible. Yet the rigor with which these ethical standards are applied in online research is thought to be relatively flexible and depends on the perceived privacy associated with the contexts in question. Since publically accessible archives and forums are assumed to provide less privacy to users than private or secure environments, researchers are thought to be less obligated to follow the ethical standards of participant-driven research (Madge, 2007).

This assumption also governs the Queen’s Digital Data Collection Policy (2008), which outlines how internet users “do have some expectation of privacy, and, that these expectations vary according to specific characteristics of the site to which they are posting” (p. 5). Moreover, the policy asserts that “when a user posts material on a site widely known to be viewable by the general public this may be taken as evidence that this user expects their material to have public visibility” (p. 7). When encountering any user-generated content from social media (images, comments, web links etc.) or other online sources, I ensured my data collection process was governed by the spirit of this policy. I only analyzed content or comments posted to publically accessible sites such as YouTube and Instagram or commercial and corporate pages within social networks such
as Facebook. I did not access information from sites or social media spaces in which users could reasonably expect to post content that would be protected from public visibility. These included personal social media profiles, forums that required separate logins or passwords outside/within the broader social network, or discussion venues built around a smaller sub-set or community of Movember participants. I operated under the assumption that the visibly public and commercial status of the spaces from which I collected my data would mitigate any expectations of privacy attached to material posted by online users.

When discussing the intricacies and ethics of internet research, some scholars have stressed the importance of gaining “insider” understandings of online content rather than imposing the researcher’s interpretations on this complex material (Lankshear, Leander, & Knobol, 2011). This emphasis on “insider” knowledge mirrors many approaches to traditional ethnography that construct the researcher as always initiating research as an “outsider” seeking to gain a degree of insider status. Only having worked to achieve this level of familiarity and closeness with a relevant community will a researcher be able to gain intimate insights into the social phenomenon in question (Markula & Silk, 2011). My approach to online discourse analysis, however, does not conceptualize the research process as following a linear progression from unacquainted outsider to knowledgeable insider. Rather, I envision the insider/outsider binary as a fluid and unstable boundary that reflects and produces dynamic subjectivities for the researcher across time and space (Mullings, 1999). As Mullings argues, insider/outsider subject positions are not mutually exclusive. A researcher cannot consistently occupy an exclusively insider or outsider position throughout the course of the research, nor should
they expect to undergo a linear transformation from one position to the other. Indeed, the
degree to which a researcher can obtain insider insight into a cultural phenomenon is very
much dependent on the changing contexts of the study and the power dynamics these
contexts enact (Mullings, 1999).

I argue that while I researched Movember I simultaneously occupied both insider
and outsider positions depending on the online contexts I encountered. I was
unquestionably positioned outside the movement because I have never participated in
Movember or grown a moustache for charity. Yet my white, male, heterosexual and
middle-class identities, as well as my status as an English-speaking student at a Canadian
university and consumer of a wide variety of popular culture, situates me within the
demographic through which Movember is most visible. This combination of identities
and consumer practices makes me more likely to be attuned to the cultural frames of
reference around which Movember is constituted than researchers situated within
different cultural and historical circumstances.

Particular aspects of my identities and personal histories provide me with a degree
of “insider” knowledge about Movember that enabled me to contextualize and interpret
the forms of intertextuality and irony that give the movement its signature style. My
familiarity with social media, moreover, provided me with a capacity to follow the ways
in which particular content is connected or associated across multiple online platforms.
Despite these structural privileges and technical proficiencies, I encountered a great deal
of content that appeared to beyond my spheres of cultural knowledge and would
assumedly make more sense to well-initiated Movember participants. My lack of
participation in the campaign made some parts of the discourse more difficult to interpret
and reinforces my murky place along the insider/outsider boundary. Yet as a non-participant, my relative distance from the movement means I should engage with Movember in substantially different ways than someone consuming the brand at face value. My tenuous relationship with Movember indeed provides unique opportunities to grapple with the contradictions that emerge within the discourse and engage with the “ambivalence” of the brand and its post-political promotional narratives.
Chapter 3

“Real Men, Real Moustaches, Real Outcomes”

This chapter investigates what I consider to be the three pillars of the Movember brand: masculinity, facial hair and health. The importance of these three components is reflected in one of the campaign’s slogans, “Real men, real moustaches, real outcomes” (Movember Foundation, 2013). I use this phrase to organize my examination of the foundational principles of the movement: that Movember is a campaign for men, that manhood is “naturally” expressed through facial hair, and that a moustache-based campaign can produce positive changes to the state of “men’s health” worldwide. This chapter proceeds, first, by explaining the value of discursive approaches to the study of masculinities and describing the multiple and sometimes conflicting connections between discourses of masculinity, health and men’s fashion. Second, I explore arguments from the critical academic literature on hair and facial hair, while also outlining cultural trends around shaving and considering how the involvement of women in Movember is related to these histories. Lastly, this chapter concludes with a brief overview of how Movember’s impact on health is envisioned through the promotional discourses circulated through the campaign. The purpose of this chapter is identify some of the foundational assumptions on which the popularity of Movember rests and to challenge the “naturalness” of these common sense ideas.

“Real” Men

Following the campaign’s oft-repeated slogan and referencing common sense ideas about masculinity and the male body, “real men” is a staple phrase within media
coverage and online conversations about Movember. The notion that there can even be such a thing as a “real man” is often taken-for-granted in these discussions, but the expression holds value in presupposing a hierarchy privileging a “real” or authentic masculinity over other false and inferior gender performances. So what exactly defines a Mo Bro as a “real man?” This is a complex question with a lot of different answers. The versions of masculinity communicated through Movember are very much tied to meanings associated with the moustache and the virile male body, but also involve ideas about health, consumption, technology and philanthropy. These connotations, of course, are packaged as part of a brand identity that looks to balance a fun, playful side with more serious concerns. Many references to “real men” throughout Movember equate manliness with the perceived quality of a Mo Bro’s moustache, and, by extension, the supposedly innate biological potentials of the (hairy) male body. Other accounts construct masculinity as embodied through various “manly” acts: shaving techniques or the consumption of particular products. While the Movember brand is commonly articulated through associations with stereotypical “manly” pursuits such as sports, working on cars, and drinking beer, the campaign also constructs “real men” as re-defining masculinity by resisting other traditional masculine stereotypes (such as neglecting one’s health). Thus, participating in Movember is frequently constructed as a gateway to a manly state of being that is identifiable as distinctly masculine, but can be reached in multiple (and sometimes competing) ways. Despite the widespread attention given to notions of manhood and masculinity in the discourses that constitute Movember, there seems to be no clear answer to our original question: *what makes a Mo Bro a “real man?”*
In the context of Movember, the “real man” ideal works as a discursive mechanism to police social practices related to gender, legitimizing some ideas about masculinity and marginalizing others. The processes through which media discourses construct hierarchies among men is most commonly theorized by sociologists using the work of R.W. Connell and her conception of *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell, 2005). I have found through my explorations into the field of critical masculinity studies that Connell’s concept is frequently used as shorthand for problematic behaviours and ideas related to men and masculinity, and has very much shaped the theoretical directions of this type of research. The starting point for most theories of hegemonic masculinity is that there is no “true” or “natural” state of manhood. These theories look to disrupt discourses and practices that conceive of masculinity and “male behaviours” as biologically determined. Instead, hegemonic masculinity is a concept that considers men and men’s bodies as part of a socially constructed system of gender relations. Connell’s understanding of masculinity emphasizes how gender is not reducible to the body or biological sex characteristics, but is enacted through a series of complex social practices that privilege masculinity and marginalize the feminine (Connell, 2005, p. 71). The notion of hegemonic masculinity, then, represents the culturally agreed upon practices that construct masculinity as dominant and superior, and legitimizes patriarchy as a natural and unquestioned way to make sense of social life. In addition to describing a hierarchical gender order, theories of hegemonic masculinity also highlight the existence of multiple forms of masculinity and hierarchies of difference among men. Indeed, not all men can claim equal access to the meanings and practices through which masculinity maintains its dominance in the gender order. Accordingly,
Connell proposes that theories of hegemonic masculinity should consider how identities not limited to race, sexuality, class, ability and nationality intersect and contribute to broader gender hierarchies (2005, p. 75).

In her canonical book *Masculinities* (2005), however, Connell is careful to note that hegemonic masculinity should not be understood as a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same (p. 76). This part of Connell’s definition draws crucial attention to the importance of differing cultural and historical contexts in delineating what masculine practices can be conceptualized as hegemonic. Yet “hegemonic masculinity” is employed within many studies of men and masculinity in ways that make the concept appear to refer to a well-established set of pre-defined traits (J. Hearn, 2004). Such a concern is evident in the definition of hegemonic masculinity from *The Encyclopedia of Gender and Society* (2009):

> Hegemonic masculinity, particularly in Western industrial societies, is heterosexual, aggressive and competitive. It involves physical strength; economic success; control; exclusive heterosexuality and the search for sexual conquests even if by force; athletic prowess; stoicism and suppression of emotions that convey vulnerability such as empathy, sadness, and the like; and the patrolling of other men’s masculinities (as well as women’s femininities). These are the characteristics encompassed in being a “real man” – the most honoured type of man (Lynch, 2009).

The term hegemonic masculinity is similarly employed to refer to the experiences of white, middle or upper class, able-bodied men and thought to be exemplified in high risk, violent or “heroic” professions and activities. The sheer scope and breadth of descriptions that outline what makes “the most honoured type of man” raises questions about how to define the threshold at which masculine bodies or practices are considered hegemonic. How can we account for men who fulfill some requirements of this hegemonic character type and not others? Do some of these “hegemonic” qualities count more than others in
making these decisions? How does a theory of hegemonic masculinity adequately explain how the same masculine performance can be taken up in multiple ways at the same time? Theories of hegemonic masculinity that highlight the existence of multiple masculinities have helped researchers account for cultural or historical differences in how masculinity is constructed and move beyond essentialist ways of thinking about masculinity (Pringle, 2005). Yet the complex ways in which Movember simultaneously incorporates different and competing understandings of gender within its brand poses challenges for a straightforward reading of the campaign as exclusively reaffirming or opposing hegemonic masculinity.

Within my analysis, I seek to resist simply constructing Movember as automatically reproducing a version of hegemonic masculinity. Past scholarly examinations of the campaign either rely solely on theories of hegemonic masculinity or conceptualize the brand of masculinity promoted by Movember as representing a relatively stable set of well-established tropes (Jacobson, 2010; Robert, 2013; Wasserburg, Oliffe, & Han, 2014). Robert (2013) describes how Movember participants conform to “stereotypical notions of masculinity” (p. 270), while Wasserburg, Oliffe and Han (2014) outline a set of “classic male values” through which the Movember moustache is understood (p. 6). Moreover, Jacobson (2010) employs the explicit language of hegemonic masculinity to argue that “rather than Movember breaking the negative construction of a ‘real man,’ Movember continues to build into the discourse of hegemonic masculinity” (p. 88). Yet these studies also attempt to account for some of the movement’s complexities by identifying how certain values are more visible in Movember’s promotional material. Wasserburg, Oliffe and Han (2014), for example,
suggest that Movember’s success involves putting individuality above aggressive or combative models of manhood. Robert similarly describes how the Movember movement trades on masculine notions of competitive individualism, honour, and heteronormative sex appeal while also making altruistic and health-conscious behaviours appear respectable and manly. These analyses identify how particular qualities often associated with hegemonic masculinity are foregrounded in Movember’s promotional material while others might be actively deemphasized. These studies also highlight how these markers of traditional masculinity exist alongside traits less frequently associated with “real men.”

I argue, however, that these investigations assume that characteristics associated with gender can be easily categorized in this way while ignoring how gender norms overlap and are always in conversation. Movember’s emphasis on individuality and competition cannot be neatly separated from notions of aggression and dominance; indeed, imagery celebrating violence and militaristic combat are at times invoked within the campaign. Movember operates under the assumed heterosexuality of its participants, but also occasionally celebrates gay male icons and fashion trends. The campaign promotes ideas about health, compassion and self-care, but is also often associated with subcultures and institutions in which toughness and pugnacity are privileged attributes. Movember promotes supposedly “universal” ideas about masculine honour and what it means to be a gentleman, but does little to address how these standards can vary or be challenged according to race and class identities. Thus, the purpose of my analysis is not to consider how Movember satisfies particular categories or dichotomies of masculine ideals, nor do I intend to assess if the Mo Bro fulfils the requirements of any version of hegemonic masculinity. Instead, I interrogate how the Movember brand navigates the
contested and complex terrain of masculine norms and practices by making multiple and sometimes conflicting ideas about masculinity intelligible in a number of different contexts.

One of my areas of primary concern, therefore, involves examining the specific language and imagery through which ideas about masculinity are communicated through Movember. My analysis considers how the brand enacts multiple co-existing gender hierarchies that often overlap, shift and contradict each other (albeit not always explicitly or perceived as such). Following my theoretical and methodological commitments to contextualizing and historicizing Movember using the tools of Foucauldian discourse analysis, I conceptualize masculinities as being produced through ways of knowing ourselves and others that connect language, bodies and relations of power. My approach to masculinity as a theoretical concept is grounded in thorough critiques of hegemonic masculinity articulated by Richard Pringle (2005) and Toby Miller (1998) among others. These critiques outline how neo-Gramscian notions of power and hegemony are limited in providing ways to theorize complex masculine subjectivities. I similarly argue that treating hegemonic masculinity as the “default” theory for understanding Movember would also limit how I could account for the discursive connections and inconsistencies that characterize the campaign. A Foucauldian approach to studying masculinities also enables me to consider contradictions and slippages within Movember’s promotional discourse as representing how the movement is continuously framed and re-framed, interpreted and reinterpreted, in a number of different media contexts. My theoretical approach resists looking to fit Movember participants within a pre-determined typology of masculinities or even to categorize different types of Movember participants; rather,
my analysis explains how the Movember brand creates space for particular discussions about masculinity but constrains others. The crucial process that my examination problematizes involves how the brand facilitates the acceptance of these discursive limits and the moments in which the stability of these boundaries are called into question.

The notion that masculinities are enacted during Movember through discontinuous and contradictory processes, however, does not lessen the movement’s connection to broader social relations of power. I will argue throughout this dissertation that the Movember brand operates through an acceptance of a gender binary and makes already entrenched gender hierarchies appear natural and indisputable. Yet this does not mean that I will claim that the discourses that constitute the Movember campaign are entirely hegemonic, nor will I contend that Movember is a counter-hegemonic movement. The campaign does not encourage absolute conformity to dominant understandings of masculinity, but also does not actively promote resistance to overarching power structures. To explain Movember’s relationship to broader social relations, then, I abandon the all-or-nothing models of power and resistance favoured by most theories of hegemonic masculinity (Pringle, 2005; Tomlinson, 1998). Rather, my analysis calls attention to how the discourses that promote “change” and the re-definition of attitudes about health and masculinity throughout the campaign legitimate certain changes as worthwhile while other possible transformations to prevailing gender norms are left unsaid. My dissertation explores how the discourses circulating through the Movember campaign say much about masculinity and how it might be changed; but I am also interested in seeking out the complexities and silences within portrayals of the movement’s participants. A Foucauldian approach to the social construction of
masculinities provides a flexible theory of gender that avoids taking the social implications of masculine (sub)cultures for granted.

Movember has developed its global reach and trendy status during a cultural moment in which masculinity and the societal positions of men are the subject of much scrutiny and debate. Best-selling books with titles such as Are Men Necessary? (Dowd, 2005), The End of Men and the Rise of Women (Rosin, 2012) and Manning Up: How the Rise of Women has Turned Men into Boys (Hymowitz, 2012) represent a line of cultural thought within the past decade whereby the social prominence of men and masculinity is believed to be diminishing, or at the very least, in transition. In Canada, TV Ontario hosted a special cultural issues panel in 2013 about perceived changes to the role of men in Canadian society called Singing the Masculinity Blues (TV Ontario, 2013). That same year, the renowned Munk Debates series at the University of Toronto staged a panel discussion entitled “Gender in the 21st Century” at which speakers were ask to support or refute the statement: “be it resolved men are obsolete” (Munk Debates, 2013). The provocative tone of these accounts of the status of men within this contemporary cultural moment certainly resonate with a well-rehearsed narrative about the recent emergence of a “crisis of masculinity” in places such as Canada and the United States. These discourses of crisis are typically characterized by a perceived decline in masculine influence within typically male-dominated institutions (government, education, and the family), but also anxieties about how the diminishing significance of distinctly masculine qualities is leading to the “feminization” of men (T. Edwards, 2006). Yet historical research has demonstrated how the fears that drive such “crisis of masculinity” narratives are not particularly new and tend to re-emerge at moments in which stereotypical gender
divisions have been questioned or de-stabilized (Connell, 2005; T. Edwards, 2006; Kimmel, 2006); in fact, some historical scholarship traces the so-called “contemporary” crisis of masculinity back over 200 years (Kimmel, 2006). That said, anxieties about the contemporary status of men and masculinity form an important part of the context in which Movember has evolved as a cultural phenomenon. Two particular aspects of this narrative require further elaboration: concerns about a crisis of “men’s health” and the legacy of the metrosexual.

The Movember Foundation promotes its fundraising and awareness efforts as responding to what they describe as the “poor state of men’s health” (Movember Canada, 2013i). Like many other narratives that reference health as a key indicator of a crisis of masculinity, Movember’s promotional material points to a gendered gap in life expectancy whereby, for example, Canadian men live an average of four years less than women. The Movember 2013 “men’s health” web page accounts for this gendered discrepancy by citing men’s lack of awareness and understanding of health issues, their reluctance to talk about health or “take action” when they don’t feel well, and the well-documented tendency for men to engage in risky and dangerous behaviours. Movember’s health-related information also draws links between stigmas around mental health and statistical trends showing that men commit suicide about four times as often as women. Such an understanding of men’s health follows the extensive body of sociological research that seeks to move beyond purely biological and physiological explanations and consider the impact of social structures on health behaviours (Courtenay, 2011; Dumas & Bournival, 2012; Gough & Robertson, 2010; Gough, 2010; Lohan, 2010). Many of the most commonly cited sociological studies about “men’s health” have in some way
explored how socially produced expectations associated with masculinity (especially those relating to strength, toughness and feelings of invulnerability) can foster health-damaging behaviours and lifestyles. Often referring to the “consequences of masculinity” as they pertain to health (Courtenay, 2011), this scholarship frequently advocates for health promotion initiatives that strike a balance between changing individual behaviours and re-defining particular understandings of masculinity. These ideas about the relationship between health behaviours and a specific set of gender norms underlie Movember’s health promotion paradigm.

Yet this school of thought also runs the risk of pathologizing masculinities and masking the complex and often contradictory nature of masculine norms. Many critical studies on gender and health inequalities recognize that a direct link between masculinity and poor health can be complicated by accounting for cultural variations and other notions of identity not limited to race, ethnicity, social class and sexuality (Dumas & Bournival, 2012; Lohan, 2010). To the organization’s credit, Movember’s health “awareness” initiatives gesture toward the importance of cultural context in assessing health-related problems; as stated on the campaign’s “men’s health” web page, “The reasons for the poor state of “men’s health” in Canada and around the world are numerous and complex” (Movember Canada, 2013i). This type of health promotion messaging often begins to unravel, however, when considering how to address the paradox that the very cultural practices that undermine the health of many men are the same behaviours that confer status and prestige on men that best perform these masculine undertakings (Courtenay, 2011). The intricacies of this paradox commonly seep into the way masculinity is spoken about within “men’s health” promotion discourses. Although
seeking to encourage men to make changes to health behaviours and shifting masculine norms as they pertain to health, many health promotion programs directed at men use language and imagery that work to preserve traditional masculine ideals (Gough, 2010). Often mimicking the discursive styles of popular men’s and fashion magazines, scholars such as Brendan Gough (2010) have demonstrated how these programs carefully construct images of the “healthy” and “unhealthy” male subject while taking great care not to undermine other cherished aspects of traditional manhood. Movember’s representation of “men’s health” is indeed situated within a health promotion discourse that has been critiqued for promoting only limited changes to male behaviour within an already narrow conception of masculinity.

The health promotion paradigm within which Movember is situated has also been critiqued by scholars like Gough (2010) for advocating for consumer-based solutions to social problems. Through these health promotion discourses, men are constructed as body-conscious consumers who can improve their wellbeing by investing in a range of health and fitness products while avoiding making significant changes to their masculine identities. Such strategies, I would argue, are only possible given the normalization of self and image-conscious consumption by men, an area of social life that throughout the 1980s and 90s was considered a threat to traditional gender divisions (Mort, 1996). The idea that men’s consumer practices were motivated by concerns about their appearance and informed by contemporary fashion trends instigated cultural anxieties about the inevitable “feminization” of men. Yet at the same time, media discourses proclaiming the arrival of “the new man” worked to legitimize overtly image-conscious, consumer-based lifestyles as acceptable masculine performances.
This tension was intensified when discourses emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s constructing “the metrosexual” as producing a new “crisis of masculinity.” The term metrosexual denotes a heterosexual man that engaged in stereotypically feminine practices thought to be the exclusive domain of women and gay men (Coad, 2008; Ervin, 2011; Kimmel, 2006; Malin, 2005). The metrosexual was well dressed and well groomed, possessed domestic and culinary skills, and engaged in cultural pursuits outside the “manly” realm of sports, “jock rock” or action/adventure films. The metrosexual, however, was undeniably straight and these types of “feminized” consumer and bodily practices were commonly incorporated within a narrative of heterosexual conquest. The discourses that constituted the metrosexual sparked a great deal of resistance (especially among white, working class men), but over time the cultural performances that were once thought to pose legitimate to “authentic” masculinities were normalized as part of the routines of “regular guys” (Ervin, 2011; Kimmel, 2006).

There is very little mention of the metrosexual within the media discourses that constitute the Movember campaign. The campaign’s emergence in the mid-2000s took place as the concept of a “metrosexual revolution” begun fading from cultural relevance. Yet the legacy of the metrosexual and how the concept contributed to widespread changes in the social construction of masculinity is a prominent factor in how the Movember movement has materialized. The normalization of qualities associated with the metrosexual helped cultivate the nature of men’s relationships to brands and consumer products, but more importantly further legitimized heterosexual men’s engagement in personal grooming practices (Ervin, 2011). What’s more, many of the anxieties about the threat of the metrosexual concerned men’s hair, both the excessive
styling of hair but also its removal. As much as body and facial hair serve as longstanding symbols of corporeal masculinity, the metrosexual offered a new ideal embodied by men who could exercise control over their hairy masculine attributes (Cole, 2008). As advertising campaigns and male celebrities embraced this new ideal, the stylized grooming and removal of body and facial hair (as well as the consumption of a variety of personal grooming products) became widely accepted as a staple performance of some middle class masculinities (Ervin, 2011; Kimmel, 2006). The rise of the metrosexual, it should be noted, also coincided with the absence of the moustache from modern fashion (in favour of high maintenance facial hair styles such as the pencil-thin, ultra-chic goatee) and preceded the moustache’s current revival through cultural movements like Movember (Peterkin, 2012). The contemporary trendiness of the moustache cannot be separated from the legacy of the metrosexual and the new understandings of grooming that it heralded. Although different tropes such as the hipster, lad and “lumbersexual” (Willa Brown, 2014; Rhoades, 2014) are more commonly linked with the Movember movement, the legacy of the metrosexual looms large over understandings of the campaign.

“Real” Moustaches

As part of its well-documented origin story, Movember’s promotional material proudly proclaims that the official rules for participation are the same guidelines that governed the inaugural version of the campaign. This list of five rules provide, first and foremost, an explicit declaration of what constitutes the “real moustache” so commonly revered as Movember’s foundational symbol. Re-published every October and circulated
through Movember’s website and social media channels, the campaign’s official rules read at first glance like an innocuous style guide or list of grooming tips:

1. Once registered at Movember.com, each Mo Bro must begin the 1st of Movember with a clean shaven face.
2. For the entire month of Movember, each Mo Bro must grow and groom a moustache.
3. There is to be no joining of the Mo to your side burns. That’s considered a beard.
4. There is to be no joining of the handlebars to your chin. That’s considered a goatee.
5. Each Mo Bro must conduct himself like a true gentleman… (Movember Canada, 2013)

Yet the fifth and final rule, stipulating how each participant should conduct himself like a “true gentleman,” reveals how questions of identity are woven into Movember’s core practices, even as they relate to the “natural” growth of facial hair. These rules imply that growing a Movember moustache comes with a moral obligation to act according to an unspoken code of gentlemanly behaviour. Such a requirement demonstrates how the Movember moustache is clearly more than a natural expression of unhindered and uncontrolled manhood, but is entangled with cultural norms and expectations about hair, the body and identity.

**Denaturalizing the Moustache – Critical Studies of Hair**

Movember is founded on the belief in an unshakeable link between the moustache and masculinity. This common sense notion is neatly encapsulated in moustache expert Allan Peterkin’s primary explanation for “why men will always grow moustaches;” he asserts, “because a moustache is masculine and virile (and studies prove it!)” (2012, p. 9). The idea that the moustache is an inherent and natural embodiment of manhood is woven throughout much of the public discussion about Movember’s popularity. In *New York*
*Magazine*, for example, Charlotte Cowles (2012) declares that Movember’s mission to reclaim the moustache as “something intrinsically masculine” has been an essential part of the movement’s success. *Time* magazine similarly quotes Adam Paul Causgrove, the chairman of the American Moustache Institute (a real organization!), who envisions the moustache as proudly announcing someone’s gender, “Anyone who is wearing a mustache is basically putting across the middle of their face, ‘Here I am, I am a man’” (Causgrove as cited in Waxman, 2013). Meanwhile, in perhaps the most famous viral video associated with Movember, Nick Offerman declares how growing a moustache for Movember is the “manliest journey of your life” (MadeManDotCom, 2012a).

![Figure 3](https://example.com/movember.jpg)

**Figure 3** (MadeManDotCom, 2012a)

The few scholarly analyses of Movember similarly highlight the campaign’s reliance on the perception of a natural link between facial hair and masculinity. Jacobson (2010) describes Movember as drawing on historical understandings of the moustache as
a cultural practice “associated with rank, power and masculinity” (2010, p. 54). More recently, Robert (2013) underscores how “for Movember, great emphasis is placed on the moustache’s power to transform boys into respectable, esteemed men in the heteronormative traditions of virility and fatherhood…” (2013, p. 268). Wasserburg, Oliffe and Han (2014) similarly see the popularization of Movember as relying on the moustache’s symbolic power as “a biological marker of manhood, which distinguishes the adult male from boys and women” (2014, p. 4). That the association between manhood and facial hair is almost universally perceived as a biological truth (studies prove it after all!) makes Movember’s celebration of this link appear natural and common sense. Yet there is a body of academic scholarship that looks to complicate the perceived naturalness of hair and consider how hair is a visible manifestation of the connection between the body and the social world. Not surprisingly, critical studies of facial hair are well-represented within this area of research and point to the moustache as a complex and contextually specific gender performance.

In her book *Hair Matters* (2000), Ingrid Banks traces the history of academic research on hair back to early psychoanalysis and Sigmund Freud, who theorized about the unconscious meanings of hair (namely, how its removal was related to castration anxiety). Several anthropologists and sociologists since Freud have worked to challenge this psychoanalytic interpretation by demonstrating how the meanings behind hair practices are not only rooted in the unconscious, but informed by social norms and cultural values (Cooper, 1971; Hallpike, 1969; Hershman, 1974; Leach, 1958). Following in this tradition, Sociologist Anthony Synnott explores the cultural politics of hair in his book *The Body Social* (1993). Synnott draws on the notion that the body should not be taken
for granted as an exclusively material or biological thing, but should be conceived as a socially constructed category. When turning his attention to hair, Synnott conceptualizes the “tangled profusion and confusion of hair norms” through a theory of opposites. His theory proposes that opposite sexes have opposite hair, head hair and body hair are opposite, and that those with opposing political beliefs often wear different hair styles (p. 104). Accordingly, for Synnott, facial hair should also be understood through the theory of opposites with the male beard functioning as a primary means of distinguishing between the sexes (p. 111). Although initially theorizing hair through a strict binary logic, Synnott complicates this conception by contemplating the ways in which “the same hair can symbolize different realities” in different contexts. This dilemma leads him to ponder how we might imagine hair norms as regulated via shifting cultural processes, to which he then concedes that the search to find stable or natural symbolism in hair may ultimately be in vain (p. 124).

Through his theory of opposites, Synnott represents how dominant societal ideas about hair can be organized into categories that produce understandings of “normal” hair for particular social groups: boy hair should be different than girl hair, for example, and girls can’t grow facial hair like boys can. Yet Synnott’s admitted confusion about the almost infinite variation of hair norms throughout history and across different cultures (and subcultures) points to the limits of relying on a binary system for conceptualizing the meanings associated with hair. A greater attention to contextual and historical factors leads us to consider how overlapping and ever-changing political ideologies and religious doctrine, norms concerning gender, race, class and sexuality, as well as trends in fashion and popular culture, influence how the growth, regulation and stylization of hair (and
facial hair) are interpreted as bodily practices. This point is worth emphasizing to unsettle the strict binary logic that undergirds Movember’s celebration of facial hair as naturally and inherently masculine. The contextual specificity of hair norms and practices makes the connection between the moustache and manhood much more complicated than a common sense gender binary would make it appear.

With the complexities and contradictions of facial hair practices in mind, there is a body of scholarship that I loosely conceptualize as Critical Studies of Hair that very much guides how I theorize the social implications of the Movember moustache. Hair practices are too often conceptualized as individual choices that may be influenced by the surrounding cultural environment, but ultimately come down to personal preference. Yet many critical studies of hair assert that such “choices” are not arbitrary or trivial identity performances, but are mechanisms of social differentiation through which cultural boundaries are enacted and policed (Banks, 2000; Biddle-Perry & Cheang, 2008). Common sense understandings and mundane dialogues about “good” and “normal” hair are informed by complex narratives of difference and identity politics that go beyond aesthetic choices. In many ways, understanding hair is part of the process through which we understand the organization of the social world.

As hair and facial hair contribute to the discursive production of masculinity, the materiality, texture and colour of hair are key aspects of constructing the masculine body (October, 2008; Synnott, 1993). Synnott describes how dark hair is persistently associated with maleness and power whereas fair or blonde hair is considered feminine and somehow less manly than darker shades. Grey hair, Synnott continues, is often dreaded by men as a sign of age and mortality, but can also be considered a mark of distinction.
for older men. These norms around hair colour are, of course, rife with gendered double
standards through which colours seen as “natural” or attractive for men are viewed as
undesirable for women. Similar contradictions exist when considering hair texture and
thickness. Men are thought to covet thick and coarse hair as symbolic of youth in some
cases (i.e. they are not yet going bald), but to confer age and manliness in others (i.e. a
full, thick beard is symbolic of maturing from boyhood to manhood and becoming less
feminine in the process). As I will explain throughout my analysis, thick and dark facial
hair appears to be preferred throughout Movember’s online discourses as most
representative of “real” masculinity. Yet this straightforward reading is complicated by
attention to metrosexual and hipster trends around the grooming of facial and body hair,
as well as how the materiality of hair is read in the context of racialized bodies and racial
stereotypes.

Several scholars have indeed interrogated how perceptions of hair (along with eye
and skin colour) are employed to identify racial and ethnic boundaries (Banks, 2000;
Cheang, 2008; Mercer, 1987, 1994; Shirazi, 2008). Hair is intensely racialized through
descriptors like “wooly” and “nappy” that are derived from colonial histories of slavery
and exploitation, but also anthropological traditions that exoticized hair as a marker of
racial difference. Hair served and continues to serve as a medium through which racial
categories and ideas concerning racialized “others” are constructed and maintained. For
racialized women, hair styles and fashion are negotiated according to white standards of
femininity and beauty, whereby judgements of “good” and “bad” hair favour styles,
colours and textures mostly associated with white bodies. Yet as Banks (2000) writes,
hair styles like the afro or corn-rows have been used in specific political contexts as a
way to subvert codes of “appropriateness” largely informed by oppressive racial and class ideologies.

Beards also hold a long-standing association with rebellion and political radicalism, but the beards worn by some Muslim men are commonly stigmatized as being linked to religious fundamentalism (October, 2008; Shirazi, 2008). Indeed, beards and moustaches are commonly portrayed as epitomizing a racialized version of Muslim masculinity that has been widely vilified in many Western nations throughout the post-9/11 War on Terror (Helly, 2004). Beards (and body hair) are also focal points within many gay male subcultures in ways that go beyond mere stylistic choice. As Cole (2008) writes, the growth or removal of facial and body hair are a fundamental means by which gay men negotiate the tensions between performative expressions of gender and sexuality. Cole then critiques Synnott’s theory of opposites as obscuring how gay men may follow or actively subvert conventional hair practices in constructing subjectivities that defy any straightforward dichotomy. Cole’s argument can be extended to illustrate how hair practices contribute to the production of multiple and overlapping subjectivities shaping and shaped by social constructions of gender, race, religion, politics, ability etc.

My research into the Movember movement is similarly undergirded by a theoretical and political conviction that “hair matters” (Banks, 2000).

But how are social hierarchies enacted when a bunch of (mostly white, mostly young) men grow moustaches to have some good-natured fun in the name of a charitable cause? It would seem, at first glance, that looking for deeper meaning or social significance in the goofy, yet well-intentioned, antics of Mo Bros could be written off as an example of sociological hyperbole, an attempt to make something out of nothing.
After all, the Movember moustache is not thought to be tied to religious affiliations, political ideologies, subcultural identities or cases of racial profiling; Movember is taken up as a mainstream, feel-good movement that holds improving health, raising money and and having a little fun as its primary concerns. How, then, could the Movember moustache be the subject of serious sociological critique?

The answer to this question lies in disrupting popular accounts of Movember’s success and the re-emergence of the moustache as a trendy facial hair style. Dominant narratives about Movember’s popularity affirm that most of the campaign’s participants are secretly curious to know what they would look like with a moustache given the style’s well-documented disappearance from the fashion landscape. One of the virtues of Movember, this narrative proclaims, is that it provides men with the opportunity for this type of aesthetic experimentation otherwise constrained by conversative fashion norms and cultures of corporate professionalism. As Morgan Campbell (2012) writes in the business section of the Toronto Star, “Moustaches have gone out of fashion but Movember provides a chance to combat the idea that certain types of facial hair don’t belong in the workplace.” Peterkin (2012) similarly credits Movember as contributing to the re-legitimization of the moustache as an appropriate facial hair style following the popularity of high maintenance beards like the goatee throughout the 1990s. But Peterkin sees these post-millenial moustaches as taking on a distinct character and calls them PoMo (or postmodern) Mos in reference to the playful, self-awareness exhibited through these contemporary grooming practices. He asserts that the postmodern moustache is worn “with a wink of an eye” and that men sporting these post-millenial moustaches can “actually revel in the ways [their] furry face[s] get misread, ridiculed or fetishized” (p. 8).
Peterkin also attributes the postmodern nature of contemporary facial hair styles to a great number of men realizing that their faces were “blank canvases” and that moustaches represented an opportunity for playful self-expression. For commentators like Peterkin, the complexity and ambiguity of these moustache styles are a marker of post-millenial performances of masculinity that are increasingly self-aware, culture-savvy and, indeed, ironic.

Yet contrary to Peterkin’s claim, the faces and bodies of these men are not “blank canvases,” but are the embodiment of social and political histories that make some grooming practices legitimate displays of masculinity and others unacceptable. The idea that the face is a “blank canvas” erases how bodies are situated within social relations of power and obscures how moustaches are a medium through which hierarchies of bodies (and hierarchies of men) are produced. Instead, Peterkin seems to conceptualize the PoMo Mo as part of the “presentation of self in everyday life” (Goffman, 1959), in which interactions between social actors and a world of spectators are primarily shaped by individual choices between styles and tastes. While some moustaches carry logical or even obvious political significance, the social implications of the Movember moustache (even with all its postmodern panache) should also be recognized. The styles and grooming techniques favoured by the movement make particular bodies and the gender performances they undertake appear normal and more masculine, while others are rendered as inadequate or obscured entirely from view.

“Shave it for Later:” The Rituals and Politics of Shaving

While the majority of Movember’s promotional discourse markets the movement
as an opportunity to grow moustaches for 30 days, this dominant narrative is sometimes accompanied by a misconception that participation in Movember requires men to “stop shaving” for the duration of the campaign. Global News Edmonton titles their segment about the launch of Movember in 2013, “Putting away the razors for Movember,” while the Nanaimo News Bulletin suggests that participants’ “razors were tossed in the trash” at the beginning of November (Cunningham, 2013; Global Edmonton, 2013). The Guardian quotes Movember participant Ben Powers testifying that Movember is “easy to do – you don’t need to go training for it; all you do is stop shaving” (Powers as cited in Jones, 2012). The chorus to Derrick Watts & the Sunday Blues’ Movember-themed parody of the Carly Rae Jepsen hit “Call Me Maybe,” the video for which went viral in 2012 and won Movember’s official video competition the same year, simply proclaims “This Movember, I won’t be shaving!” (Derick Watts & The Sunday Blues, 2012). In addition to these examples that served to define and promote Movember for (social) media audiences, the campaign’s misunderstood relationship with shaving made headlines in January 2014 when consumer goods multinational Procter & Gamble cited Movember as contributing to a noticeable decline in the sale of men’s razors (Associated Press, 2014; J. Neff, 2014; Ziobrio, 2014). In Procter & Gamble’s press release, Chief Financial Officer Jon Moeller blamed contractions in the market for razors on a “reduced incidence of facial shaving, and that was exacerbated by the quarter we were just in because of the prostate-cancer related movement in North America not to shave facial hair in the month of November” (Moeller as cited in J. Neff, 2014).

Procter and Gamble’s claim, along with similar media accounts detailing Movember’s supposed moratorium on shaving, are puzzling given how the cultural
symbolism of the moustache is very much intertwined with shaving as a bodily practice. As Peterkin (2012) writes, there can be “no stache without the razor” and “any history of the moustache naturally implies a parallel history of shaving” (p. 67). In his earlier book *One Thousand Beards* (2001), Peterkin similarly claims that that distinction between moustache and beard styles is determined by the careful selection of what hair can grow and what hair must be shaved (p. 152). In this spirit, the official rules for Movember clearly involve shaving as participants must begin the month clean shaven and confine the growth of their facial hair to the area around the upper lip (Movember Canada, 2013j). Thus, the Movember moustache is a masculine performance that is as much about shaving as it is about the growth of facial hair. Such logic is even intimated in one of the movement’s defining and oft-repeated puns: I *moustache* you a question, but I’ll *shave* it for later!

Dene October’s (2008) discussion of the politics of men’s shaving practices is instructive in disrupting shaving’s status as a taken-for-granted rite of passage and masculine performance. Similar to how critical studies of hair often seek to denaturalize hair and hair norms, October’s work unsettles the perceived naturalness of shaving and reveals how the seemingly mundane practice of shaving facial hair is visibly stylized and highly regulated. Yet the norms governing shaving and facial hair have undergone substantial changes in the last century and, as October argues, mapping the historical transformation of shaving from a public spectacle to domestic routine is crucial for understanding the complex politics bound up in this practice. From the Victorian era through to the early 20th Century, shaving largely took place in the masculine spaces of (also racially segregated) public barbershops. These public spaces were showcases for
what October calls the “spectacle of the cutthroat razor,” whereby the perceived danger associated with the straight razorblade contributed to the barbershop’s macho environment (p. 70-71). Barbershops were similarly spaces of homosocial bonding among men and thought to be safe havens from the perceived threats of feminization largely emanating from the domestic sphere. Not only were barbershops the exclusive domain of men, but the social boundaries constituting this space were also drawn along class lines. Given the expense and idle time that a visit to the barbershop required, a clean-shaven face was for a time an unmistakable symbol of affluence and social status.

Yet public anxieties about the links between facial hair and poor hygiene, as well as the continued development of safer and cheaper razors for personal use, pushed shaving out of the exclusive confines of the barbershop and into the domestic sphere. These changing social norms and technological developments made the shaving of facial hair a more accessible and subsequently more frequent practice for many men (October, 2008; Peterkin, 2012). The arrival of shaving in the home brought with it the challenge of how men could re-establish the masculine values of the barbershop within the feminized domestic sphere. Since the advent of widespread domestic shaving in the early 20th century, shaving practices and their associated realm of consumer products have been involved in ongoing processes of masculinization to both re-assert masculine dominance within the home and legitimize this type of personal grooming as a “manly” practice. The masculinization of domestic shaving was also facilitated by the rush for companies and entrepreneurs (like Procter & Gamble) to establish and maintain a market for personal grooming products for men.

The shift in men’s grooming practices that saw shaving be re-conceptualized as
an everyday domestic routine rather than public spectacle illuminates important theoretical distinctions concerning hair, the body and gender. It is indeed shaving’s very ordinariness that makes the mundane activity a powerful vehicle for the reproduction of gender norms. The repeated and routinized act of daily shaving of facial hair carries a symbolic function through the ongoing practices of “doing gender” (C. West & Zimmerman, 1987). Shaving is something that most men do regularly, if not every day, and acts as a frequent and simple reminder of what it means to be man. Yet the symbolic role of shaving as a gendered practice points to an important epistemological distinction between the ideas that constitute common understandings of facial hair and the processes by which it is removed; in other words, how do we know that a moustache and its associated grooming practices are inherently masculine? How are these processes constructed as “natural” and essential markers of gender? As much of the media discourse surrounding Movember clearly indicates, the obvious answer to this question involves understanding facial hair as a secondary sex characteristic that distinguishes between biological categories of male and female. West and Zimmerman (1987) discuss how facial hair serves as a socially-agreed upon marker of biological difference that defines membership in the male sex category; here, we can draw parallels to Synnott’s theory of opposites and his assertion that beards are understood as a way to distinguish between men from women. But as West and Zimmerman point out, the seemingly “natural” relationship between facial hair and “maleness” relies upon a perceived congruence between this secondary characteristic and the social construction of biological sex. The social function of facial hair to define and contain what counts as a legitimate display of maleness is reflected in the importance of beards and moustaches
for transgendered men through the process of transition and drag kings looking to offer a more “authentic” performance (Erickson-Schroth, 2014; Halberstam, 1998).

Thus, following West and Zimmerman (1987), the biological and often uncontrollable process of growing facial hair is socially constructed as a way to proclaim membership in the male sex category. Yet I argue that the ritualized and stylized removal of this hair is a vivid example of the ongoing activity of “doing gender” and engaging in behaviours that are seen by others as normal and acceptable gender displays. Shaving can be read first and foremost as a civilizing process (Elias, 2000), whereby the removal of facial hair is a way to exercise control over the material body and distance “civilized” and professional men from (often racialized) “primitive” or working class cultures. Shaving is also woven into practices of socialization in which boys and young men are taught facial hair removal skills as a rite of passage into manhood. The shaving ritual itself, however, is also masculinized in interesting ways in specific contexts. Through the 1950s and 60s, electric razors were popularized as a sign of technological progress and a symbol of affluence and the “modern man.” Responding to the popularity of electric razors, stationary safety and cartridge razors were similarly marketed as high-tech devices and fostering an exhilarating shaving experience (Peterkin, 2012). Indeed, this commercial trend continues: throughout the last two decades, it is maddeningly commonplace to see advertisements for razors that liken shaving to piloting a fighter jet or driving a race car. Yet with the recent comeback of traditional wet shaving techniques involving straight and safety razors, men’s magazines and websites are frequently portraying more “modern” devices (especially electric razors) as paradoxically outdated and out of style. In their section specifically dedicated to shaving, for example, men’s lifestyle website The Art of
Manliness calls using an electric razor an act of “sacrilege” and implores men to shave with traditional-style razors like their grandfathers or great grandfathers (supposedly) did (The Art of Manliness, 2014). Therefore, while the growth of facial hair and the perceived need to shave it serves as a culturally sanctioned confirmation of maleness, a short glance at the social history of shaving highlights the production of contextually-specific hierarchies of shaving which, in turn, produce hierarchies of men. These ways of “doing gender” through shaving are mundane, everyday activities that create complex cultural distinctions between men, but through their repetition, ordinariness and connection to the physical body also appear to reinforce the essentialness of gender.

Yet despite the widespread notion that cultural differences around facial hair and shaving are merely superficial manifestations of an essential and “natural” male practice, the social construction of shaving does more than reflect pre-existing biological categories and is indeed part of the cultural production of gender (October, 2008). West and Zimmerman (1987) emphasize that ways of doing gender are not expressions of fixed categories, but cultural processes through which difference between genders are produced and maintained. Even biological sex categories are interpreted according to socially constructed norms and understandings of the “natural” body. While these ideas are certainly communicated in West and Zimmerman’s canonical essay, they are most commonly associated with the work of Judith Butler (1999) and the notion of gender performativity. Butler, like West and Zimmerman, aims to disrupt the supposed primacy of gender and sex categories while conceiving of gender as constituted through actions rather than representing a state of being. As Butler famously writes in Gender Trouble (1999), “identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to
be its results” (p. 25). Butler borrows the dramaturgical language of “performance” favoured by past theorists of identity like Goffman or West and Zimmerman, but re-assigns this vocabulary to conceptualize the production of social norms. For Butler, no identity pre-exists the performances that supposedly express and substantiate fixed or stable gender categories. Thus, despite their biological character, secondary sex characteristics like facial hair should not be taken-for-granted or thought to pre-exist cultural norms; rather, the ways we think about, talk about and experience facial hair are acts that together make gender categories appear coherent and unquestionably “natural.”

Yet I interpret Butler as making a substantial departure from West and Zimmerman in theorizing how understandings of gender can change or be re-conceptualized. West and Zimmerman detail how ways of “doing gender” are very much culturally specific, but maintain that these practices inevitably reinforce ideas about gender essentialism; they argue that although people have many social identities, “we are always women and men – unless we shift into another sex category” (p. 139). Butler, in contrast, advocates for a more fluid conception of gender that can be redefined and subverted. For Butler, the contingency and ambiguity of gender performances means they are always open to interpretations that disrupt and re-constitute the norm; indeed, any notion of “doing gender” makes a theory of “undoing gender” increasingly possible. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that several scholars undertaking critical studies of hair incorporate theories of performativity and identify hair as a means to unsettle the illusion of gender (Biddle-Perry & Cheang, 2008; Cole, 2008). In this way, Synnott’s (1993) “tangled profusion and confusion of hair norms” serves as more than a theoretical challenge, but also an opportunity to denaturalize hair as a marker of stable gender and
sex categories. I follow these scholars and conceptualize the growth and removal of facial hair as gender performances that contribute to the “cultural production of masculinity” in meaningful and often conflicting ways. Employing notions of performativity provides a vocabulary and space for critique through which I can imagine hair as doing more than re-affirming essentialist understandings of gender. As I argue that Movember’s celebration of the natural link between masculinity and facial hair needs to be questioned, it is crucial to recognize the possibility of a counter-politics of hair whereby this connection is not so straightforward.

*The Plight of the Mo Sista: Women’s Involvement in Movember*

Much of Movember’s command over ideas about gender comes from the movement’s capacity to constrain and re-frame counter-narratives that might disrupt the unproblematic conflation of masculinity with biological maleness. The ways in which Mo Sistas are implicated in reproducing the Movember ethos sheds important light on how the campaign constructs narratives about gender and the body. On the 2013 edition of the Movember website, the page dedicated to Mo Sistas was introduced with a graphic reading “Sistas can Mo too.” The page goes on to define a Mo Sista as “a woman who supports the power of the Mo, essentially doing everything a Mo Bro does, except *without the Mo*” (Movember Canada, 2013e, emphasis mine). Official campaign narratives carefully outline the role of the Mo Sista to foster a (perceived) sense of inclusiveness and community that spans across genders. Promotional materials for Movember also portray women as crucial contributors to the campaign’s health-related goals; as stated on the Movember website, “While not expected to grow a moustache, a
Mo Sista can lead by example in other ways by encouraging men to know more about their health.” Similarly, the Movember website praises women for being “traditionally more comfortable when it comes to talking about [health] matters, so they can be great facilitators in supporting the Mo Bros in their life to share their personal journeys with each other, or a health care professional.” (Movember Canada, 2013g). Yet despite the important role that Mo Sistas are invited to play in Movember’s health-related programs, women are always already relegated to supportive or secondary positions within the campaign based on a supposed biological fact: they can’t (and shouldn’t) grow moustaches.

Many Mo Sistas, however, are still shown as embracing the moustache symbol in online images promoted by and associated with Movember. The 2013 Mo Sista page features a photo of a young, blond, conventionally attractive white woman under the subtitle, “the importance of being a Mo Sista.” This woman is shown grinning and holding her index finger across her upper lip to mimic the “real” moustaches grown by Mo Bros. The representation of various types of artificial or stand-in moustaches for women is common throughout Movember’s online discourses; in fact, these types of “fake” moustaches are even encouraged by official Movember spokespeople. When asked for his opinion about “ladies who wear (fake) moustaches to show their support
[for Movember]” during a Reddit Ask Me Anything (AMA) session, Adam Garone replied by highlighting how the campaign “encourage[s] the Mo Sistas and kids to rock a fake mo in support of their Mo Bro” (Garone, 2013). These artificial moustaches take on many forms and display varying degrees of authenticity or realism; but these moustaches are almost always portrayed as inferior or illegitimate compared to the “real moustaches” grown by the “real men” celebrated most fervently by the Movember campaign. In the same way, these “fake” moustaches are not taken up as inherent symbols of masculine strength and virility like those that “naturally” emerge from the male body.

Figure 5 (Movember Canada, 2013g)
Photos of women holding an index finger across their upper lip, like the prototypical image from the Mo Sista page on the Movember 2013 website, are fixtures of the campaign’s social media activities; sometimes the woman’s finger will even be marked with a stylized image of a moustache that has been drawn, stuck or tattooed on. These and other forms of “moustache-enhancement” feature quite prominently within Movember’s promotional discourse. When model Kate Upton was announced as Gillette’s Movember brand ambassador in 2013, she was photographed wearing a stylish evening dress while holding a moustache-on-a-stick in front of her face (CBS News, 2013; Dold, 2013). The Ottawa Citizen Style section published an article under the headline, “Movember - not just for men anymore,” profiling a group of women selling a photo-calendar to raise funds for the campaign. The calendar is designed in a pin-up girl style, and displays images of these young, thin, mostly white women (some in playful or sexualized poses) with “faux mos” made of artificial hair attached to their faces (Ottawa Citizen Staff, 2013). Similarly, Ashley King, a graphic designer (and self-proclaimed “imagination enthusiast”) posted to the Movember Facebook page advertising the sale of photographs depicting her sporting a different style of “fake” moustache for each day of November (A. King, 2013a).

But how are these images of women wearing moustaches situated within Movember’s celebration of the connection between masculinity and facial hair? Do the “fake” moustaches worn by these women make them appear more masculine or disrupt common sense ideas about hair and gender? At first glance, a woman wearing a moustache of any kind might be considered an example of “gender-bending” or cross-dressing that could work to blur the boundaries between acceptable gender performances.
for men and women. Yet I argue that these gender performances actually work to shore up the norms of conventional femininity and feminine attractiveness. Issues of temporality are front and centre in how these unorthodox gender displays are consumed. Much like the campaign’s thirty day schedule places limits on the appropriateness of Movember moustaches and the exaggerated performances of masculinity they represent, the “fake” moustaches worn by Mo Sistas are acceptable simply because they are perceived to be wholly artificial and temporary. These images represent little to no threat to conventional femininity or the masculinization of the moustache because these performances are unquestionably ironic, contrived and for a limited time only. Indeed, some of the women themselves offer comments that preserve their “natural” femininity by highlighting their inability or unwillingness to grow moustaches. Kate Upton, for example, begins her description of the role of Mo Sistas in Movember by expressing her relief that women “[are] not growing moustaches, thank goodness” (Upton in CBS News, 2013). Ashley King similarly explains her fundraising efforts by declaring, “Seeing as I am a lady and lack the ability to grow glorious facial fluff, I decided to put together a set of images to raise money for men’s health issues” (A. King, 2013b). These obviously temporary instances of gender play do not represent cases of gender-ambiguity or androgyny; in spite of their moustaches, these women do not appear masculine or pose any threat to dominant understandings of masculinity. Rather, the clear playfulness and artificiality of these performances provide a guarantee that these women will quickly return to embodying conventional norms of femininity and heterosexual attractiveness once Movember concludes.
These images of mustachioed women, of course, are also thought to be non-threatening to dominant gender norms simply because their facial hair isn’t “real;” these moustaches are simulations, and oftentimes, not very convincing ones. Yet these imitations of facial hair can be juxtaposed with media accounts of women growing actual facial hair to lend their support to Movember. In 2012, a 36-year-old woman from Northern England named Siobhan Fletcher was profiled in several news stories as growing a beard in the spirit of Movember (Cannon, 2012; Dolak, 2012). In 2013, 29-year-old Sarah O’Neill of Hull, England received similar publicity for letting her moustache grow throughout Movember (Huffington Post Staff, 2013; Kirkova, 2013).

While Fletcher and O’Neill were frequently praised for their confidence, charitable spirit and “overall awesomeness” (Huffington Post Staff, 2013), these narratives also stressed that their facial hair growth was a result of a hormonal condition called Polycystic Ovary Syndrome. Thus, despite the positive tone of the coverage, the medicalized portrayals of both women construct their facial hair and bodies as biological anomalies. The sensationalist coverage harkens back to the oppressive spectacle of “bearded ladies” as part of many 18th and 19th Century circus sideshows (Peterkin, 2001) – although the headline accompanying a story about Fletcher detailing “the bravery of the bearded lady” makes this connection much more explicit (Cannon, 2012). The facial hair grown by these women may be perceived as more “authentic” than the “fake” moustaches worn by Upton and her contemporaries, but the media narratives surrounding these bodily practices possess important similarities. These media accounts of female facial hair of both types portray the adoption or mimicry of a male trait by women is momentarily acceptable as long as it is confined to November and does not stray beyond the well-
defined boundaries of the Movember event. Once the campaign is over, however, it is paramount for these women to resume the conventional facial hair removal regimes and return to being objects of the male gaze. While their physical growth of facial hair may rival many Mo Bros, these women cannot claim to have “real” moustaches because “real” moustaches are assumed to be the exclusive property of male bodies. Thus, the facial hair grown by Fletcher and O’Neill does not represent masculine strength, virility and power in the Movember tradition; instead, these discourses reproduce a conception of facial hair as an “unnatural” abnormality for female bodies and reaffirm women’s year-round obligation to keep their faces youthful, clean and hairless.

These brief and contained imitations of maleness draw more attention to the supposed fixity of normative (hairless) femininity than they serve as performances of a subversive femininity or female masculinity that blur gender binaries (cf. Halberstam, 1998). The discourse through which women’s facial hair is constructed as abnormal or unnatural reinforces how female hairlessness is taken-for-granted. These types of media narratives also overlook the differences in hair norms and practices across racial, ethnic and class categories, and reassert the dominance of a white, middle class femininity. Movember’s preferred vision of the feminine body is one identifiable by the lack of visible facial hair, and the absence of dark, thick and coarse hair on women’s faces is thought to be “just the way it is.” This conceptualization of the female body further obscures from public consideration the host of hair removal practices undertaken by women. Meanwhile, male shaving practices are publically celebrated as inherent manifestations of the male body as a site of masculine strength and power. In this way, Movember does not fulfill the promise of hair as a performative vehicle to destabilize
gender norms; instead, the campaign re-cements the idea that facial hair is exclusive to men and male bodies and, by extension, binds masculinity and its associated privileges to those who identify as men.

“Real” Outcomes

Movember is organized around the broad goal of “changing the face of men’s health.” Yet the campaign also identifies more specific health-related outcomes through its promotional material that provide a better sense of what the Movember movement has been able to achieve. The Movember Foundation funds several research and advocacy programs that contribute to the charity’s public image and branding strategies. In partnership with Prostate Cancer Canada, the Movember Foundation launched A Survivorship Action Plan (ASAP) in 2012, a program designed to provide services for those living with and being treated for prostate cancer (Movember Foundation, 2012a). Movember funds also helped establish the Canadian Men’s Health Network (CMHN) in 2012, a working group comprised of “a panel of key men’s health experts from across the country” that serve as advisors to Movember Canada (Movember Canada, 2013d) (the CMHN has since been folded into Movember’s broader advocacy and education advisory programs). The major research arm of the Movember Foundation is the Global Action Plan (GAP), an international collaboration of medical and bio-scientific researchers working on projects related to “men’s health.” The GAP is facilitated through Promoveo, an online collaboration platform that the Foundation describes as “a bit like LinkedIn,” but custom built for the prostate and testicular cancer research community (Movember Canada, 2013e; Movember Foundation, 2015b). The Movember Foundation has also
funded and initiated programs related to mental health “awareness” and global programs specifically aiming to improve the quality of life of men diagnosed with prostate cancer and their caregivers (Movember Foundation, 2015b).

In addition to its involvement in formal research and advocacy programs, Movember’s “awareness” and education initiatives are shown to culminate in changes to men’s health-related attitudes and behaviours. I discuss the intricacies of this health discourse more thoroughly in Chapter Eight. Yet the key aspect of the Movember brand that emerges from its “awareness” goals is the campaign’s ability to generate “conversations” between men about their health. In fact, the “real outcomes” portion of the slogan around which I have organized this chapter is sometimes replaced with “real conversations.” I am not, however, interested in conversation as an “outcome” of the campaign, but am rather concerned with how meanings associated with masculinity, facial hair and health shape the interactions that can occur through the Movember brand. In other words, I am not necessarily interested in the “outcomes” of Movember and how effective the campaign is in achieving them. I will not be measuring the effectiveness of the Foundation’s research programs or seeking to verify how many conversations about health truly happen as a result of the movement’s “awareness” initiatives. Rather, I contextualize the process whereby these outcomes and other aspects of the brand are articulated through Movember’s promotional narratives and are entangled with broader social norms. This approach, as I have outlined thus far, creates opportunities to interrogate how the Movember brand influences ideas about gender, activism and social change.
Chapter 4

Selling the Moustache: Movember as Brand(ed) Activism

At first glance, the Movember brand is built around a simple premise: growing facial hair for a good cause. Movember USA Chief Operating Officer Jason Hincks firmly defines the focus of the Movember campaign by asserting, “We have one product, and that’s the moustache” (Hincks, as cited in Cowles, 2012). In previous chapters I have discussed how cultural and biological understandings of manliness are cultivated in and through the moustache; yet the ways in which the moustache and its associated values are packaged as a recognizable brand also produces complex relationships between Movember and its legions of participants. This process begins, most notably, with Movember’s annual launch of a new theme for each edition of the campaign. Since 2010, Movember has introduced a new logo, colour scheme and slogan that gives the campaign a new look each year. The brand’s design makeover is also about establishing new values and attitudes for the campaign; as business journalist Alicia Adroich writes, “Each year, Movember switches up its mojo” (Androich, 2013). Adam Garone similarly affirms that reinventing the Movember brand every year is an attempt to confront the challenge of maintaining the trendiness and cultural relevance of the campaign and the moustache more broadly (Garone, as cited in Vizard, 2013a). Several design bloggers and marketing writers concur that Movember’s tradition of unveiling a new theme each year keeps the movement fresh and culturally significant, while fostering interactivity and building anticipation for each subsequent campaign (Androich, 2013; Beltrone, 2012, 2013; Lundgaard, 2013; Vizard, 2013a).
In 2010 and 2011, the Movember theme was envisioned as paying tribute to “different types of gentlemen” (Vizard, 2013a). The 2010 edition of Movember was constructed around portrayals of what the campaign’s official narratives called, “The Modern Gentleman.” Promotional material prominently featured images of well-groomed mustachioed men in fashionable clothes (often suits, dressy shirts and ties) photographed in lavish surroundings emphasizing style and luxury. The 2011 incarnation of Movember, known as the year of the “Country Gentleman,” was characterized by a blue-collar aesthetic built around masculine visions of work, sports and the outdoors. The 2011 campaign was sold using representations of men dressed in trendy adaptations of wilderness apparel (plaid shirts, jeans, and work boots) and engaged in various outdoor activities like hunting, building fires and chopping wood. In the image of the “Country Gentleman,” Movember’s 2011 campaign very much foreshadowed the “lumbersexual” style that would emerge as a widespread fashion trend a few years later (Willa Brown, 2014; Rhoades, 2014).

As explained by a 2012 Movember press release, the Modern and Country Gentleman themes could be imagined together as exploring some common ground between upper and working class sensibilities: “Over the past two years, Movember has paid homage to the Modern Gentleman and Country Gentleman, exploring his appreciation and penchant for luxury items, etiquette, craftsmanship, pride and honour” (Movember Canada, 2012d). The images of the fashionable, affluent man-about-town and the rustic but equally well-groomed woodsman are tied to a set of admirable values promoted as exemplary markers of masculinity; but these performances are also strikingly stylized in ways that construct the moustache as requiring appropriate attire and
accessories. These stylish themes, and the important ways in which they support
dominant understandings of gender, race and social class (ideas that I will examine in
further detail later on), further underscore the notion that there are some “universal”
masculine values that transcend identities and can be readily and unproblematically
expressed through trendy consumption.

The two editions of the campaign that served as the primary starting points for my
research, however, were “Movember & Sons” from 2012 and 2013’s “Generation
Moustache” or “Gen Mo.” The Movember & Sons theme revolved around the concept of
the father-son relationship. The theme is built upon ideas about the importance of
patriarchal lineage and tradition, while mobilizing these sentimental notions to encourage
men to share knowledge and wisdom with other men. As Robert (2013) argues in her
analysis of the Movember & Sons theme, the onset of facial hair growth in puberty
represents a rite of passage through which fathers can confer practical knowledge about
grooming and self-care to their sons. Robert envisions the Movember moustache as a
symbolic opportunity for sons to demonstrate that they can follow in the footsteps of their
fathers and become prosperous, virile and masculine men in their own right. The
moustache, then, becomes a metaphor for the campaign’s health promotion strategies.
Just like the father will dutifully pass on wisdom about facial hair and shaving to his son,
the elder statesman should transfer knowledge about his family’s health history to
younger generations (Movember Canada, 2012d). The “& Sons” addendum references
the popular naming convention of family businesses and notions of apprenticeship and
inheritance as filtered through the lens of commercial capitalism. As illustrated by one of
the slogans for the 2012 campaign, “Purveyors of Knowledge and Fine Moustaches,” the
Mo Bro is constructed as demonstrating his masculine fortitude by providing information and wisdom to other men in addition to growing an impressive moustache; in the context of Movember & Sons, this manly business is imagined using the language of production and consumption (Robert, 2013). Through the Movember & Sons theme, Robert concludes, manhood is upheld as an unequaled ideal that is actualized through financial success, the transfer of knowledge from father to son, and the growth of a well-groomed moustache. While the promotional imagery of the Movember & Sons theme draws on serious or sentimental ideas concerning family and patriarchal tradition, the apparent nod to folk-rock hit-makers Mumford & Sons puts a contemporary, pop culture twist on the campaign’s more earnest approach.

Figure 6 (Movember Foundation, 2012b)

The following year, Movember ventured even further into the culture of popular music with its “Gen Mo” theme. Gen Mo was inspired by the rebellious spirit of rock
music and took its name from the mid-90s tendency for demographers to classify successive generations of people with vague one-letter labels such as Generation X or Y (Androich, 2013; Beltrone, 2013; Gosling, 2013). Gen Mo featured a monochrome palette and stylized images of snakes and wolves reminiscent of a countless number of rock band logos or tattoos. In this way, the Gen Mo style combines the images of rebellion commonly associated with rock music subcultures and facial hair. Long hair and beards have since the 1960s been linked to the often loud and defiant sounds of the rock and heavy metal genres, while co-existing as symbols of anti-establishment or anti-materialist values (Peterkin, 2001; Synnott, 1993). Through Gen Mo, Movember appropriates the images and aesthetic values representative of these histories, but re-fashions them to fit the goals of the Movember brand. Thus, the moustache and the campaign’s snake and wolf logos, stand in as symbols of rock and roll’s rebellious spirit; but these images are also branded as enacting a bold and defiant performance of masculinity that thrives on change and upheaval. When Movember Canada posted the campaign rules to its Facebook page in late October of 2013, the Gen Mo wolf logo was accompanied by the caption “Moustaches with a Cause,” a phrase that undoubtedly plays off the classic James Dean film Rebel Without a Cause (1955). The Gen Mo theme is subsequently marketed as channelling this rebellious attitude in the name of Movember’s mission to facilitate changes to men’s health behaviours and transform the poor state of “men’s health” (Androich, 2013; Beltrone, 2013; Market Wired, 2013; Vizard, 2013a).
These re-branding efforts are frequently praised for keeping the campaign fresh and innovative. Yet journalists are also sure to emphasize that despite Movember’s annual “visual refresh,” the movement’s underlying brand platform and its core values, practices and reason for being remains consistent from year to year. How Movember attempts to strike the delicate balance between novelty and consistency, then, raises questions about the implications of these branding practices for the campaign’s supporters. How does the brand define consumption and participation and how does this change from year to year? What does the brand ask Mo Bros and Mo Sistas to do and how do participants discern the requirements and limits of their involvement? Or in
marketing parlance, how does the brand encourage interactivity and consumer engagement while still shaping the narrative and staying on message?

The purpose of this chapter is to peel back the multiple layers of the Movember brand and situate the campaign within contemporary consumer cultures. Through this analysis, I propose *brand(ed) activism* as a concept that helps convey how Movember is different from other types of commercialized philanthropy. I argue that Movember represents something distinct from other forms of commodity activism in that it strongly reflects, and contributes to, a consumer culture organized around brands rather than products, while also engaging the body as a central aspect of the campaign’s promotional strategies. I make this argument by first providing a brief overview of important scholarship on brands in the context of philanthropy. I then describe how I envision brand(ed) activism as occurring through Movember and elaborate on my departures from past academic work on the realm of commercialized philanthropy. I conclude this chapter by outlining how brand(ed) activism takes place in online environments and consider the role of the selfie in Movember’s branding practices. This chapter highlights how Movember’s contribution to flexible, open-ended expressions of masculinity in the context of charity is largely constrained by the campaign’s need to extract an ongoing supply of brand value from these performances.

**Mapping the Philanthropic Landscape: Charity and Consumer Culture**

Some scholars have sought to understand how the Movember brand functions according to the specific best practices of health promotion and health communication (Robert, 2013; Wasserburg et al., 2014). I examine the movement, however, as situated
within the broader consumer cultures through which Movember competes for capital and relevance alongside other popular consumer trends. I conceptualize Movember first and foremost as a marketing campaign that promotes ideas, images and information that materialize as a recognizable brand. The ways in which Movember’s portrayals of masculinity are tied to broader consumer cultures reflect how most charities and non-profits are organized as brands competing for media attention and consumer dollars (S. King, 2006; Lury, 2004; Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). Movember epitomizes the contemporary marriage of brands and philanthropy through which social activism is increasingly enacted through the lens of commercialized consumption and popular culture (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012; Richey & Ponte, 2011). Most importantly, the emergence of a culture of charity largely defined by individual consumerism works to legitimate Movember’s reliance on the consumption of products and online media as the campaign’s primary “awareness” and fundraising strategies.

Cultural theorists have given considerable attention to the commodification of philanthropy and social activism. The growth of scholarship in this area has led to a proliferation of terminology to describe the processes through which consumption is legitimized as a vehicle for social change. This logic emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as a business practice commonly referred to as cause-related marketing, most notably critiqued by Samantha King (2006) in her work on the ubiquitous pink ribbon campaigns for breast cancer. Richey and Ponte (2011) similarly consider Product RED merchandise and marketing campaigns for international aid and development as manifestations of what they call causumerism or brand aid. In the context of cause-related marketing and brand aid, contributing to a social or charitable cause helps companies attract the loyalty
of consumers or, in other words, “aid the brand” achieve distinction and market share. Other authors have placed more emphasis on the role of consumers in further version of “philanthrocapitalism” (Edwards, 2008, as cited in Richey & Ponte, 2011). Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) use the concept of commodity activism to explain the trend toward imagining social action as defined through the purchase of consumer products. Lewis and Potter (2011) outline a comparable shift in the nature of consumer politics through the term ethical consumption. For Lewis and Potter, ethical consumption represents attempts both to critique consumer cultures and “change the world” by simply shopping better.

These concepts are by no means interchangeable with each accounting for the complexities of specific manifestations of the relationship between “doing good” and “shopping well.” Yet despite the intricacies of each concept, they share three important tenets that work across these distinct contexts. First, this group of authors theorizes the commercialization of philanthropy and activism as representative of and contributing to the current neoliberal moment, in which culture and identity is increasingly defined in economic terms. These concepts each articulate how socially-conscious consumer practices emphasize individual rather than collective action that can be most readily achieved through the logic of the free market and corporate profits. Second, each theory represents a version of social activism that is conceived through the actions of citizen-consumers. The marriage of social progress to shopping is founded upon the belief that consumers can build civic pride and cultural identities through their consumption practices. These citizen-consumers are envisioned as informed and reflexive, but their agency is seen as primarily expressed through individual acts of consumption rather than
politicized collective action. Finally, these concepts explain how modes of consumer-citizenship are both enabling and constraining in terms of producing solutions to complex social problems. Commodified activism indeed fosters potential for a degree of change to dominant social and institutional forces. These transformations, however, occur according to the logics of neoliberalism that often work to commodify cultural identities and reproduce social inequalities.

These are the fundamental ideas through which I situate Movember within consumer culture and they form an important foundation for my analysis of the cultural politics that emerge through the Movember brand. I especially draw on King’s work on the culture of pink ribbon philanthropy to illustrate how Movember fits into the broader context of commodity activism. As I write in my account of the movement’s origin story, the founding of Movember was very much inspired by and in response to the popularity of the pink ribbon campaigns. As detailed in King’s work, the culture of breast cancer philanthropy is organized around the pink ribbon as a marketable symbol of white, middle-class femininity. The normative femininity associated with the pink ribbon is produced, of course, through the campaign’s stereotypically feminine colour scheme and style, but also through vividly enacting the association of women with shopping. Movember’s relationship with consumer culture requires challenging gendered stereotypes about consumption that have, at times, made minimal or utilitarian consumption a hallmark of traditional (and especially working class) masculinities. Longstanding ideas about masculine practicality, reason and stoicism are often linked to consumption practices that demonstrate little concern for the cultural meanings attributed to these products (i.e. men only buy “what they need”) (Mort, 1996; Nixon, 1996). Yet as
exemplified through the normalization of practices associated with the metrosexual trope, self-conscious or superficial consumer choices are no longer disregarded as inherently feminine behaviours but are part of the shifting boundaries of masculinity materializing through culturally-specific styles and practices. In the context of Movember, masculinity is performed through a variety of consumption and bodily practices undertaken within the campaign’s multi-layered brand environment.

Movember as Brand(ed) Activism

My conception of the Movember brand represents a substantial departure from established literature on commercialized philanthropy because I highlight how the campaign’s engagement with consumer culture is about more than the choice between and possession of commodities. Instead, as I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, Movember looks to facilitate and create space for particular experiences and feelings associated with the brand (Arvidsson, 2005; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Baudrillard, 1998; Lury, 2004). Contemporary brand managers often seek to tap into the ethos of an historical moment or subculture then work to portray the consumption of specific products, events or media as ways to personify these ideas. The consumer is less concerned with what it means to buy and use products, but is encouraged to find ways to experience the emotional states and embody the attitudes associated with a particular brand. The purchase of commodities, then, is only one of many activities through which a consumer can perform a brand and its core values. Effective brands facilitate meaning-making activities that go beyond owning or using a product and seep into a consumer’s everyday experiences (Arvidsson, 2005; Lash & Lury, 2007).
I argue that the Movember brand facilitates the performance of a number of connected practices that sometimes, but not primarily, involve the purchase of branded commodities. The media discourses that comprise the Movember brand revolve around the growth of a moustache, but also connect this grooming practice to a number of stylized and mediatized performances of masculinity that draw on a tongue-and-cheek relationship with facial hair and popular culture. To faithfully perform Movember’s distinct ironic style and value system indeed requires more than just a moustache. In addition to the grooming practices for maintaining a moustache in line with Movember’s campaign rules, the Movember brand invites supporters to purchase a variety of commercial goods, but also maintain a month-long body project while participating in a number of philanthropic events and online activities. Thus, engaging with the Movember brand requires growing and grooming a moustache, but also might involve perusing the latest grooming tips posted online and buying haircare products recommended by style experts. A participant’s contribution to Movember might include purchasing any number of official branded products with some proceeds supporting the Movember Foundation, but also creating, disseminating or consuming online videos and images related to the campaign. These overlapping practices are fostered through Movember’s far-reaching brand environment that facilitates complex, multi-platform experiences of being a Mo Bro.

My analysis, therefore, works through the distinction that the Movember brand is less about “having” and more about “doing” (Lash & Lury, 2007; Lury, 2004). The values associated with Movember are performed through a variety of cultural practices that are connected through the campaign’s recognizable style and imagery but are not
limited to the purchase of branded products. The Movember brand is performed in multiple ways that encourage a degree of agency for its participants. Mo Bros are invited to be creative with their preferred moustache style and accompanying fashion choices, while supporters are similarly encouraged to create their own Movember-themed content and engage with the brand through the campaign’s online portals. These moments of interactivity are left open-ended but are constrained by the confines of the multi-platform brand environment. Both the online and offline activities undertaken by Movember participants are situated within cultural boundaries that strongly resist certain performances, but playfully invite choices between a range of others (Arvidsson, 2005; Lury, 2004; D. P. Marshall, 2002). Movember very much echoes what Arvidsson (2005), borrowing from Žižek (1999), calls the credo of contemporary brand management: the brand does not call out “You Must” but “You May.” In this spirit, the Movember moustache is not an object to possess or even display, but an interactive medium that encourages creativity and enables a number of communicative possibilities that makes the brand visible across its multiple platforms. The Movember brand still governs the practices of participants but does so by managing the limits within which their agency can be exercised and by providing the raw materials from which their engagement with the brand can be constructed (Arvidsson, 2005).

Although my analysis draws on a range of theoretical concepts used to describe the connections between social activism and consumer culture, I argue that Movember represents a distinct trend that I call brand(ed) activism. The concept of brand(ed) activism is intended to unsettle the centrality of material commodities in understandings of philanthropy, while emphasizing the multiple, overlapping ways in which brands
circulate in association with a charitable cause. By defining brand(ed) activism as distinct from other modes of philanthropy, I am focusing primarily on charitable campaigns such as Movember that operate as recognizable brands within a consumer marketplace. This process is different, I contend, than the ways in which companies might engage in cause-related marketing or corporate social responsibility practices. I use the term brand(ed) activism to illustrate how the fundraising and “awareness” initiatives promoted through the Movember brand are not exclusively fixed to static commodities, official promotional materials or one-off (mega-)events. Rather, the brand is enacted in and through everyday performances of Movember’s ironic masculine attitudes across multiple cultural environments.

The term brand(ed) activism is meant to draw attention to the two conceptual distinctions I am proposing through my analysis of Movember. The first involves undertaking analyses of commercialized philanthropy that consider the shift from the sale of static commodities to the production of flexible brands designed to cultivate a variety of feelings and experiences. The second emphasizes how the bodies and everyday practices of those participating in charitable movements are themselves commodified and sold to the public as branded representations of the campaign’s core values. In other words, charitable campaigns such as Movember are recognizable brands and their participants become branded through the commodification of their philanthropic activities. My choice to employ new terminology is not to suggest that past writing on this topic has not engaged with these two trends. Yet by naming Movember as an example of new or distinct developments in the nature of philanthropy, I seek to shed more light on how these changes have been in conversation with broader shifts in the
mechanisms of consumer culture. I propose brand(ed) activism as a conceptual tool to highlight how charities can operate as recognizable brands that materialize across bodies, objects and multiple interactive media platforms. The remainder of this chapter addresses these two arguments separately, yet explains how they work together to produce a nuanced understanding of the Movember brand and brand(ed) activism more generally.

Commodities to Brands: Moustaches, Fashion and Indirect Consumption

The shift from consumer cultures revolving around the purchase of commodities to the experience of brands has been a focus of some past scholarship regarding the commercialization of philanthropy. When defining commodity activism, Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) write that the “commodity” in question is not always a tangible product, but often intangible values that are increasingly being sold as a measure of conspicuous consumption. In the realm of commodity activism, feelings of civic and moral responsibility are attached to brands and consumption is promoted as a way to experience a sense of community and “doing good.” Yet through my research into Movember, I explore the multiple ways citizen-consumers can be produced through brand activities even under the umbrella of a single charitable movement. Even as the forces of neoliberalism discipline consumer practices and construct individual consumption as the path to social change, these activities are not inevitable or predetermined. I propose brand(ed) activism as a means to analyze how brands such as Movember are designed to create multiple overlapping and sometimes contradictory ways to create value in the philanthropic marketplace and distinguish themselves from other charities or social causes. Consumers are invited to act as bricoleurs, not blindly
conforming to a brand identity but piecing together a relationship with the brand from the collection of raw materials made available through consumer and popular culture. Through brand(ed) activism, experiences of philanthropy and social change are tied to specific consumption practices, but also allow for play and creativity within the limits of the particular brand environment.

As Movember is largely dominated by young, white middle-class men, the movement has been able to attract support from brands targeting that lucrative demographic (Cowles, 2012; Jacobson, 2010). Jacobson (2010) explains how the launch of Movember in Canada involved very few official sponsors (only four in 2009) and a small amount of official merchandise for sale. As the campaign expanded and gained greater mainstream popularity, however, corporate support grew steadily. Jacobson describes how the moustache and its association with masculinity allowed for companies that traditionally market directly to men to make links between their products and the early incarnations of the Movember brand. Most of the official sponsors or “friends of Movember” involved in the editions of the campaign on which I focused also promoted thematic connections between their brand and Movember’s ironic take on the moustache. These instances of collaboration are most commonly classic examples of cause-related marketing: well-known companies enhance their corporate image by producing and selling branded Movember products with the proceeds being donated to the Movember Foundation. Some companies chose to capitalize on Movember’s emphasis on grooming and men’s fashion (Gillette, Speedstick, 7 for All Mankind denim, Frank & Oak Menswear, Links of London). Others mobilize the Movember brand to promote their product as channeling stereotypical masculine lifestyles or values (Sherwood hockey
sticks, Harley Davidson motorcycles, Roots of Fight clothing, Chunky Soup). TOMS, famous for their promotion of ethical consumption through their donation of shoes to children in need, sold limited edition Movember footwear as part of a thematic marketing campaign. The TOMS campaign drew on Movember’s construction of the Mo Bro as stylish and trendy, but the association with another charitable movement also fit into the reputation of TOMS as a brand that markets to the ethical or compassionate inclination of consumers. In addition to selling branded merchandise, many of these companies also produced slick and often humorous advertisements or online videos to promote their involvement with Movember and encourage viewers to donate.

Yet Movember’s promotional material strongly asserts the movement’s “grassroots” status, while openly resisting the trend toward hyper-commercialization that is a source of many public critiques of breast cancer marketing (S. King, 2006; Klawiter, 2013).
As Movember USA director Mark Hedstrom told the New York Times in 2013, “We look to limit as best we can the number of products that are out there with the Movember logo on it. The point is participation and what we see as a big opportunity for us is our [corporate] partners speaking to their audience about Movember” (Hedstrom, as cited in Newman, 2013). The promotional emphasis on participation and conversations fosters a relationship between the campaign’s participants and corporate partners that goes beyond the production and consumption of branded Movember commodities.

Movember is marketed as a fundraising and “awareness” campaign that is not limited to the hyper-commercialized commodity-based philanthropy commonly associated with pink ribbon campaigns. This doesn’t mean, of course, that the movement avoids any sort of reliance on the workings of consumer culture. Rather, the campaign’s promotional strategies are indeed tied to the purchase of branded Movember products, but are even more dependent on the production and consumption of online user-generated content and an assortment of “indirect” consumer practices.

As I described in Chapter Two, engaging with the Movember brand requires the consumption of a wide variety of media. This might include the vast array of official and user-generated videos, pictures and memes shared across the movement’s social media platforms. In fact, Movember possesses a type of “memability,” whereby the moustache can be easily replicated, re-made or re-contextualized in creative ways without losing its association with the campaign’s central values. The ways in
which the moustache is so easily re-packaged allows participants to simultaneously express both their individuality and connection to a community of Movember supporters (Robert, 2013; Shifman, 2014). Yet given the intertextual references to celebrities and popular culture that comprise much of Movember’s online content, participants also require a great deal of cultural knowledge to meaningfully interact with the campaign’s ironic brand. The moustache-related jokes, allusions and witty phrases constitute a way of speaking that is very much grounded in some degree of familiarity with mainstream Western popular culture. Many Movember participants will easily recognize the references to these celebrities and iconic popular culture artefacts. As I explain in more detail in Chapter Five and Six, a participant’s ability to identify these intertextual citations, however, could be greatly influenced by their age, gender, race, nationality and access to media. Yet historicizing these iconic moments in popular culture and linking them to particular fashion trends is certainly meant to be part of the fun.

In a similar vein, producing and marketing the image of the stylish, fashion-forward Mo Bro is indeed a key part of Movember’s brand strategies. As I described in the introduction to this chapter, the theme for each subsequent edition of Movember is crafted around a carefully styled look related to contemporary fashion trends. As reflected in the campaign’s origin story, Movember was first and foremost portrayed as a movement to legitimize the moustache as a fashionable grooming practice for (predominantly white, middle-class) men. Adam Garone is often quoted as describing how a moustache can contribute to a man’s sense of style and help cultivate a “highly stylish, gentlemanly look” (Garone as cited in Lyon, 2012). Gillette’s slogan for their 2013 Movember promotional material assured Mo Bros that they should use the
company’s products to carefully groom their moustache and “look good while doing good” (Kukura, 2013). The fashion statement accompanying the campaign’s annual refresh is part of what makes Movember a trendy movement, even if this statement is promoted as a humorous or ironic one. Though the moustache may once have been interpreted as resisting or disrupting contemporary fashion norms, the gradual resurgence of the moustache has shaped, while being shaped by, the portrayal of the Mo Bro as someone who is always in touch with what is stylish or on trend.

The reputation of Movember as a fashionable movement encourages a variety of indirect consumption practices involving commodities other than those branded with the official Movember logo. The shaving, trimming and waxing practices that allow Mo Bros to maintain a “stylish and gentlemanly look” require a combination of products that circulate within the consumer culture around men’s grooming. These might include razors, shaving creams and moustache waxes, brushes and combs, and a variety of other washes, shampoos and ointments. Moreover, these consumption practices are situated alongside broader conceptions of men’s fashion that put grooming rituals in conversation with other stylistic choices regarding clothing, accessories and electronics. This type of fashionable consumption is reflected through Movember’s roster of official sponsors, but Movember’s sense of style is perpetuated and informed by the everyday consumption of commodities that are promoted as trendy yet manly. It is not surprising, then, that blogs and websites that champion stylized facial hair grooming as a legitimate expression of masculinity – such as *The Art of Manliness*, *Ask Men* and *How to Grow a Moustache* – are also online hubs for men to seek advice about cultivating a “gentlemanly style.” In addition to providing a series of grooming and shaving tips, these websites also display
the latest in trendy clothing, shoes, bags and other accessories, while instructing readers how to properly combine these fashion items to fit their look. In fact, *How to Grow a Moustache*, goes as far as posting a special entry about “matching your facial fur to your look,” in which moustaches are discussed as requiring different fashion choices than bearded or clean-shaven faces (Smythe, 2014). Indeed, Movember’s trendiness is tied to a sense of style that can be actualized year round through the purchase of commodities that do not feature the Movember logo and are in no ways directly connected with the movement, philanthropy or “men’s health.”

As I worked on this dissertation, however, I observed the emergence of a similar mode of indirect consumption through the development of a kitsch industry surrounding the moustache. As Movember has gained popularity alongside the moustache’s return to cultural relevance, a growing number of kitsch items can be found on the shelves of mainstream retailers and available through online shops. These products include clothing, jewelry and fashion accessories featuring a moustache logo and pattern, but also stationary, housewares and novelty objects such as drinking straws, ice cube trays and baby soothers. This phenomenon also involves the sale of artificial or costume moustaches that appear in scenarios ranging from self-serve photo booths at weddings to retro-themed parties to everyday social media photo streams. As I conducted this research and was on the lookout for evidence of the commodification of the moustache, it was common for me to encounter entire sections of moustache-related merchandise in mainstream bookstores or trendy retail shops. While exploring Movember’s online networks, I also came across multiple Pinterest and Etsy sites, as well as numerous “Best Of” lists, exclusively dedicated to moustache-related kitsch.
Kitsch is traditionally conceived as a domain of consumer goods often defined by their inferior quality and association with bad taste (Arning, 2009). Kitsch items become fashionable mainly because consumers are expected to know that these products are tacky, outdated and without any sort of artistic sensibility. Kitsch is designed to be read as a super-abundance of superficial signs that leave little room for nuance and interpretation (Baudrillard, 1998). The stylized image of the moustache in the realm of kitsch relies on the one-dimensional notion that a moustache is analogous to manhood; through endless repetition, however, the moustache inevitably becomes nothing more than a symbol of itself. The moustache is fetishized as what Baudrillard (1998) calls a *pseudo-object*, a simulation that can be infinitely copied and commodified across a range of consumer products without referring to any complex reality or communicating an

**Figure 10 – Photos by the Author**
artistic or political vision. The cultural significance of moustache kitsch is derived exclusively from its trendiness and value as a hyper-commercialized sign; yet the novelty afforded the moustache in the context of kitsch is also the source of its disposability. Scholars who have explored this phenomenon suggest that the celebration of kitsch as part of popular culture materializes through eclectic and often ironic consumer practices that are knowingly half-joking and half-serious (Arning, 2009; Baudrillard, 1998; Călinescu, 1987). Consumers are supposed to know that these symbols and patterns are not timeless or classic, but are tied to superficial commercial trends that will inevitably become passé and be replaced. The stylized image of the moustache is currently enjoying a moment of near ubiquity as a consumer phenomenon, but according to the logic of kitsch it is destined to be replaced by another trendy symbol and irreversibly stripped of its all-important sign-value.

The contemporary trendiness of this wide range of moustache kitsch is a powerful example of the indirect consumption that fuels the Movember brand. These types of products may be more visible once Movember is underway, but they are sold and produce their sign-value all year round. The Movember brand is entangled with consumer practices that are not directly associated with the campaign but still work to maintain the cultural relevance of its ironic approach to pop culture and facial hair. Movember did not cause or invent these trends, nor did these fads inspire the creation of Movember. Rather these phenomena are continually co-constructed as part of a consumer culture that positions the moustache as simultaneously stylish, ironic and masculine. Movember shapes, and is shaped by, a broader context in which the moustache is mobilized to sell commodities but is also a commodity itself. Movember participants, therefore, are able to
draw from this collection of products, trends and images in fashioning their own experience of the Movember brand based on raw materials that transcend the boundaries of the campaign itself.

Our Moustaches, Ourselves: Constructing the Body through Brand(ed) Activism

The second tenet of brand(ed) activism involves how consumers themselves are commodified as they participate in charitable activities. As the boundaries between producer and consumer become blurred (especially online), brands capitalize on the immaterial labour that consumers engage in as they contribute to charitable movements (Arvidsson, 2005; A. Hearn, 2012; Lazzarato, 1996). By wearing merchandise featuring an organization’s logo, attending and being photographed at charitable events, and posting pictures, memes and links related to a social cause online, participants in philanthropic movements are packaged as part of a charity’s brand and sold back to consumers as evidence of the foundation’s popularity. Yet Movember is built upon a different configuration of immaterial labour contingent on the physical practice of growing a moustache. The moustache is the campaign’s logo; it can be found everywhere from branded merchandise to the endless stream of online Movember content, but this logo appears most crucially on the faces of the thousands of Mo Bros involved in the movement.

Through the growth and grooming of facial hair, the brand quite literally emerges through the faces of Mo Bros. The brand’s logo materializes through the growth of hair on the faces of Movember participants. Through the Movember moustache, the body becomes a brandable space and serves as both the object and medium of brand activity
(A. Hearn, 2008; Moor, 2003). The moustache can serve as a logo and an opportunity for creativity and self-expression only because the campaign’s participants undertake the physical practice of growing and grooming hair across their upper lips. The extent to which Movember mobilizes and exists predominantly as an internet-based movement, moreover, allows images of the bodies of Mo Bros to be seamlessly woven into the campaign’s online promotional narratives. The moustache as a physical practice acts as the primary site connecting the campaign’s multiple and multi-media branding strategies.

One of the conceptual goals of brand(ed) activism, then, is to answer Klawiter’s (1999) call to re-centre the body in analyses of charitable discourses and consider how the body is situated within contemporary modes of “philanthrocapitalism.” As I highlight in my introduction, King (2006) writes that physical activity fundraisers are events through which neoliberal ideas about the body are made starkly intelligible in the contexts of health and consumption. I argue that, for Movember, the body is even more crucial for promoting the campaign’s image and is directly implicated in the generation of brand value.

The physical practice of growing a moustache shapes, and is shaped by, the processes of meaning-making associated with facial hair and the Movember campaign. Here, I draw directly from Foucault’s (1977) foundational idea that bodies are trained to carry out tasks and perform physical practices, but also emit signs. Men who grow moustaches in November are incorporated into a commodified sign-system and their bodies become the bearers of Movember’s brand values. The Movember moustache is constructed as a body project through which ideas about gender, hair and citizenship are vividly enacted. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, growing a moustache is a visible
means of *doing* gender and, accordingly, the Movember brand is built on widespread perceptions of facial hair as an innate or “natural” form of body modification for men (Robert, 2013). Portrayals of women within the campaign’s promotional material without facial hair or wearing artificial moustaches also contribute to this aspect of the brand by confirming the assumption that “real” Movember moustaches are the exclusive property of men. The processes through which bodies are incorporated as part of the Movember brand, however, are constrained by ideas about race, age and social class, and how they pertain to understandings of gender and facial hair. Thus, the flexibility and creativity that characterizes the Movember moustache as a form of brand(ed) activism is bound by cultural assumptions about who can properly or most easily take up this body project.

Despite the apparent consensus that the moustache is a body project that should be instinctive or straightforward for men, much of the discourses comprising Movember construct growing facial hair as a difficult and arduous practice. In a 2012 interview with *Bloomberg Business*, Adam Garone asserts that undertaking these practices of body modification is “a huge commitment” (Garone as cited in Damast, 2012). Likewise, while describing Movember’s “awareness” activities at the trendy South By Southwest festival, Garone constructs the moustache as a symbol of a participant’s loyalty to fundraising and spreading the campaign’s health-related messages, “The commitment is to grow the ‘stache, and that leads to conversations around men’s health when your co-worker asks you, ‘Hey, what’s up with that mustache?’ You talk and raise some money” (Garone as cited in Lyon, 2012). Movember’s official page outlining the role of women in the movement emphasizes how Mo Bros require support and encouragement because “the thought of growing a moustache can be a daunting one” (Movember Canada, 2013g).
These comments are similar to those found within the Movember Event Guide that describe participation in the campaign as “no small task” and highlight the “dedication it takes for a Mo Bro to change his appearance for 30 days” (Movember Canada, 2013h). Perhaps most bluntly, Nick Offerman states in his tongue-in-cheek guide to growing proper facial hair that “growing a moustache isn’t easy” (MadeManDotCom, 2012a).

Envisioning the moustache as a challenging body project requiring unshakeable dedication over a thirty-day period constructs Movember’s brand of philanthropy as more legitimate than other charitable endeavours. Jacobson (2010), as well as Neff and Moss (2011), write that the moustache is implicitly positioned within Movember’s promotional material as more authentic than wearing a coloured ribbon or making a one-time donation because it requires a form of long-term physical investment. This sense of the moustache’s “authenticity” relates to how facial hair is not easily removed or hidden in the same way that a ribbon can be taken off or discarded at any time. Movember’s version of “physical investment,” unlike what is required to participate in “thons” or other physical activity fundraisers, extends beyond a one-time event and lasts for an entire month. The perceived authenticity of the moustache draws from meanings often attributed to other forms of body modification such as tattoos and piercings. The Movember moustache is constructed as more than a fun and easy way to stylize and transform the body. Rather, like tattoos and piercings, the moustache is depicted as symbolizing notions of permanence, involving thoughtful planning, and requiring participants to endure a degree of physical pain or sacrifice (Sweetman, 1999). These ideas are often the subject of jokes or funny anecdotes within online discussions about
Movember, but remain important touchstones in formulating the campaign’s ironic masculine ethos.

This is not to suggest, however, that other types of fundraisers or charitable activities cannot function as sites of brand(ed) activism. At most physical activity fundraisers, for example, active bodies are put on display and are themselves commodified and sold back to the public as representations of the event’s philanthropic spirit. Through media coverage and promotional material for future happenings, the presence of active, visibly happy participants serves as testament to the popularity and effectiveness of the event. Moreover, these bodies are tasked with performing the preferred, normative identities associated with the charitable organization in question; the work of King (2006, 2012) and Klawiter (1999) critiquing the white, youthful, middle-class femininity promoted through breast-cancer philanthropy is especially relevant in this context. The bodies that populate thons and similar events produce value for the brands through which both non-profit and for-profit corporations seek to distinguish themselves in consumer marketplaces.

Applying this logic to Movember, the extension of the campaign’s physical commitment beyond special one-off occasions into the everyday experiences of participants facilitates a seemingly continuous supply of brand-value. Throughout November, Mo Bros carry the Movember brand with them as they go about their daily lives; they cannot detach themselves from the production of brand value without shaving their moustache and betraying their commitment to the cause. The metaphor of the “walking billboard” is indeed an apt characterization of how the bodies of participants are put into service of the Movember brand. Yet moustaches on the faces of Mo Bros do not
simply point to or represent the brand the way a billboard would. These participants are not simply representations or images of a brand’s values. Instead, by growing a moustache, the Mo Bro becomes the brand and embodies its values. While Movember is taking place (especially in contexts where the campaign is most popular), moustaches carry an inextricable association with the campaign and at least beg the question: Did you grow that moustache for Movember? If a participant fits Movember’s primary demographic of white, middle-class, heterosexual men, his moustache is almost unavoidably shaped by the campaign’s brand of ironic masculinity. These are processes of brand(ed) activism that illustrate how brands can colonize bodies and put them to work in service of a campaign like Movember and its sponsors. However, the “naturalness” of the moustache and the universal good championed by Movember keep this erosion of the boundaries between brand and body from ever being called into question.

**Moustaches and “Male Selfies:” Brand(ed) Activism Online**

Movember is noticeably distinct from other charitable campaigns when considering how the movement’s form of brand(ed) activism translates into online contexts. While the Movember brand vividly materializes through the bodies of Mo Bros, the selfie is the preeminent medium through which this brand-image is most commonly produced and consumed online. The selfie transforms the corporeal manifestation of the Movember brand into an online digital format that can be endlessly copied and shared, while being readily connected to branded spaces of e-commerce. A participant’s “Mo Space” on the Movember website not only serves as the online portal through which the Mo Bro can solicit online monetary donations, but also constitutes an archive of images
that document the progress of his moustache. Movember’s use of the selfie taps into how
digital self-portraits are circulated as part of a social media economy of “showing and
being shown” (Couldry, 2012, p. 47). By frequently posting photos and witty
commentary that provide updates on the progress of their moustaches, participants can
obtain cultural capital within Movember’s online network as measured by the amount of
“likes,” shares, comments and donations their updates initiate. A majority of Movember
selfies follow the common conventions of digital self-portraiture, cropping the image
tightly to focus on the subject’s face or posing in front of bathroom mirrors. Yet other
Movember selfies embrace the originality encouraged by the campaign’s promotional
messaging by posing in costume or in distinct and bizarre locations; other participants
creatively use digital photo editing software to depict themselves and their moustache in
original, comedic or absurd scenarios. The open-endedness built into the Movember
brand is reflected through the multiple types or genres of selfies that I encountered across
official Mo Spaces and social media platforms.

By actively sharing selfies and other updates related to Movember, the
campaign’s trendiness, fun-loving masculine ethos and charitable spirit can be readily
woven into the Mo Bro’s online self-brand. Alison Hearn (2008) defines self-branding as
the self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative or meta-image of the self to be
consumed by others both known and unknown to the user. In these contexts, the self is
produced as a biography of images, market purchases and life experiences that constitute
an individual’s online brand that competes for attention and approval with the narratives
constructed by others across expansive online networks. Activism and public
performances of good will or civic responsibility are similarly commodified within this
information economy as desirable aspects of a self-brand (A. Hearn, 2012). These types of experiences are increasingly being documented through the use of digital self-portraiture across a number of social media platforms. These images provide instantaneous visual confirmation of that narrative accounts that comprise a social media user’s self-brand (Lasén & Gomez-Cruz, 2009).

The Movember selfie is particularly noteworthy because this genre of digital photography is sometimes derided as a stereotypically feminized and narcissistic pursuit intended to attract attention or compliments from other social media users (Senft & Baym, 2015). A 2013 Facebook post for the campaign touted that Movember had been “supporting the male selfie since 2003.” This pronouncement suggests that the ways in which men take and share selfies online are inherently different than the social media practices of (young) women. I also interpret this statement, however, as assuring Mo Bros that they should not be embarrassed of their willingness to take photos of themselves and share them online (to most likely be viewed by a community made up of other men). Rather, Movember’s promotional material intimates that these images showing off the progress of their moustaches act as “evidence” of their masculinity and contribute to the homosocial male camaraderie on which the campaign is founded. Sharing Movember selfies positions these men as part of a trendy and socially-conscious movement that is supposedly set apart from the superficial and narcissistic tendencies associated with feminized online practices of self-representation.

I commonly observed the positioning of selfies as “evidence” through the posting of “before” and “after” photos to social media during the November 1st launch of the campaign. These images were taken up as indisputable as proof that the Mo Bro was
following campaign rules. The “before” and “after” selfies were used to confirm that the participant had started his moustache “from scratch” and defy any accusation of cheating. Those who were suspected of beginning Movember with a pre-existing moustache were often called out by social media commenters and expected to post a selfie as visual proof that they had indeed shaved down. Even National Hockey League tough guy and Movember icon George Parros was subject to this type of scrutiny. Following a Movember Canada Facebook post in which Parros was featured alongside a number of moustache celebrities, a commenter asked, “But the question is….did he [Parros] shave down like the rest of us?” (McLelland, 2013). The official Movember Canada Facebook account quickly replied with a photo of Parros without his iconic moustache, providing visual evidence that even celebrities have to play by the campaign’s rules (Movember Canada, 2013m). This surveillance of the bodies of Mo Bros serves to preserve the sense of commitment and “authenticity” associated with the moustache, but also places strict limits on what is commonly portrayed as a largely open ended physical practice.

This surveillance and uniformity is important for the brand given how the campaign gains popularity and extracts value from selfies as they are shared and circulated across social media platforms. The production and consumption of Movember selfies are indeed commodified through their connection to monetary donations, but the role of these images in the “awareness” aspects of the Movember campaign points to value beyond the realms of economic exchange. The Movember selfie is packaged as a branded image to be consumed within an online environment populated by other brands and branded products. As the creation, distribution and consumption of selfies narrate the Mo Bro’s online self-brand, every “like,” share and social media comment increases the
depth and reach of Movember’s brand environment. As much as the selfie stands for evidence of the individual Mo Bro’s moustache-growth over time, these images also provide visible “proof” of a thriving Movember community and the brand’s online popularity.

Yet, as the Mo Bro’s body project is crystallized in the selfie, it is further colonized as Movember’s marketing material. The body is cast both as a medium for individual expressions of masculinity and a means for facilitating the circulation of the Movember brand. The physical practice of growing a moustache, multiplied across multiple experiences and media platforms, is first and foremost given economic value as a way to improve a participant’s cultural capital, but is also put into service within Movember’s ongoing competition with other brands. That the popularity of Movember is so reliant on the commodification of the body, everyday experiences and online practices makes the movement putatively different from philanthropic campaigns that have been the subject of past academic analyses (S. King, 2006; Klawiter, 1999; Lewis & Potter, 2011; Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012; Richey & Ponte, 2011). This is why I have designated brand(ed) activism as a concept distinct from, yet related to, past theorizations of trends in commercialized charity and activism. The Movember moustache entails individualized and creative performances of masculinity that are simultaneously commodified as part of the self-brand of participants and the campaign’s overarching brand environment. The ways in which consumers are invited to participate in the Movember community revolve around these performances of masculinity, which can be at once validating for those involved but also contested if they do not fit within the codes and expectations of the campaign. Indeed, as I will discuss in the following chapter, the
various ways in which the Movember brand is taken up are not homogenous or straightforward. They involve complex interactions through which Movember participants engage in practices that are related to competing identities, but are also constructed as maintaining substantial distance from political concerns.
Chapter 5

Producing Irony through Movember’s Discursive Communities

Not surprisingly, the meanings most commonly attributed to the Movember moustache as a body project revolve around the supposedly natural relationship between full and thick facial hair and a “real” or more “authentic” manhood. This relationship is explained within Movember’s online discourses through ideas about testosterone and other physiological factors, but also by evaluating perceptions about men’s lifestyles and personality traits. Wasserburg, Oliffe and Han (2014) similarly suggest that Movember’s promotional material accentuates the “natural” connection between the moustache and manliness by making the growth of facial hair appear representative of other supposedly masculine qualities. This understanding of masculinity is typically couched with humour or witticisms that make the movement appear to innocently stop short of making significant pronouncements about the existence of gender hierarchies. Yet the ironic representations of masculinity through which the Movember moustache is given meaning rely upon a variety of cultural assumptions shared amongst the campaign’s supporters. These assumptions tie Movember’s *discursive communities* together and provide the foundation for participants to undertake practices and produce content that “fits” within the version of ironic masculinity promoted by the movement. Following Linda Hutcheon (1994), discursive communities comprise groups that share cultural knowledge and vocabularies with which they can produce and interpret performances of irony. This communal knowledge base is a product of shared experiential contexts and common frames of reference that make certain types of communication possible amongst groups of people.
The shared meanings required to participate in Movember are talked about as if they pertain only to the realm of masculinity and moustache-related antics. Respectable participants should know the official Movember rules and be familiar with a number of different moustache styles. They should be able to instantly recite the names of masculine icons or recite moustache puns in conversation with other members of the discursive community. Yet these seemingly innocent interactions not only draw on common assumptions about gender and facial hair, but are inextricably bound up with ideas about race, sexuality and social class that indicate who best belongs within Movember’s fraternity of “real” men. The purpose of this chapter is to identify and contextualize these types of cultural knowledge and how they are deployed to constitute Movember’s online discourses. The ironic discourses through which these assumptions are communicated are not always straightforward or direct and are taken up by Movember participants in complex and often contradictory ways. I argue, however, that Movember’s discursive communities are formed around assumptions that privilege a normative image of the Mo Bro, even in the context of light-hearted and well-meaning banter. The campaign’s moustache-related antics are most often not mean spirited, but frequently draw on problematic expectations and stereotypes that allow these ironic performances to make sense.

“Your Mo Will Get Fuller” – Moustache Hierarchies and Gendered Boundaries

The function of the moustache as a means to determine or verify the existence of hierarchies among men was taken up with varying degrees of sincerity throughout Movember’s online discourses. The jokey or facetious tone underlying the portrayal of
the moustache within Movember’s online environment was often ambiguous and led to complicated readings of Movember’s promotional content. The blurry boundaries between fun and seriousness that characterize much of the discourse defy any straightforward reading of the moustache as the practice that defines Movember’s ironic take on masculinity. The supposed test of manhood that is enacted through the moustache is also entangled with other social hierarchies as multiple identities intersect in the production of the Movember brand.

The complexities and ambiguities emerging through the Movember moustache are exemplified in the “Your Mo Will Get Fuller” video produced by official Movember partner, MadeMan.com (MadeManDotCom, 2012b). The video stars moustache icon Nick Offerman, as well as actors Jake Lacy, Brian Baumgartner and Oscar Nunez best known for their supporting roles on television sitcom The Office. The video parodies the well-known It Gets Better Project, an internet-based “awareness” campaign that aims to reassure gay and lesbian youth that the bullying and anxiety they might be experiencing as young people will subside as they grow older. Like the It Gets Better Project, “Your Mo Will Get Fuller” promotes the idea that the stress and trauma that comes from feeling excluded or being a target of harassment will diminish with the passage of time; but, of course, the message concerns facial hair and is delivered with a flippant and ironic flair. Posted midway through Movember 2012, the video jokingly assures Movember participants with skimpy or sparse facial hair that their moustaches will grow fuller as the month goes on. Offerman begins the video by acknowledging that by the midpoint of the campaign, many Mo Bros have “heard the taunts” then lists a series of insults meant to mock the quality of someone’s moustache: “dirty hipster,” “carnie ride operator,” and
“ugly Geraldo” (a not so veiled jab at television personality, Geraldo Rivera). As Offerman pronounces these unpleasant taunts, Lacy, Baumgartner and Nunez visibly whimper, drawing attention to the disappointing state of their moustaches. Offerman, however, offers a comforting sentiment, “to all of you out there rocking the ‘in-between’ moustache, we’ve all been there,” a message accompanied by the caption, “You are not alone.” The video continues with Offerman stating, “But I’m here to tell you: it gets fuller.” The “It Gets Fuller” tagline directly spoofs the It Gets Better Project’s most prominent “awareness” strategy that encourages adults from gay and lesbian communities to speak about how their lives improved as they got older. Here, Offerman, fully-enshrined among the pantheon of Movember icons, reassures inexperienced or less mature Mo Bros that their moustache will improve throughout the month if they “stick with it.”

With clever references to well-known moustaches from popular culture (including Jack Sparrow from *Pirates of the Caribbean* and the seemingly obligatory nod to *Magnum P.I.*) and campy, over-the-top production values, the It Gets Fuller video invokes the rhetoric of the It Gets Better Project but actively depoliticizes language typically reserved for more overt forms of social activism. After pleading with viewers to offer emotional support to those with less-than-stellar moustaches and repeating the campaign’s “change the face of men’s health” slogan, Offerman encourages participants to “finish what [they] start” as a caption reading “WE CAN DO IT” is displayed on screen. Viewed on its own terms, the It Gets Fuller video skilfully sends up the often over-sentimentalized and hyper-sincere style characteristic of It Gets Better and similar “awareness” campaigns. Yet taken in the broader context of the specific messages
associated with Movember and the It Gets Better Project, it is clear that the It Gets Fuller parody obscures and downplays the social issues underlying both campaigns. The moustache-themed spoof jokingly portrays inadequate facial hair (rather than sexuality) as a source of bullying and harassment. It Gets Fuller, moreover, playfully exaggerates how moustaches can be understood as producing a sense of masculine confidence and virility. As the underdeveloped facial hair worn by Lacy, Baumgartner and Nunez magically transforms into luxurious, over-the-top and clearly artificial moustaches (in a puff of smoke, no less!), the men replace their sad, pitiful expressions with strong, self-assured poses.

Gender norms are key aspects of the public discussion around both Movember and the It Gets Better Project. Yet within It Gets Fuller, gender norms and their relationship to the body, as well as physical and emotional health, are subsumed as part of a light-hearted parody about moustaches that trivializes the political underpinnings of both campaigns. The premise of the parody reduces It Gets Better to its aesthetic and linguistic attributes while denying the substantial overlap between the goals of the It Gets Better Project and Movember’s initiatives concerning men’s health behaviours and mental health. The reference to It Gets Better is not positioned as a vehicle for alliance-building despite these connections and the well-documented relationships between sexuality, bullying and mental health. Instead, the It Gets Fuller parody simply borrows the features and personality of It Gets Better. The video, moreover, does not create space for viewers to consider how Movember’s promotion of a heteronormative masculinity clashes with the underlying message of the It Gets Better Project. The lack of sensitivity to the contradictions underlying the parody was not lost on one YouTube commenter who
declared, “Crap use of the “it’s (sic) gets better” project. Hope you choke on your tash” (bettyboohadapoo, 2012). While I might stop short of wishing that moustaches could act as choking hazards, these tensions shed some important light on the post-political sensibility that defines Movember’s ironic ethos.

Perusing the social media comments about It Gets Fuller further illustrates the complexity brought about through the parody’s brand of humour. Many users simply praise the video for its comedy or draw more attention to Offerman’s renowned facial hair. Yet despite the video’s tongue-in-cheek message about how to cope with feelings of moustache inadequacy, some commenters make more straightforward or serious connections between their inability to grow a moustache and their perceived level of manliness. One user expresses his dismay regarding the reaction his Movember moustache received and how it produced an experience of emasculation, “i kept mine for about 10 days, but i couldn’t go on, everybody was making fun of me, like everyone! my girlfriend refused to kiss me, my buddies were all like you look like an afghan orphan!!! so after bearing severe emasculation by almost everyone i knew i was forced to shave off : (” (MrMeidon, 2012). This comment represents an example of how Movember’s ironic value system can be muddled or disrupted by an overly literal reading of the moustache’s connection to manhood. For this commenter, having an inadequate moustache supposedly prevented him from properly enacting the characteristics of heterosexual masculinity (“my girlfriend refused to kiss me”) and reduced his status in the eyes of others to that of a feminized, racialized Other (“you look like an afghan orphan!!!”).

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Other YouTube users commenting on It Gets Fuller express similar regrets that they could not grow facial hair worthy of revered mustachioed heroes and what they think that means for perceptions of their manliness. One commenter specifically cites Offerman’s renown as a moustache icon, “Offerman tweenstache support group, I’m Matt and I suffer from halfstache” (HQ Matt, 2012). Another user references the “challenges” entailed in growing a moustache and perpetuates the campaign’s heteronormative values by emphasizing how a proper moustache should attract attention from female admirers; yet this commenter also invokes masculine images of fatherhood and the military in detailing the shame he felt for his unimpressive moustache:

I did Movember last year. It’s hard. Challenging. Some girls will respect you. Most will laugh at you. My father, who wore a stache all his life ever since he left the military, laughed at me. This year I might not wear it. I salute all of you that do grow it. Maybe I will grow some balls and have one at the end of the month (BulldozerJack, 2012).

Others were more direct in communicating their concerns about their lack of facial hair growth:

I am 31 and mine grows like I am a 14 year old boy. Annoying! 8 days now and just a few long hairs, looks like pubic hair on my face (TeamOfThe80s, 2012)

so close to achieving that but first i must be able to actually grow facial hair...
*sigh* (centurioni, 2012)

It is difficult at times to infer the degree of sincerity communicated through these types of remarks (or be certain the gender identity of the commenter); some commenters may indeed just be “playing along” with It Gets Fuller’s ironic script. Yet these comments demonstrate how the importance attributed to the moustache as a marker of biologically determined hierarchies among men can momentarily disrupt or distort Movember’s light-hearted, ironic portrayal of masculinity. The different degrees of seriousness with which
commenters described how their moustache reflected their masculine status illustrates how the Movember brand is not taken up in homogenous or predictable ways.

Some commenters appear to misinterpret the ironic humour of the parody or overlook the video’s connection to the It Gets Better project. Instead, some comments provide tips for growing proper moustaches (some more serious than others), while others include homophobic slurs that made the video’s parody of the It Gets Better theme appear even more distasteful. One user offered a list of guidelines for “growing a big [moustache]” that reads like an unpleasant perversion of the no-nonsense masculinity portrayed through Offerman’s *Parks & Recreation* character, Ron Swanson:

If you want to grow the big one. Get a man job, like in the foundry I worked in. Factory will do. Drink AMERICAN BEER! Smoking helps. Beat the bloody fuck out of anyone who calls you a fag, gay or not, still kick the shit out of them. For that matter just stand up for the underdog. I will bet that soon you will grow the bush and get laid a lot more than you are today (bigdanbear, 2012)

Through this comment, the moustache is held up as a product of behaviours that combine masculine virility, working class honour and homophobic violence. The subtly of the Movember parody of It Gets Better is overlooked and the ironic sentiment is replaced with a more literal inventory of stereotypical masculine performances. Other commenters exchanged advice for growing thicker, more impressive moustaches ranging from dietary tips to exercise regimes to medical interventions. This short exchange about potential medical routes to better facial hair, for example, epitomizes the seriousness characterizing much of the conversation around It Gets Fuller:

you can get a steroid shot (needle) in your beard region and it will allow the hair follicles to wake up and grow faster and sometimes thicker (ShlomoMetzenbaum, 2012)
Seriously?!!! Where’d you hear about that?? I’m willing to try that crap. I need some facial hair (2mbalvarado1, 2012)

Taken alongside the tongue-in-cheek banter about the moustache as part of a cultural performance of masculinity, this interaction and other similar conversations indicate how the connection between facial and notions of biological manhood can, for some, dominate readings of Movember’s online narratives. Despite the light-hearted, fun-loving nature of Movember’s online brand, comments communicate anxieties about the relationship between hair and masculinity serve as momentary ruptures to the campaign’s message.

Yet the discussion around Your Mo Will Get Fuller is nonetheless confined within the limits of Movember’s post-political discourse; the noticeable ruptures and disconnections within the narrative for the most part still appeal to “universal” conceptions of health, individualism and masculinity under neoliberalism. The video spoofs a more politicized advocacy campaign, but stays well clear of addressing the political concerns underlying both Movember and the It Gets Better Project. The parody does not draw attention to the flaws endemic to the It Gets Better movement or broader cultures of heteronormativity and, increasingly, homonormativity. The parody simply uses It Gets Better as comedic fodder detached from notions of advocacy or identity politics. From sifting through the social media commentary around this video, this distance from the social justice cause at the heart of Its Get Better make the parody less intelligible for some who appear to have overlooked or misread the video’s ironic spirit. Despite the collective faith in perceived connections between facial hair and masculinity across the responses to It Gets Fuller, the diverse interpretations of this parody further demonstrate how participants do not engage with Movember in predictable ways but embrace the brand with varying levels of seriousness and access to cultural knowledge.
Irony and Movember’s Discursive Communities

One of the theoretical goals of this dissertation is to contextualize what Hutcheon (1994) calls the “scene of irony” and map the relations of power that materialize through ironic modes of communication. Following Hutcheon, I argue that it is crucial to avoid taking the Movember moustache and the campaign’s brand of humour for granted as inherently ironic or subversive practices. It is important to ask how and why irony comes about and to consider the consequences of interpreting a text or practice as ironic. Hutcheon seeks to avoid straightforward understandings of irony as simply an inversion of what should be expected and defines irony as “the mode of the unsaid, unheard and unseen” (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 9). Irony involves a kind of misdirection; a sense that what was just heard, seen or read is not meaningful on its own, but requires supplemental or inferred meaning to make sense. Hutcheon emphasizes that the ironic meaning is not simply the unsaid meaning in place of what is readily perceptible. Rather, irony involves the relationship between said and unsaid meanings that is enacted through a particular discourse or practice. The Movember moustache, therefore, can be understood as ironic through the relationship between straightforward readings of facial hair as a symbol of biological manhood and the unstated acknowledgement that most moustaches are currently imagined as invoking outdated fashion trends or representing old-fashioned masculine norms. Movember’s origin story makes this point clear: the Movember founders thought the moustache would be an apt conversation starter for the very reason that it was a passé or antiquated facial hair style and would look out of place on the faces of young modern men (Movember Canada, 2013a). Yet the self-aware and self-deprecating practice of wearing an outdated facial hairstyle does not replace the
moustache’s long-time association with masculinity; instead, the ironic moustache adds intriguing new layers to those traditional norms. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I delve beyond dictionary definitions and conventional understandings of irony and into the cultural processes through which the Movember moustache is promoted is an ironic practice. By unpacking the discursive relationships between said and unsaid meanings, I consider how the practices and cultural references that comprise Movember’s brand of irony shape and are shaped by complex social relations of power.

Examining the intricacies of irony as a discursive strategy requires moving beyond conceptions of irony as a static rhetorical tool that can be deployed in homogenous or predictable ways (Hutcheon, 1994). Rather, I am interested in investigating how irony happens through a complex communicative process between the Movember brand and its participants. The dynamic and interactive nature of the Movember brand invites participants to fluctuate between the roles of ironist and interpreter while producing and consuming content that can be read as ironic to varying (and contested) degrees. The discursive relationships that produce ironic texts and practices are always contextual and based on socially agreed upon markers that make unsaid meanings perceptible to both ironists and interpreters. Like many forms of humour and satire, the plural and complex meanings that support the Movember moustache as an ironic practice are contingent on the circumstances surrounding the discursive situation. The irony that drives the Movember ethos is not universal or predictable, but relies upon a specific context that makes the discourse intelligible to the campaign’s supporters. Yet as I argued regarding the It Gets Fuller video, there is no guarantee that that the images
and messages associated with Movember will be interpreted as ironic in all situations or that all consumers will “get” the irony in the first place.

The brand’s ironic ethos relies upon the existence of common frames of reference to foster the ironic relationships between said and unsaid meanings. This discursive context is comprised of the cultural knowledge that allows the campaign’s irony to make sense: popular culture references and histories of fashion trends, ideas about masculinity and grooming, familiarity with the wide assortment of moustache-themed consumer products, and a seemingly endless supply of moustache jokes and puns. This knowledge is shared by a community of Movember staff, participants and supporters who shape and work with these discourses as they interact across the campaign’s brand platforms.

Similarly, the relevance of this cultural knowledge is reinforced through often light-hearted and playful media reports about the campaign, but is also highlighted in everyday media discourses that explore the links between facial hair, consumption and notions of masculinity. Movember did not necessarily create these meanings, but draws on this discursive context to cultivate a distinctive brand of irony that might appeal most to individuals who can meaningfully engage with this shared stock of cultural knowledge.

These are the discursive communities that provide context for the attribution of irony to particular texts and practices related to Movember. Thus, the campaign’s signature moustache and the communication practices that surround it can only be understood as ironic because relevant discursive communities emerged before, through and alongside the rise of Movember. In other words, Movember did not singlehandedly encourage ironic readings of moustaches and their relationships to masculinity. Yet the movement both draws on and contributes to the supply of cultural knowledge that is shared by its
participants and makes the “ironic” relationship between said and unsaid meanings possible.

(En)Gendering a Discursive Community

The Movember brand relies on neoliberal conceptions of health and charity through which social problems are constructed as individual rather than collective responsibilities. Yet the campaign’s ironic flair emerges primarily from understandings that connect masculinity and facial hair to consumption and cultural knowledge. In Chapter Three, I discussed the Movember moustache and the assumptions it entails regarding hair and the gender binary. I argued that Movember upholds and is supported by the idea that men are and should be the only people growing any type of facial hair. Moreover, where men may be portrayed as having varying capacities to grow moustaches, women are permitted under very few circumstances to perform their gender in ways involving visible facial hair. This assumption was reinforced through the media coverage of Siobhan Fletcher and Sarah O’Neill, women who grew moustaches in support of Movember. Yet these women, despite being praised for the charitable efforts, were portrayed as medical anomalies whose gender performances were clearly outside the boundaries of any sort of “normal” femininity. These medicalized representations work alongside the dominant narratives surrounding Mo Sistas as being unwilling and unable to grow facial hair to make a white, middle class, hairless femininity appear to be the unquestioned and natural norm.

Women are, however, permitted to participate by wearing “fake” or synthetic moustaches of various kinds. When asked in his Reddit Ask Me Anything conversation
how he felt about “ladies who wear fake moustaches to show their support,” Adam Garone responded by clarifying that Movember’s core values revolve around “real men growing real moustaches” (Garone, 2013). Garone then adds that the support of Mo Sistas is integral to the culture of Movember and thus he encourages “Mo Sistas and kids to rock a fake mo in support of their Mo Bro.” The supposedly obvious and undisputed fact that women should only participate by wearing artificial moustaches can be juxtaposed to the moralistic narratives around “cheating” that pervade much of the discourse around Movember’s official rules. “Cheating,” in this case, involves showing an unwillingness to engage with the campaign’s friendly competitive spirit by not starting the campaign clean shaven and providing a true measure of the participant’s masculine capacities.

The possibility of Mo Bro participating by wearing a synthetic moustache is rarely part of the conversation. In 2011, eleven-year-old Jackson Maclean participated in Movember by drawing a moustache on his face before his hockey games using his mother’s black make-up pencil (Dunning, 2011). Maclean’s efforts were praised by local and national media as a feel good human interest story. The 11 year old from Ottawa declared on his Mo Space that he was “too young to grow a moustache,” exonerating him from the surveillance and codes of participation that govern other men. It is unclear at what age or stage of development boys are no longer permitted to participate in Movember by artificial means. Yet there is an undisputedly clear consensus across the campaign’s online discourses that once men reach adulthood they must participate by growing “real moustaches” and so-called “fake” moustaches should be viewed with contempt and suspicion. YouTube viewers debated the merits of the campy, artificial
moustaches worn by the actors in “It Gets Fuller” and even questioned whether Nick Offerman’s moustache was legitimate. One commenter declared his belief that Offerman’s moustache was artificial by stating, “Fake mustaches are disgraceful! How did he [Offerman] get to be in this? He’s a disgrace to all mustache faces” (JonzeyGears, 2012). A second commenter claimed that “He [Offerman] wears a fake moustache on Parks & Rec” (Accidentally on Purpose, 2012), while another viewer asserted, “too bad his [Offerman] mustache on the show [Parks & Recreation] is fake” (Daniel Osuna, 2012). These comments were met with a matter-of-fact reply from another YouTube user who stated, “It’s actually real, he [Offerman] had a fake one for a while because he had to shave it off for the episode where Tammy 1 showed up” (Rads ical, 2012). This exchange, taken alongside the countless comments pronouncing Offerman (or his Parks & Rec character, Swanson) as the pinnacle of masculinity and facial hair, rest on pre-existing faith in how hair is read through the logic of the gender binary. One exchange of comments about this video neatly summarized the movement’s faith in the gender binary: one YouTube viewer wrote, “How to grow a moustache: be a man (Maauadeeb28, 2012), to which another replied: “How to be a man: Grow a Mustache” (Ugotta Bekiddingme, 2012). This perceived naturalness allows the quality or authenticity of a man’s moustache to be questioned, while “normal” and “healthy” women (and children) must remain hairless and can only wear moustaches that are undisputedly artificial.

Movember’s discursive communities are also built around a related binary through which men are constructed as the active ambassadors for the campaign and women are considered as more passive bystanders and “supporters” (Jacobson, 2010; Robert, 2013). As Robert (2013) outlines, the Mo Bro is cast as the valiant hero of
Movember who raises “awareness” and drives change to the state of “men’s health.” Women, in contrast, cannot fully participate and are relegated to a role offering loyal, unwavering support to Mo Bros. The 2013 Mo Sista page explains that women’s participation in Movember is inherently limited because they “are not expected to grow a moustache” (Movember Canada, 2013g). They are still invited to participate by raising money, while using social media to raise “awareness” and having conversations with men about their health. This explanation of the role of Mo Sistas similarly describes how women have “an important role in helping men break down barriers and talk about their health.” The official narrative also recognizes that women might serve as “great facilitators” in changing men’s health norms and behaviours. Yet following this brief discussion of how women might in fact be able to take leadership roles in Movember’s broader health-related project, the Mo Sista is swiftly returned to a more passive position. The description finishes by re-affirming the daunting task Mo Bros face in growing their Movember moustache then asserts that women should “never underestimate how far a kind word of encouragement or a wink and nod from a Mo Sista can go in helping a Mo Bro as he navigates the month of Movember.” The Mo Sista, although praised for her potential contributions to the campaign’s broader goals, is reduced through these types of comments to a passive supporter providing flirtatious validation to the Mo Bro’s noble efforts.

Similar to the formal descriptions of the role of Mo Sistas, many other high profile examples from both official and unofficial media narratives construct women’s main role in Movember as confirming the sex appeal of the moustache. My analysis echoes Robert’s (2013) claim that the Mo Sista is primarily encouraged to engage in the
campaign by offering their affection, winks and flirtatious smiles to Mo Bros to reinforce the idea that these men are the epitome of heterosexual masculinity. For example, the lyrics for Derick Watts & the Sunday Blues “Movember Song” describes one of the key benefits of participating in the movement by proclaiming, “Think of all the chicks/they’ll want us daily!” (Derick Watts & The Sunday Blues, 2012). In the song and its accompanying music video, heterosexual conquest is help up as the primary evidence of the male protagonists’ transformation from facial hair underachievers into “real” men with impressive moustaches. After declaring that their extraordinary moustaches enable them to undertake masculine activities such as chopping firewood and drinking gravy, the video ends with the two men, now brimming with moustache-inspired confidence, taking to the streets to seek the attention of the attractive women they encounter. Similarly, in a 2011 YouTube video from ManMade.com called “What Not to Do with Your Moustache,” Mo Bros are encouraged to always carry a bandana to keep their moustache clean because “if a girl comes up to you and sees snot and boogers, she’ll walk away quickly” (MadeManDotCom, 2011b). Similarly, a nominee for the 2012 Moscars titled “The Talk” captured the spirit of that year’s Movember and Son’s theme by portraying a scene involving a heart-to-heart father-son chat (AMPproductionsTV, 2012). The conversation is drenched in sexual innuendo, but the video’s father figure makes clear that he is talking about moustaches rather than any other objects of male anatomy; he states, bluntly, “Let’s be clear, we’re talking about your moustache, not your wiener.” The father dutifully advises his son that “it doesn’t matter what it [his moustache] looks like, as long as the ladies like it.” Like the “Movember Song,” these examples
demonstrate how the Movember moustache is a heteronormative performance intended for a perceived audience of always eligible, young heterosexual women.

Another 2012 Oscars nominee further entrenches the supposed naturalness of women’s supportive role in Movember. The video is simply titled “Movember 2012,” but is billed as a “tribute to the unsung heroes taking a stand for men’s health” (Mike Nybroe, 2012). The clip begins with an image of a young, white woman looking into a mirror giving attention to a red, irritated patch of skin above her upper lip. The video then alternates between images of thin, attractive, mostly white and middle class women in everyday situations made uncomfortable due to the damaged skin above their mouths. Meanwhile, a deep, male voice over asks: “What makes a hero? Why do some people make a difference? To stand up for someone else? What makes them do it? Is it loyalty? A sense of duty? Or is it something else?” As this string of questions comes to a close, the camera focuses on a young white woman cooking food in a well-appointed kitchen. The woman is then approached by a well-dressed white man wearing a moustache who passionately kisses her and then proudly marches out of the room. The woman is left alone to tend to the damaged skin inflicted by the mustachioed man’s romantic advances.

The Movember 2012 video is cleverly scripted to resemble a trailer for a major motion picture, but the clip’s message points to assumptions about masculinity, power and privilege that underlie the campaign’s dominant discourses. This video cements women’s passive role within the Movember movement as objects of the male gaze. Women are praised as “heroes” because they passively acquiesce to men’s sexual desires even though it may be uncomfortable or distressing. This sentiment was echoed on social media. As one YouTube commenter proclaimed, “Don’t forget it is hard on a Mo mans
(sic) woman too. New whiskers make for a Porcupines kiss. We share the pain.” (Kelley Davis, 2012); this type of response exists alongside men airing their grievances about how participation in Movember might adversely affect their romantic relationships as illustrated through this Facebook comment: “Wife refuses to kiss me” (Andrew Kim Wylie, 2012). The jokey allusion to pain or bodily harm exhibited in the Movember 2012 video and some social media content downplays and makes light of the assumption that women are generally expected to “sacrifice” their wellbeing for the interests of men. Yet despite the humourous and good-natured tone of its premise, the video exists in an uncomfortable tension with the trope of the battered woman who “stands by her man” in the face of hardship or violence because it is the “right” thing to do. This representation of the noble and complaint love interest of the manly hero is tied to ideas about male privilege and men’s power over women’s bodies that extends far beyond Movember into the political, legal and cultural realms. Moreover, the presence of well-dressed, thin, white bodies in a distinctly middle-class setting makes this allusion more palatable and insulates the joke from stereotypes connecting the threat of domestic violence to racialized and working class masculinities. The heroism (or “hair-oism” in this case) of the women in the video and the participation of women more broadly is based on an assumed heteronormative relationship between Mo Bros and Mo Sistas, as well as a the maintenance of an active/passive gender binary.

**Interтекstuality and the Politics of “Style”**

The good-natured humour and intertextual representations of moustaches and manliness enable certain types of ironic communication while constraining others. These
discourses influence what types of irony “fit” within Movember’s brand environment and create boundaries around how certain supporters are portrayed as best participating in the campaign’s ironic banter. This is not simply a question, however, of how irony is deployed, but who can use irony and who can properly interpret a text or practice as ironic (Hutcheon, 1994). The complex ways in which Movember’s dominant masculinities intersect with notions of race, class, sexuality and national identities work to set the limits around what can be done, produced and consumed in the name of Movember’s ironic spirit. Examining Movember’s ironic portrayals of masculinity, therefore, also requires more than an understanding of what is overtly portrayed as “manly” through the campaign’s promotional material. Instead, it is crucial to consider how Movember implicitly produces notions of difference and familiarity, but downplays these connotations by appealing to the movement’s emphasis on universal super-values such as fun, community building and “real” manhood.

The unsaid and unwritten meanings underlying the campaign rely on shared understandings of what performances and cultural knowledge counts as legitimate manifestations of the Movember brand. What styles or grooming techniques abide by or further the campaign’s ironic values? What memes, puns or pop culture references make sense as part of the movement’s promotional discourses? How did Tom Sellick, Burt Reynolds and Nick Offerman become Movember icons when other well-known mustachioed celebrities are largely absent from the campaign’s dominant narratives? Engaging with discursive communities requires the production of common cultural ground that determines the appropriate language and subject matter supporting Movember’s distinct brand of irony. These processes of shared decision-making entail
setting the boundaries around what cultural material makes irony happen in the context of Movember. Figuring out what “works” as a meaningful expression of the Movember brand involves ascertaining what performances of masculinity and facial hair practices can be appropriately sent up, imitated or exaggerated in line with the campaign’s playful spirit. These choices, however, go beyond establishing consensus about what’s “funny,” “popular” or “trendy;” they inform the intertextual relationships that drive Movember’s ironic ethos and draw on shared assumptions about the connections between facial hair, style and identity.

While the logistical and technical instructions for participating in Movember are outlined in the official rules I discussed in Chapter Three, the aesthetic trends that shape the campaign’s ironic flair are laid out in the campaign’s annual style guides. Each year, and often reflecting the campaign theme, Movember publishes an official style guide that displays suggestions for types of moustaches that a Mo Bro can wear. Of course, participants are not limited to these styles; but by promoting certain types and giving them funny names or backstories, these images work to legitimize certain facial hair performances and shape the discourses through which these performances are conceptualized. The names given to certain styles sometimes allude to celebrity moustache icons (e.g. “the Dali”), popular culture tropes (e.g. “The Rock Star” or “Undercover Brother”) or identify well-known, more generic facial hair varieties (e.g. “The Handlebar”). The slew of unofficial style guides that appear online each Movember often make more direct reference to celebrity moustaches and draw on more provocative cultural stereotypes. These style guides are informed by pre-existing terminology and understandings of facial hair, but in the context of Movember, work to curate, organize
and give meaning to the range of performances available to the Mo Bro. The conversations about these styles most commonly foreground how they relate to dominant masculinities; yet these gender performances intersect with competing articulations of masculinity that playfully, yet forcefully, establish a white, middle-class, heterosexual version of manhood as the unquestioned norm.

Sexuality, Deviance and Difference

The heteronormative underpinnings of Movember also inform allusions to sexual deviance or sexual violence that stem from cultural stereotypes linking moustaches to such perpetrators. These types of references even form parts of Movember’s official narratives concerning potential moustache styles. In his Reddit Ask Me Anything segment, Adam Garone responded to a question about the common stigmatization of the moustache by citing the moustache’s “interesting era in the 70s and 80s adult film industry” (Garone, 2013). The “interesting” history is frequently invoked in online style guides and narratives as the inspiration for popular grooming techniques. Garone, when interviewed for a 2012 MadeMan.com video detailing the history of the movement,
describes his preferred moustache style as the “80s Porn” (Garone as cited in Pell, 2012). This type of reference to the facial hair characteristic of the male porn stars of the 1980s was common throughout discussions of possible moustache styles. MadeMan.com’s “40 Moustaches in 100 Seconds” style guide begins with an image of the 80s porn style, while many social media comments made similar references to this look:

   Mine is full, but my boss tells me I have a porn moustache (curraheewolf, 2012)

   I’m about 2/3 to an 80s porn moustache at the moment 😊 (guillars, 2012)

   PORN-STACHE!! (Andrew Nash, 2011)

Press coverage also made frequent flippant mentions of this trope, most often after describing the quality of a moustache or the perceived attractiveness of men with facial hair. The production and consumption of pornography, of course, is a fiercely controversial topic, especially relating to the fortification of unhealthy gender norms and expectations. Yet the casual appropriation of the porn moustache trope within Movember’s lighthearted narratives stays at a safe distance from these often politicized debates. Movember’s fun-loving, post-political sensibility mitigates this connection even though issues around masculinity and sexual health are at stake in both the Movember campaign and discussions about the pitfalls of the porn industry.

While explicit references to deviant sexualities and sexual violence were not prevalent in official narratives, I frequently observed mention of these topics in social media commentary, especially in the comment threads responding to YouTube content. Some social media users joked about certain moustache styles pointing to stereotypical images of the sexual predator. When responding to MadeMan.com’s video style guide, for example, one commenter jokingly suggested that “The Pervert” and “The Pedophile”
be added to the list (paldri, 2011); another user offered a similar suggestion: “The Molestache” (Tyler Mitchell, 2011). A YouTube viewer added to the mostly inane banter following the “How to Grow a Moustache with Nick Offerman” video by declaring, “What’s that saying? Oh yeah. All pedophiles have moustaches” (Trace M, 2012). The comments discussing the popular Nick Offerman video also contained several remarks that kidded about the relationship of facial hair to the trope of the “rapist.” One of the top comments for this video (receiving 56 likes from YouTube users) makes this connection clear: “better to look like a rapist with a moustache than a rapist without one” (lowdownshakinchill, 2012). Other commenters similarly drew on this trope throughout the conversation:

Not all people with moustaches are rapist (sic)...but all rapist (sic) do have moustaches (ShooManFu, 2012)

A handsome manly rapist (Ron Swanson, 2012)

But I look like a rapist with a moustache (bastardian); A manly rapist (1dui1, 2012)

The use of the rapist and pedophile tropes are most likely not intended to trivialize sexual violence; but these jokey allusions construct the community of Movember participants as unquestionably different and distant from those who might fall into those deviant categories.

The playful references to violent or oppressive sexualities work to construct ironic distance between these tropes and the average Movember participant. The community of largely white, heterosexual middle-class Mo Bros can draw on these tropes as appropriate comedic or ironic fodder, as long as these as jokes are uttered at a safe distance from the perceived threat of actual violence. These allusions are built upon perpetuate the myth of
the rapist or pedophile “hiding in the bushes” who is cast off from society but is still identifiable by his “creepy” moustache. Yet these jokes form part of a context in which a well-documented culture of sexual violence persists online and on university campuses (Wooten & Mitchell, 2016); these are the same spaces, of course, in which Movember has garnered much of its popularity. Despite the polarizing and politicized debates about the connections between sexual health, sexual violence and the cultures of masculinity existing across “manly” spaces such as sports locker rooms and college campuses, assumptions about the nature of deviant or violent sexualities and the perceived gentlemanliness of Movember’s well-meaning participants allows these ironic comments to continue unhindered in the campaign’s online environment. That social media users can casually make jokes about how Movember participants might “look like” a rapist, pedophile or porn star insulates the movement from having to meaningfully interrogate the foundations of its culture of heteronormative masculinity. The ironic distance created by these types of comments makes it appear unnecessary to ask questions about how the campaign’s ironic emphasis on being a “real man” might have implications for understandings of masculinity and sexual health beyond expressing a greater willingness to seek medical attention.

Ironic distance is similarly produced by further removing well-known tropes and public figures from their sociopolitical contexts. It is clear that the 80s porn moustache refers to a bygone era of adult film production, but the particularities of how the industry shaped (and continues to shape) dominant understandings of gender and sexuality has no bearing on the symbolic value of the moustache for the Movember brand. We are left with a straightforward, one-dimensional image of masculine virility that crystallizes in
the form of the moustache for the sake of ironic re-purposing in the context of Movember. I observed a similar phenomenon in the few representations of gay or queer masculinities within the campaign’s online discourses. I encountered some references to 1970s disco group The Village People, including a moustache style labeled “The YMCA” as part of MadeMan.com’s video style guide (depicting an image of the recognizable horseshoe moustache associated with the group’s white “biker” character”). Similarly, both official and unofficial social media posts made mention of iconic Queen singer, Freddie Mercury. A 2013 official Facebook post cited Mercury (alongside other presumed straight moustache icons such as Chris Hadfield, Nick Offerman, Hulk Hogan and George Parros) on a list of “Mo Mentors,” celebrities from which Mo Bros could find “inspiration for style, fundraising or spirit” (Movember Canada, 2013).

Figure 12 (MadeManDotCom, 2011c)

In both cases of the Village People and Freddie Mercury, like the parody of the It Gets Better Project, the celebrities are cited exclusively for their aesthetic value with no acknowledgement of how their respective importance to LGBTQ movements might disrupt the campaign’s heteronormative image. Moreover, Mercury and the Village
People are often connected to the “Clone” style of the 1970s, which grew out of social movements of the previous decade and normalized a more masculine-looking subculture of gay men. The style was characterized by fashion associated with rugged working class masculinities, including jeans, work boots and often a full moustache. The Clone look was considered a means for gay men to more confidently express their masculine identities in public, but also to combat homophobic stereotypes that represented all gay men as weak, scrawny or hyper-feminine (Cole, 2008; Peterkin, 2001). Movember’s online narratives fail to draw attention to the importance of the moustache in linking Mercury and the Village People to historically significant fashion trends for certain subcultures of gay men. Instead, these fashion icons are ripped from their historical context, reduced to their aesthetic value, and put in the service of a heteronormative media campaign. This is especially curious when considering how the campy representations of masculinity characteristic of the personae embodied by Queen and the Village People bear much resemblance to the exaggerated performances of masculinities that define Movember. Movember’s indebtedness to the fashion sensibilities of icons like Mercury and the Village People is acknowledged through the use of their likenesses in campaign narratives but these images are circulated with no mention of how they might disruptive the heteronormative masculinity that defines the movement.

*The Moustache and Social Class: Between Connoisseurs and Boxcars*

Whereas the majority of Mo Bros are portrayed as participating in a largely middle class consumer culture, many of the cartoonish images that serve as the inspiration for ironic moustache styles are drawn from stereotypes concerning social class
identities. As reflected in Movember 2010’s theme “The Modern Gentleman,” for example, some moustache styles allude to refined, upper class masculinities defined by luxury, high culture and fashion sense. The “After Eight” style, for example, describes a thin, long horizontal moustache delicately waxed at both ends. The After Eight calls to mind the iconic moustaches of Clark Gable and Errol Flynn, and is constructed as part of a masculine performance emphasizing style and sophistication. Adam Garone identifies the After Eight as the style most appropriate for businessmen (Campbell, 2012), while the Telegraph (2012) says of those sporting the style: “super suave, and boy does he know it.” Attention to style and grooming, however, can be representative of more ambiguous or competing ideas. The name given the “Connoisseur” style appears to suggest an appreciation of high culture and the finer things in life; indeed, the same style guide from the Telegraph declares that the connoisseur’s curly facial hair style is for the “classiest of gentleman only.” The Connoisseur, like the After Eight, requires “maximum grooming” and attention to perfect the style’s “artistically waxed tips” (“Movember 2012: inspiring moustache styles and how to sport them,” 2012; Movember Canada, 2013f). Yet other accounts, including Movember’s official description, refer to a mixed bag of masculine tropes. Movember’s 2012 style guide states the Connoisseur is “reminiscent of villains, British infantry and dapper detectives.” Men’s Fitness magazine also refers to “stereotypical villains,” but also names circus ringleaders among the men who have popularized this style (C. Robertson, 2013). The diverse group of figures representative of this style – from classy gents to soldiers to cartoon villains - demonstrates how multiple and contested meanings can be associated with one particular style. Yet the
attention to grooming and artistic panache required to wear these styles sets them apart from the working class sensibilities related to other popular moustache designs.

**Figure 13** (“Movember 2012: inspiring moustache styles and how to sport them,” 2012)

Styles such as the “Boxcar” and “Trucker” draw on masculine working class tropes and are praised for being easy to grow and “low maintenance.” These shaggy, largely unkempt moustaches typically involve less attention than the more sophisticated styles that require complicated trimming or waxing to maintain the moustache’s proper shape. The Trucker’s “horseshoe” style has a straightforward connection to the perceived shaving practices of many long haul truck drivers and a working class lifestyle often romanticized in popular culture narratives (including more than a few blues and country music standards). The Boxcar similarly draws its symbolism in a nomadic version of working class life. The popular shaving blog “How to Grow a Moustache” stresses that this style is named after its rectangular shape, but also refers to the “hobos and ramblers” who wore the low maintenance style out of necessity throughout the Great Depression. A precarious life “riding the rails” in search of work or food during the Depression has also been largely sentimentalized in novels and films like *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). The
readymade connection between these moustache styles and associated working class
tropes also serves to glorify masculine performances thought to be rugged or resilient.

![Image](image1.png)

**Figure 14** (Movember Canada, 2013f)

Yet one moustache style, the unfortunately named “Trash Stache,” was only
encountered in unofficial narratives, but strongly alluded to a disparaged or vilified
working class identity: the “white trash” or “trailer trash” male. I first came across a
reference to the Trash Stache when researching Movember’s presence in the branding
practices of the National Hockey League. A 2011 article on sports blog *Total Pro Sports*
ranking the “15 Best Movember Moustaches of 2011” offered a tongue-in-cheek
compliment about how Brent Burns of the San Jose Sharks “complimented (sic) the trash
stash (sic) with a camouflage shirt” (the appropriateness of this combination, it would
seem, draws on cultural stereotypes linking hunting or military-inspired fashion with
white rural, working class identities) (On, 2011). As I searched for more evidence of the
Trash Stache within the discourses comprising the NHL’s participation in Movember, I encountered a Tumblr account called “Kevin Shattenkirk’s Trash Stache,” showcasing a gallery of images of the moustache worn by the St. Louis Blues’ defenseman (Sarah_Connors, n.d.). The Trash Stache terminology, however, is not exclusively used to describe hockey players; indeed, the trope is employed by writers and social media users to make self-depreciating jokes or mock the moustaches worn by celebrities such as Johnny Depp, Nicholas Cage and Justin Bieber. The Trash Stache even has an entry on Urban Dictionary, which describes the style as “a poor excuse for a moustache” generally worn by “trailer trash” and “rednecks” among other notorious facial hair offenders (Urban Dictionary, 2015). Unlike the Trucker or Boxcar, the Trash Stache does not draw on romanticized narratives of working class masculinities. The name of this style further entrenches cultural assumptions about social class hierarchies that disparage uneducated, country-dwelling white men who cannot possibly live up to Movember’s middle class trendiness and sophistication.

The ways in which these moustache styles are portrayed and discussed point to shared assumptions regarding facial hair and social class that invite ironic readings of masculine working class tropes. These moustache styles are positioned as relics of a distant past or representative of class identities presumed different than those claimed by most Movember participants. These working and upper class masculinities are used as stable referents for Movember’s ironic masculine performances. They capacity to draw attention or generate momentary humour by wearing a moustache style that is “not your own” reaffirms the Mo Bro’s unshakeable middle class-ness. He does not identify as or with the white trash working class stiff or the wealthy, up-scale connoisseur beyond their
aesthetic or ironic value. These ironic portrayals invite Movember participants to take on the role of the culture-savvy, witty middle-class gentleman who acknowledges the absurdity of his performance and can exaggerate these class identities to the point of farce. I would argue, moreover, that the need for this ironic distance explains why the wax-tipped Connoisseur moustache would not work in the same way if it were nicknamed “the hipster,” despite the style’s popularity among young white middle-class men who might fall into the much maligned male hipster category. Doing so would comprise irony’s discursive function as a “distancing mechanism” (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 49) from the particularities and inequalities of the socio-political context in which Movember’s discursive communities are situated. Using exaggerated caricatures or well-known popular culture tropes, rather than referencing familiar aspects of middle-class life, re-asserts that the campaign remains at a distance from contemporary political concerns and should not be taken too seriously.

Race and Racialization: Undercover Brothers and Fu Manchus

The ironic distance cultivated by particular moustache styles is also tied to assumptions about the normativity of whiteness and the “othering” of racialized bodies through stereotypes about facial hair. Some styles are given names that allude more explicitly to understandings of race; for example, the “white trash” trope called to mind by the Trash Stache rests on the portrayal of corrupted or distorted whiteness associated with rural, working class communities. Yet, although Movember promotes itself as an inclusive movement in which “anyone” can participate (and many racialized people do), the content that makes up the campaign’s style guides are very much informed by
assumptions about racialized masculinities that establish white bodies as representing the
dominant and normative image of Movember.

The campaign’s whiteness is produced through often unspoken assumptions that suggest that the “real” moustaches endorsed by Movember are most likely to be found on white faces. The roster of Movember’s most celebrated icons – from Tom Sellick to Burt Reynolds to Hulk Hogan – make whiteness appear dominant across the movement and represent masculinities (often rugged, honourable and almost always heterosexual) that are unquestionably racialized as white. Almost every style guide I observed similarly display the “ideal” representation of each moustache style on white faces or by placing a stylized digital moustache logo on a plain white background. These design decisions could be justified as purely aesthetic, yet the continuous repetition of pictures of white celebrities or dark moustaches on white backgrounds sends powerful messages regarding how race informs the ideal image of the Movember moustache. Jacobson (2010) and Robert (2014), moreover, both write of the absence of racialized men within Movember’s promotional material and social media activities. While I encountered some images of racialized men across Movember’s dominant narratives and occasional statistics about health risks for men of different racial backgrounds, the predominant whiteness of the movement persists through the campaign’s ironic imagery and social media chatter.

Some of the playful banter around the Movember moustache concerns assumptions about how a man’s capacity to grow facial hair varies according to his race. Most commonly, men classified as “Asian” were subject to stereotypes about their inability to grow a proper moustache, which were reflected in social media comments. When a YouTube viewer asked for further advice about growing facial hair in the
comment section for the “How to Grow a Moustache with Nick Offerman” video, another user sarcastically replied, “Try your hardest not to be Asian” (VelaToNorma7, 2012). Another user commenting on the Nick Offerman video offered the self-deprecating remark, “I’m Asian, I have no hope 😞” (Skylrovka, 2012), whereas a viewer further down the thread asked the tongue-in-cheek question, “Any extra advice for Asians???” (Asianbomb47, 2012) (a question that garnered over one hundred likes on the social media site, garnering some level of approval from its online audience). Similarly, a viewer asks in the It Gets Fuller comments, “How many Asians have you seen grow a stash or any kind of facial hair?” (wentzel82, 2012). The presumed inability for Asian men to grow moustaches comparable to those worn by the campaign’s “real” (white) men is shaped by, while continuing to inform, stereotypical notions of a one-dimensional effeminate and infantilized image of Asian masculinity (Fung, 1996; Han, 2006).

A representation linking facial hair and Asian masculinity, however, was sometimes portrayed through the cartoonish image of the Fu Manchu moustache. This moustache style gained notoriety through almost a century of Western popular culture as
a stereotypical way to represent men, often villains or criminals, from China or Asia more broadly. These representations typically emerged as way to demonize Asia in the context of anxieties about illness, hallucinogenic drugs or corruption associated with racist perceptions of “The Orient” (P. Baker, 2015). Contemporary images of the Fu Manchu are largely distanced from these contexts, but still stand in as a stereotypical and over-the-top shorthand for Asian masculinity. Indeed, although this style was referenced in many online videos and many social media comments, the Fu Manchu was almost exclusively represented by participants wearing artificial moustaches rather than being grown by men of any race or ethnicity. Most notably, when Oscar Nunez magically sprouts facial hair in the It Gets Fuller video, he is shown to be wearing an over-the-top and obviously artificial moustache in the Fu Manchu style. The prevalence of fake moustaches used to represent this facial hair style (both in this video and other representations I observed) adds to the overstated and sarcastic tone through which men racialized as Asian were represented in Movember’s online discourses.

The suggestions for potential moustaches within Movember style guides also produce tensions regarding how the movement’s intertextual discourses draw on racial and ethnic stereotypes. The Mario Brothers, for example, of the iconic Nintendo video game franchise that bears their name, were frequently cited as moustache icons with the two famous cartoon plumbers invoking an exaggerated vision of Italian working class masculinity. The value of this reference is built upon a widespread generational nostalgia for the early 1990s video games and their successors but also finds meaning in ethnic stereotypes about the tendency for some Italian men to wear moustaches and work in construction trades like plumbing. Yet the irony that makes the reference to the Mario
Brothers characters work, I would argue, materializes more through the collective memory of the Nintendo video games rather than the perceived representativeness of the stereotypes embodied by the Mario and Luigi characters. The unsaid meaning here involves recognizing that the Mario Bros. franchise is largely outdated and technologically unsophisticated compared to contemporary state-of-the-art gaming platforms. This intertextual relationship is built upon the ability to put the Mario Brothers in context and the recognition that many Mo Bros have shared childhood histories with these iconic (yet antiquated) videogames. The humour derived from these references does not need to revolve around the race or ethnicity of these characters because they are presumed white and are lumped in with a host of other white moustache icons.

Meanwhile, both official and unofficial style guides referred to the “Undercover Brother” as a possible moustache choice for Movember participants. The 2012 official style guide described the Undercover Brother style as “just covering the upper lip with subtly rounded corners” and the “perfect style for those who crave a mo but don’t need undue attention” (Movember Canada, 2012e). In Movember’s intertextual tradition, the name of this particular style can be traced back to a 2002 film of the same name starring black actor and comedian Eddie Griffin who plays a secret agent called the Undercover Brother. In the film, which revolves around a plot mocking the state of American race relations in the early 2000s, Griffin indeed wears a moustache, as well as well-defined afro. The subtle nod to the racialized main character from this largely forgotten film begs the question: is the Undercover Brother the predefined style choice for black men participating in Movember? Yet, in the context of Movember, the Undercover Brother style was strangely portrayed on white faces and backgrounds or worn by white
celebrities such as Daniel Craig, Jude Law and Nick Offerman. Adam Garone informed
the audience for his Reddit AMA that he had been “rocking the undercover brother all
year” (Garone, 2013). A similar phenomenon occurred when the white male singers of
the Derick Watts and the Sunday Blues “Movember Song” ponder if they should grow a
“fro” moustache (Derick Watts & The Sunday Blues, 2012). The men, of course, are
referring to the afro, but speak only to the style’s aesthetics and ignore its sociopolitical
history as a vehicle for black political expression (Banks, 2000). Unlike the nostalgic
references to the Mario Brothers, these depoliticized and sanitized references to black
culture fail to acknowledge the historical context of each style beyond setting up an ironic
take on facial hair fashion for white men.

Movember’s ubiquitous style guides and social media banter participate in the
systematic “othering” of racialized men by making the facial hair practices of (middle-
class) white men appear natural and normal, while legitimizing styles popularized by
white celebrities or drawing from historical fashion trends favoured by white men. The
legitimization of certain moustache styles occurs according to expectations about which
racial groups can grow “proper” facial hair and assumptions about which hair textures or
consistencies can be easily manipulated or groomed into those popular shapes. Thus, the
Movember brand invites a wide variety of moustache styles to its primary demographic
of white middle-class men, but the range of possibilities constructed for racialized
participants is by comparison rather narrow. Expectations pertaining to race go largely
unspoken when assessing the moustache styles most suitable for white men; yet racial
stereotypes are often front and centre in shaping the participation of non-white
individuals in Movember. I have already discussed the assumptions about facial hair
ineptitude that shape the jokes about Asian men; a distinct set of racialized expectations also informs how narratives are constructed around men with perceived roots in Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

The animated style guide posted by MadeMan.com to their YouTube channel at the beginning of the 2012 Movember campaign offers “The Swami” as one of the 100 moustaches available to potential Mo Bros. This style is depicted as a dark, thick moustache that curls sharply toward the sky at both ends. The moustache is also accessorized with a bright orange turban in the Sikh tradition, yet astonishingly superimposed over the same white face on which every other style was modeled. The stereotypes associated with the “Swami” trope are also reproduced in official accounts of the 2013 campaign’s concluding Gala Partés. Several photos from these events portrayed men who are racialized as brown-skinned (including nominees for the highly touted Man of Movember Award) in costume as stereotypical characters such as genies, sultans, and sheiks (Movember Canada, 2013r). These representations exist in a post 9/11 context in which Muslim, Middle Eastern or Southeast Asian men still encounter racism and Islamophobia through the “bearded terrorist” stereotype. While men of colour encounter widespread discrimination based on their facial hair and are reduced to racialized caricatures through events such as Movember, young white men, under the banner of irony, can safely appropriate and manipulate the meanings associated with a variety of beard and moustache styles.
In the context of Movember’s unrelenting whiteness, assumptions about the connection between race, facial hair and masculinity constrain the range of performances for racialized Mo Bros to participate in the campaign. These participants are subject to cultural processes of Othering, where white Mo Bros and Mo Sistas are invited to laugh along with these one-dimensional, cartoonish representations of racialized masculinities. Subsequently, the participation of racialized men within the movement appears contingent on a willingness to abide by and play into dominant racial stereotypes. These types of constraints are not placed to a similar degree on those racialized as white but might also fall into categories based on ethnicity; the Mario Brothers trope does not bind the participation of all Italians or Italian-Canadians, just as all Mo Bros from Quebec or France are not expected to perform the characteristics of the playful, yet sexualized, “French Tickler.”
There are indeed boundaries around what racialized representations can be included within Movember’s light-hearted discourse; while lampooning Fu Manchus, “swamis” and “brothers” is apparently appropriate, I did not encounter any allusion to more violent or pathologized racial stereotypes. Yet these moustache-themed hi-jinks promote ways of speaking about race akin to the discourses of “ironic” or “hipster” racism through which humour and satire serves to mask the processes of Othering that cement whiteness as the unquestioned norm (Fudge, 2004; Lindsay, 2014; L. West, 2012). Surprisingly escaping substantial academic attention, hipster racism has been described as a way of speaking for educated, privileged and often self-identified progressive white people in Western nations. This type of speech is often characterized by jokes or remarks citing racial stereotypes that are supposed to be witty or enlightened, but actually perpetuate racism by dehumanizing a particular race for the sake a laugh (Lindsay, 2014). This more benign form of racist discourse is protected by the assumed awareness that the white, progressive hipster knows better and that these comments should never be taken seriously. The racialized representations of moustaches in the context of Movember are also insulated from criticism because these forms of hipster racism are perceived to be in the service of a worthy cause. White participants of Movember are cast as the reflexive, culturally-aware champions of a progressive movement that acknowledge the stereotypes at play in the campaign’s playful discourses. Racialized Mo Bros are subsequently invited to play along and willfully assume a role as the cartoonish, racialized Other. Yet this type of “inclusion” primarily serves the interests of Movember’s white majority, while doing little to improve the conditions of the marginalized subject of the joke (Lindsay, 2014). These expectations about how race can
be discussed in the context of masculinity and facial hair are crucial to the construction of Movember’s sense of style and the discursive communities around which the campaign’s brand is cultivated.

Movember’s discursive communities are largely brought into existence through a common cultural sensibility around masculinity and facial hair rather than a shared politics or solidarity. The ironic ethos through which Movember is promoted makes the social and historical contexts in which the campaign’s intertextual pop culture references and sense of “style” appear inconsequential. This post-political narrative is enabled by faith in the good intentions of Movember participants, but also by the understanding that these practices are supported by “common sense” ideas about gender, sexuality, race and class. It is assumed that these representations are not meant to be offensive or harmful. Any quip or image that borders the politically incorrect is readily covered off by the sense that we’re all supposed to be in on the joke. This depoliticized understanding of the campaign, however, gives little attention to the historical particularities of both facial hair and the cultural processes through which the Movember moustache is given meaning.
Chapter 6

Movember and the “Ambivalence” of Ironic Masculinity

The goal of the previous chapter was to continue the enormous task of mapping out the “scene of irony” that encompasses Movember’s online brand environment while considering what cultural assumptions are shared across the movement’s discursive communities. This process involved identifying and interrogating the socially agreed upon ideas and practices that allow the brand’s version of irony to make sense. The key lesson from this survey of the campaign’s discursive foundations is that the good-natured fun that attracts so many supporters to the Movember cause is sustained by assumptions regarding gender and masculinity, but also race, class and sexuality. These cultural expectations shape the parameters for working within and contributing to Movember’s brand environment. These are boundaries, as I have argued, that are constructed around the perceived normalcy of white bodies, middle-class consumption and heteronormative sexual conquest. Those portrayed outside these normative limits are subject to processes of Othering that actively constrain participation in the movement. These methods can make involvement in Movember appear reliant on a readiness to fulfill particular tropes informed by harmful cultural stereotypes. These assumptions also ignore the politicized meanings attached to the moustache for marginalized groups and erase the sociopolitical histories that influence why someone might be (un)willing to participate in the campaign. It is expected, however, that the good cause and fun-loving nature of Movember should transcend notions of difference that are produced through the campaign’s discursive communities.
The cultural boundaries and assumptions produced through Movember’s discursive communities inform the campaign’s official narratives, but also, perhaps more importantly, enable internet users to create content that fits within and further disseminates the brand’s ironic ethos. The expectations about what defines Movember participation serve as discursive guides for the campaign’s brand of irony that provide a sense of what moustache-related banter will gain approval from other members of the community and what meanings, styles or images might be off-limits. These assumptions enable performances of what I call *ironic masculinity*, a set of meanings and practices that exaggerate and often poke fun at masculine characteristics while still reproducing broader gender hierarchies. The purpose of this chapter is to interrogate the “ambivalence” of ironic masculinity as a mode of representation and how it is enacted specifically through the Movember brand (Banet-Weiser, 2012). I argue that ironic masculinity provides a way of speaking about masculinity that works both with and against traditional ideas about manhood. Ironic masculinity recognizes ongoing changes to notions of manliness and allows for flexible or unconventional performances of manhood as long as they do not subvert prevailing perceptions about differences between men and women. I begin this chapter by detailing how understandings of time and history support the performance of irony within Movember, then define ironic masculinity and outline how the campaign’s relationship with hipster culture is a vivid example of the contradictions endemic to the Movember brand.
 Movember and the Politics of Retro: Complexities and Temporalities

Proper participation in Movember involves acknowledging that, for most of the movement’s supporters, the ironic appeal of the moustache has a pre-determined shelf life. While some may keep their moustache into December and beyond, most Mo Bros will take part in the ritualized removal of their Movember moustaches at the end of November. Movember’s 30 day timeline is important to how the campaign is organized; it centralizes the campaign’s fundraising efforts, allows for clever marketing around the launch of each year’s theme and creates anticipation for the November 1st Shave Down ritual. Yet since part of Movember’s promotional narrative involves allowing men to grow facial hair for the first time or justify “trying out” ridiculous moustache styles, it is crucial that these changes to their grooming habits are only temporary. Partners, employers and co-workers are encouraged to relax their normal expectations for proper or professional grooming practices with the promise that their lenience is for a good cause and will only require a 30-day commitment.

The end of Movember each year is importantly marked by a number of customs and spectacles that are celebrated in the campaign’s online discourses. There are, of course, the wildly popular Gala Partés at which participants come together in costume at Movember’s annual conclusion to show off their facial hair growth and toast the campaign’s accomplishments. The end of Movember is also acknowledged by online content that jokingly sends up the process of removing a moustache. On December 1st, 2013, Movember Canada’s official Facebook account posted an image titled “Saying Goodbye to your Mo” that displayed hair shavings around a bathroom sink drain (which were playfully arranged in the shape of a curly moustache). A 2012 video, linked through
YouTube as suggested content on official Movember posts, revolves around a student at an Ontario university who raised money with the promise of waxing his full-grown moustache at the end of Movember. The video depicts the painful, bloody and ill-advised process in full view. Yet many viewers voiced their approval in the attached comments, saluting the Mo Bro’s manliness and praising him for being “tough as nails” or handling the painful endeavour “like a man.” On December 1st, 2012, the Huffington Post posted a video directed by internet marketing gurus Rhett & Link called “How to Kill Your Movember Moustache” (Huffington Post Staff, 2012). Despite the violence implied in its title, the video spoofs how “parting ways with your precious face fur can be more of an emotional experience than you think” and shows a man trying various strategies to cope with the loss of his moustache. The video, however, looks forward to the following year’s campaign by reassuring viewers that “your grief is already nourishing the roots of your next nose neighbour.” From the emotional state implied in “saying goodbye” or grieving the loss of your facial hair to the over-the-top spectacle of removing a moustache in a predictably painful fashion, these images and videos take up the Movember brand in different and complex ways. But this content is connected by the assumption that the ritualized or ceremonious removal of a moustache is a valued aspect of Movember’s ironic masculine performance and initiates participants’ shared anticipation for the following year’s campaign.

Movember’s official 30-day timeline is reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984) notion of the carnivalesque and the temporary relaxation of societal norms and codes of behaviour. For Bakhtin, carnival marked the subversion of the dominant through humour and farce; for Movember, each November marks the relaxation of contemporary norms
and modes of professionalism that legitimizes the moustache (in various stages of growth and cleanliness) in unexpected contexts. Yet just as the carnivals described by Bakhtin had a well-defined beginning and conclusion that re-established the authority of dominant social norms, the Movember moustache loses its ironic value and must be removed at the end of the month. This phenomenon is vividly depicted, for example, at the end of the music video for Derick Watts and the Sunday Blues’ “The Movember Song” (2012) The video’s male protagonists, brimming with confidence after miraculously growing impressive moustaches at month’s end, take to the streets in search of female companionship. The two men appear dismayed, however, when their attempts at moustache-fueled heterosexual conquest fail and they don’t attract much attention from a young, attractive woman who passes them by. They are then shocked to realize that it is December 1st and Movember has ended; overcome by embarrassment, the two men quickly cover their moustaches with their hands. This video communicates how the ironic value of the moustache can be exhausted at Movember’s inevitable conclusion and the return of typical grooming norms.

While Movember’s 30-day calendar is important, the historical lineage claimed by the movement is also crucial for understanding the campaign’s ironic ethos. I am not referring to the history of the campaign that I outlined in Chapter Three, but rather how Movember’s relationship with the past informs its intertextual irony and idealized vision of masculinity. I argue that Movember is a *retro* movement that follows pop culture’s predisposition to endlessly quote trends, icons and styles from the not-too-distant past. This cultural inclination toward the past, however, is not exclusive to Movember or its appropriation of various moustache styles. Simon Reynolds (2011), for example,
thoroughly documents popular music’s “fascination for fashions, fads, sounds and stars that occurred within living memory,” whereas Elizabeth Guffey (Guffey, 2006) identifies how this trend has materialized through music, but also fashion, art and architectural design. Following the work of Guffey most closely, I theorize Movember as representing a distinctly retro sensibility through its referencing of largely past-their-prime masculine icons and outdated facial hair styles. Movember’s intertextuality, as I have argued previously, requires a shared stock of cultural knowledge; but this shared archive of cultural information is built upon ways of knowing the past through popular culture rather than more formal or institutional histories. Movember obtains its retro chic through the ways in which the campaign recycles popular culture of the recent past and re-situates these images and styles within surprising or peculiar contexts. Here, we are reminded of the original impetus for the inaugural Movember campaign and Peterkin’s 2001 assertion that moustaches were at the time almost never found on the faces of young men (p. 152). This abnormality or “out-of-place-ness” was exactly what the founders of Movember thought would make the moustache a perfect catalyst for conversations. The movement was indeed founded on the expectation that moustaches on the faces of young middle-class men would spark curiosity from onlookers simply because these facial hairstyles were unquestionably outdated and unfashionable.

This process of re-contextualization and the cultural awareness it requires gives retro its defining ironic stance (Guffey, 2006). As Guffey writes, retro is characterized by a certain dissatisfaction with contemporary narratives of progress, as well as popular culture’s subversive and playful instincts. Retro brands such as Movember are not consumed through a lens of sentimental nostalgia for the distant past, but a desire to re-
appropriate knowingly outdated, stale or past-their-prime cultural forms and re-contextualize them within an equally flawed present. Retro is defined by a reflexive impulse and an awareness that the celebrities and trends being cited have long gone out of style and lost their cultural relevance. Movember epitomizes this non-serious relationship with the past through the ironic ways the campaign alludes to popular culture that is recognizably outdated, but still modern and familiar. This is what Currie (2007) and Scanlon (2012) call the narrative contingency of irony; you can either be up-to-date and on trend or embrace a style ironically a decade or more later – but you cannot be caught in between. The moustache was able to have its ironic renaissance simply because it was unquestionably passé. It disrupts the linear narratives of history that underlie accounts of the popularity of the high-maintenance goatee or the legacy of the clean-shaven metrosexual by dredging up memories of the facial hair styles of the 1970s and 1980s.

Movember has a seemingly natural and permanent link to these decades. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the “porn stache” or the “80s Porn” style directly reference these eras. The movement’s affinity for the 1970s and 1980s, however, is most evident in the frequent celebration of Tom Selleck and Burt Reynolds as moustache icons. Selleck (*Magnum P.I.* [1980-1988], *Three Men and a Baby* [1987]) and Reynolds (*The Longest Yard* [1974], *Smokey and the Bandit* [1977]), of course, are well-known actors and sex symbols of the 1970s and 80s. In the context of Movember, these men are renowned for their trademark moustaches, but also the masculine performances epitomized by their most famous characters – especially Selleck’s portrayal of the tough, wealthy, womanizing Thomas Magnum from *Magnum P.I.* Yet although both Selleck and
Reynolds have had prolific acting careers stretching into the 21st century, the images most frequently cited in Movember’s online narratives almost always show the men in their 1970s and 80s heydays. While these images are often associated with their career (and moustache) defining roles, the obvious outdated-ness of these personae and the fashion norms they represent contribute to Movember’s retro sensibilities. Moreover, these references to Selleck and Reynolds are given an ironic edge that rests on a shared understanding that these characters and the actors who played them are memorable, but no longer popular or culturally relevant to younger generations of media consumers.

There appears to be a contradiction to Movember’s affinity for the recent past, however, when considering the movement’s frequent allusion to styles and images for the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In Chapter Five, I discussed how the inspiration for the “Boxcar” moustache can be found in the working or underclass styles of the Great Depression. Movember’s discursive communities are built around a shared vision of men’s lifestyles from that historical period. Many of the shaving products that sponsor or are promoted through Movember are “vintage” style products that hearken back to turn-of-the-century grooming practices and are marketed using iconography reminiscent of that era. These vintage motifs make up much of the content of trendsetting men’s websites such as The Art of Manliness, where old-fashioned pictures of turn-of-the-century gentleman or interspersed with articles and advertisements for the latest in men’s fashion. Moreover, many memes and corporate marketing campaigns for well-known brands such as Rickard’s beer were produced using sports motifs constructed around vintage or old-fashioned looking wrestlers, boxers or baseball players who wore recognizable moustache styles characteristic of the decades between 1880 and 1920. The
end of this time period also signalled the emergence of domestic shaving, a shift that took some men away from the practices of male bonding and camaraderie that took place within the confines of the barbershop. As I discussed in Chapter Three, domestic shaving also ushered in a collection of personal grooming products (straight razors, creams and shaving brushes) that have recently been provided with a degree of vintage cachet.

The widespread portrayals of mustachioed men from this time period is prominent in contemporary contexts beyond Movember, and might be a reaction to the all-too-recent metrosexual phenomenon. Metrosexuality worked to legitimize many personal grooming practices for men; yet these practices and the products that supported them underwent an aesthetic process of masculinization. Frank (2014) writes that the re-masculinization of grooming for men has involved the proliferation of powerful discourses that equated these practices with notions of heterosexual appeal, masculine control and modern consumption. I would add to Frank’s analysis that the popularity of products that allude to turn-of-the-century barbershops and shaving products have similarly contributed to the masculinization of male grooming practices. These “throwback” products, such as Penhaligon’s Ltd moustache wax or shaving brush, react to understandings of metrosexual masculinity that promotes the consumption of ultra-modern, state-of-the-art and often disposable commodities (electric razors, creams, gels etc.), and instead reach back to the imagined simplicity and durability of consumer goods from a bygone era. With these items come a vision of gentlemanliness that romanticizes the practices and value systems of a more authentic masculinity. The re-appropriation of these practices and products from over a century ago shares retro’s reflexive dissatisfaction with present trends such as metrosexuality by re-claiming masculine
images and ideals that serve as historical links to late Victorian and post-Victorian societies. Yet, despite the ways in which these product lines disrupt narratives of modern progress, these norms of gentlemanly style and decorum were forged in eras of gender inequality, racial segregation and homophobia. The appropriation raises questions about who has the luxury to hold on to past and who might want to discard or re-write it (Guffey, 2006).

I argue that the degree to which Movember’s retro or vintage aesthetics enacts a dissatisfaction with the present cultural moment falls well short of offering any sort of political statement. Instead, the movement extracts the superficial image of these moustache-related icons, logos and styles with little to no attention to the historical contexts from which these images emerged. The images and icons cited by Movember amount to primarily aesthetic choices rather than socio-political particularities. The aesthetic appeal that characterizes the Movember brand, then, exemplifies Guffey’s claim that retro amounts to a “non-historical way of knowing the past.” Peterkin (2012) similarly writes, when describing what he calls the PoMo Mo, that “postmodern men seem willing to forget or deconstruct all the historical baggage that comes with the mo and embrace the sexy, comical and macho all at once” (121). The unwillingness or inability to engage with the “historical baggage” that accompanies many of Movember’s intertextual and stylistic references demonstrate retro’s tendency toward constructing the past in ways that “remove rather than invest meaning” (Guffey, 2006, p. 28). Movember can revisit the past in a manner that is self-reflexive or cognizant of historical changes and trends; but the movement also pillages history from images and styles with little regard for the sociopolitical contexts that underlie this process of appropriation.
Movember’s relationship with the past requires an ironic stance that recognizes that many of the campaign’s most popular icons and fashion trends are outdated and unfashionable. This ironic disposition requires a sense of the past that places the movement’s retro imagery and practices on an historical timeline and classifies them as modern, but not contemporary: just passé enough to become cool again. Yet this type of empty historicizing does not take into account the social and political contexts that shaped, and were shaped by, the celebrities, styles and practices being cited in Movember’s online narratives. The complex gender, race, class and sexuality politics that contributed to the popularity of Magnum P.I., the Village People and Queen, or turn-of-the-century grooming practices, are obscured from view and declared irrelevant. Instead, Movember’s discursive communities share a one-dimensional recollection of these popular culture forms that reduce these complexities to static representations of a famous moustache. These images are almost entirely decontextualized, except for the superficial recognition that they remind us of eras from pop culture’s retro past. References do not represent a sincere or nostalgic longing for a full-on return to times when “men were truly men.” These images and icons have meaning as representations of masculinity but resurface as ironic style choices rather than meaningful conversations with a revered past. They are put to work to re-fashion contemporary masculinities that pay respect to pop culture’s past while also recognizing and reveling in its obsolescence. Movember’s retro sensibility may occasionally possess a nostalgic tone, but any hint of a sincere longing for the past is unmistakeably disrupted by the inability to trust if the sentiment should ever be taken seriously. This lack of sincerity shields Movember from having to consider the
historical particularities of its ironic retro panache, even when it ventures into the politicized terrain of gender and masculinity.

**Introducing...“Ironic Masculinity”**

The self-aware and often self-deprecating appropriation of dated, untrendy styles and grooming practices are given meaning through their relationship to expectations or tropes pertaining to a number of overlapping cultural identities. While the construction of inferred meanings is what makes the Movember moustache ironic, these unsaid ideas do not replace the original referent or more literal interpretations of facial hair or masculine style. These ironic readings make sense precisely because they strongly gesture toward (rather than erase) the denotative or traditional meanings associated with the moustache. The Movember moustache does not abandon facial hair’s traditional status as a symbol of masculine strength, virility and power, but, in fact, makes these values more visible by exaggerating and finding humour in their perceived stability. In understanding the discursive construction of the Movember moustache, the silly, witty and absurd is always in conversation with the serious, literal and conventional. The relationship between Movember’s outward celebration of outdated masculine symbols and the implicit recognition of the imagery’s relative datedness is not fostered through an either/or binary of said and unsaid. Rather, this discursive relationship constitutes an ongoing cultural exchange that produces a new reading of the moustache recognized as not serious or sincere, but also not entirely removed from traditional or conservative ideals. As I’ve demonstrated throughout my analysis, this relationship is often contested and enacted
differently depending on how the irony is produced and how participants are situated within Movember’s discursive communities.

Linda Hutcheon (1991, 1994) reminds us, however, that irony shapes and is shaped by broader social relations of power. The mobilization of irony as a discursive strategy for Movember is not arbitrary or innocuous, but has implications for how the movement’s message is connected to other social contexts and issues. I have argued that the constitution and contributions of Movember’s discursive communities privileges white, middle class, heterosexual men as the campaign’s normal or dominant participants. Yet the Movember moustache is situated within an historical context in which masculinity is a topic of fierce debate and irony is widely embraced as a way of knowing and representing the masculine. The tension between the contentious role of masculinities in contemporary societies and the tendency for masculine traits to be portrayed in an ironic fashion raises questions about the social and political implications of irony. Put simply, what does Movember’s brand of irony teach us about contemporary masculinities in Canada and elsewhere? How is Movember situated alongside other representations of “ironic” masculinity? Does an ironic reading of the Movember moustache promote radical re-imaginings of gender or re-assert the status quo? The answers to these questions are numerous and complex mainly because the Movember movement does not have exclusive domain over performances of what I call ironic masculinity.

Ironic masculinity emerges as a discourse that exaggerates, inflates and amplifies traits and practices classified as manly or masculine. These over-the-top performances of masculinity draw excessive attention to conventional ideas associated with manhood, finding humour in the exaggeration of these characteristics while still highlighting the
legitimacy and cultural value of the masculine. The tongue-in-check or sarcastic tone of these discourses is what separates ironic masculinity from what is commonly described as “hyper-masculinity.” Hyper-masculinity encompasses the practices and beliefs producing exaggerated or over-developed ideals of manhood characterized by aggression, violence, risk-taking and overt negations of the feminine (Burstyn, 1999; Schroeder, 2004). Messner (1988) similarly describes hyper-masculinity as representing “the extreme possibilities of the male body.” Ironic performances of masculinity often share the foundational principles of hyper-masculinity, including firm belief in clear-cut gender divisions and the celebration of male biological traits. Yet in its ironic mode, “masculinity” is always placed in quotation marks; the over-the-top gender performances are never intended to be taken as true or completely sincere. These ironic practices knowingly embrace performativity and inauthenticity while embellishing traditional symbols of masculinity to make them appear out of place or absurd. This important conceptual distinction represents a break with past scholarship that has described Movember as a hyper-masculine campaign in which irony is deployed solely as a clever marketing strategy (Jacobson, 2010; Robert, 2013; Wasserburg et al., 2014). Irony is not simply a different way to represent hyper-masculinity, but creates discursive space for distinct and more complex understandings of gender that discourage one-dimensional conceptions of masculinity. I argue that distinguishing ironic masculinity from narratives of the hyper-masculine enables us to better understand the social and political implications of Movember’s online brand.

I am careful to note, however, that I do not offer ironic masculinity as a new trope or category of masculinity. In fact, as I discussed in Chapter Three, I resist the creation of
new or more detailed gender typologies and over-categorizing masculine archetypes. I also wish to avoid classifying ironic masculinity as a “hybrid” of different categories (Messner, 2007) or as “oscillating” between two relatively fixed types (Benwell, 2004). I have taken a position against the over-categorization of masculine archetypes in some of my past work concerning the social construction of masculinity (Brady & Ventresca, 2014), and following Pringle (2005) and Miller (1998), I advocate for conceptions of masculinity that do not abide by strict or even overlapping categories. Instead, I seek to map discursive formations that allow for identities that are discontinuous, fragmented and, at times, contradictory. Rather than reinforcing, combining or resisting pre-existing categories of gender, discourses of ironic masculinity simultaneously shape and constrain understandings of multiple identities within different historical contexts. In other words, ironic masculinities are ways of knowing and speaking about gender that allow for and even embrace multiplicity and contradictions that can be interpreted differently depending on the particular time and place.

My conception of ironic masculinity is greatly influenced by Butler’s (1999) theories of gender performativity and how her approach encourages us to resist pre-given subjectivities and gender essentialism. In some respects, my definition of ironic masculinity is similar to Butler’s discussion of gender parody as a way to combat essentialism and reveal how gender (while appearing natural and stable) is solely performative and artificial. Citing the power of drag performances, Butler points to the “denaturalizing action” of gender parody in exposing the fallacy of gender’s innate or biological origins. Similarly, ironic masculinity knowingly emphasizes and deconstructs the performative and artificial nature of gender identities by highlighting how they are
socially constructed and change over time. The moustache, of course, is thought to be one of the most enduring symbols of Western manhood but can still fall hopelessly out of style and become representative of stigmatized or old-fashioned masculinities. Contemporary discourses of ironic masculinity draw in a similar vein from a camp tradition that exaggerates and theatricizes seemingly stable and knowable signifiers to protest against notions of gender essentialism and heteronormativity (Christian, 2001; Halperin, 2012; Sontag, 1964). Yet the political underpinnings of ironic masculinity are quite distinct from gender parody or camp; these differences emerge most vividly in how discourses of ironic masculinity are situated within the workings of consumer culture.

In addition to Movember, the iconic Old Spice Man is one of the most prominent examples of ironic masculinity in contemporary popular culture. The Old Spice Man was the protagonist of the popular “Smell like a Man, Man” campaign that Old Spice (a division of Proctor and Gamble) launched in 2010 to re-invigorate the fledgling brand of men’s grooming products. The Old Spice Man, played by former NFL player Isaiah Mustafah is portrayed as the quintessential masculine archetype; yet the campaign’s ironic twist involves how the commercials spoof the masculine norms that pervade modern advertising. Mustafah’s character is an over-the-top representation of classic masculine ideals: he is muscular, rugged, handy, wealthy, romantic and, of course, well groomed. The Old Spice Man is all of these qualities rolled into one charismatic package that takes these traits to their unreasonable and absurd extremes. In this series of advertisements, the Old Spice Man goes from shamelessly flexing his muscles in one shot to wielding an axe in another, then offering numerous diamonds as a gift and riding a white horse. The Old Spice Man character begins each commercial with the greeting,
“Hello, ladies,” establishing the heteronormative pre-text of the campaign and reaffirming his status as a paragon of masculine virility and sexual prowess.

The ironic masculinity embodied by the Old Spice Man, therefore, stems from the assumption that the audience recognizes and embracing the absurdity of Mustafah’s performance. Through the Old Spice Man character, we see how multiple ideas about masculinity can be made intelligible at once but are represented in a way that points to their inauthenticity and artificiality. As Yannick Kluch (2014) writes in his Master’s Thesis on this series of commercials, the audience is invited to reflexively consume and mock the stereotypes offered by the Old Spice campaign as the qualities of a “real man.” Classic tropes are embellished to the point where they are laughable and ridiculous. These include “universal” masculine ideals, but also those particular to Mustafah’s performance of masculinity. His blackness, most specifically, and constructions of the hyper-sexual and naturally athletic black body are also included as part of the parody; these traits are celebrated as representations of the epitome of manliness at the same time as they are recognized as contested racial stereotypes (Kluch, 2014). In the production of Mustafah’s character as purposefully epitomizing over-the-top ideas about black masculinity, we see traces of hipster racism whereby the assumed awareness of the stereotypical nature of these representations are thought to make them more palatable.

Kluch argues, however, that these playful representations actually work to reinforce rather than subvert a version of hegemonic masculinity based on male power, action and control. The viewer, according to Kluch, is ultimately emasculated and feminized in comparison to the idealized figure of the Old Spice Man. I agree with Kluch’s premise that the irony at play in this Old Spice campaign re-asserts some
dominant masculine norms in the context of heterosexual relationships. Yet instead of envisioning these ads as insidiously re-producing the characteristics of a pre-determined version of masculinity, I view the Old Spice Man and ironic masculinities more broadly as providing a different way of speaking about masculinity that allows for both the questioning and preservation of contemporary gender norms. In assessing the effectiveness of irony in advertising campaigns directed at men, Tyso n Smith (2005) argues that this type of marketing taps into men’s anxieties about properly performing masculinity and plays up the impossibility of attaining accepted ideals of manliness. This discourse is structured around an implicit acknowledgement that men cannot possibly meet the standards of ideal masculinity set by modern advertising. These representations invite male viewers to take on the subjectivity of the “ordinary guy” who performs a more accessible and understated version of masculinity in his everyday life. This subjectivity allows men to laugh in the face of the media’s unrealistic portrayals of “real men” yet still value and access meanings representative of authentic or traditional masculinities through their consumption practices.

Following Smith, then, I argue that discourses of ironic masculinity provide a means to negotiate a growing awareness of changes to patriarchal power structures alongside the perceived need to re-inscribe traditional gender norms. Proctor and Gamble is involved in Movember through their Gillette brand rather than Old Spice, but the images of the Movember moustache and the Old Spice Man are co-constituted in and through discourses of ironic masculinity that circulate through contemporary popular culture. These brand images construct contemporary masculinities as both malleable and stable (Malin, 2005). The ironic discourses that comprise these campaigns do not lie to us
about the persistence of male dominance and gender inequality, but offer portrayals of manliness that recognize the complex and changing nature of gender norms in the 21st Century without abandoning the association of masculinity with power, action and dominance. The Movember moustache may be an ironic performance for white, middle-class, heterosexual men that points to the social construction and flexibility of masculine values but does not disown or denounce the privilege afforded men by these ideals. Ironic masculinities do not destabilize gender hierarchies but provide different ways to describe gender difference and masculine superiority.

The tendency to preserve rather than disrupt gender hierarchies reveals the post-political nature of ironic masculinity. Ironic masculinity may share the anti-essentialist imperatives of gender parody, but these discursive formations do not fulfill irony’s potential to destabilize patriarchal structures. In line with Butler, as well as Haraway’s description of irony as a political method characterized by “serious play,” a well-established theoretical position envisions irony as part of a feminist project that undermines the authority of gender binaries (Butler, 1999; Haraway, 1991; Hutcheon, 1991; Rainford, 2005). Ironic femininities involve embellishing and amplifying the qualities that produce women’s “innate secondariness” to extreme proportions making these ideas seem contrived or unnatural. As Lydia Rainford (2005) writes, if the repetition of gendered practices cannot be avoided then irony provides a vehicle for these discourses to be repeated differently in ways that subvert the supposed fixity of these practices. Leibetseder (2012), for example, offers the “ambivalent irony” performed by Madonna in the 1980s and 90s as a version of ironic femininity in that the pop singer’s performances consciously blow up and subvert stereotypical feminine tropes such as the
virgin, the “femme fatale,” and the “material girl.” McRobbie (1999) similarly suggests that the ironic consumption of stereotypically feminine pop culture by young women as disrupting gendered dichotomies of cultural knowledge. McRobbie argues that exaggerated performances of taste for cheesy boy bands, women’s magazines and romantic comedies across some feminine subcultures makes the unsophisticated marketing of these cultural products to women appear overly contrived and insulting. Camp is similarly performed as the strategic re-appropriation of stereotypically feminine or hyper-masculine constructs (including facial hair) to ironically redefine social roles and enact a recognizable form of political resistance (Christian, 2001; Cole, 2008; Halperin, 2012). Both camp and ironic femininities unravel the “truth” of gender without stepping outside the oppressive system itself. Instead, these performances play with the familiarity and ordinariness of gendered practices by blowing them out of proportion and expressing discomfort with the “natural” order of things.

Whereas the political potentials of ironic performances of femininity emerge from the marginalized position of women as inferior to dominant masculine norms, I am concerned with how Movember’s brand of irony is produced from positions of social privilege. Much like the Old Spice Man, the Movember brand exposes some traditional or supposedly innate masculine traits as cultural products that are subject to historical variation or occasional disruption. Yet Movember’s reliance on the moustache as its logo and central practice is based on a stable definition of masculinity that constrains the ways gender can be represented or discussed within the context of the broader movement. This contradiction produces the “ambivalence” of Movember and ironic masculinity. Again, Movember represents masculinity as flexible and perhaps even fragile but also stable.
enough to always be distinct from femininity and resist questioning gender divisions. Movember’s brand of ironic masculinity entails working within and exaggerating the gender structures that favour men but does not recognize or undo this privilege. These ironic discourses foster the belief that masculinity can be parodied in a vacuum and jokingly reimagined without attention to the trivialization of femininity or the experiences of those who do not fit within Movember’s white, middle-class heterosexual ideal. This lack of sensitivity toward broader power relations is quite different than the “serious play” characteristic of ironic femininities that make symbols of oppression (rather than the markers of privilege) more visible. Dominant or stereotypical understandings of gender are repeated through Movember’s embellishment of masculinity but these performances do not represent opportunities to question social inequalities or draw attention to other’s suffering. Instead, as I demonstrated through the “ironic” representations of race, sexuality and social class throughout the campaign’s online narratives, Movember’s version of ironic masculinity implies distance from other types of identity or political concerns.

**Movember and the Perils of Hipster Irony**

The ways in which discourses of ironic masculinity materialize through Movember is illustrated by the campaign’s often contested and fraught relationship with the figure of the contemporary hipster. The connection between Movember and hipster culture may seem self-explanatory; as Schiermer (2014) writes, the moustache stands as the original hipster signifier. Indeed, in her book *So You Think You’re a Hipster?* (2013), Kara Simsek dedicates a section to the moustache declaring that the rise of 21st century
hipster made it seem more likely to encounter young men wearing moustaches than those without. Yet Simsek also provides a glimpse into the hipster moustache being reviled as representative of inferior or subordinated masculine performances. Simsek writes, “There was really only one problem with the moustache – it looked repulsive” (p. 19). She continues, echoing some of the comparisons found within Movember’s online narratives, by criticizing men wearing the hipster moustache as resembling criminals, pedophiles and those with “mild learning disabilities” (pg. 18). The moustache is often singled out as representative of the hipster’s ironic and narcissistic flair and is often at the centre of the hate and animosity directed at hipster culture. When popular men’s lifestyle *Ask Men* published a list of the top ten hipster trends to hate, the moustache was derided as “a hop, skip and a jump from screaming ‘please, please look at me!’” (Averill, n.d.). The moustache, I would add, also helps fuel the dislike of the hipster’s casual appropriation of trends from the past or cultures other than their own. These ironic practices and the casualties of the hipster’s quest for cool are often acknowledged as representing broader issues related to social class, urban gentrification and privilege (Halperin, 2012; Marsden, 2014; Schiermer, 2014; Wampole, 2012). As Schiermer (2014) explains, hipsters are most frequently young, white and middle class, but revel in the appropriation of low, obsolete or marginalized cultures; the formerly “popular,” working class, ethnic or exotic and the urban spaces in which these cultures thrived. Similar to the ways in which Movember scours the past for moustache-related trends with little attention to their historical contexts or the implications of these practices, hipster culture’s endless cycles of retro citation leave little room for engaging with the political consequences of these trends.
Despite these similarities, the much maligned hipster has a contentious relationship with the Movember movement. In his oft-cited 2011 Ted Talk, Adam Garone makes the case that Movember’s revitalization of the moustache preceded the “hipster moustache trend.” Similarly, Tom Rollins of the online magazine Substance blames Movember for bringing the hipster moustache to the mainstream. Garone was also asked in an interview for MadeMan.com how to distinguish between “an ironic hipster moustache from a Movember moustache” (Garone replies by stating that a Movember moustache looks “more awkward”) (Pell, 2012). Nick Offerman cites “dirty hipster” in the Your Mo Will Get Fuller video as an insult those with inferior moustaches might hear from resentful onlookers. A Facebook user commented on one of Movember’s official videos encouraging Mo Bros to register online by fiercely declaring that “Hipster dudes who think ‘Movember’ is fashion must be stopped” (St. Jean, 2013). The moustache is strongly connected to both Movember and hipster culture; but some attention is given within Movember’s online discourses to the task of creating distance between hipsters and the campaign’s noble and more masculine participants.

Yet in spite of attempts to detach hipster culture from the popularity of Movember, the two trends are virtually inseparable and co-constituted through developments in contemporary popular culture. In addition to the ubiquitous moustache, other hallmarks of hipster culture including horn-rimmed glasses, tattoos, barbershops and the fetishization of kitschy or old-fashioned consumer products are prominent throughout Movember’s online environment. The tongue-in-cheek premise of the short-lived yet well-publicized Tumblr account “Hipster or Movember?” points to the undeniable parallels between the two trends that go beyond the moustache. The blog’s
central question is similar to the scenario Garone received from MadeMan.com, but the sarcastic tone that characterizes “Hipster or Movember?” communicates how the two cultural phenomena are nearly indistinguishable. Even Garone, despite his and others’ stance that Movember was conceived prior to the hipster moustache trend, concedes to Los Angeles Magazine that Movember is indeed “a little bit hipster.” Garone also remarks in that same interview, however, that “some of the hipsters that rock a moustache all year round get a little bit annoyed with Movember, too” (Boss, 2012). The mainstream, feel-good nature of Movember in some ways clashes with the knowingly pretentious celebration of cool associated with hipster culture; but, unified by the unapologetic celebration of the moustache and other fashion styles, the two trends continuously inform and support each other. Even the underlying willingness to keep Movember separate from hipster culture shows the movement’s hipster stripes; one of the trademarks of hipster culture, of course, is the unwillingness to self-identify as a hipster in the first place (Halperin, 2012; Marsden, 2014; Wampole, 2012).

Given the undeniable similarities of hipster culture and the Movember movement, what are the social implications of this relationship? If these phenomena are co-constituted (and often conflated) in and through popular culture, how might these discourses inform a conception of ironic masculinity? There are, of course, hipsters who do not identify as white men, just as Movember’s ironic attitude is sometimes perpetuated by those who do not fit the brand’s ideal of white, heterosexual, middle-class masculinity. Yet the discourses that construct Movember and its relationship with hipsters provides important insight into the depoliticized nature of ironic masculinity and the campaign’s online narratives.
Here, I want to further emphasize that, despite the appropriation of traditional masculine signifiers, it is not hyper-masculinity that binds Movember and hipster culture but the performance of inauthenticity and insincerity when it comes to gender. In fact, hipsters are often singled out and mocked for being unmanly and are often feminized in popular discourses. For example, after declaring that “moustaches are probably the easiest way to spot a hipster,” a blog for irreverent Canadian satellite TV channel Bite explains, “hipster dudes are skinny and less male like, therefore facial hair makes them feel more like a man” (“Hipster Moustaches,” 2010). Some writers similarly describe hipster style as androgynous, combining outward markers of manly taste, such as facial hair, plaid works shirts, meat and cheap beer, without the bulky or muscular bodies associated with these masculine stereotypes (Benoria, 2013; Bridges, 2014). In the Globe and Mail, Iris Benoria (2013) compared hipsters to the “weirdos that the normal taunt” and the “nerds beaten up by jocks.” The mockery leveled against hipsters indeed seeps into the ways in which Movember participants are often scorned for temporarily borrowing the moustache and growing inadequate facial hair. An entry on the Tumblr account “Dads Were the Original Hipsters,” for instance, makes the feminization of both hipsters and Mo Bros clear by writing that “Your dad participated in Movember before you did and he’s had the manicured follicles to prove it.” The post continues with the following words of wisdom, “So hipsters, when you’re splashing Rogaine on the pre-pubescent beginnings of your trash-stache and dreaming of hairy-glory while disgusting everyone you encounter, remember this…Your dad didn’t need an excuse to have a mustache because he was man enough to shit-kick his way through destiny with one every day” (“Your Dad Participated in Movember Before You Did,” n.d.). These quotes
not only scoff at Movember’s appropriation of retro facial hair styles but also ridicules participants for their failure to live up to the moustaches worn by the “real men” of years past.

Yet, as much as they are often spoken about in the same breath, the cultures of hipsters and Movember are not the same per se. Again, Movember’s relationship with hipster culture is a contentious one and highlights how discontinuous and contradictory understandings of gender can operate simultaneously through discourses of ironic masculinity. While Movember can incorporate elements of urbane hipster fashion into its brand image, but also embrace the less-than-sophisticated violent masculinities of NHL hockey players. Movember can tap into the hipster’s retro counter-culture and at the same time grow to be an unquestionably popular and mainstream movement. Hipsters are known for their ironic insincerity that borders on apathy, but their image and fashion sense is appropriated by a campaign that values a sincere devotion to fun and “doing good.” These elements of the Movember ethos do not cancel each other out but are co-articulated as part of a complex understanding of gender and irony. The contestations and contradictions that emerge through Movember’s relationship with hipster culture points to how the ironic stance that characterizes both phenomena favours the realm of the superficial image and intertextual citation over depth and history. Following Tristan Bridges’ (2014) analysis of the gender politics of male hipsters, Movember appropriates strategic bits and pieces of traditional masculinities in a performance that revolves around the moustache. But, like hipster culture, Movember incorporates the forms and styles that represent the masculine with little attention to the substance or histories of masculinity (Bridges, 2014). Therefore, conflicting images, meanings and practices can materialize
through Movember’s online narratives – including its contentious relationship with hipster culture. The campaign’s ironic attitude works to stitch these ideas together and keep these contradictions from being called into question.

The artificial appropriation and citation of masculine images, practices and icons offers important lessons about the depoliticized nature of Movember and irony masculinity. The ironic masculinities representative of hipsters and Movember are superficial, fashionable and trendy, and not compatible with the subversive impulse underlying camp or performances of ironic femininity (Halperin, 2012). Their attachment to a movement happens through ironic appropriation and stylistic choice rather than drawing attention to oppression and systemic inequality. As David Halperin argues in *How to be Gay* (2012), ironic references to masculine signifiers that are accompanied by the assumption that “they don’t really mean it” appear to exempt the ironist from the systems of inequality that give these cultural artefacts their meaning and cachet. Putting “masculinity” in square quotes, then, creates a sense of distance from the culture that produces both marginalized identities and the positions of social privilege that Movember participants can enjoy. Mo Bros can instead recuse themselves from political engagement and claim that they are just having fun for a good cause. Camp and ironic femininities, however, do not allow for this type of detachment because repeating dominant systems of meaning often require facing up to the patriarchal structures that marginalize women and gay men. The key implications of ironic masculinities, as I will explore in the next chapter, emerges from the expectation that Movember participants exhibit a well-informed self-awareness in how they go about their moustache-related practices; the movement operates under the assumption that everyone is in on the joke, so to speak.
This presumed reflexivity across Movember’s discursive communities allows the movement to be branded as detached from political concerns while constraining attempts to politicize the discussion around the campaign. What Christy Wampole (2013) writes in the *New York Times* about the perils of hipster irony applies to the post-political nature of Movember: “no attack can be set against it – it has already conquered itself.” Many of the characteristics of hipster irony are articulated through Movember to similar effect; these elements produce an ironic version of masculinity that can exist across multiple social and cultural domains while still insulating the movement from politicized antagonisms.
Chapter 7

Grooming, Eating and Skating “Like a Man”

This chapter explores five key case studies that illustrate how discourses of ironic masculinity emerge within the context of Movember. These examples include the portrayals of mirrors as part of Movember-content, the 2012 film Mansome, the endorsement of Movember by celebrity Nick Offerman, the role of food in the campaign’s marketing materials, and Movember’s promotional partnership with the National Hockey League (NHL). The case studies illuminate how discourses of ironic masculinity create space to acknowledge ongoing changes to gender hierarchies while mitigating the extent of these potential threats to male dominance. The movement absorbs traits or behaviours that may be viewed as unsettling traditional understandings of masculinity within Movember’s ironic discourses. In doing so, the campaign encourages its supporters to avoid interpreting these performances as destabilizing male privilege or broader gender hierarchies. Instead, Movember’s brand of ironic masculinity allows space for slight changes to understandings of manhood without fear that these transformations will unsettle the gender binary or diminish faith in the “naturalness” of male dominance. This chapter furthers my emphasis on representations of the body and physical practices as crucial aspects of Movember’s brand(ed) activism.

The Men in the Mirror: The Moustache and its Discontents

A memorable storyline from season one of critically-acclaimed sitcom Modern Family illustrates a prominent way in which the image of the moustache is often encountered and internalized by Movember participants (Winer, 2010). The series did not
include a specific Movember-themed episode, but the plot of this episode is instructive for thinking through how the moustache is recognized as part of a Mo Bro’s identity. In this episode, Phil, the patriarch of the Dunphy family (played by Ty Burrell), drives by a roadside sign for his real estate business only to see that the image of his face that dominates the advertisement has been vandalized. The defacement is particularly damaging because the amateur graffiti artist drew a moustache on the picture of Phil’s face. Dunphy claims that the image of his moustachioed face would make potential clients perceive him as dishonest and unreliable. He declares in dismay, “I don’t take it kindly when someone Tom Sellecks my bus bench.” Yet before Phil gets back into his car to drive away from the scene of the crime, he stops in front of the unfamiliar image of his mustachioed face and appears inescapably fascinated by the facial hair he sees on the picture before him.

A few scenes later, Phil has returned home and is now wearing an artificial moustache from an old Halloween costume. He tells his daughter, who appears visibly unimpressed, that he is trying out his “new soup strainer to see what people think.” Phil then encounters a young construction worker outside the family home who is wearing a full-grown horseshoe moustache. When Dunphy compliments the worker on his moustache, the young man cheerfully replies, “You too, brother.” The scene then switches to one of the series’ trademark cutaway interview segments and Phil smugly repeats the construction worker’s compliment while pointing to his artificial moustache. Through this spontaneous moment of male bonding with the young tradesman, Phil feels vindicated: his manliness and his moustache have been legitimized by one of the archetypes of blue collar masculinity. The key moment in Phil’s transformation, however,
comes from his first encounter with his own moustache on the vandalized advertisement. He stands mesmerized by his own image and is able to see himself as a different and better man. By seeing himself in that modified picture of his own face, Phil is able to imagine himself wearing a moustache and imagine himself taking on a more masculine identity. The vandalized bus bench serves as a mirror through which Phil recognizes the moustache as a practice through which he can forge a new identity.

The mirror is frequently represented as a crucial part of the Movember experience. Mo Bros are frequently portrayed as shaving, trimming or inspecting their moustaches in the mirror, but I read these representations as implying that these men are also seeking out validation in their mirror image. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (Lacan, 2001, 2010) wrote extensively about the role of the mirror in the psychological development of children and how they begin to establish a sense of self. I argue that Lacan’s theory of the “mirror stage” can help explain why the mirror plays an important role in how the moustache is conceived across Movember’s promotional discourses. For Lacan, the child’s initial encounter with their reflection in a mirror is their first recognition of a distinction between self and other. This experience enables the development of an internalized sense of self and the acquisition of an identity independent from the mother and the child’s immediate environment. The child’s encounter with their reflection facilitates the discovery that they can influence what they see in the mirror and thus control and master the movements of their own body. The mirror stage comes with the promise of self-mastery and independence, but also signifies the child’s first process of social acculturation. By “representing oneself to oneself” in the mirror the child begins to internalize that they are also represented to others in a social
environment (Grosz, 1990). The predominance of the mirror throughout Movember’s promotional narratives serves a similar purpose in shaping the discourses of ironic masculinity that characterize the campaign. Like Phil Dunphy’s encounter with his mustachioed “reflection” in the defaced billboard, the mirror facilitates the Mo Bro’s relationship with the Movember brand and invites understandings of gender to which the moustache is undeniably central.

If Peterkin (2012) can confidently write that there can be “no moustache without the razor” (p. 67), then I should be just as assertive in adding that there can also be no moustache without the mirror. As the ritualized shaving practices that allow a Movember moustache to take shape involve a host of grooming products and techniques that are most commonly performed in front of the bathroom mirror. The videos and images that portray the mirror as surface on which a Mo Bro can guide and maintain his grooming regimen also show the mirror to be a space where he can seek validation of his efforts. An official 2013 post to Movember Canada’s Facebook page called “The Nod – The Silent Salute” encourages Mo Bros to proudly nod their heads at fellow participants to recognize their moustache efforts (Movember Canada, 2013n). The video opens by defining “the nod” as “a respectful bow of the head” that is “usually performed to acknowledge an act of valour, heroism or charity.” The video then follows a young white fair-haired protagonist as he goes about his daily routine, receiving nods from the men he meets along the way. He then encounters a group of young women, however, who don’t acknowledge him with the codified masculine greeting, but the young man quickly settles back into a space of male camaraderie as he meets a group of male friends at a coffee shop who properly show their support. The nod, a symbolic greeting not unlike the
masculine-coded handshake, works as an enactment of the campaign’s rituals of male bonding to which women are given roles as secondary bystanders. The tagline “Every Mo Matters” then flashes upon the screen and the video reveals that its protagonist has a less than impressive, blonde moustache that does not compare to the thick, dark facial hair worn by his friends. The video closes, however, with a scene depicting the main character nodding to himself in the bathroom mirror. The ultimate gesture of respect he receives is his own as he recognizes himself as a Mo Bro who matters in the mirror’s reflection.

A similar image of the mirror is depicted in a 2009 commercial for Snickers chocolate bar that was linked via YouTube’s Recommended Videos tab from one of the 2012 Moscars nominees (Munn, 2009). The 30 second advertisement shows a white clean-shaven teenager staring sadly at pictures of grown men sporting extraordinary moustaches. The fresh-faced teen takes a bite of a chocolate bar and stands in front of the
mirror. He then holds his breath while clenching the muscles in his face showing signs of strenuous effort. The camera zooms in to show his nose and upper lip until suddenly a thick, dark moustache instantly grows in place. The young man stares proudly at his reflection in the mirror, stroking his moustache and revelling in the image of himself as a different and better man. In both “The Nod” and this Snickers commercial, the mirror serves as the surface on which Mo Bros can bask in the glory of their moustache and perceive themselves as masculine, virile men. Similar to the ways in which the child must recognize the image in the mirror as their own and self-identify with what they see reflected back at them, the Mo Bro can see the masculine image of the moustache in the mirror and confidently declare “That is me!” (Grosz, 1990). The Mo Bro’s masculine performance may be legitimized through the actions of others but it is most vividly confirmed in the mirror’s reflection.

The representations of mirrors within Movember’s promotional material is also used to punctuate the experience of removing a moustache. Mirrors are often included within portrayals of the annual Shave Down rituals, especially when those with longstanding facial hair see themselves clean shaven for the first time in years. When NHL player Mike Brown and alumnus Wendel Clark participate in Movember Shave Downs in 2012, they are shown their image in a mirror after having their facial hair removed. Clark cannot hold back laughter as he sees his clean shaven face in the mirror, whereas Brown exclaims “It looks so different!” when shown his reflection. The men must recognize themselves in the mirror without the hairy symbol of masculinity and virility that once adorned their faces. Yet, as I discussed in Chapter Six, the removal of
facial hair merely signals the opportunity for these men to grow a new moustache and
demonstrate their masculine capacities once again.

While the mirror can be a surface from which a Mo Bro’s masculine identity is
reflected back to him, the mirror can also facilitate feelings of inadequacy regarding the
quality of a participant’s moustache. In Chapter Five, I outlined how Movember’s fun-
loving brand of irony can be complicated by accounts of anxiety from Mo Bros who
cannot grow what they conceive as adequate facial hair. As clearly portrayed in “The
Movember Song” by Derrick Watts and the Sunday Blues, these feelings are often
associated with the image of manhood Mo Bros see reflected back to them in the mirror
(Derick Watts & The Sunday Blues, 2012). In the music video for The Movember Song,
the two vocalists sing about their failure to grow great moustaches for the previous
Movember. The camera focuses on the image of each man in a mirror while they openly
weep and shave off the remnants of last year’s paltry effort. The singers are also shown
staring into handheld mirrors as they longingly wish for the ability to grow better
moustaches. After wishing on a shooting star, both men magically grow thick moustaches
overnight just in time for the end of Movember, but much of the video portrays the two
singers staring anxiously into mirrors dismayed at their lack of facial hair growth (The
song also contains the lyric “with no hair upon my face, what would our parents say?” – a
quest for parental approval that would satisfy more than a few psychoanalysts!).

The clear light-heartedness of The Movember Song invites the viewer to avoid
taking the video’s over-the-top displays of emotion too seriously. Yet the comedy duo’s
ironic representation of masculinity throughout the video also makes strong statements
about gender relations that are tied to aspects of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Critics of
Lacan’s work have argued that his conception of development beginning with the mirror stage privileges the male body as exclusively phallic, strong and virile (Butler, 1999; Grosz, 1990; Halberstam, 1998). Lacan is often charged with representing the phallus, symbolic of power and dominance, as “naturally” associated with masculinity and the male body (especially the penis). In contrast, femininity and the female body is subsequently defined by a loss or lack of maleness and this symbolic power. A close reading of Lacan and his critics is beyond the scope of this analysis; but the progression from the mirror stage to a conception of “having” or lack is helpful in considering how masculinity is privileged through the phallic image of the Movember moustache.

In many representations across Movember’s online narratives, the moustache stands in for the phallus and further entrenches the association of masculinity with the penis. I outlined in Chapter Five how the moustache is jokingly conflated with the penis in user-generated videos such as 2012’s “The Talk” (AMPproductionsTV, 2012). The Movember-themed Snickers commercial I described earlier in this section demonstrates a similar trend. The portrayal of the young man’s chocolate-fueled transformation is followed by the slogan “Get some nuts. Grow a Mo for Movember.” The playful innuendo again pointing to the moustache acting as a visible signifier of the relationship between the male genitalia and the symbolic phallus. This association is also reflected in social media comments that equate growing a Movember moustache with “growing some balls.” Conversely, the representations of men unable to grow proper moustaches and recognize themselves in the mirror as manly, virile men are defined by a sense of lack. These men are unable to signify the powerful phallus through their moustaches and through this lack or absence are feminized and subordinated. As the female love interest
explains to the male hero in Ask Men’s Movember parody of the film *Limitless* (2011), she justifies her need to end their relationship by stating that when she looks at his face she feels that “something’s missing” (Ask Men, 2011, emphasis mine). The joke, of course, is that she is not only referring to her feelings of emotional detachment, but also the absence of a moustache on her partner’s face. Yet, in psychoanalytic terms, his lack of a moustache, or “what’s missing,” cannot be disassociated from the phallus and his inability to fulfil his entitlement to masculine power through his body and satisfy his partner. In this context, the moustache stands in for the phallus as the locus of masculine power, strength and virility. Without a manly moustache, the clip’s protagonist is feminized and made to appear inferior to other men. However, after he grows a moustache, his newfound facial hair unlocks his potential allowing him to achieve greater business, financial and romantic success. As demonstrated through the phallic connotations ascribed to the moustache, Movember’s brand of ironic masculinity facilitates a light-hearted, yet powerful, way to portray the moustache as representative of “natural” male dominance over feminized and inferior Others. This piece of innuendo relates back to Lacan and the mirror stage, as the ability for men to “recognize themselves” in the mirror is meant to allow them to lay claim to the dominance enacted by the presence of the phallus (or moustache in this case).

**It’s Not Easy Being Mansome: Ironic Masculinity on Film**

The image of the mirror also makes its way into Adam Garone’s appearance in the film *Mansome* (2012). *Mansome* is a feature-length documentary directed by famed filmmaker Morgan Spurlock that seeks to explore how masculinity has evolved alongside
changes to men’s grooming habits. Within the five minutes of the film dedicated to Movember, Garone re-affirms the idea that “every guy secretly wants to know what he looks like with a moustache.” He then explains how a lot of men will “grow out a beard and shave it down to a moustache to check it out for that moment in the mirror.”

Garone’s assertion that men will alter their grooming habits for a moment of “self-reflection” plays into some of the film’s overlapping themes: self-care, vanity, fashion and the (perceived) threat of feminization. Yet despite venturing into some weighty cultural territory, Mansome is not a “serious” documentary with a well-defined thesis or political project. The film is most memorable for its roster of A-List celebrities and the ironic and playful ways it speaks about men and masculinity. I argue that the light-heartedness that guides the treatment of gender and grooming practices throughout Mansome draws on the discourses of ironic masculinity that shape, and are shaped by, Movember’s promotional narratives.

Garone’s time in Mansome is not spent directly promoting the Movember cause, but providing his philosophy on facial hair and masculinity. Garone declares, “You can’t let the moustache wear you, you’ve got to wear the moustache.” He also states that wearing a moustache comes with a “sense of authority” associated with masculinity and leadership. Garone then leads a tongue-in-cheek anthropological survey of “moustaches in nature” that describes the growth of “facial hair” among certain species of fish, birds and mammals including the Mexican molly fish, Inca tern and emperor tamarin. Garone then names “The Walrus” as a common animal with a moustache; but instead of showing an image of the tusked marine mammal, the film flashes to a video clip of celebrity oatmeal enthusiast Wilford Brimley. The witty and unexpected reference to a celebrity
moustache icon known for sporting the “walrus” moustache style serves as Mansome’s nod to Movember’s trademark intertextuality. The film then segues into an account of Spurlock’s involvement in Movember that culminates in one of Mansome’s most memorable scenes: upon noticing that his father has shaved his long time moustache to participate in Movember, the documentarian’s young son bursts into tears at the sight of his clean-shaven dad. Mansome provides little detail about the broader goals of the Movember campaign or its contributions to the moustache’s contemporary renaissance. Instead, the presence of Garone and Movember within the film works as a motif to foster the tone and personality that very much defines Mansome.

Spurlock’s film was largely panned by critics who found it to be an overly superficial exploration into a complex topic that provided little in terms of analysis or cultural perspective (Bennett, 2012; Puig, 2012; Rapold, 2012). Despite featuring commentary from respected sociologist Michael Kimmel, as well as facial hair expert and psychologist Allan Peterkin, critics of Mansome write that the changing relationship between masculinity and grooming is never interrogated in much depth throughout the film. In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, producer Ben Silverman points to the sociological impetus behind Mansome by identifying anxieties about masculinity in an era when the traditional strongholds of male dominance are seen as rapidly eroding: “There’s a real feeling among men that if they’re not the breadwinner, if they’re not chopping things down or skinning things and that the division of labor and responsibility has been equally split, then what makes us men?” (Silverman, as cited in Tschorn, 2012). Yet the tensions concerning feminization, sexuality and consumption that loom over the film’s central question “what does manliness mean?” are addressed fleetingly with little
attention to the broader cultural contexts in which they are situated. Several prominent reviews of *Mansome* similarly commented that Spurlock was “late to the party” in identifying male grooming practices and metrosexuality as societal trends worthy of analysis (Bennett, 2012; Puig, 2012). As I discussed in Chapter Three, metrosexuality was a way of performing masculinity that is generally thought to have reached its peak of cultural notoriety in the mid-2000s.

In spite of the potential staleness of the questions posed by Spurlock concerning men and metrosexuality, *Mansome* is indeed quite timely in its portrayals of ironic masculinity throughout the film. Spurlock appears to appreciate the prevalence of irony as a mode of representing masculinity across contemporary popular culture. He uses interview footage with Old Spice Man Isaiah Mustafa for several segments, while also filming comedian Zach Galifianakis in the woods providing stream of consciousness commentary that plays up stereotypical notions of masculinity; Galifianakis at one point reminisces that, when growing up, his father smelled like a mixture of “garlic and diesel fuel” that “smelled beautiful to [him].” The most notable representations of ironic masculinity within *Mansome*, however, involve actors Jason Bateman and Will Arnett who also co-produced the film. Bateman and Arnett are shown in a luxury day spa having conversations about the nature of masculinity while they receive a number of cosmetic treatments (manicures and pedicures, facials, massages). They also find themselves in a number of homoerotic situations including sharing a candlelit bathtub that are laughed off according to the irony that shapes how we should read their homosocial bonding. As Jessica Bennett (2012) of *The Daily Beast* writes, “Two men. One bathtub. A $200 facial scrub. Competing for who has the deepest voice. It’s perhaps the perfect example of the
modern male contradiction.” Throughout these scenes, Bateman and Arnett personify the complexity of contemporary masculinities in ways that are similar to the brands of irony exemplified by Old Spice and Movember. Yet instead of embellishing stereotypical masculine qualities, Bateman and Arnett exaggerate the “feminine side” that is frequently portrayed within Mansome as seeping into and disrupting traditional notions of masculinity.

The awkwardness produced through the Bateman/Arnett scenes reveals how changes in male grooming practices exist in an uncomfortable tension with notions of sexuality and feminization. The irony and humour that undergirds the performances by Bateman, Arnett and others throughout Mansome prevent the audience from placing too much weight in any of the arguments the film portrays. In Mansome’s final scene, Bateman echoes a theory offered by many commentators throughout the film (including an evolutionary anthropologist) purporting that changes in male grooming, hair and fashion norms can be reduced to an innate drive for men to reproduce. Arnett concurs with this heteronormative assumption and responds, “Nature always wins…except against robots.” This quip epitomizes what critic Nicolas Rapold (2012) describes in the New York Times as one of the major flaws of Mansome. He writes that the “hit-and-miss” comedic portrayals of masculinity throughout the film “exist mainly to make sure that no one takes anything too seriously.” The erosion of traditional ideas about masculinity and the consequences of this for men is a topic of discussion in Mansome; yet the film responds not with thought provoking analysis about changes in gender norms, but with jokes and off-the-wall humour that works to contain or downplay any perceived threat to male privilege. Indeed, Garone’s observation regarding the moustache being connected
with masculinity and leadership is never taken up by any of the documentary’s team of experts. The moustache’s resurgence and its association with power or authority is never linked to the contemporary status of women or historical trivialization of femininity.

Instead, the film is notable for how it exemplifies ironic discourses that brush aside sociopolitical histories and make it appear as though masculinities can be analyzed (and spoofed) detached from their broader context. The portrayals of masculinity in Mansome draw from and contribute to the discursive formations around which Movember’s ironic brand revolves; these discourses celebrate the moustache and jokingly decry the feminization of men while employing a tone that constrains “serious” questions about how these ideas might influence understandings of femininity, sexuality or the treatment of women. What binds Movember and Mansome together goes beyond Adam Garone’s brief cameo, but involves how both the movement and the film implicitly reproduce hetero-masculine superiority and the gender binary through the strategic mobilization of irony and the trappings of celebrity culture.

**Nick Offerman: How to Grow a Moustache with Ron Swanson**

Movember’s most notable celebrity endorsement comes from actor and comedian Nick Offerman. Offerman has appeared in a number of film, television and theatre productions, but he is most known for his role as Ron Swanson on popular sitcom Parks & Recreation (2009-2015). On Parks & Recreation, Swanson is the director of the Parks Department in fictional Pawnee, Indiana. His character is defined by traits typical of a “man’s man:” he is a skilled handyman and craftsman, enjoys the outdoors, consumes great amounts of meat and whisky, and lives by a code of masculine honour and respect.
Swanson is portrayed as a staunch libertarian who is obsessed with privacy and personal liberties while abhoring public institutions (in spite of his job at the municipal government). Yet, most importantly, Offerman performs as Swanson wearing a thick, dark moustache that is both the actor’s and the character’s trademark. Offerman and his iconic moustache were featured in four promotional videos for Movember produced by men’s lifestyle website MadeMan.com. In addition to the send up of the It Gets Better Project I discussed in Chapter Five, Offerman also stars in “How to Grow a Moustache with Nick Offerman” (MadeManDotCom, 2012a), “Great Moments in Moustache History” (MadeManDotCom, 2013a), and a parody of Irene Cara’s 1983 hit “Flashdance (What a Feeling)” called “Stachedance” (MadeManDotCom, 2013b). These videos were posted to Made Man’s YouTube channel, but also shared across Movember’s official social media platforms. The purpose of this section is not to conduct close readings of each video, but to consider how the images of Offerman and Swanson contribute to the discourses of ironic masculinity that pervade contemporary popular culture and inform the Movember campaign.

In the Movember videos featuring Offerman, he is introduced as Nick Offerman but wears the moustache that is inextricably connected to the Swanson character. At the beginning of “How to Grow a Moustache,” Offerman indeed references his breakout role on Parks & Recreation. The association of Offerman’s moustache with his portrayal of Swanson was not lost on many of the YouTube users who cited the show in the comment threads attached to these videos. In fact, the top comment on the It Gets Fuller parody video (receiving 56 likes) simply stated “I’m Ron Fucking Swanson!” which references the words of self-affirmation often spoken by Swanson in times of adversity
The conflation of Offerman and Swanson is made more prominent by the substantial overlap between the two personae. Elements of Offerman’s public image and personal life, including his penchant for woodworking, the outdoors, red meat and whisky, are reflected in the Swanson character (Cullers, 2014). Yet, as demonstrated through the Made Man videos, the moustache is the central piece through which Offerman’s celebrity is bound to the popularity of Ron Swanson. When introducing himself in the “How to Grow a Moustache” video, Offerman confirms that viewers probably know him best for his signature moustache. Similarly, in a 2015 interview with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s (CBC) Q radio program, Offerman recounts the feelings of disappointment fans often communicate when they see him without the moustache he made famous on Parks & Recreation. Offerman explains the difficulties of separating his everyday physical appearance from the Swanson character to CBC Radio host Shad, stating “I hope fans of the moustache become fans of my face” (“Nick Offerman on his ’stache-free life after Ron Swanson,” 2015). The ways in which Offerman’s moustache binds his public persona to Ron Swanson also work to further entrench ironic readings of masculinity as central to the Movember brand.

Offerman’s involvement provides a degree of celebrity validation for Movember (Richey & Ponte, 2011), but he also serves as a recognizable figure (with a recognizable moustache) who epitomizes ideas about masculinity on which the Movember brand is built. Marshall’s (1997) crucial work on celebrity culture conceives of celebrity figures as signs that provide an organizing structure for complex processes of meaning-making. Richey and Ponte (2011) describe how celebrities like Bono and Angelina Jolie perform a similar function in the discourses that shape understandings of charity and international
aid. Richey and Ponte argue that aid celebrities work to reduce complex global events and issues to simple moral truths, forgoing nuance to promote easy-to-grasp policy prescriptions. For Richey and Ponte, media portrayals and advertising campaigns work to frame these types of celebrities as experts who make complicated issues related to international diplomacy and development appear more accessible to a wide audience. Richey and Ponte argue that these celebrity “experts” encourage consumers to develop emotional reactions to social issues that might overshadow the politics and complexity at the heart of the particular problem. The role of these celebrities is, most importantly, to inspire consumers to experience a sense of moral obligation to “help out” and then “feel good” about their involvement in various forms of commercialized philanthropy or activism.

Offerman is not framed through the Movember campaign as an expert on issues related to men’s health or philanthropy, but is widely constructed in the media as an expert on manhood and masculinity. His comedy routines and portrayal of Swanson centres on understandings of ways to be a better man and he is commonly called upon in media appearances to provide commentary on the contemporary state of American manhood. Three of Offerman’s video vignettes for Movember are framed through discourses of expertise: he is portrayed as having the expert authority to teach a lesson on the history of the moustache, provide a “How To” guide about growing facial hair and offer counselling to those not living up to Movember’s masculine standards. In these videos, Offerman’s “expertise” is meant to guide how participants can make meaning through their participation in the campaign; yet his ironic role as masculinity expert
creates ambiguity around what aspects of his advice should be taken seriously and what information could be jokingly laughed off.

Irony is very much at the heart of the Offerman/Swanson dyad and the overstated nature of these performances greatly shape the brand of masculinity promoted through Movember. The Ron Swanson character is constructed through a number of over-the-top performances of white, heterosexual masculinity that can be simultaneously read as both ridiculous and admirable. Many of Swanson’s characteristics, from his unshakeable stoicism to his love of the outdoors to his taste for expensive scotch, are valorized as an image of traditional or conventional manhood. Offerman’s body also informs his portrayal of Swanson and reactions to this character. He is middle-aged and fleshy, but still muscular; he takes pride in his moustache but is not overly fashionable or well-groomed. Swanson serves as a counterpoint to the fashion norms associated with metrosexuality and hipster style, while still demonstrating sexual prowess and an ability to woo attractive women with his no-nonsense performance of masculinity. Like the Old Spice Man, the Swanson character speaks to male anxieties about the unrealistic portrayals of masculinity often found in contemporary advertising. He symbolizes how the epitome of white heterosexual manhood can mean more than having a young, muscular, and perfectly groomed body.

When discussing what lessons Swanson might offer about masculinity, Offerman suggests that the popularity of the character might stem from a collective nostalgia for masculine figures from the past such as fathers, teachers and other authority figures (“Nick Offerman on his ’stache-free life after Ron Swanson,” 2015). These men are remembered as living by simple codes of gentlemanly decorum and honour that can be
juxtaposed to the stereotypically materialistic and narcissistic values of the modern metrosexual or hipster. In this way, Swanson is indeed a “throwback” character; a “man’s man” who craves simplicity while despising changes to technology, fashion or his personal life. Yet, on *Parks & Recreation*, these traits are taken to their absurd extremes – Swanson lives “off the grid” in a cabin in the woods, can drink excessive amounts of alcohol without feeling any effects, and will violently destroy technological devices he finds threatening or useless. Thus, while the Swanson character points to flaws in the unrealistic portrayals of masculinity found in contemporary advertising and popular culture, Offerman’s performance is not a completely serious or sincere critique of these media discourses. Instead, Swanson represents a combination of familiar and seemingly stable masculine tropes that are also embellished to absurd and unrealistic proportions.

There are indeed interesting nuances and contradictions to be found within Swanson’s seemingly simple masculine code. In spite of his typical stoic demeanor, Swanson does occasionally show emotion in scenarios that may not call for that type of reaction. Moreover, although he takes pride in his staunch individualism and distance from others, Swanson is sometimes shown to value emotional attachments, friendship and altruism in certain contexts. Offerman’s involvement in Movember sheds light on similar complexities, especially in how he constructs a vision of masculinity in the viral video, “How to Grow a Moustache with Nick Offerman.” Throughout the two minute video, Offerman provides tips for growing a better moustache that allude to his “expertise” on the subject, as well as the well-recognized overlap between his public persona and the Swanson character. After providing a lengthy and ridiculous backstory outlining how he became a moustache icon, Offerman does not present legitimate
techniques for growing fuller facial hair. Instead, he gives a list of over-the-top behaviours that will supposedly prepare men for participation in Movember. In line with the Offerman/Swanson persona, these suggestions draw from stereotypically masculine domains including construction, woodworking and the outdoors. Offerman advises Mo Bros that hammering a nail or smelling wood will lead to a better moustache. The image of Offerman inhaling the scent from a block of wood is accompanied by a stern caption that reads “Suck it up, momma’s boy!” Offerman also encourages participants to simply “sweat,” an instruction that in the context of the masculine code of behaviour represented by Offerman implies notions of strenuous work or outdoor exploration. It is clear from very early on in the video that this “How To” guide actually has very little to do with growing a thicker moustache, and instead intends to educate its viewers about properly performing a rugged style of masculinity.

Figure 18 (MadeManDotCom, 2012a)
Other pieces of advice provided by Offerman, however, take on a more ambiguous character and do not seem to align with media portrayals of Offerman or the Swanson character. Offerman, for example, includes “tolerat[ing] a crying baby” on his list of reputable masculine behaviours. This action appears somewhat out of place in that the allusion to childcare differs from the more typical masculine image invoked by Offerman’s other tips. Yet the idea that a man should be able to “tolerate” a crying baby still distances the Mo Bro from the feminized image of the nurturing and sympathetic caregiver. Later on in the video, Offerman instructs participants to “capture a household bug and set it free.” This declaration is accompanied by the caption, “imprison a lower life form, learn to love again” while an image of a colourful butterfly escapes from a jar as Offerman looks on in wide-eyed amazement. This brief scene encapsulates how Offerman’s persona as it is informed by the image of Ron Swanson can allow multiple and contested images of masculinity to co-exist within Movember’s online discourse. In the same breath, Offerman alludes to both practices of masculine dominance such as capturing or imprisoning and ideas about sensitivity, caring and childish wonderment. At one and the same time, Mo Bros are jokingly told to exercise their power over “lower life forms,” while also embracing ideas about love and expressing emotion.

How to Grow a Moustache culminates with Offerman, after some hesitation, biting into a raw onion to demonstrate his last piece of advice to novice moustache growers. This sequence points to stereotypes around masculine toughness and risk taking, but I read Offerman’s daring final act in this video as the ultimate clue to viewers that his words of advice should not be taken too seriously. Indeed, Offerman’s suggestions are part of an ironic discourse that construct a performance of white middle aged masculinity
that is as laughable as it is heroic. His tips for growing a better moustache (and being a
better man) draw on complex and sometimes contradictory understandings of
masculinity, but are always couched by an awareness that these ideas should not be taken
entirely at face value. Even though, as I discussed in Chapter Five, many social media
users sought out tips to grow thicker, fuller moustaches, Offerman’s “expertise” is
mobilized in How to Grow a Moustache to absurd and comedic rather than practical ends.

The ironic nature of the representations that comprise Offerman’s involvement in
the movement, however, do not lessen their importance in guiding conceptions of
Movember and its trademark moustache. The YouTube commentary discussing
Offerman’s Movember videos frequently valorize him (and his Swanson alter ego) as the
epitome of contemporary masculinity. One commenter exclaimed regarding Offerman,
“Now there’s a MAN :p” (MildManNerd, 2013), while another declared: “Nick Offerman
is almost too manly. Even for real men. A legend walks among us” (Wiggyson
Wiggyson, 2013). Another viewer responded to the How to Grow a Moustache video by
using the image of Swanson to describe his own feelings of emasculation, “Ron Swanson
makes me feel like a 12 year old girl, he’s so much man (sic) I wish I was” (l ol, 2012).
This comment elevates Swanson’s status within the pantheon of masculine television
characters, but does so by invoking the trivialized and feminized trope of the pre-teen
girl. A different YouTube commenter similarly wrote that Offerman “has no time
whatsoever for anything isn’t manly.” Although Offerman prescribes a broad range of
gendered and sometimes conflicting behaviours in his How To guide to moustaches, his
persona is already assumed to be the epitome of masculinity or perhaps to be even “too
manly” when compared with everyday masculine norms. What, then, can be learned
about ironic masculinities from Offerman’s involvement in Movember and how the movement is situated within broader social relations? How does his persona encourage particular interpretations of the Movember moustache while constraining others?

The ironic performance of masculinity enacted by Offerman/Swanson speaks again to anxieties about ongoing changes to dominant understandings of manhood while allowing traditional gender divisions to remain undisturbed. I argue that Offerman’s moustache (and its association with the Swanson character) serves as an unchanging signifier that re-asserts faith in a gender binary while other masculine touchstones are more and more frequently called into question. Offerman performs a version of masculinity that is malleable and fragmented, but assuredly and comfortably stable. Despite the nuances that might disrupt the image of a traditional white, heterosexual “man’s man,” Offerman’s persona and his portrayal of Swanson can still be considered the epitome of masculinity because of the discursive weight attributed to his over-the-top performance of manliness. In other words, any deviant or unusual facets of Offerman’s persona does not threaten his status as masculine “expert” because his broader performance of manhood is so exaggerated and extreme that his gender identity appears unshakeable. In fact, that Offerman and Swanson are firmly entrenched as masculine archetypes gives the instances of unexpected compassion and sensitivity their comedic worth. The audience is invited to laugh at these surprising moments simply because Offerman’s masculinity otherwise appears immune to substantial threat.

The inimitable moustache worn by Offerman is central to the ironic discourse that allows some changes to dominant gender formations as long as they occur within a seemingly unchangeable binary structure. Offerman’s trademark moustache is constant;
Despite parts of the Offerman/Swanson personae that sometimes appear out of place or perhaps even feminine, the moustache serves as a stable reminder that preserves the connection between masculinity and power, strength and virility. While Offerman can hint at love, caring and childcare being legitimate expressions of masculinity, the legendary status of his moustache in the context of his exaggerated performance of white, heterosexual masculinity constrains the degree to which these traits can be considered challenges to dominant masculine norms. The How to Grow a Moustache video portrays complicated and contradictory messages about how to properly perform masculinity, but Offerman’s moustache represents a stable and reliable way to “do” manhood in the face of this complexity. Despite any contradictions or nuances within Offerman’s performance, his moustache serves as a constant reminder than he is indeed a “man’s man.” The conception of masculinity as both stable and malleable is similarly epitomized through a popular internet meme called The Many Faces of Ron Swanson. This meme is made up of several images of Offerman with each picture labeled with a different emotional state. At first glance, each image appears identical except for their unique captions; but upon closer inspection, Offerman performs subtle facial expressions for each emotion that make every picture distinct. This meme serves as a visual enactment of the discursive work performed by the Offerman/Swanson persona in shaping contemporary understandings of masculinity; slight deviations from dominant norms are permitted because other aspects of his masculine image are embellished to their extremes. His instantly recognizable moustache and the degree to which it is revered in popular culture are powerful reminders of how facial hair is constructed as reinforcing a
heteronormative gender binary that places limits on potential threats to broader gender norms.

![Figure 19](NBC, 2013)

Offerman’s involvement in Movember builds strong ties between the campaign and the characteristics attributed to his public image and the Swanson character. I argue that the Offerman/Swanson persona and the Movember brand are co-produced through the discourses of ironic masculinity that invite complex performances of masculinity that can be safely read as humorous or absurd as long as they remain situated within relatively
narrow parameters about what it means to be a “real man.” As demonstrated in some of the social media commentary regarding Offerman’s endorsement of Movember, his persona and portrayal of Swanson represent unrealistic expectations for legitimate performances of masculinity and should not be taken seriously. The inferred or unsaid meaning at play in the representations of Offerman is that the audience should know that these masculine qualities should not and cannot be taken to their extreme levels by “everyday, ordinary guys.” As one social media user commented, “I love that he [Offerman/Swanson] is so intense in situations that don’t call for it at all” (TheChainsOFMisery, 2012). Yet these exaggerated performances make masculinity appear stable and knowable; Offerman’s moustache serves as the most immediately identifiable of these masculine practices. As I explored in Mansome, the moustache is constructed as an aspect of manhood that appears immune to change and fears about feminization. The popularity of Offerman’s comedy and the Swanson character work in and through Movember to reinforce this understanding of gender and the body. Ironic readings of Offerman and Swanson serve a duel function: they allow viewers to laugh in the face of unattainable masculine norms around grooming, fashion and physical fitness, but also enable certain performances that might not follow traditional standards of manliness. The involvement of Offerman in Movember and the exaggerated nature of his persona, then, creates discursive space for participants to negotiate the health-related changes the movement encourages without disrupting broader understandings of gender. Participants can enter into often feminized domains of health and self-care, but their moustache keeps these broader performance of masculinity from ever coming under threat.
Eat Like a Man: Consuming Food in the Movember Marketplace

In addition to biting into a raw onion in How to Grow a Moustache (an act that was given its own “behind the scenes” feature and drew much scrutiny from online commenters), Offerman also alludes to the relationship between food and masculinity in two other Movember-themed videos. Part of Offerman’s bizarre dance sequence with an animated version of his moustache in Stachedance involves him scraping vegetables off a plate piled high with meat. In Great Moments in Moustache History, Offerman ends his lesson by declaring, “In a world of PEDs (performance enhancing drugs), manscaping and tofu bacon, we need the moustache more than ever.” He utters the words “tofu bacon” with added scorn and shows his disgust by angrily spitting on the floor. By including mention of this meat substitute alongside steroid use and excessive grooming, Offerman creates a trinity of inauthentic masculinities for which the moustache is constructed as an important solution. Many YouTube viewers echoed Offerman’s sentiments about the evils of tofu bacon. One commenter proclaimed, “Tofu Bacon! THIS IS AN OUTRAGE!” (Luke Fennell, 2013), while another declared, “We must stop tofu bacon!” (James Trainor, 2013). The consumption of meat, as I discussed in the previous section, is a key aspect of Offerman’s comedy routines and vital to the Ron Swanson character on Parks & Recreation. The centrality of meat to the Offerman/Swanson persona is part of a larger discourse that materialized as a reaction to many men eating smaller portions and opting for vegetables and meat alternatives in place of more traditional meat-based diets (Buerkle, 2009). Buerkle (2009) maps the emergence of what he calls a “retrograde masculinity” that reinforces normative gender roles by re-centring the excessive consumption of meat as an inherently masculine
practice and feminizing more healthy or meatless diets. Any widespread reaction to a greater diversity of food practices among men, however, has not resulted in a strict dichotomy; instead, new ways of speaking about the relationship between food and manhood have shaped how the consumption of meat (or lack thereof) is portrayed as a way to perform masculinity (Brady & Ventresca, 2014).

The complex relationship between food and masculinity is enacted through the variety of responses to Offerman’s disparaging comments regarding tofu. Indeed, not all viewers uniformly welcomed Offerman’s joke at the expense of meat substitutes even though they might embrace other facets of the Movember brand. One commenter reproduced the association of facial hair with power and respect, but refused to accept Offerman’s tofu bacon joke: “I shall grow a full beard, including a moustache, and you shall repent for your tofu-hating ways” (Equinox of the Gods, 2013). Another YouTube viewer borrowed Movember’s sarcastic and witty script to make a comment about the connections between meat, masculinity and health: “Ironically, consumption of meat leads to a decrease in sperm production. So eating tofu bacon is manlier than regular bacon” (Peter Maguire, 2013). Despite widespread myths about men’s homogenous food practices being simplistic and always involving meat, Movember’s promotional material offers multiple ways to “cook like a man.” Whereas Offerman’s involvement calls to mind the “retrograde masculinity” explored by Buerkle, other campaign narratives, such as the official Movember cookbook, legitimize more complex and sophisticated understandings of food and masculinity.

The official Movember cookbook, predictably titled *Cook like a Man* (Marriott, 2013), is billed as the “cookbook for the modern gentleman.” The elaborate recipes, from
Lamb, Pomegranate Couscous and Sumac Labna to Chanterelle-Filled Reindeer Fillet with Cranberry Sauce, take on a more gourmet character and stand in sharp contrast to the fatty or simple foods stereotypically identified as manly (Julier & Lindenfield, 2005). There is an over-representation of meat and grilling recipes, yet the book makes clear the importance of balancing meat-based meals with “plenty of vegetables and maybe even some cooked tomatoes” (there is, however, a conspicuous absence of dishes featuring tofu). In *Cook Like a Man*, the ideal Mo Bro is not portrayed as being inept in the kitchen and culinary arts. Instead, the book is written for the “Mo Bro Chef” who looks to “pursue the time-honoured tradition of good eating” and is a “fearless gourmand.” The Mo Bro Chef is encouraged to “close the microwave door” and “put on an apron.” The portrayals of masculinity through the book value domestic pursuits like cooking and cleaning alongside more manly activities such as hunting or whisky drinking. *Cook Like a Man* represents a masculine character similar to the figure of the “lad chef” epitomized by men such as Jamie Oliver who are depicted as both manly and having refined cosmopolitan and epicurean tastes (Hollows, 2003). The book’s layout shows young, well-dressed, mostly white men in outdoorsy, rustic or upscale locations. The aesthetic design of the book is reminiscent of both Movember’s 2010 theme “the modern gentleman” and the 2011 theme, “the country gentleman.” In this way, the book makes strong allusions to understandings of social class where appropriations of both upper and working class practices are packaged as accessible to educated, middle class “lads.”
The text in the book noticeably strays from Movember’s trademark ironic style. There are few jokes or ironic images or plays-on-words. The book, in fact, has a serious message; it suggests that too many men lack adequate cooking skills and that this culinary ineptness has deleterious consequences for the state of “men’s health.” In an introductory section titled “Good Eating,” the book states that men can exercise control over their diets in ways that, when combined with exercise, can actively improve their health. The neoliberal health messages throughout *Cook Like a Man* are intertwined with straightforward and literal discussions of masculinity. In the introduction, the book represents the Mo Bro as a “strong, confident individual” and a “leader of men.” The final pages of the book provide a description of “the persona of a man with a mo” that
defines the Mo Bro as someone who is “calm,” “in control,” “never stressed,” and can “handle any situation that is thrown at him.” This list of the ideal qualities of a Mo Bro noticeably clashes with the campaign’s goal to reduce stigma around depression and mental illness. While Movember vows to address the shame and embarrassment that men might feel when seeking help for issues related to their mental wellbeing, some of the campaign’s own promotional literature reinforces gendered expectations that equate masculinity with always being calm and in control. Here, the Movember brand demonstrates some marked discontinuity in how masculinity and health are discussed. The book once again advocates for men to undergo some sort of behavioural change related to their health; yet these transformations are expected to take place without disturbing a rigid understanding of masculinity that contradicts some of the campaign’s most publicized health promotion messages.

Another food-related promotional vehicle for Movember appears to disrupt the campaign’s portrayal of masculinity by playing with norms around the capacities of male and female bodies. A 2013 advertising campaign from Chunky Soup called “Now You’re Eating for Two” is a classic example of cause-related marketing; each time its Movember-themed social media content was liked or shared, Chunky’s parent organization Campbell’s Soup Company pledged to make a small donation to the Movember foundation up to a pre-set amount. The Chunky campaign was organized around the hashtag #FeedYourMo and was associated with the brand’s “pub-inspired” and meat-filled line of soups and stews. While soup varieties such as “Meatball Bustin’ Sausage Rigatoni” and “Smokin’ Bacon Cheese Sliders” tap into traditional understandings of masculinity consistent with past Chunky brand advertisements, the
“Now You’re Eating for Two” campaign constructs the moustache as straddling a strange boundary between manhood and womanhood. The content related to Movember posted through Chunky Soup’s social media feeds depict the Movember moustache using the language of parenthood. One tweet warned Mo Bros that their moustache will “probably want a brother next year,” while another jokingly compared shaving off a moustache to a child “leaving the nest.”

![Image of a Chunky Soup ad](image)

**Figure 21** (Campbell’s Soup Canada, 2013)

More strange were the allusions to pregnancy through which the Chunky campaign constructed a Mo Bro’s relationship with his moustache. Of course, the phrase “You’re Eating for Two” is commonly repeated as a way to encourage and justify the additional food a pregnant woman might consume. Through the Chunky Soup Movember
campaign, this idea is amusingly applied to men who are supposedly “pregnant” with their moustache. Chunky’s social media content is rife with well-known tropes related to pregnancy except, in an ironic twist, men are at the centre of these portrayals. One image posted to social media was constructed as a “Mo Growth Chart” that detailed “Phase 7” of moustache growth in ways that reflected conventional ideas regarding the stages of progress during a pregnancy. Another post cautioned Mo Bros to prepare for the inevitable late night food cravings that would come with the growth of their moustache. This image showed a bowl of Chunky soup in the foreground, while a combination of food more typically associated with pregnancy cravings (such as pickles and ice cream) sits in the background. Other social media images invoked stereotypically feminized images such as the stork and ultrasound that jokingly imply that a Mo Bro is pregnant with his moustache.

Figure 22 (Campbell’s Soup Canada, 2013)
The peculiar, yet amusing, mixture of images representing manhood and womanhood comprising Chunky Soup’s “Now You’re Eating for Two” advertisements is an ironic inversion of the gender binary. The campaign cleverly plays with the common sense idea that only men can grow moustaches and only women can become pregnant. Yet the joke is not only founded on supposedly innate biological differences between men and women, but also how projecting the feminized meanings surrounding pregnancy and childcare on to an undisputedly masculine domain appears strange, abnormal and indeed laughable. Returning to Hutcheon (1994), then, it is important to go beyond simply identifying the logic behind an ironic discourse and consider the social and political implications of the irony. The “Now You’re Eating For Two” campaign is a vivid example of my conception of ironic masculinity in that the advertisements acknowledge the social construction of the gender binary without considering its effects. For men, stereotypical tropes around pregnancy and parenthood can work as aesthetic props within an ironic discourse that ensures definitions of masculinity are always positioned outside those feminized domains. For women, these spheres are sources of trivialization and ongoing struggles for childcare parity, reproductive rights and gender equity. Like the light-hearted and awkward banter between Jason Bateman and Will Arnett in Mansome, the Chunky Soup Movember campaign can send up conventional understandings of womanhood because the irony that defines the discourse prevents any potential threat to dominant understandings of masculinity from being taken seriously. The idea that a man can be “pregnant” is so absurd that the associated feminized performances are firmly positioned outside the realm of reasonable masculine behaviours.
Moustaches and Violent Gentlemen: Movember and the National Hockey League

The athlete most commonly discussed within Movember’s online discourses is former 1970s Major League Baseball player Rollie Fingers. Fingers wore a curly handlebar moustache throughout his years playing for the Oakland Athletics and the style quickly became the pitcher’s trademark. A Movember-themed article for USA Today’s “For the Win” blog went so far as saying that “Fingers was to having a mustache what Babe Ruth was to hitting home runs” (Berg, 2013). Indeed, Fingers’ signature moustache is probably more well-known than the outstanding statistics he accumulated during his hall of fame career. Yet in the tradition of Movember’s style of retro citation, it is less important that participants be able to identify Fingers by name or recite his statistics, but crucial that they are able to historicize him as a relic from baseball’s not-too-distant past. The same can be said for the occasional photograph of baseball players from the late 1800s that surfaced on Movember-related social media (the era to which Fingers may have very well been paying tribute with his handlebar style). The retro or vintage cachet of these images of baseball’s “rich moustache tradition” (Berg, 2013) outweighs the relevance of the players’ biographies or historical details about their careers.

In Canada, as well as parts of the United States, the Movember brand has capitalized on hockey’s facial hair tradition. Adam Garone called the “grassroots” involvement of NHL players as the “tipping point” for expanding the reach of Movember in Canada since 2010 (Garone, as cited in Androich, 2013). As Garone explains, Movember representatives approached the NHL and individual teams early in Movember’s development, but were turned away because the league had already established its own cancer charity, Hockey Fights Cancer. Yet as groups of players
started participating in Movember and sharing content across social media, the NHL 
 began to embrace their involvement and promoting the campaign through official league 
 channels. In 2013, every NHL team launched a cause-related marketing campaign for 
 Movember, ranging from moustache-themed game nights and broadcast segments to 
 online video series to the sale of Movember team merchandise. As the NHL became 
 more involved in Movember, this promotional affiliation and interest spread to minor 
 league franchises, Canadian junior hockey teams and other amateur hockey 
 organizations.

The relationship between the NHL and Movember has been a result of the 
 enthusiastic participation of players, but also draws on one of hockey’s most revered 
 rituals. The association of hockey and facial hair materializes most prominently through 
 the legendary playoff beard, the annual tradition when NHL players let their facial hair 
 grow unhindered as they compete in the grueling months-long tournament for the Stanley 
 Cup. The symbolism attributed to the playoff beard speaks to some of the sport’s most 
 cherished values and myths. The ability to grow an impressive playoff beard is a visual 
 and symbolic way to separate the men from the boys, just as withstanding the arduous 
 journey through the playoffs is envisioned as the ultimate test of a player’s manhood. The 
 playoff beard, however, also connects the contemporary hockey player to the meanings 
 that celebrate the sport’s roots in the Canadian wilderness. As hockey is seen as the 
 product of the conquering of the unforgiving northern landscape, understandings of the 
 playoff beard connect contemporary hockey players to the mythological figures – such as 
 the lumberjack and coureur de bois – whose aggressiveness and perseverance allowed 
 them to conquer this harsh environment. The playoff beard is perpetuated as an annual
superstition to encourage team building and togetherness. Yet the tradition of facial hair growth at playoff time also represents a symbolic link to national mythologies around the legendary endurance and survival skills of the determined and unkempt men who ventured deep into the Canadian wilderness in search of work, furs and fortune (Marche, 2011, 2015; Robidoux, 2012a). Moreover, the ways in which hockey’s traditions perpetuate the myth of a barren, unpopulated landscape available to be conquered by brave white explorers demonstrates how the sport is implicated in settler colonial narratives of the Canadian past (McKegney, 2009; Robidoux, 2012b). The playoff beard performs discursive work similar to the outdoor Winter Classic games that comprise a regular part of the NHL schedule or icons such as Johnny Canuck, the bearded, lumberjack logo for the 1960s Vancouver Canucks (then of the now defunct Western Hockey League) that has resurfaced as part of the team’s recent retro re-branding. The playful, cartoonish image of Johnny Canuck hints at the lighter side of the playoff beard mythology whereby players with sparse facial hair late in the season are jokingly teased by unimpressed teammates, commentators and fans.

This light-hearted discourse is similarly perpetuated in the series of “Best Of” or “Top 10” lists that emerge each November rating the quality of Movember moustaches grown by NHL players. These lists and other profiles of Movember participants from the world of hockey have cemented contemporary players including George Parros and retired legends such as Lanny McDonald as the NHL’s unquestioned moustache icons. The celebration of hockey moustaches through Movember has also served as a “throw back” to the 1970s and 1980s when several players wore facial hair that reflected historical trends in men’s grooming (or lack thereof). The popularity of Movember in the
context of the NHL has only worked to further entrench the relationship of hockey and facial hair most commonly expressed through the playoff beard. The success of the partnership between Movember and the NHL, however, is greatly informed by the cultural politics that materialize across these two global brands. In this section I explain how the NHL’s involvement in Movember “makes sense” as a vehicle to promote the campaign’s ironic masculine ethos and contributes to the campaign’s post-political sensibilities.

Understanding why Movember’s brand of ironic masculinity “fits” within the culture of the NHL requires conceptualizing how the league is racialized. The whiteness that characterizes the culture of the NHL allows a moustache and masculinity-themed charitable event to “make sense” within the league’s promotional discourses. Cultural ideas about race and masculinity in Canada allow images of NHL players to neatly co-exist alongside Movember’s roster of almost exclusively white pop culture icons and the campaign’s promotion of facial hair styles that are at their most ironic when worn by young, fashion-forward white men. Movember’s inescapable whiteness is paralleled by how hockey’s history is often framed as harkening back to the lost simplicity of the small towns that sprung out of the Canadian wilderness. These nostalgic narratives unapologetically celebrate, to paraphrase sports historian Mary Louise Adams (2006), “Canada at its whitest” (75). These two vectors for the reproduction of whiteness – hockey’s rugged, violent masculinities and the urban, culture-savvy Mo Bro – come together in the quintessential Canadian “rags to riches” story of the pro hockey player who leaves his quaint small-town existence to find fame and fortune in the bright lights of the big city (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). Whiteness remains the unquestioned norm in
shaping how the hockey player plays the game the “right” way while showing himself to be a “good guy” off the ice by participating in charitable initiatives such as Movember. Of course, there are several racialized players in the NHL just as there are many racialized Movember participants; yet the undeniable whiteness that underlies the culture of both organizations enables the seamless integration of each brand into the other’s promotional strategies.

The ways in which the culture of hockey in North America is defined by its whiteness might also explain why Movember has been embraced by the NHL and other pro or amateur hockey associations, but has failed to gain substantial traction in other high profile sports leagues that are in season during November – such as the National Football League (NFL) and National Basketball Association (NBA). Although the league is in the early stages of its season during November, the NBA undertook only a small number of Movember-related initiatives in 2012 and 2013. Most notably, the Phoenix Suns staged a Movember-themed game night in 2013 at which fans received a team branded moustache-on-a-stick prop and volunteers accepted donations to the Movember Foundation. Otherwise, I did not encounter media coverage or promotional campaigns specific to the participation of individual NBA players or teams. A small number of NFL stars, including quarterbacks Aaron Rodgers and Carson Palmer, linebacker Clay Matthews and wide receiver Victor Cruz, have been involved with Movember, with details of their moustache-related exploits surfacing on official team blogs and social media. Most of the few participating NFL players, however, were lesser-known names whose Movember activities received minimal publicity other than a short profile on their team’s website or press release on Movember.com. The two most publicized Movember-
themed happenings were a Movember towel giveaway promotion organized by the Detroit Lions in 2012 and a 2013 video campaign put on by the New England Patriots (Associated Press, 2012; Patriots Today, 2013). The videos promoted by the Patriots, featuring little-known players Danny Amendola and Nate Solder, represent a moment of synergy between the team’s cause-related marketing efforts and the corporate interests of Gillette, one of Movember’s title sponsors that also owns the naming rights to New England’s football stadium. Yet what is most striking about the league’s limited involvement in November is how almost every participating player could be readily identified as white-skinned despite the over-representation of racialized players on NFL rosters. Other than Cruz and Pittsburgh Steelers star Troy Polamalu (who trimmed his trademark curly hair to raise funds for Movember in 2013), the little promotional material I observed linking the NFL to Movember almost always featured a group of white or light-skinned players.

This notion is even more apparent when comparing the NHL’s involvement in Movember to the most visible fundraising initiative in pro sports: the NFL’s “A Crucial Catch,” the annual campaign through which the league rallies its fans in support of breast cancer awareness. While both hockey and football are premised on performances of a violent, aggressive masculinity, the noticeable differences between A Crucial Catch and the NHL’s Movember initiatives raise important questions regarding the meanings associated with the culture of each league. In her Pink Ribbons Inc., Samantha King (2006) outlines how the NFL’s annual breast cancer campaigns are attempts to mitigate cultural anxieties about race, crime and violence against women that are commonly connected to professional football. The supposed predisposition of black athletes to
violence and crime crystallized in the popular imagination through media discourses from the 1990s and 2000s that attributed the (mis)conduct of NFL players, at least in part, to their racial backgrounds. Well-publicized incidents involving black NFL players ranging from gun charges to domestic and sexual assaults were commonly mobilized as “evidence” to support the notion that all black players were potentially violent criminals. These discourses co-existed alongside ideas that contrasted the “naturally” gifted black athlete with their more cerebral, hardworking white counterparts (Abdel-Shehid, 2005; Hoberman, 1997). King’s analysis illuminates how the NFL’s pink ribbon campaigns serve to mitigate the tension between racialized portrayals of black athletes and the criminalization of black masculinity by portraying the league’s players as benevolent and compassionate towards women.

The noticeable differences that separate A Crucial Catch from The NHL’s Movember initiatives demonstrate how cultural politics inform the tone, scope and imagery associated with each campaign. Processes of racialization shape the ways in which the NHL can undertake a charitable campaign that emphasizes, rather than downplays, outward and sometimes violent displays of masculinity. Movember’s relationship with the NHL indeed celebrates hockey’s hyper-masculine culture and its status as an environment where boys learn to become men. Through its promotion of violence, toughness and physical aggressiveness, professional hockey serves as a site through which traditional codes of masculine honour, superiority and vigilante justice are actively maintained and reproduced. Unlike the racialized and pathologized understandings of pro football’s violent (black) masculinity, the NHL’s culture of
whiteness enables particular discourses that construct its players as aggressive and manly, but never dangerous or posing a threat to society.

While the hockey player’s facial hair might allude to the historical origins of the sport’s violent, aggressive masculinity, the playful and ironic flair exemplified by the Movember moustache also taps into the perception that the NHL is populated by good-natured, men of character. Despite the league’s reputation for violence and physical aggressiveness, much of the discourse comprising the NHL’s participation in Movember involves friendly jokes and banter that make light of the perceived quality of a player’s moustache. In this context, the good-natured fun associated with Movember is seen as a natural reflection of the homosocial environment of the hockey locker room, a space where players are expected to leave their intensity and aggressiveness on the ice in favour of a masculine performance promoting light-hearted teasing, horseplay and camaraderie (Robidoux, 2001). The promotional videos frequently posted to NHL team websites through Movember are often structured in ways that play up these assumptions. The format of these segments frequently involved a cameraperson or host approaching players asking them to jokingly rate the quality of their teammates’ moustaches. The playfulness that characterizes the Movember moustache provides a window into the locker room antics that help cement hockey players’ reputation as nice, friendly people off the ice. These men are the unquestioned “good guys” that TV commentator Don Cherry so often applauds on Coaches Corner. These polite men of character are also celebrated in films such as Goon (2011), the tagline for which describes protagonist Doug Glatt (played by Sean William Scott) as “the nicest guy you’ll ever fight.”
The practices through which honourable hockey players must properly navigate this multi-layered masculine performance is vividly represented in the trope of the violent gentleman. I borrow the term “Violent Gentleman” from the name of a clothing line founded by former NHL enforcer, moustache icon and enthusiastic Movember supporter, George Parros. The dark, bushy moustache worn by Parros throughout his career was very much the enforcer’s signature look and was thought to contribute to his intimidating on-ice persona. His moustache was frequently cited in social media chatter as the hands-down best moustache in the NHL and his image was also included in broader lists assembling Movember’s pantheon of moustache icons (Movember Canada, 2013). Parros was also prominently featured in an official 2013 wrap up video wearing a Violent Gentleman brand Movember t-shirt (Movember Canada, 2013). The piece of content featuring Parros that stands out, however, is a video promoting the partnership between Movember and Lancaster Limited, an apparel company whose Roots of Fight line celebrates the history of boxing and martial arts. This video is called “The Man Code” and features Parros extolling the virtues of fighting as an honourable way to police the unwritten rules of hockey with respect and valour (Lancaster LTD, 2012). The vignette ends with a graphic in the style of a mathematical equation reading “honour, respect, protect, tradition = MAN CODE” followed by the Movember and Sons logo (the only time Movember is mentioned throughout the video).
The widespread involvement of a popular enforcer such as Parros demonstrates the centrality of the NHL within Movember’s marketing efforts, but also how the campaign freely celebrates the violent masculinity that still dominates public perceptions of the league and its players. Again, I argue that the term violent gentleman is instructive here as it neatly encapsulates the assumption that NHL players can be both aggressive and intimidating but also nice, down-to-Earth people away from the rink. The violent gentleman trope also points to how on-ice violence in hockey is thought to be governed by a masculine code of honour that is policed by the sport’s most rugged, fierce competitors (Bernstein, 2006; Krebs, 2012). In the context of Movember, the notion of violent gentlemanliness vividly emerges through the production of campaign
merchandise by the apparel company owned by Parros, but also through the over-representation of players known for their aggressive play in the rosters of NHLers included in Movember’s promotional material. Notable tough guys such as Mike Brown, Cal Clutterbuck and retired Toronto Maple Leafs star Wendel Clark were commonly featured in press coverage and NHL marketing spots, while Leafs enforcer Colton Orr was pictured alongside Parros in official Movember promotions (Movember Canada, 2013). Yet these hard-nosed pugilists and grinders were also shown to have a lighter side, as players were often depicted as making self-deprecating comments and challenging others to friendly moustache-growing competitions. As defenseman Karl Alzner (a player admittedly not known for his aggressive play) explained as he described a Movember competition organized between Parros and Brown, “But this [Movember] is kind of a funny thing. People start looking at us, and it brings a bit of laughter to the whole thing. People really enjoy this. Hopefully we’ll still have a few different styles to laugh at” (Alzner, as cited in Sumner, 2012). This type of good-natured teasing reveals the irony behind the NHL’s involvement in Movember: that men known for their fearlessness and aggressiveness can still poke fun at their embarrassing or unimpressive displays of masculinity through facial hair.

The construction of this divided persona associated with professional hockey players, however, is not without its contradictions. One social media user criticized the idea that someone could be both aggressive and polite when commenting on an official Movember Facebook post featuring Parros: “FYI violence sucks and is certainly not the behaviour of a gentleman” (Nadine, 2013). Yet the NHL’s involvement in Movember serves as another discursive site that allows conflicting meanings around violence,
masculinity and race to co-exist and seemingly make sense. A 2010 press release announcing the league’s involvement in Movember called “The Gentlemen of the NHL” declares “Hockey players have long been known for their fine dress and manners off the ice and their speed and toughness on…” (Movember Canada, 2010). The perceived dichotomy that comprises dominant understandings of hockey players (especially Canadian hockey players) enables the NHL to participate in a campaign through which outward displays of masculinity and even violence are celebrated. The emphasis on “fine dress and manners” might be specific to the campaign’s 2010 Modern Gentleman theme, but also perpetuates commonly held beliefs about the comportment of hockey players. Don Cherry has long been outspoken about the need for hockey players to wear suits when arriving at games, claiming that this fancy wardrobe stands as “proof” that NHL players are always “class acts.” The racialized undertones informing this assumption are clear when considering the NBA’s implementation of a league-sanctioned dress code in 2005 that banned fashions deemed unprofessional or associated with gangs and hip-hop culture (boots, gold chains, tracksuits, and do-rags). The easy integration of the well-dressed NHL player into Movember’s promotional discourses draws on norms around masculinity and men’s fashion, but also works through ideas about race that makes whiteness synonymous with gentlemanliness and “class.”

I did observe media coverage in which racialized NHL players were depicted as being involved in Movember. Black players Jarome Iginla and Kenndal McArdle were occasionally mentioned as participants, whereas the moustache grown by goaltender Carey Price, who has partial First Nations heritage, was a popular topic of conversation across blogs and social media. Yet the involvement of these players is still strongly
shaped by the widespread appreciation of the “Gentlemen of the NHL” and the overarching racial composition that defines the culture of the league. The frequent use of the (violent) gentleman trope in linking Movember to the NHL acts as veiled praise for the honourable behaviours and values most often valorized in portrayals of white players, even when it comes to committing and policing acts of violence. These discourses circulate in stark contrast to construction of criminalized and pathologized black masculinities associated with the NFL and NBA. Movember’s hockey-related promotional discourses make sense because they profess faith in the “good guys” making up the bulk of NHL rosters who don’t let their violent and aggressive behaviour ever leave the rink. These messages can poke fun at the hyper-masculinities performed by hockey players because these behaviours are thought to be counterbalanced by the manners, respect and good-humour they display off the ice.

The discourses comprising the NHL’s involvement in Movember and the trope of the violent gentleman work to further depoliticize the campaign’s broader messages. The ways in which Movember is promoted through the culture of professional hockey disconnect the sport’s code of honour and on-ice violence from the broader norms of white masculinity that inform and are influenced by these practices. In other words, the NHL/Movember partnership is built upon the illusion that the violent and aggressive masculinity gleefully promoted by the NHL can be separated from the health norms and behaviours that Movember seeks to address among men. Movember’s ironic and light-hearted take on facial hair deflects attention from questions concerning how a league that profits from the promotion of violent masculinities measured by a player’s aggression, toughness and willingness to “suck it up and play through the pain” can support a
campaign tasked with offering meaningful health promotion messaging to its loyal and often vitriolic fan base. Highlighting the contradictions underlying the NHL’s involvement in Movember would politicize the discourse in ways that would disrupt the league’s narratives of corporate social responsibility and appear in opposition to Movember’s fun-loving spirit. A more serious conversation about the role of hockey in shaping understandings of health and manhood in the Canadian imagination might also unsettle racialized ideas about violence that make it appear as though the consequences of hockey violence seldom move outside the confines of the arena. Indeed, such a discussion could reveal how Movember’s ironic send up of the playoff beard relies on the assumption that it is safe to laugh at the manly performances of white hockey players simply because they do not carry the perceived threat associated with criminalized non-white masculinities. While overlapping cultures of whiteness enable promotional discourses that poke fun at the “natural” link between facial hair, the Canadian wilderness and a fierce, aggressive masculinity, these are the same ideas used to exclude or police those who do not conform by the sport’s violent masculine code.

The well-meaning and good natured activities that connect hockey and Movember make the contradictions between the NHL’s brand and the seemingly natural and universal values endorsed by the campaign appear irrelevant. There are few opportunities within Movember’s online discourses to ask questions about the NHL’s role in reproducing ideas about male dominance, violence and white normativity through the league’s involvement with Movember. Moreover, given Movember’s recent emphasis on men’s mental health, the widespread outcry about concussions in hockey and their relationship to mental health issues should indeed be a focal point of the campaign’s
narratives (Branch, 2015; Christie, 2011; Proteau, 2013). Yet discussions about the role of masculine health norms in shaping experiences of hockey injuries and the NHL’s negligence in addressing concussions and mental health problems among its players is displaced by the league’s depoliticized narrative of corporate social responsibility. In the post-political world of the NHL/Movember partnership, there is little to no discursive space for putting the campaign in its proper context or asking uncomfortable questions about the connections between the campaign’s health promotion goals and the social issues with which the league is currently faced. The campaign’s depoliticized discourses suggest that doing so would represent an unnecessary and unwarranted disruption of the feel good stories about some “good guys” having fun for a good cause.
Chapter 8

The “Serious Side” of Movember

This chapter explores how Movember is portrayed as having a “serious side” related to the campaign’s health-related programs and message of “change.” The purpose of this chapter is to investigate how Movember’s more sincere and emotional content is articulated through a brand best-known for its fun-loving and ironic take on masculinity. I begin by situating Movember alongside other hair-based charitable campaigns and juxtapose the brand’s image to the values supporting many breast cancer marketing initiatives. After analyzing some of the serious or even solemn Movember content I observed through my research, I detail some of the resistance and controversies the campaign has faced, as well as the considerable backlash critics of Movember have endured. These reactions to public challenges to Movember’s light-hearted narrative of charity and generosity, I suggest, further cement the post-political character of the campaign. I conclude this chapter by describing how Movember’s depoliticized and “universal” conceptions of health and masculinity induce problematic assumptions about social movements and what social change should look like.

The Philanthropic Landscape: Rivals, Imitators and Allies

The practice of designating specific months on the calendar to draw attention to social or charitable causes is a widespread, if not international, phenomenon. The association of October with pink ribbon culture has normalized the processes by which these fundraising and “awareness” campaigns are carried out through global brands and the consumption of consumer products. Yet the popularity of Movember has spawned a
new model of philanthropic activity that revolves around meanings and practices related to hair. Indeed, the publicity given the financial success of Movember and the campaign’s place in popular culture have facilitated the emergence of charitable initiatives that construct hair as a gateway to socially conscious civic engagement. These movements are different than the popular “Cuts for Cancer” initiatives through which individuals cut and often donate their hair to raise money or create wigs for cancer patients. Instead, this new “genre” of philanthropic campaign echoes Movember’s emphasis on physical commitment, community and, quite often, wit and humour.

A number of other charitable causes have championed fundraising strategies that mirror the format popularized by Movember. Decembeard is an initiative that has been taking place in the United Kingdom each December since 2011 and encourages men to grow beards in support of bowel cancer research. Decembeard greatly resembles Movember in both its style and rhetoric; even the Decembeard slogan, “Real Men Grow Beards,” appears as an attempt to both acknowledge and ridicule the popularity of Movember throughout the previous month (Beating Bowl Cancer, 2015). In contrast, Manuary is a Canadian-based initiative that runs each January in support of research into head and neck cancers (Manuary, 2015). With bases in five major Canadian cities, Manuary also asks men to grow beards for the month, but mostly brands itself as a health-based event rather than drawing from popular culture or overtly tapping into ideas about masculinity. The primary selling point for Manuary, according to the campaign’s website, is the opportunity to grow a beard in the middle of the cold, Canadian winter.

Movember’s closest competition, however, is a campaign called No Shave November. No Shave November runs concurrent with Movember and operates under a
very similar premise: for men to raise awareness for “cancer awareness” by growing facial hair (No-Shave November, 2015). The rules of No Shave November involve participants not shaving for the entire month and donating their “shaving expenses” to the cause. Since 2009, No Shave November has donated some amount of proceeds to various cancer research organizations including, since 2013, the American Cancer Society. Since the campaign encourages men to avoid shaving completely for 30 days, No Shave November is not tied specifically to the moustache, yet the movement does use a moustache logo in much of its promotional material and merchandise. The similarities shared by Movember and No Shave November result in confusion regarding the two movements and their respective causes. Given Movember’s more successful fundraising track record and larger sphere of cultural influence, No Shave November is oftentimes assumed to fall under the umbrella of the Movember organization. In fact, when I searched for No Shave November on Google, the cover image produced by the search engine was a Movember moustache logo.

Figure 24
The similarities and competition between the Movember and No Shave November has produced the makings of a minor rivalry between the two movements. Fans of No Shave November frequently commented on Movember social media posts criticizing Movember and attempting to drum up support for the less popular November ritual. Meanwhile, when asked about the difference between the two competing campaigns during his Reddit Ask Me Anything session, Adam Garone responded by stating, “We launched the campaign [Movember] in 2007 and heard about No Shave November in 2009. As far as I know there is no cause and an excuse for the US College crew to not shave…The art of laziness” (Garone, 2013). Garone’s snarky comments reflects the lack of exposure and respect commonly afforded No Shave November by mainstream media outlets and the general public. The intertextuality that characterizes Movember’s promotional material and the movement’s relationship to celebrity culture has helped generate more recognizable branding practices and an international reach that No Shave November has not matched. The Movember brand also has a more prominent role in drawing on and shaping understandings of masculinity through popular culture including, as I have argued, the contemporary prevalence of ironic representations of manliness. It should also be telling, I might add, that I am writing this dissertation about Movember rather than No Shave November or any other charitable campaign related to facial hair.

In addition to campaigns involving men growing moustaches and beards, examples of the “Movember model” also include hair-related charitable events for women and women’s health causes. The most well-known of these campaigns was Julyna, a Canadian-based event that took place in July between 2011 and 2014. Julyna encouraged women to style their pubic hair in funny or creative ways while raising funds
and “awareness” regarding cervical cancer and the Human Papillomavirus (HPV). The promotional material for Julyna echoed Movember’s distinctive style in that references to pubic hair were very much framed ironically and through the lens of popular culture.

Robert (2013) also identifies ways in which both Movember and Julyna fashioned their participants as trendy, sexually desirable and socially conscious individuals. Through Julyna, Robert argues, a stylized, sexualized and often trivialized grooming practice was seen to be put in service of the public good.

Yet much like the Movember moustache works to shape and enact dominant ideas about masculinity and the male body, the grooming practices promoted by Julyna act out complex tensions concerning hair and femininity. The grooming or removal of pubic hair relates to a normative femininity that is shaped by understandings of both race and social class (Dault, 2011; Toerien, Wilkinson, & Choi, 2005). As Dault (2011), as well as Toerien and her colleagues (2005), have explained, many women feel obligated to follow a regime of grooming practices that is influenced by expectations that associate femininity with smoothness and hairlessness. These are very much the same norms that inform the portrayals of Mo Sistas that I discussed in Chapter Five. Julyna, however, hints at the type of ironic playfulness that creates a platform for women to draw attention to oppressive gender norms by repeating them differently or rebelliously in public space. Yet the tension between public statement and private grooming practice loomed large over Julyna. Unlike how the Movember brand materializes through the faces of its participants in a very public and unmistakeable manner, the private and almost invisible nature of women’s grooming practices (especially regarding taboos around the removal
and presence of pubic hair) regrettably limits the power of any political statement to be made through a campaign like Julyna.

Another body hair-related charitable campaign directed at women was the short-lived Armpits4August. Armpits4August was a 2012 and 2013 initiative limited mostly to the United Kingdom that encouraged women to stop shaving their armpits for the duration of the month (Armpits4August, 2014b). The event was intended to raise “awareness” and funds for research into polycystic ovary syndrome (coincidentally, this is the same condition experienced by the women I discussed in Chapter Three who were praised for their participation in Movember). Armpits4August is notable for the campaign’s explicit attention to both health and social issues. One of the primary goals of the initiative was to disrupt contemporary beauty norms both related and unrelated to hair while encouraging self-worth and acceptance among a national community of women (Armpits4August, 2014a). One of the primary messages of Armpits4August was acknowledging how taken-for-granted grooming practices can undermine women’s self-image. These practices are informed by an image of white, hairless femininity that is held up as the ideal image of female beauty. With this in mind, the campaign sought to encourage acceptance of more diverse forms of feminine attractiveness.

Armpits4August put philanthropic activities in conversation with the grooming rituals that reproduce normative femininities, yet the campaign looked to challenge these norms head on without the veil of irony characteristic of Julyna or Movember. This direct engagement with gender politics was reflected in some of the media coverage around the fledgling movement, including headlines such as “Armpits4August is making women’s body hair a feminist issue” (C. Marshall, 2013). Yet some commentators also lament that
the very stigma around women’s body hair that Armpits4August looked to disturb was very much the source of its unpopularity (K. Edwards, 2013; Phipps, 2013). These authors suggest that unlike the common acceptance of growing a Movember moustache as a noble and masculine challenge for men, the idea that women should deviate from their regime of constant grooming is one that remains widely stigmatized. It is unfortunately telling (and perhaps unsurprising) that two movements that shed light on the inevitability of female body hair did not receive widespread support or appear to make longstanding cultural impacts. Armpits4August represents a model for a hair-based charitable campaign that directly engages with social inequalities by demonstrating how contemporary gender and hair norms are rife with vicious double-standards. Yet, as detailed in accounts of the brand’s origins, Movember has been most inspired by another “women’s issues” campaign that does not make claims about resisting discrimination or oppressive power structures.

The pink ribbon campaigns for breast cancer “awareness” are indeed the most well-known and marketable charitable initiatives concerning “women’s issues.” The culture of breast cancer philanthropy is organized around the pink ribbon as a marketable symbol of white, middle-class femininity (S. King, 2006, 2012). This normative femininity associated with the pink ribbon is produced, of course, through the campaign’s stereotypically feminine colour scheme and style, but also through vividly enacting the association of women with shopping. The distinctly gendered aspect of the pink ribbon is promoted in tandem with a neoliberal value system founded upon volunteerism and individualism rather than collective political action. The symbolic style and values of the pink ribbon are most prominently realized through practices of ethical consumption.
whereby commodities are imbued with social and moral significance as ways to “make a difference.” Despite a number of controversies involving major charities and considerable backlash concerning this mode of breast cancer philanthropy, the ubiquitous pink ribbon is still marketed as a powerful symbol of both corporate philanthropy and individualized civic engagement (Orenstein, 2013).

As I wrote in my account of the movement’s origin story, the founding of Movember was very much inspired by and in response to the popularity of the pink ribbon campaigns. Moreover, given its concern with gender-specific health issues and annual launch immediately following Breast Cancer Awareness Month in October, Movember is persistently portrayed in juxtaposition to the popular pink ribbon campaigns. Like most forms of breast cancer philanthropy, Movember also involves an informal association of national non-profits, multinational corporations, various levels of government and mass media support. In the context of Movember, however, some of the ways in which this relationship is organized and promoted through media platforms differentiate the moustache-related event from its pink October equivalent. As I discuss in Chapter Four, Movember’s promotional material strongly asserts the movement’s “grassroots” status, while openly resisting the trend toward hyper-commercialization that is a source of many public critiques of breast cancer marketing. As Movember USA director Mark Hedstrom told the New York Times in 2013, “We look to limit as best we can the number of products that are out there with the Movember logo on it. The point is participation and what we see as a big opportunity for us is our [corporate] partners speaking to their audience about Movember” (Hedstrom as cited in Newman, 2013). Yet the differences between Movember and pink ribbon culture extend beyond Movember’s
promotional emphasis on “participation” and “conversations;” the campaign’s light-hearted tone and fun-loving spirit is commonly cited as a distinguishing Movember from the sentimental sincerity characteristic of breast cancer marketing. The perceived dichotomy between irony and sincerity underlies the ways in which Movember and pink ribbon campaigns engage with political concerns and shape how these movements are portrayed as enacted varying degrees of social change.

The Delicate Balance: Irony versus Sincerity

Pink Ribbon culture shares some elements of Movember’s playfulness and emphasis on fun, but breast cancer marketing is most prominently defined by its overt sentimentality. Pink ribbon marketing campaigns and events revolve around feelings of positivity and an outpouring of emotional support for breast cancer survivors. The survivor ceremony, a highlight of many fundraising events, brings together those in attendance who have experienced breast cancer diagnosis and treatment for the disease, and serves as a public celebration of individual strength and perseverance. These ceremonies are powerful symbols of courage and community, and are designed to stir emotions of hope and togetherness among those affected by breast cancer. Yet, as King (2006) writes, these inspirational images of determination and triumph leave little room within discussions of breast cancer for politically-charged anger and resistance to government inaction, political economies of biomedicine, and health-related inequalities. Indeed, King writes that the all-encompassing banner of “survivor” works to homogenize difference and the socioeconomic factors that impact health and understandings of disease. The sentimental image of the breast cancer survivor depoliticizes both the
discursive constructions of the disease and the philanthropic activities seeking to “find a
cure.” The depoliticized ways of thinking about health and illness facilitate what King
calls the “tyranny of cheerfulness,” through which feelings of optimism and positivity
displace anger and political resistance as legitimate responses to the pervasiveness and
experience of disease.

The tone and emotional outlook associated with a philanthropic campaign is also
traditionally understood as a gendered phenomenon. Put simply, the implicit
juxtaposition underlying much of the press coverage of Movember distinguishes the
innocence and compassion characteristic of the feminized image of breast cancer
marketing from the ironic, witty culture of Movember. One journalist made the
dichotomy even more clear by suggesting that campaigns targeting men require “different
tactics and messaging” because men’s involvement is “typically contingent on external or
social factors, like talking or connecting with peers” whereas women tend to be more
“internally driven by feelings” (Glushefski, 2013). This sentiment was echoed in the
same article through a quote from Joe Waters, author of Cause Marketing for Dummies,
who confirms that “women’s causes…often engage you with sadness, but Movember
engages you with humour” (Waters as cited in Glushefski, 2013). This logic is also linked
to problematic assumptions about women somehow not being as funny or quick-witted as
men and being therefore less capable of producing (and engaging with) humourous
content. Although these strategies reproduce gender stereotypes about emotion and
relationships (I personally know many funny women who enjoy “talking” and
“connecting with peers”), the tendency for philanthropic initiatives directed at men to
avoid overly-serious, heavy-handed imperatives is reflected in the critical literature
concerning male-oriented health promotion campaigns. As Brendan Gough (2010) explains, health promotion messages targeting men are often typified by the continual use of humour and a playful, informal style reminiscent of men’s lifestyle magazines. This light-hearted and fun-loving approach keeps the recommended changes to men’s health behaviours from undermining dominant masculine identities that value strength, control and self-confidence. Moreover, Wasserburg, Oliffe and Han (2014) argue that Movember’s emphasis on fun strikes an important balance between containing potential threats to traditional understanding of masculinity and catering to fragmented, (post)modern masculinities constructed through playful displays of personal expression.

Yet this gender distinction does not materialize as a cut-and-dried dichotomy. Indeed, breast cancer philanthropy certainly has a lighter side. Pink ribbon events frequently feature upbeat music and live performances, while it is common to find women’s t-shirts emblazoned with strategically placed handprint graphics across the chest or merchandise displaying the innuendo-laden (and problematic) “Save the Ta-tas” slogan. Similarly, Julyna’s brief existence revolved around funny, ironic takes on (white) femininity, fashion and pubic hair grooming practices. There are also aspects of Movember’s online discourses that appear more serious and sincere than the witty, fun-loving banter for which the campaign is best known. These moments of sincerity and sentimentality, however, are few and far between, and are very much overshadowed by the playful moustache antics that define Movember. Throughout the remainder of this section, I will consider how the serious side of Movember informs the vision of what it means to be a Mo Bro and distances Movember participants from political concerns related to “men’s health.”
Movember is most commonly shown to be a serious-minded campaign through individualized health narratives and promotional material professing faith in biomedical research paradigms. A 2012 page on the Movember website detailing the campaign’s relationship with Prostate Cancer Canada featured a short video about the Prostate Cancer Genome Project, a genetic research program seeking to develop a test identifying “personalized” treatment options for specific patients (Movember Canada, 2012c). This video even begins with a screen displaying the title, “The Serious Side of the Mo: Your Funds in Action.” The connection between the fun and hilarious antics of Mo Bros and the “serious work” of doctors and scientists is a common thread throughout the Movember website. Many informational pages and videos proudly proclaim how the fundraising efforts of Movember participants provide financial support for “men’s health” research that is working toward the next big scientific breakthrough. When outlining recommendations regarding how men can improve their health, the campaign uses forceful language, asking men to “take responsibility for their health” (Movember Canada, 2012a). Similarly, in promoting their MOve campaign encouraging exercise as part of a “healthy lifestyle,” some Movember content draws on moralizing ideas around physical inactivity and even repeats the ominous slogan “sitting is the new smoking” (Evans Health Lab, 2013; Movember Canada, 2013h). Yet in describing the activities that fall under the mandate of MOve, the campaign’s messages are lively and upbeat while emphasizing fun rather than the physical demands or time commitments that come with this type of medical intervention. Movember’s mental health information page covers solemn topics concerning depression and suicide, while providing a series of disheartening statistics about high rates of deaths attributed to mental health problems.
among men (Movember Canada, 2013d). These figures, however, are preceded by a disclaimer explaining how Movember does not like to “use scary stats to motivate people.” Such a statement represents a small rupture in this promotional material and illustrates how the fun, ironic ethos that defines Movember sits in an uncomfortable tension with the movement’s health-related goals. This disconnect is further evidenced by the symbolic distance constructed between the campaign’s participants and the perceived beneficiaries of Movember’s fundraising and research initiatives.

Despite the conventional wisdom that men’s charities do not engage supporters with sadness, Movember does promote content designed to elicit emotional responses from supporters. A 2012 video posted to Movember’s YouTube channel profiles Ron Telpner, a prostate cancer survivor from British Columbia (Movember Foundation, 2012c). Telpner is a wealthy, white man in his sixties who worked in the advertising industry before he retired and calls himself “the Original Mad Man” (a reference to the popular television series *Mad Men* [2007-2015] that was set in a 1950s advertising agency). The video portrays Telpner as a fashionable, culture-savvy trendsetter; much attention is given to his clothing, the stylish design of his home and his enjoyment of certain types of music (he listens exclusively on vinyl, of course). The profile then shifts to describe Telpner’s cancer diagnosis and decision to have a radical prostatectomy. Telpner is quite outspoken and emotional in the days leading up to his surgery. He expresses serious regret about how his extreme dedication to work forced him to neglect his health. Telpner credits Movember for providing a network of resources that made his journey “much less scary,” but also makes a stark connection between the campaign’s health-related goals and his everyday experience by stating: “This isn’t fighting cancer,
This type of forthright discussion of pain, emotions and vulnerability is rare among Movember’s online content and conflicts with the campaign’s otherwise light-hearted promotional narratives. The video received only a few thousand views on YouTube, yet the overwhelmingly supportive comments demonstrate how Telpner’s story evoked emotional responses from Movember participants.

On November 18, 2013, Movember Canada posted an emotional letter from David Henry, a young Movember participant who was diagnosed with testicular cancer but received successful treatment (Movember Canada, 2013o). The letter explains how Henry had learned about testicular self-examination through Movember’s promotional materials and was able to detect a tumor early enough that it was easily treatable. This post received resounding support from Facebook users amounting to more than 500 likes and more than 250 users posting Henry’s letter to their own social media accounts. Henry commented from his own Facebook account shortly after the video was posted and stated, “I’m glad my story can make a difference.” This comment received more than 40 likes, the highest level of support I observed for any unofficial social media activity. Decidedly less personal and emotional than the profile of Telpner, Henry’s letter induced a number of congratulatory comments affirming the effectiveness of Movember as a health promotion campaign. Indeed, both Henry and Telpner’s stories are offered as evidence that Movember “works” as a network to offer resources to those living with cancer and vehicle for circulating educational material to its participants.

Yet how do these solemn and emotional narratives fit within the ironic, fun-loving spirit of Movember? I argue that these and other more serious representations of Movember contribute to the campaign’s themes of individualism and volunteerism.
These accounts of how cancer survivors have benefitted in some way from the work of the campaign also construct Mo Bros as noble citizens who contribute to Movember’s worthy cause (but do not require these resources or benefits themselves). Social media comments discussing the Telpner and Henry stories reflect the implied distance from the ill health and disease experienced by people living with cancer. One YouTube viewer responded to the Telpner video by writing, “I can’t say why I was so affected, I’ve never had prostate cancer nor has anyone in my immediate circle of friends, but hearing your story has brought home what Movember is really all about” (Pascal Tremblay, 2012). Similar themes ran through the responses to Henry’s letter. One Facebook user commented, “‘THIS is the reason we do Movember, not just to look silly with our MOOOStashes. Another brother alive to tell the story” (Olivieri, 2013). Another commenter described Henry’s story as providing a “good MOtive for all of us!” (Beeton, 2013). The responses to Movember’s more solemn content reproduce the idea that the movement is primarily about supporting and helping others. The emotional reactions to these types of narratives and the celebration of the effectiveness of Movember as a health promotion campaign further entrenches the image of Mo Bros as valiant “heroes” who engage in philanthropic activities for the sake of the wellbeing of others (Robert, 2013). The Movember website makes the movement’s vision of the heroic Mo Bro undeniably clear by attributing the success of the campaign to the actions of “selfless and generous” participants (Movember Canada, 2012f). Thus, the “serious side” of the campaign draws on neoliberal ideas about volunteerism and philanthropy that construct growing a Movember moustache as a way to help others in need.
Whereas the carefully constructed image of the “survivor” is often a focus of breast cancer marketing and pink ribbon events, these types of emotional narratives are far less prominent within the culture of Movember. Rather, Mo Bros are placed front and centre as generous and noble citizens whose commitment to the Movember cause will help a largely imagined (and mostly invisible) group of men experiencing disease and ill health. Earlier in this section, I reference King’s (2006) arguments concerning how the “survivor discourse” that dominates breast cancer marketing works to constrain the space for politically-targeted activism. The image of the heroic Mo Bro, who is courageous for his willingness to change his appearance for 30 days, similarly works to depoliticize the discussions around “men’s health” by constructing symbolic distance between Movember participants and diseased or unhealthy bodies. The campaign cites testicular cancer – a disease more prevalent in young men – as one of its major focus areas, but the centrality and normalization of prostate cancer as the most important “men’s health” cause further distances Movember’s primary demographic from the mostly older men perceived to benefit the most from the efforts of Mo Bros.

The production of this symbolic distance is enabled by constructing a particular sense of time. Younger Mo Bros, of course, are envisioned as being years away from having to worry about the risk of illnesses such as prostate cancer. Yet these young men are also encouraged to re-think masculine norms that have traditionally led to poor health outcomes for men. Movember’s health promotion materials construct these ideals as outdated and imply that poor decision making in the past contributed to the ill health currently experienced by older men who depend on Movember’s support. Moreover, Mo Bros are invited to seek out medical services and undertake lifestyle changes to help
avoid disease in the future. The temporal dimensions of the Mo Bro’s relationship with health is clearly confirmed in a press release to announce the launch of the 2012 Movember & Sons theme: “The collective knowledge of generations gives us great power to avoid mistakes of the past, plan thoughtfully for the future and to become the best version of one’s self” (Movember Canada, 2012d). Thus, Mo Bros are constructed as occupying a distinct position in which they are distanced from both the mistakes of the past and the potential illnesses of the future. This discourse seamlessly connects with the campaign’s narratives of volunteerism, individual responsibility and self-betterment. Growing a Movember moustache is a way to help the “unhealthy” others suffering through the repercussions of past mistakes while encouraging practices that will ensure healthy futures for active, well-informed young men.

Movember’s brand of irony relies upon the discursive construction of distance between the serious aspects of the campaign and the everyday experiences of participants. I am not seeking to discount the many participants who get involved with Movember to help negotiate their own experiences of disease or those hoping to support others who have been diagnosed with cancer or other illnesses. I am rather drawing attention to how these types of experiences are not typically reflected in the tone and content of the online discourses that constitute the Movember campaign. A majority of Mo Bros may hold personal or emotional investments in Movember, yet these meanings and stories were not commonly communicated through the content I observed from the 2012 and 2013 campaigns. The work of irony as a distancing mechanism pushes frank conversations about the experience of disease to the fringes of the campaign and makes them appear irrelevant to the achievement of Movember’s broader goals. Since
Movember celebrates its success by pointing to the funding of scientific research programs and advancements in testing and treatment options for a largely imagined and invisible group of older men, supporters can easily reconcile the campaign’s fun approach to a serious subject. The movement’s overarching silliness is deemed acceptable because all moustache-related antics, from the mundane to ridiculous, are promoted as noble, altruistic gestures that help others in need. The perception of symbolic distance between participants and the goals of the movement makes Movember’s irony happen. This distance legitimizes irony as an appropriate discursive strategy and makes fun and humour appear to be unquestioned vehicles for social betterment. Because “having fun while doing good” is framed as an appropriate and effective way to bring about meaningful change to “men’s health,” emotional or forceful interventions are deemed wholly unnecessary and raining on the campaign’s ironic parade.

**Resistance and Controversies**

Despite the supposedly universal appeal of Movember’s ironic take on moustaches and charity, some journalists and social media users have resisted and critiqued the campaign’s fun-loving approach. Many of these criticisms have drawn on suspicions regarding the lack of transparency and fiscal responsibility of many philanthropic organizations. One Facebook user condemned the campaign for not making good use of fundraising dollars, “I was wondering what you guys were doiing (sic) with the money people give you since we know that YOU DON’T GIVE A PENNY FOR CANCER?” (Tone E Scott, 2013). A YouTube viewer expressed a similar point of view.
when commenting on an official campaign video outlining “Movember’s Impact on Awareness” by declaring that “cancer nowadays is a business, it’s a cash cow” (thesly74, 2012). Another social media user voiced scepticism in a YouTube comment claiming that Movember participants were only interested in having fun growing a moustache and were unlikely to raise or donate funds to the cause (Sterling Archer, 2012). Anticipating this type of cynicism, Movember has a page on its website dedicated to outlining the foundation’s corporate structure and disclosing its finances. Moreover, ideas about increased transparency and accountability are built into how the Movember brand is promoted as an innovative, cutting edge charity (Movember Canada, 2012b).

Other critical comments focused less on issues around finances and instead expressed disapproval with the general idea of a moustache-based charitable campaign. One commenter took issue with the light-hearted nature of Movember by stating that prostate cancer was “no laughing matter” (Bale, 2013), while others doubted the campaign’s ability to raise meaningful “awareness” of issues related to “men’s health.” The largest group of social media users voicing dissent, however, were far less descriptive in outlining their critiques. Some, as demonstrated by the following comment, asked topical questions about the movement’s effectiveness, “I’m confused, how does me growing a moustache help fight cancer?” (Cmr33xx, 2012). Yet many users left short, direct comments that made their lack of support for Movember unmistakeably clear without providing a specific reason for their disapproval. A YouTube viewer replied to the “Movember’s Impact on Awareness” video by declaring that the movement was “unbelievably stupid” (theoremaxim, 2012). A Facebook commenter responded to an official post promoting the launch of that year’s campaign by complaining to Movember
staff that he was “already pretty sick of seeing your crap” (Malak, 2013). Meanwhile, another user replied to the same Facebook post by simply writing “fuck this” (Regular Human, 2013).

Responses to these different types of criticisms were unsurprisingly mixed. Most negative social media comments did not receive any reaction from other users. In fact, disapproving comments on YouTube were often hidden from view because they had been “voted down” by substantial numbers of viewers (these comments were replaced by a disclaimer declaring that “This comment has received too many negative votes,” but could be revealed with an extra click of the mouse). Yet other criticisms of the campaign across social media elicited responses from Movember supporters. The Movember Canada Facebook account typically replied to comments on official posts that related to specific campaign issues. Most commonly, these carefully-crafted replies would link to information on the Movember website that addressed the commenter’s concerns. In other scenarios, social media users would respond to critiques with comments supporting Movember and vouching for the effectiveness of the campaign’s efforts.

One social media exchange in particular, however, illustrates how Movember’s post-political sensibilities materialize through comments defending the campaign and insulate the movement from substantial critique. A YouTube user commented on the “Your Mo Will Get Fuller” video from MadeMan.com by suggesting that the popularity of Movember reveals much about the misguided priorities of American charities, “a middle eastern war zone that has been quiet for two decades is now rebooting. and all we can think of is a movement for facial hair growing. im telling you people, this is why the rest of the world hates us [Americans]” (amernice, 2012) (Not surprisingly, this comment
received many negative votes and was hidden on the YouTube comment page). One user
replied by both insulting the initial poster and upholding Movember’s generous spirit of
volunteerism,

No it isn’t you moron. This facial hair growing is raising money for very
worthwhile causes. More over, it’s not just about America, people from all
over the world are taking part so I don’t know what’s with your last sentence.
I’m growing a mustache and raising money, it doesn’t mean I'm oblivious as
to what is going on in the Middle East. Of course there are horrible things
happening in other parts of the world, in your own no doubt but you can’t
change it so get of your high horse. (Cenotaff, 2012)

This response angrily defends Movember by pointing to the worthwhile causes supported
by the movement and the global popularity of the campaign. Yet another user countered
the original comment with the sarcastic reply, “your right we should all stop having fun”
(Mitch Newell, 2012). These two reactions demonstrate how the “having fun and doing
good” philosophy that defines the Movember brand functions as the cornerstone of the
movement’s response to criticism. Faith in the virtue of Movember’s spirit of selflessness
and generosity, as well the assurance that irony and fun are appropriate ways to raise
“awareness” about a social issue, insulate the movement from large-scale criticisms
seeking to politicize the discussions about “men’s health.” Criticisms of Movember are
readily taken up as affronts to the campaign’s well-intentioned participants and attempts
to spoil the fun being had in the name of a good cause.

The capacity for the playfulness and perceived virtuousness of the Movember
brand to smother counter-narratives was on display most vividly in the collective
response to two well-publicized critiques of the movement. These articles were subjected
to intense scrutiny from Movember supporters and were frequently circulated on social
media as examples of needless and unreasonable resistance to the campaign. Both
commentaries were published in November 2013 and explore how Movember, despite the good intentions of participants, implicitly excludes and trivializes substantial groups of people (some of these arguments may be familiar to those who have read this dissertation closely). These articles raise important questions about the social and political implications of Movember and the movement’s fun-loving approach to philanthropy. Yet the responses to these criticisms from campaign staff, as well vitriolic comments from outraged readers, illustrate the power of Movember’s ironic brand and the movement’s post-political sensibilities.

The first major criticism of the movement was written by Ralph Haddad for the *McGill Daily*, a student newspaper based at McGill University in Montreal. Haddad’s piece appeared under the headline, “Movember as microaggression: Slacktivism and way too many awkward moustaches” (Haddad, 2013). The author begins his argument by acknowledging the “pure and charitable sentiment” evident in the actions of Movember participants, but then lays out a thesis that would prove to be controversial once the article was taken up by Movember’s community of supporters. Haddad writes, “what once started out as a harmless campaign has becomes sexist, racist, transphobic and misinformed.” Haddad goes on to argue that the link that Movember makes between masculinity and secondary sex characteristics such as facial hair and prostate works to marginalize transgender people. He states, “Being a man, according to Movember, implies an archaic view of gender that implies that only a male/female gender binary exists.” Haddad also outlines the ways in which Movember trivializes and objectifies women, while contributing to the surveillance of female bodies. Much like I argue in Chapter Five, Haddad suggests that the supposed male exclusivity of moustaches
promoted by Movember makes women’s facial (and body) hair appear “unnatural” and require routine removal. Finally, the author highlights the conflict between the higher risk of prostate cancer for black males and the overwhelming over-representation of white men participating in Movember. Haddad leaves no ambiguity in affirming his dissent, declaring “The idea of suggesting that men show solidarity with each other by growing moustaches is completely absurd.”

Haddad’s central claim, that Movember contributes to discrimination against those not represented in the campaign’s white cisgender male majority, drew the ire of the movement’s online community. The first online response, coming almost immediately after the publication of the article, was written by the director of Movember Canada, Pete Bombaci. In a long and business-like statement, Bombaci outlines an argument that seeks to “clarify many of the inaccurate points” within Haddad’s piece. Bombaci first claims that “the magic of Movember is that is can unite all sorts of socio-economic backgrounds under one flag: men’s health” (Bombaci, 2013). He continues by reinforcing Movember’s spirit of volunteerism, and suggests that participating out of self-interest is antithetical to Movember’s vision. He uses this reasoning in an attempt to counter Haddad’s assertions regarding race, maintaining that white cisgender men should not be questioned for selflessly raising funds to fight prostate cancer despite not being the social group most affected by the disease. Bombaci writes that Movember’s mission to encourage men to express vulnerability and take care of their bodies can only make life better for “all of us.” Bombaci’s comments make issues of inequality or social determinants of health appear irrelevant to conversations about Movember and “men’s health.” By invoking ideas about volunteerism and unity, his arguments frame Movember.
as supporting a universal cause that affects “all of us” and downplay the movement’s connection to social issues. Bombaci’s words echo the post-political logic of the Movember brand; he both defends Movember from Haddad’s claims about discrimination and exclusion, while disassociating the movement from topics that might politicize and polarize discussions around men’s health.

Bombaci uses similar arguments when responding to Haddad’s accusations regarding transphobia and sexism. Bombaci describes how making claims that Movember is not a space for transgender people reproduces the “stigma and lack of understanding that trans people face everyday.” He disputes Hassad’s assertions about Movember perpetuating a rigid conception of the gender binary by confirming that the movement would never discriminate against a willing participant; Bombaci writes, “the only binary we recognize is Movember and the rest of the year.” Bombaci also stresses Movember’s welcoming spirit in discussing the role of women in the campaign. While admitting that the campaign does not encourage women to grow out their leg or armpit hair, he declares that the movement would “never turn down a nicely styled Mo, regardless of who wears it.” Bombaci then references a women from Ottawa who was planning to grow a moustache for Movember and asks, “who would dream of squashing that type of determination?” These examples construct an almost utopian vision of Movember, in which everyone can participate as long as they are committed to the movement’s ideals. Yet Bombaci’s response also appeals to universal values that work to make the Movember brand palatable to a wide audience.

Bombaci’s statement fosters a post-political understanding of health through which social inequalities are deemed unrelated to Movember’s primary goals. His
arguments constrain the space to look beyond the campaign’s message of togetherness and universal social betterment. Through this post-political logic, calls to question how the Movember brand normalizes certain performances of masculinity and citizenship while delegitimizing others are deemed unnecessary and unwarranted. Exploring how the brand materializes or is resisted through the everyday experiences of different groups of people is constructed as a needless and impractical endeavour. Yet even when the movement’s connection to cultural politics and social inequality is laid bare in a thoughtful and constructive piece of analysis, Bombaci is able to defend the movement without addressing the campaign’s lack of explicit advocacy on behalf of marginalized people; the continued success of Movember, Bombaci explains, will benefit “all of us” in the long run. Moreover, Bombaci’s rhetorical question, “who would dream of squashing that type of determination?”, speaks to a vision of a welcoming community of Movember supporters. I argue, however, that asking this question also serves to preserve the perceived universality and righteousness of Movember’s efforts while making critics voicing dissent appear irrational and unreasonable. Indeed, who would dream of criticizing such determined efforts to work together toward a common, unquestioned social good?

Haddad’s article received more than 700 comments on the McGill Daily website with many applauding and echoing Bombaci’s defense while reproducing the post-political nature of the Movember brand. A group of commenters participated in a heated exchange about the genetic science that either supported or disproved the existence of a gender binary and the pervasiveness of intersex populations. Another fiery conversation involved two commenters discussing the usefulness of “microaggressions” as a way to
describe discrimination or social injustice. Yet the majority of the comments on this article were not part of a larger dialogue. Instead, they commonly took the form of one-off statements that were often venomous criticisms of Haddad, his arguments and the academic disciplines associated with intersectional analyses of social inequality. These posts were often anti-feminist or anti-Marxist rants, drew from discourses of “men’s rights” and leveled accusations of reverse sexism and overbearing political correctness.

The comments on this article also demonstrate the widespread resistance to those seeking to politicize the public discussion about Movember. One commenter wrote off Haddad’s arguments as “post-modern deconstructional wishy washy nonsense” then joked that the article was an example of “post-wave feminism at its best: being useless while complaining about everything” (HotWingExtremist, 2013). Another commenter complained that “Social Justice types are such sociopathic narcissists” (Vancouverois, 2013). These comments shift the discussion away from the limits of Movember as a charitable campaign and instead attack Haddad’s character and his indebtedness to certain well-established academic paradigms. These comments assert that Haddad’s arguments are not worthy of assessment or dialogue and should be written off as the outlandish products of a self-centred dupe under the unfortunate influence of postmodern feminism (I shudder to think what labels might be applied to someone who has written almost 300 pages of similar critiques).

Other remarks more directly perpetuated the idea that politicized conversations about Movember are unnecessary and unwelcomed. I encountered comments such as “whine for the sake of being a whiner” (J. Dan Aiken, 2013) and “if you flex your brain muscles enough, you can find offense in just about anything” (Eli, 2013) alongside
indictments of the hopeless actions of “social justice warriors.” Some of these sentiments were reinforced in a commentary in the *National Post* by columnist Robyn Urback (2013) who described Haddad’s article as being rife with “classroom catchphrases applied to real life” and an example of how “students take their newly found senses of social justice to the extreme.” Urback concludes, “Movember’s detractors would be wise to look at the bigger picture, lest we all become dumber for listening to their gripes.” Like the comments on the *McGill Daily* website, Urback’s arguments limit the space for political engagement around Movember. It appears, according to Urback, that all critiques of the campaign are unwarranted because they fail to look at “the bigger picture” and all Movember’s detractors are misguided and misinformed. I would argue, in contrast, that the willingness of critics like Haddad to consider the broader social contexts in which Movember takes place demonstrates a well-informed sense of the “bigger picture” being bigger than the foibles of an annual single-issue charitable campaign. Again, the post-political sensibilities of Movember come to light through the responses to Haddad’s article in which the campaign’s noble goals are constructed as impervious to critique or association with social issues beyond health.

I observed a series of similar responses to an article written by Arianne Shahvisi and Neil Singh (2013) for the British political and cultural magazine *New Statesman*. Shahvisi and Singh cover some of the same topics as Haddad, shedding light on how Movember condones the objectification of women at campaign events and reproduces ideas about the intolerability of women’s body hair. The authors also highlight how Movember reinforces the problematic link between masculinity and biology in ways that are oppressive to trans men or men who are unable to grow facial hair for any number of
reasons. Yet Shahvisi and Singh also delve deeper into issues of race and suggest that Movember perpetuates colonial traditions of racism through the playful celebration of the moustache. They argue that, by emphasizing the ironic or humourous value of the moustache, Movember implicitly trivializes the cultural and religious significance attributed to facial hair by many racial and ethnic groups. Shahvisi and Singh suggest, in a similar vein to my analysis in Chapter Five, that Movember normalizes the systemic “othering” of “foreigners” by the generally clean-shaven, white majority. The final paragraph of the article summarizes the authors’ provocative arguments by declaring that Movember is divisive and gender normative, racist, and ultimately ineffective as a means of tackling important health issues affecting men.

The several hundred comments about this article on the *New Statesman* website cover comparable themes to those responding to Haddad’s article for the *McGill Daily*. Not surprisingly, many of the comments I observed are overtly anti-feminist, accused the authors of reverse sexism, and complained about hyper-sensitive “lefties” trying to over-analyse an inherently positive movement. Some readers made sarcastic remarks likening Shahvisi and Singh’s writing to bad parody or satire, while others openly joked about men being “viciously” excluded from breast cancer events. A good number of comments, however, strongly reinforced the idea that all criticisms of Movember were unwarranted and that the movement was somehow immune to serious political discussion. One reader responded by writing, “No one is trying to upset anyone. This is about cancer” (William Parkin, 2013). The logic underlying this comment seems to be that issues related to cancer and health are unquestionably outside the domain of politics and the noble intentions of Movember participants should outweigh anyone’s inclination to be offended
by the moustache-fueled antics of Mo Bros. Other comments such as “Calm down, love” (He’s Spartacus, 2013) and “the author needs to chill out a bit” (Sally Quilford, 2013) insinuate that Shahvisi and Singh’s attempt to politicize the discussion around Movember is reactionary and emotional and beyond the realm of reasonable or rational debate.

Some parts of the discussion included readers defending Movember by drawing even more explicitly on discourses of post-politics. One commenter replied by mocking the premise that Movember should be criticized and joked, “Men having a laugh and raising money for charity – the b*stards” (Ringstone, 2013). This sarcastic quip mirrors Movember’s “having fun while doing good” mantra and implies that the inherent virtue of good-natured fun and philanthropy should protect the movement from substantial criticism. Another reader chided the authors for their misguided point of view and asserted, “People choose to raise money for charity. Stop judging them and imbuing them with your own prejudices” (Instant karmas gonna get you, 2013). The accusations of undue judgement and projecting prejudice on to well-meaning fundraisers portrays Shahvisi and Singh as unreasonable radicals seeking to unjustifiably politicize a campaign that should remain free from polarizing debate. Yet these comments do not speak to the universal good Movember supports as much as they reveal the degree to which discourses of post-politics inform the campaign’s brand. The ease with which supporters can draw on these discourses to refute politicized critiques illustrates how the Movember brand, and conceptions of charity more broadly, actively enable post-political understandings of the campaign and constrain the potential for resistance or criticism.

The pieces in the *McGill Daily* and *New Statesman* were not the only critiques of Movember to generate controversy across mainstream and social media; these two
articles, however, received the greatest degree of public scrutiny and response from the Movember online community. My analysis overlaps with and is very much informed by these commentaries. Indeed, my use of post-politics as a theoretical concept very much came out of reading the often baffled and vitriolic responses to these and similar articles. While both Haddad and Shahvisi and Singh worked to mitigate potential backlash by commending the movement for its good intentions and exclusively focusing their critiques on broader meanings associated with the campaign, I was able to examine the hostile reaction to these critical commentaries as part of the discourse constituting Movember’s ironic brand. Having these comment threads as sites of analysis enabled me to examine how the Movember brand is designed and taken up in ways that shield the campaign from any connection to political issues. These responses also revealed how the task of defending the campaign through allusion to universal super-values is performed through official channels, but also through the online activities of campaign supporters. The collective resistance to attempts to politicize Movember and “men’s health” is reflected in the ways the movement’s fun-loving spirit, as well as the health promotion goals of the campaign, are organized and framed. Despite its call to “change the face of men’s health,” Movember’s rhetoric constructs careful limits around what those “changes” might entail and what types of transformations are far beyond the movement’s universal mission.

**Moustaches Against Establishment?**

From Movember’s ubiquitous “changing the face of men’s health” slogan to its marketing and health-related messages, the rhetoric of “change” is one of the defining
elements of the campaign’s promotional discourses. In his response to Ralph Haddad’s article in the *McGill Daily*, for example, Pete Bombaci asserts that “the truest mark of a Mo Bro is his willingness to change the world” (2013). The idea that Movember participants are in a unique position to enact global or societal change is also a common feature of press coverage about the movement. A 2013 Movember press release distributed through public relations service MarketWired included the headline “Generation Moustache: Stand Up. Make Change. Do Good” and declared that “Gen Mo stands for one thing: change” (Market Wired, 2013). Adam Garone is quote in *AdWeek* magazine confirming that “the campaign is all about change” (Garone as cited in Beltrone, 2013). In *Marketing Week*, Garone similarly outlines his goals for the 2013 campaign as targeting “a new generation of fundraisers and driv[ing] positive change” (Garone as cited in Vizard, 2013a). As I will discuss throughout the remainder of this chapter, much of Movember’s rhetoric of change is related to the marketing of the Generation Moustache theme from 2013. The notion of “change,” however, is an enduring fixture of the campaign’s promotional materials. The 2012 About Movember page on the campaign’s website, for instance, boasts that “the moustache is bringing about change” and links to an official video that describes how the moustache is a “catalyst for change” (Movember Canada, 2012f). Yet how does the movement define these changes and how might they be measured? What types of changes are worth pursuing and what changes are untenable, irrelevant or unrealistic? Through the campaign’s universal message of better health for men, Movember legitimizes particular conceptions of “change” and excludes other types of social transformations from the conversation.
The type of changes most explicitly defined in Movember’s online promotional narratives are those related to specific health behaviours. The About Movember webpage from 2012 explains, the primary goal of the campaign is to “change attitudes and habits relating to men’s health” (Movember Canada, 2012f). As I outlined in Chapter Three, Movember organizes its health promotion initiatives around addressing the “poor state of men’s health” and the fact that, overall, men have a lower average life expectancy than women. Thus, the campaign advocates for men to undertake specific health changes to their health and fitness behaviours. These changes include seeking out medical services when feeling ill and avoiding risky behaviours that might adversely affect health.

Movember also encourages men to make changes to their diet that will improve their health and wellbeing. As stated clearly in the introduction to the official Movember cookbook, diet is one thing that men can “control” and “actively manage” to become healthier. The campaign also promotes physical activity as an indispensable health practice. While the recommendation for increased physical activity is a staple of many contemporary health promotion campaigns, this suggestion was especially salient as part of Movember’s MOve initiative. Online materials promoting MOve constructed physical activity as a “miracle cure” for a number of health conditions ranging from back pain to arthritis to depression to erectile dysfunction. These educational resources also demonize “sitting” and inactivity as contributing to increased risk of heart disease, diabetes, cancer and depression. The MOve campaign, therefore, suggests a number of diverse ways to “move more” that include sports or conventional modes of “working out” but also subtle ways to “expend more energy” such as walking instead of driving or standing instead of sitting at work (Movember Canada, 2013h).
These prescribed changes are framed through neoliberal discourses of health and wellness that stress individualism and choice as key contributors to healthier populations. As I outlined in my introduction, Movember strongly reinforces ideas about health being the responsibility of individuals and a product of better choices that are hallmarks of contemporary neoliberalism. These associations are perpetuated in specific health initiatives organized by the campaign. Adam Garone asserts in a video promoting the MOve campaign, “It’s your health, it’s your move” (Evans Health Lab, 2013). Similarly, most health promotion materials promoted through the Movember website and social media channels emphasize that better health can only be achieved if men choose to “take action” and change their health behaviours. Movember’s health promotion initiatives draw on distinctly masculine ideals that construct men as active subjects exercising mastery and control over their bodies. These narratives also reproduce neoliberal conceptions of health as a universal super-value that transcends difference or inequality. The Movember website outlines how issues related to health and illness present distinct challenges for men, yet much of the campaign’s educational materials gloss over how identity and inequality can influence health behaviours. In a video promoting MOve, doctor and radio personality Mike Evans portrays exercise as a medical treatment accessible to “everyone:” “this treatment works and is available to you whether you’re rich or poor, black, white, brown, or blue, big city roller or country dude, jock or non-jock or somewhere in between” (Evans Health Lab, 2013). The statement that exercise “works” and is available to everyone obscures how structural and cultural barriers might influence health behaviours and outcomes, and instead places the onus on individuals to “take action” and make healthier choices regarding their physical activity. Again, these
types of “universal” solutions to health problems are a widely acknowledged staple of neoliberal health regimes; in the context of Movember’s post-political narratives of societal betterment, however, ideas about choice and individual responsibility further depoliticize conversations around the campaign.

Movember, to its credit, recognizes the importance of enacting a degree of cultural change as part of its health promotion initiatives. Movember’s marketing materials describe this cultural shift as involving changes to “men’s attitudes and habits relating to men’s health” (Movember Canada, 2012f). The Movember website includes men’s perceived invulnerability and unwillingness to discuss health and emotions among the reasons accounting for the “poor state of men’s health.” The website’s mental health page discusses how men “aren’t always good about discussing their feelings” and how “to many men, being ‘manly’ means not admitting to any vulnerabilities or expressing emotions” (Movember Canada, 2013b). These admissions point to the ways in which cultural ideas about masculinity can negatively impact the health of men and their relationship with their bodies. In his comments on the McGill Daily website, Pete Bombaci asserts that Movember is working to “change standard definitions of masculinity” and that the movement is not about competition or “men being super tough.” Instead, Bombaci writes, Movember is about “personal bests, about getting engaged in men’s health, about knowing yourself and taking care of yourself and your community” (Bombaci, 2013). In Chapter Three, I discuss how Movember’s emphasis on redefining masculine health norms has grown in the years following the editions of the campaign I analysed most closely. Indeed, these efforts work against an essentialist view of men and masculinity based on the notion that men are governed primarily by innate
biological drives and resistant to change (Connell, 2005; T. Edwards, 2006). Movember promotes the “billions” of health-related conversations “both online and in person” as evidence of the campaign’s overwhelming success. According to a widely shared infographic publicizing the results of Movember’s 2013 Global Survey, 70% of participants talked to someone about “men’s health” issues, 43% became more educated about the health issues they face and 20% went to see their doctor (Movember Foundation, 2013). Moreover, the campaign’s 2014 annual report boasts that 99% of Movember participants talked to someone about their health (Movember Foundation, 2014). These figures, of course, give little information about the content or depth of these billions of conversations or how they reflect Movember’s health-related goals.

The ways in which Movember encourages participants to undertake conversations about health and redefining masculinity is also limited in that the campaign fails to connect “men’s health” to issues concerning male dominance, power and privilege. Movember’s attempts to redefine masculinity do not address what Dumas and Bournival (2012) call the paradox of men’s health: that male privilege does not translate to men experiencing better average health outcomes than other genders. The discussions about masculinity undertaken through Movember do not account for how the attitudes and behaviours that the campaign flags as undermining the health of men are the same social practices that afford men privilege and positions of power (Connell, 2005; Dumas & Bournival, 2012; Lohan, 2010). The educational material provided through Movember does not take up how assumptions about men’s physical and emotional strength, invulnerability and toughness are connected to patriarchal notions about men’s “natural” leadership, rationality and decision making skills. The health promotion programs
organized by Movember seek to redefine masculinity without connecting this process to gender discourses and patriarchal values systems that perpetuate ideas about male superiority. The movement advocates for changes to masculine health norms while simultaneously celebrating the maintenance of a gender binary and the supposedly unshakeable differences between men and women.

Movember produces a discourse through which masculine health norms and behaviours are conceptualized as disconnected from other well-documented implications of masculinity and gender inequalities more broadly. Issues related to violence, racism, rape culture and sexual violence, homophobia and the systemic oppression of women are absent from Movember’s online discourses and envisioned as somehow outside the purview of a campaign that seeks to redefine standard definitions of masculinity. The movement does not openly address how gender inequality contributes to and is a product of the “crisis” of “men’s health” nor how health challenges are also compounded by issues related to race, sexuality, social class and (dis)ability. Movember’s promotional materials, then, illustrate how gendered meanings and norms related to health can shift and be reconceptualized without engaging with the broader discourses of gender that produce or intensify many of the problems the movement hopes to address. The goal of this portion of my analysis is not to demonize masculinity as inherently problematic, but to reveal how Movember’s mission intersects with social inequalities including and beyond gender and point to some of the potential limits of the campaign’s single-issue approach. Movember’s health promotion messaging may encourage many men to re-think how their understanding of manhood influences their individual health behaviours; yet Movember stops short of connecting a need to redefine masculinity to widespread
gender inequalities or aligning itself with social justice initiatives that engage with gender and health issues. If the “true mark of a Mo Bro is his willingness to change the world,” why wouldn’t Movember seek to channel its popularity to enact change on a larger scale?

Movember positions itself as a grassroots movement that aims to redefine masculine norms and effect global change to “men’s health.” Yet Movember’s message of change is limited because it is specific to the health behaviours of a relatively privileged group and gives little attention to social inequalities or oppression. In his book *Politics of Masculinities* (1997), Michael Messner describes how male-centred movements commonly conceive of positive change to the lives of men as best achieved by highlighting how men are different from women. According to Messner, these movements are often organized around homosocial bonding between men facilitated by acknowledging shared problems or concerns. This bonding, however, does not require men to confront the privilege that accompanies their feelings of togetherness and comes at the expense of women and some other men. I am not arguing that problems faced by men are not worthy of public discussion or that men should not have a space to share their feelings and anxieties about common concerns. Rather, like Messner, I am suggesting that movements organized to address “men’s issues” should be sensitive to the ways in which the sources of and solutions to these problems are entangled with multiple social hierarchies. Then, instead of looking to re-assert gender divisions, men who are struggling or feeling alienated could be encouraged to develop critical perspectives on gender and seek out common experiences across social groups. My concern lies in how Movember fails to promote ways of improving “men’s health” that acknowledge the
work of well-established social justice causes and highlights the potential for common solutions to problems faced by diverse groups of people.

In his book, Messner advocates for transcending single-issue politics in favour of building intersectional allegiances across identities and social causes. This approach recognizes how different social problems are interconnected and produced by overarching systems of oppression that contribute to various forms of sexism, racism, poverty, homophobia and transphobia, ableism and environmental degradation. While having well-publicized affiliations with national cancer and health charities such as Prostate Cancer Canada, Movember demonstrates no explicit connections to feminist or other social justice movements. Movember’s promotional material, moreover, offers no recognition that for decades feminists and their allies have considered the redefining of masculinities one crucial pathway to more just and equitable societies. In fact, as I outline throughout this chapter, much of the response to criticisms of the movement is commonly anti-feminist and, in some cases, anti-woman. Movember’s official channels applaud the role of women as supporters of the campaign, yet deny any explicit allegiance to feminism or feminist politics. When asked in his Reddit AMA about the feminist response to Movember, Adam Garone replied by claiming he was “fascinated” and “blown away” by these critiques (Garone, 2013). By constructing feminism as an object of fascination rather than a source of legitimate knowledge, Garone closes down potential space for dialogue and portrays feminist resistance to Movember as an anomaly to study with astonishment, but not something to be taken seriously. Garone’s diplomatic response to a question about feminism illustrates how the post-political nature of Movember makes
the movement’s connections to broader social justice issues appear irrelevant to the campaign’s goals.

The post-political sensibilities that characterize Movember have the potential to shape conceptions of social change and social movements beyond the campaign itself. Movember’s rhetoric of “change” makes powerful statements about what counts as social progress or societal betterment. By portraying the campaign’s successes as landmark societal changes, Movember helps defines how the effects of social movements should be measured and valued in the public consciousness. This discursive work is most evident in how Movember appropriates the language and symbols of social movements, especially as part of the Generation Moustache theme for 2013. In a video promoting Gen Mo, Adam Garone references the importance of “people power” and “taking the movement to the streets” as part of the campaign’s return to its grassroots beginnings (Garone as cited in Androich, 2013). Pictures posted to the Movember Facebook page invoke the image of the raised fist, a symbol of solidarity amongst oppressed peoples most recently associated with the Black Panthers and Occupy movements. A Movember news release described participation as an opportunity to “join the moustache revolution.” T-shirts were also sold on the Movember website featuring the Gen Mo logo and the slogan “Moustaches Against Establishment.” These references to social movements and rebellion conflict with the campaign’s post-political approach to health and lack of commitment to social justice. As Shahvisi and Singh (2013) wrote in their critique of Movember for New Statesman, “set against [Movember’s] damaging carnival of normativity, an official Movember t-shirt slogan Moustaches Against Establishment seems particularly empty and hypocritical.” Similarly, despite the campaign’s goal to redefine masculinity,
promotional discourses for the Gen Mo campaign frequently slide into militarized language alluding to violence and battle. Although always qualified with the assumption that Movember’s ironic brand should never be taken completely at face value, phrases such as “fight the good fight,” “rally the troops” and “fly the flag” normalize a traditional conception of tough, violent masculinities as compatible with the campaign’s mission to redefine problematic definitions of manhood.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 25** (Movember Canada, 2013p)

This chapter has developed arguments around the cultural and political implications that emerge from Movember’s treatment of “serious” subjects ranging from health to social change. The discourses I have outlined throughout this chapter place dangerous limits on how these issues are conceptualized through the Movember brand.
King (2006) writes that breast cancer marketing typically involves no call for citizens to do more beyond merely participating in the range of fundraising activities and consumer practices promoted by pink ribbon campaigns. Movember is somewhat successful in broadening their campaign goals to encourage men to have meaningful conversations about their health and make changes to health-related habits. Yet the movement frames these limited actions as sufficient and enough for Movember to claim that they are “changing the face of men’s health” or indeed “changing the world.” These discourses make reference to sociopolitical contexts or anger towards corporate, government or institutional stakeholders appear beyond what is necessary to enact social change. These post-political narratives of “change” work to trivialize the work of progressive movements that seek to challenge the rampant inequalities that influence health for many different social groups. The movement’s post-political sensibility allows these undertakings, and the viewpoints of those who disapprove of Movember and campaigns like it, to be readily written off as unnecessary and hopelessly over-the-top. This impression is encapsulated by Adam Garone’s description of the 2013 Generation Moustache theme as drawing inspiration from famous movements throughout history and having a “social movement vibe” (Garone as cited in Androich, 2013). Here, the broader message appears to be that social change is something that can be readily reduced to a marketable image rather than occurring as a site of ongoing political struggle.
Chapter 9

CONCLUSION

When speaking with people about my Movember research for the first time, I am often bluntly asked if I think the movement is a “good thing.” Aren’t the funds raised by the campaign contributing to important scientific breakthroughs? Doesn’t Movember encourage more men to go to the doctor or make better choices? Can I really deny that the movement is making men healthier while also allowing men of all ages to bond over their silly moustaches? I often answer with a diplomatic comment along the lines of “well, it’s actually pretty complicated” and launch into an explanation of how my dissertation addresses questions beyond whether Movember “really works.” My response to these types of questions illustrates what I found to be the foremost dilemma in undertaking research on a charitable campaign that is so readily embraced by the Canadian public. This predicament lies in how to carve out space for critical voices within the public conversation about Movember, especially given how the campaign’s fun-loving, ironic ethos makes the movement appear insulated from the world of politics and immune to critique. My attempts to negotiate this tension led me to the concept of post-politics as a way to describe how Movember is actively depoliticized through the campaign’s ironic portrayals of masculinity and universal message of societal betterment. I have argued in this dissertation that, despite the campaign’s well-publicized health promotion initiatives and fundraising success, the Movember brand maintains a pronounced cultural influence through how it shapes consumer choices, ideas about gender and conceptions of social change in problematic ways. This final chapter will revisit some of my key arguments and areas of contribution. I will also identify possible
directions for further research that could address gaps in my project and provide additional insight into the Movember phenomenon. My dissertation concludes with thoughts on post-politics, the future of Movember and the potential for brands to bring about meaningful social change.

**Key Arguments**

My main findings correspond to the directions mapped out through my major research questions:

1) *What social and historical forces have contributed to the popularity of Movember?*

2) *How is Movember situated within contemporary consumer cultures?*

3) *How does the Movember brand reflect and influence ideas about gender and masculinity?*

As I detail in my introduction, these lines of inquiry were also supported by a number of sub-questions that I used to further structure my three key arguments, which I elaborate below.

First, I develop a concept called *brand(ed) activism* to theorize how Movember is situated within consumer cultures and broader philanthropic practices. This idea draws on and complements existing critical work concerning cause-related marketing and commodity activism (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012; Banet-Weiser, 2012; S. King, 2006; Lewis & Potter, 2011; Richey & Ponte, 2011). My primary goals in identifying brand(ed) activism as something distinct from other attempts to describe commercialized philanthropy were to unsettle the centrality of shopping and material commodities in this past work and to re-emphasize the body as a site of brand activity within charitable
campaigns. While Movember promotes the consumption of commodities as a viable way to participate in the movement, the campaign is also structured around activities that stretch far beyond the purchase of consumer products. Participating in Movember is about cultivating a brand experience that is less about “buying” or “having” and more about “doing.” The Movember brand is sustained first and foremost by Mo Bros undertaking the bodily practice of growing a moustache for thirty days then uploading and sharing pictures of their facial hair online. Participants are also encouraged to create other moustache-related images, videos and internet memes that are informed by a far-reaching assemblage of references to retro fashion trends and popular culture. The brand offers participants a degree of agency in how they might undertake these practices and “make the campaign their own;” yet these actions take place within a carefully constructed brand environment that legitimizes some performances while constraining others. Thus, brand(ed) activism is a concept that encompasses the ways in which Movember facilitates personalized and flexible experiences of commercialized philanthropy that materialize across objects, bodies and multiple media platforms within the confines of a brand environment. Movember participants engage with the brand through their bodily practices and online activities, while simultaneously becoming branded representations of the movement and its values. This aspect of my argument engages with theoretical understandings of the relationship between philanthropy, consumer culture and the body, while also contributing to the literature on internet cultures and online activism.

Second, I sought to challenge both popular and scholarly discussions of Movember that uncritically take the movement’s promotion of the moustache as an
“ironic” expression of masculinity for granted. Following Linda Hutcheon (Hutcheon, 1991, 1994), throughout my dissertation I approach irony as a complex discursive process with important political implications. My analysis demonstrates how representations within Movember’s online discourses were often ambiguous and contested, fluctuating between irony and sincerity in unpredictable ways. While some participants playfully engaged with Movember’s fun take on facial hair and manhood, others aggressively policed the movement’s masculine code or communicated serious anxieties about their perceived male inadequacies. Moreover, countless intertextual pop culture and historical references serve as the raw materials for the movement’s ironic representations, but require a degree of cultural knowledge to enable participants to be “in on the joke.” Access to this shared stock of cultural knowledge very much influences the degree to which supporters can properly engage with the Movember brand and gain approval from other members of the discursive community (Hutcheon, 1994).

Yet this cultural knowledge also involves a common understanding of social hierarchies and shapes how young, white, heterosexual, middle class men are firmly entrenched as the prototypical Mo Bro. My analysis sheds considerable light on how the moustache-related antics driving the popularity of Movember are based on pre-conceived assumptions about gender, race, class and sexuality. These jokes make sense because of shared assumptions about what facial hair tells us about what types of bodies are “normal,” healthy or masculine and what types of bodies can be imitated or mocked for the sake of a good-natured laugh. Even though the campaign proudly proclaims that “anyone” can participate in Movember, the involvement of women, people of colour, working class men and gay or queer-identifying men is bound to normative stereotypes
that re-assert how they are different from the campaign’s white, middle-class hetero-masculine norm. These cultural boundaries, however, are safely performed through Movember’s ironic discourses; since nothing about the Movember moustache is meant to be taken too seriously, practices that reinforce notions of difference can be readily laughed off as “just a joke.”

I similarly propose *ironic masculinity* as a way to conceptualize how Movember is entangled with broader social norms. Discourses of ironic masculinity exaggerate masculine characteristics and find both humour and familiarity in the over-the-top performances of manhood. Ironic performances of masculinity show how manhood is not sacred, one-dimensional or immutable. They demonstrate that masculinity can be laughed at and played with in ways that expose how conventional definitions of manliness are often unrealistic or change over time. Discourses of ironic masculinity come with a degree of reflexivity and the recognition that masculinity is socially constructed and subject to change. Poking fun at the construct of the “real man” or the inability of many men to live up to such an ideal acknowledges how there might not be one “true” way to properly perform masculinity. Yet underlying the good-natured laughter and the idea that masculinity can indeed be flexible are strict limits around the degree and types of acceptable variation within these gender performances. By highlighting what socially acceptable traits can be spoofed as inherently and stereotypically manly, ironic representations of masculinity further cement these traits as stable and knowable. Portrayals of the Movember moustache work to reproduce ideas about the existence of a stable gender binary within which men can playfully experiment with different
performances of masculinity as long as they do not disrupt common sense ideas about the “natural” differences between men and women.

The key idea to be drawn from this aspect of my analysis is that ironic masculinity is a way to comfortably speak about masculinity as both malleable and stable. Movember’s brand of irony neatly overlaps with the campaign’s broader message of change as it resists essentializing masculinity while recognizing the pressures men face to conform to particular ideals of manliness. By laughing at one-dimensional or unrealistic representations of manhood, the movement supplants overly-sincere or traditional ideas about “true” or hyper-masculinity with a flexible set of performances more attuned to the everyday experiences of the playful, culture-savvy, (post)modern Mo Bro. This conception of how gender norms might be unstable or flexible, however, does not go so as far to abandon the association of facial hair with “natural” male power, strength and virility. The Movember campaign encourages participants to avoid taking masculinity too seriously, but still seriously enough to preserve its distinctiveness from femininity and the privilege that comes with these “natural” differences. Moreover, the campaign’s playful engagement with cultural stereotypes around race, class and sexuality suggests that certain bodies (especially racialized and working class bodies) are more stable or easily known than the ideal white, middle-class heterosexual man who has a wide range of masculine performances at his disposal. I argue that the contradictions that emerge from this fluctuating balance of change and stability further reveal the complexity of Movember’s brand of irony and lend support to discursive approaches to theorizing masculinity and gender more broadly.
Third, my dissertation explains how discourses of ironic masculinity and post-politics are co-produced through the Movember brand. Although Movember’s online discourses reproduce many cultural stereotypes through their ironic celebration of the moustache, these problematic assumptions are welcomed as part of the good-natured fun because we’re all supposed to be “in on the joke.” Irony similarly functions as a way to insulate Movember from substantial critique or attempts to politicize the discussion around “men’s health.” Because the campaign’s pronouncements are never meant to be taken at face value, critics looking to draw attention to the social and political implications of Movember are easily written off as missing the boat and being too sensitive or are simply told to lighten up. Movember’s “having fun while doing good” mantra constructs the campaign through the moral imperative of “doing the right thing” and makes criticism or confrontation appear to be foolishly working against this inherent social good. The movement’s emphasis on fun and message of universal societal betterment constrains opportunities to question how some of the movement’s practices may be exclusionary or to include debates about gender inequality, racism, poverty, capitalism and the environment within discussions of “men’s health.” As Movember is envisioned as working toward a universal social good, criticism of and resistance to the movement on almost any grounds can be swiftly dismissed as unnecessary and unwarranted.

The unwavering avoidance and stifling of polarizing discussions about Movember and “men’s health” is why I drew on post-politics as a theoretical concept (Mouffe, 2005). Departing from much of the writing on the post-political, I consider post-politics as a discourse that transcends the realm of governments and the democratic process and
pervades everyday conversations and cultural practices. I consider much of Movember’s online discourse to engage in actively limiting debate and depoliticizing discussions about health and masculinity by appealing to universal themes and moral reasoning. Most importantly, the construction of the success of Movember through a post-political vocabulary of “change” frames perceptions of what counts as activism and delegitimizes the work of movements advocating for broader social transformations. If Movember is publicized as “changing the face of men’s health” or even “changing the world,” then the campaign can be held up by its supporters as a successful movement and an example of what “change” can look like. This post-political discourse of “change” is especially evident in Movember’s lack of allegiance to feminist organizations or politics despite the movement’s call to redefine traditional definitions of masculinity. Movember’s well-publicized success and post-political rhetoric makes other types of more confrontational or politicized social justice causes appear over-the-top and misguided. As I will discuss later in this concluding chapter, the post-political discourses that characterize the campaign also greatly inform the limitations of the Movember brand in producing meaningful and sustainable social change.

**Future Directions in Moustache Research**

This dissertation is my attempt to write a critical history of Movember that sheds light on the discursive and political underpinnings of the campaign, but also helps me think through complex trends concerning contemporary masculinities and gender formations, and the relationship between philanthropy and consumer culture. I have sought to be definitively clear that my analysis was not meant to evaluate whether
Movember “works” as a health promotion initiative. I did not try to measure the impact of Movember in encouraging men to talk about their health, seek out medical services or make changes to their health behaviours. I similarly did not intend to explore how social media might influence the reach and effectiveness of the campaign’s health-related messaging, either positively or negatively. In their annual reports and other marketing materials, Movember boasts statistics about its impact on “awareness” and impressive fundraising totals, and some scholars have applauded the movement for its capacity to engage men who might be resistant to other types of health promotion campaigns (Movember Foundation, 2014, 2015c; Robert, 2013; Wasserburg et al., 2014). Other studies and commentaries have questioned if Movember’s health-related messages are lost within the campaign’s steady online stream of popular culture references and moustache-related antics (R. Baker, 2012; Bravo & Hoffman-Goetz, 2015; Coffee, 2013).

I chose not to enter into these debates in any substantial way, and instead focused on studying Movember as a cultural phenomenon. Future research in critical health studies, health communication and the sociology of health, however, could explore how the discourses I have mapped through my analysis influence understandings of Movember’s health-related goals and the perceived success of the campaign’s fundraising and research programs. These research directions might help evaluate the effectiveness of Movember as a health movement and investigate whether the campaign can convincingly claim to be “making men healthier, one moustache at a time.”

One way, of course, to assess how the Movember brand and its health promotion messages are taken up by participants would be to talk to those involved with the campaign. While I purposefully chose not to conduct interviews or surveys for this
project, my analysis is still limited by my inability to include firsthand accounts of the Movember experience alongside my own interpretation of online content. Talking with participants, as well as Movember staff or executives, would certainly aid in unpacking some of the discursive complexities I have identified including the delicate balance between fun and seriousness that the campaign aims to strike. Yet I have demonstrated how Movember’s post-political sensibilities work in and through the social media activity of loyal campaign supporters. Thus, I would caution researchers seeking the input of those deeply invested in Movember to certainly value these knowledges, but also carefully examine these narratives for evidence of the campaign’s depoliticized rhetoric. As the Movember brand relies heavily on public performances of irony, masculinity and philanthropy, the most productive conversations with campaign supporters might be those that encourage reflexivity and go beyond recounting purely individualized narratives of participation in the movement. Similarly, seeking out prominent counter-narratives or stories from those who choose not to participate in Movember could reveal much about how the campaign is disrupted outside of the branded online spaces I encountered.

The multitude of ways in which the Movember brand materializes online and through digital media applications means that I was also unable to explore the social, political and ontological implications of these processes. Further research into how the Movember brand is specifically articulated through social media, mobile apps and digital photography would greatly contribute to scholarship concerning online branding and activism, as well as digital or posthuman subjectivities (Carty, 2011; Couldry, 2012; Hayles, 1999; Lievrouw, 2011). This type of research would also add to the growing
literature on the culture and ontological properties of selfies and digital photography (Hand, 2012; Senft & Baym, 2015). Movember’s claim to be a long-time supporter of the “male selfie” raises questions about how ideas about masculinity and the gendering of self-representation are implicated in the online activities undertaken through the campaign. How, for instance, is the male selfie different from any other type of selfie except for the assumption that the photograph portrays a man? The crucial role of selfies within Movember also reveals how technology facilitates the continuing erosion of the boundaries between bodies and brands. While the Mo Bro serves as a “walking billboard” for the Movember brand, the infinite production, copying and sharing of selfies has the potential to transport that “billboard” through multiple online spaces at once and reach consumers much faster than any participant could ever move on foot. The diverse lines of research that can extend and compliment my analysis illustrate how Movember is intertwined with many aspects of social life and speak to the movement’s overarching complexity.

Concluding Thoughts: Republicans Wear Moustaches Too

The other question I most commonly receive in casual conversation about my research concerns the staying power of Movember: will the movement last? Can the annual tradition of growing a moustache for charity actually be sustained for a long period of time? These types of questions about the future of Movember mostly amount to speculation about forthcoming developments in men’s fashion, health research and online activism. Yet some noteworthy cultural trends that have taken shape since I began my research on Movember shed light on what the future could hold for the world of
moustache-related philanthropy. Media stories have already reported a marked decrease in social media activity related to Movember and the campaign’s official numbers show a noticeable decline in participation over the last three years (Movember Canada, 2015; Movember Foundation, 2015c; Vizard, 2013b). The number of registered Movember participants has indeed dwindled from a robust 1.1 million in 2012 to 950 thousand in 2013 and 750 thousand in 2014 (the official “Mo History” page on the Movember website curiously only provides a count of the total number of participants since the campaign’s inception rather than annual numbers, thus subtly hiding the recent decline in support). Yet the decrease in participation is counter to how Movember seems to be more visible in a greater number of cultural contexts and attracting more media and corporate support each year. Movember also appears to be growing to include participants beyond the white college-aged men who have commonly served as the campaign’s primary demographic. Indeed, my informal observations suggest that the movement seems to have expanded its reach to include more working class and middle-aged men than ever before. This growing mainstream acceptance could be disrupting Movember’s reputation as a trendy, cutting edge and somewhat subversive movement. The campaign is inevitably affected by how the fashion-forward trendsetters who helped make Movember cool are reacting to the movement’s increasing visibility in mainstream culture.

The popularity of Movember has also contributed to and been shaped by the increasing acceptance of facial hair of all kinds as a fashionable look for men. A 2014 article in The Guardian featured the headline, “Movember participants concerned by mainstreaming of facial hair” (Ferrier, 2014b). The report recaps how the Movember concept was built around the power of the moustache as a catalyst for conversation, but
explains how the growing ubiquity of facial hair makes the Movember moustache less and less noticeable. The article also laments how the trendiness of facial hair might make men more likely to grow a moustache during Movember without fundraising or engaging with the campaign’s health-related messages (a long-time concern, I should add, of both supporters and critics of Movember alike). The mainstream popularity of moustaches and facial hair corresponds to the long-predicted phasing out of hipster culture, and with it, the decreasing relevance of irony as a mode of cultural expression. Since I have been researching the Movember phenomenon, I have come across countless proclamations about the demise of hipster culture and its trademark ironic flair, such as “the hipster is dead” (Infante, 2015), “sincerity is the new irony” (Marantz-Henig, 2012) and “the end of the hipster: how flat caps and beards stopped being so cool” (Ferrier, 2014a). With the trappings of hipster culture supposedly having passed their cultural expiry date, the ironic Movember moustache may soon be written about as decidedly uncool and no longer the attention-grabbing fashion statement it once was. Movember may face a period of transition as the appeal of its retro brand of ironic masculinity wanes. The movement’s fashion-forward trendiness helped Movember explode as a popular charity, but also puts the campaign at the mercy of fashion cycles and the whims of fickle trendsetters. As Mark Currie (2007) writes, a fashion statement must be on-trend or worn ironically a decade later, but never caught in between. The changing fashion trends surrounding Movember will indeed present challenges as the movement seeks to re-invent itself and stay relevant years into the future.

One key way that Movember has noticeably changed since the 2012 and 2013 campaigns involves more explicit discussions of masculinity and the need to redefine
traditional definitions of manhood. The Movember Foundation has recently collaborated with distinguished sociologist Steve Robertson (Leeds Beckett University), one of the leading scholars on issues concerning health and masculinity (S. Robertson et al., 2015). Campaign messages have also more directly engaged with ideas about the social construction of masculinity and how problematic masculine norms can contribute to adverse health effects. A June 2015 opinion piece posted to the Movember website acknowledges how “society teaches our boys that they need to act tough, show strength and effectively be invincible” (Movember Foundation, 2015a). The commentary explains that contemporary definitions of masculinity can have devastating effects on men’s wellbeing and that conversations about re-defining masculinity should encourage men to share their feelings and express fear or vulnerability in times of trouble. The campaign’s revamped message, however, still does not discuss notions of power and privilege or refer to feminist-inspired movements that promote progressive and intersectional approaches to healthy masculinity. Similarly, the article’s headline asks, “Are you man enough?” and suggests that Movember may not be preparing for a major departure from the movement’s unapologetic celebration of masculinity and the gender binary. The direct engagement with the “consequences of masculinity” (at least as they pertain to health) still very much pushes the boundaries of the movement’s post-political discourse. It will be important to monitor how Movember supporters respond as the movement ventures toward more contested and polarizing political terrain.

With this in mind, I return to the key question posted by Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee (2012): “What account can we make of the political consequences of civic engagement and action being increasingly defined by the logics of the marketplace?” (p.
2). While working on this dissertation, I simplified this question even further: “Is a brand capable of bringing about progressive social change?” The success of Movember illustrates the potential for a brand to mobilize millions of people to raise or donate money in the name of a charitable cause and communicate specific, albeit often simplistic, messages about a social issue. Yet I have argued that the Movember brand is extremely limited in its ability to fulfill its goals related to the redefinition of certain aspects of cultural life, namely masculine norms around health and illness. Constituted through the logic of neoliberalism, Movember shifts the focus of civic engagement away from larger political goals and social inequalities toward the bodies, purchases and everyday activities of individual consumers. I do not wish to join the chorus of critics denouncing so-called slacktivism or clicktivism and condemning well-meaning individuals for not doing more to make the world a better place. I have rather sought to show how the emphasis on creating brand value under neoliberal capitalism alters the discourses through which activism, resistance and social change can be defined. Attempting to fashion acts of charity or resistance through the commodified activities of brands greatly limits the types of conversations we can have and questions we can ask about social problems.

As social change is increasingly imagined through the logic of the marketplace, a post-political mentality becomes further engrained as the basis for grassroots identifications and collective identities. If brands are design to organize the activities of the market by increasing brand value and “awareness,” then the universalizing language of post-politics works in the interest of the branding process. As more charities and social causes are constructed as brands competing alongside other consumer products and
trends in a volatile marketplace, adopting a post-political sensibility is advantageous in increasing market share and appealing to as many potential “customers” as possible. Moreover, organizing a campaign around a moral imperative or “universal” goal allows for the creation of brand value through attention-grabbing gimmicks or trendy promotional strategies rather than facilitating politicized debate that could polarize the public discussion and alienate consumers. Discourses of post-politics provide a way of speaking that downplays the need to question the motives of a campaign or consider the broader context around a social issue. Thus, brands can focus their attention primarily on increasing the scale and scope of their reach through tactics exclusively designed to attract attention and appeal to as many consumers as possible.

Yet this adherence to the logics of the market comes with substantial pitfalls that afflict even the most trendy, well-organized or “universal” campaign. As seen through the declining participation numbers for Movember, as well as the inability for a viral campaign such as 2014’s ALS Ice Bucket Challenge to maintain its rampant popularity, the success of these trendy brand initiatives are tied to market forces and unpredictable consumer tastes. As much as brands are mechanisms to enable consumers to share something in common, consumers are often impulsive bricoleurs continually seeking out new and improved rituals, emotions and experiences (Arvidsson, 2005). Despite the “universal” appeal of these brands cultivated through the language of post-politics, they are still constantly competing with other brands for prominence and the success of one brand can risk displacing messages from campaigns for other worthy social causes. Perhaps more importantly, discourses of post-politics also obscure how brand activities are entangled with multiple social inequalities. As Mouffe (2005) writes, “every
consensus is based on acts of exclusion” (p. 11). As I have demonstrated throughout my dissertation, a staunch belief in a universal cause or an inherent social good can only lead to the stifling of dissent or the trivializing of many marginalized voices. By popularizing a model of philanthropy in which politicized discussion and resistance is avoided at all costs, campaigns such as Movember contribute to a cultural landscape in which our political imaginaries are increasingly constituted through the activities of brands competing for attention and charitable dollars. These campaigns may facilitate the adoption of critical perspectives on a single social issue or the behaviours of individual consumers, but they constrain the potential for collective solidarities that are connected to broader political goals or social inequalities.

I will close with an anecdote that I believe nicely encapsulates the arguments I have articulated through this concluding chapter. In 1990, legendary basketball player Michael Jordan refused to endorse a black Democratic candidate for congress in North Carolina who was bidding to unseat a Republican incumbent notorious for an outdated and oppressive stance on race relations. Jordan, who at the time was reaching the pinnacle of sport superstardom and corporate marketability, supposedly defended his decision by explaining to a close friend, “Republicans buy sneakers too” (Jordan as cited in Granderson, 2012). The lesson to be learned from Jordan’s stroke of depoliticized business savvy is that, indeed, Republicans wear moustaches too (and so do some conservatives and liberals and socially-conscious college students and men’s rights activists). Similar to how Jordan avoided taking a political stance to ensure he didn’t alienate potential consumers of his Air Jordan brand, Movember’s continued promotion of post-political understandings of health and masculinity undoubtedly aids in expanding
the reach of its charitable messages. Yet the campaign’s ironic, playful ethos and “universal” message of making men “healthier” limits the extent to which Movember can meaningfully work toward re-defining manhood in ways that connect masculinity to social norms beyond health. If discussing masculinity and the male body as sites of power and privilege is bad for business, then no amount of brand “awareness” could allow Movember to be the vehicle for social change that it is so often portrayed to be.
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