

## **Connoisseurs of Consumption: Gay Identities, and the Commodification of Knowledgable Spending**

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Portrayals of gay men as pioneers of fashion illustrate the role of consumer capitalism in the shaping of social identities (Hennessy, 1994; Valocchi, 1999; Chasin, 2000; Gross, 2001; Walters, 2001; Sender, 2004; Gamson, 2005). As a gay man, it is difficult to escape from being associated with 'knowing how' to shop. Answering questions ranging from correct wood finishings for kitchen cabinets, to 'the perfect' outfit to wear to a party have somehow become a regular part of my everyday interactions with friends. So when did I, or any other gay male, transform into a shopping expert? The assumption that my subjectivity as a gay individual is tied not only to consumption, but knowing how to properly consume, raises questions around the relationship between consumer capitalism and homosexuality. Why are contemporary gay identities associated with consumption? What has contributed to the formation and maintenance of this relationship? To explore these questions, I briefly examine several ways gay have utilized goods in commercial and political life to address the structuring role of consumer capitalism in the production of modern, stylized gay identities. I argue that the collective social, cultural, and political practices of gays in the United States are dialectically linked to the creation of a consumer archetype utilized by marketing and mass media to encourage spending. In doing so, I build upon theoretical conceptions of the consumer by addressing how contemporary consumer experiences are becoming increasingly commodified and marketed as 'knowledgable'.

Although there are a number of approaches that view consumption critically (Frank, 1999; Schor 1999; Ritzer, 2004; 2008) many scholars view consumption as a positive force that allows individuals to actively engage and shape social life (Lipovetsky, 1987; Miller, 2001; Kates, 2001; 2002; Campbell, 2005). This view of consumption allows for an analysis of various processes and meanings that consumers give to their everyday experiences. Taking a critical orientation to theorizing the individual some scholars reject the notion that consumers are sovereign self-motivated actors. Instead, consumers are "not rational calculators of self-defined desires but rather the object of rational calculation by other forces, the target of a marketing drive or advertising campaign" (Slater, 1997; p.55). What emerges from this critical perspective is an understanding of the operation of consumer capitalism as a structuring force within the social world.

For Gabriel and Lang (1995), consumers can be conceptualized in various ways including the victim, citizen, rebel, activist, identity seeker or chooser. This perspective not only demonstrates the multiplicity of consumers in the market but also how consumption is a social practice which, linked to economic exchange, influences social relations. While this definition takes into account diversity among consumers, a historical analysis of any particular group of consumers must also take into account "the endless

mutating meanings of ‘the consumer’” (Gabriel & Lang, 1995; p.6). Here consumers cannot be understood as only one variation or type, but as socially situated individuals who take on multiple identities. Conceptualizing the gay subject as a consumer is important because the modern standardization of gay identities remains bound to the historical practices of gays as consumers. My decision to focus on male homosexuality is an effort to critique the processes that keep differences within the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) community invisible.

Drawing from sociological theories of consumption, I theorize the gay subject as a *connoisseur of consumption*. I use this term to characterize an individual who has both actual or perceived expertise in various modes of fashionable consumption, and an image that (in)directly encourages others to consume in a similar fashion. Fashionable consumption should not be thought of as limited to privileged groups or classes, but as exclusive to any particular social, cultural, or economic demographic. As a connoisseur of consumption, the gay subject is a product of various historical processes in consumer capitalism. Its commoditized identity is the result of an increasing stylistic homogenization and rational standardization that is bound to consumption in an attempt to produce an authentic form of gayness, or any other social identity, when none exists. As an object of consumption the connoisseur of consumption is not only consumed, but also guides consumers on issues pertaining to proper spending. For example, characters and personalities from various contemporary TV programs including *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *What Not to Wear*, and *How to Look Good Naked* serve as experts of fashion and style whose spectacular images strengthen historical links between gays and consumption while serving as a reference for consumers to extract knowledge about proper home décor, cooking, fashion, and forms of entertainment.

While a full analysis of the ways gays have historically used consumer goods is beyond the scope of this essay, I briefly highlight several historical examples to show how the internal use of consumer goods by gays for identification grew to include an outward cultural expression that coincided with the use of consumption as a tool for political change. I use the term ‘gay’ in reference to male homosexuals in the twentieth and early twenty-first century. This definition should not suggest that homosexuality did not exist prior to its ‘naming’, but that modern gay identities, like many others, are contextually bound to specific social and historical moments.

### **Situating the Gay Subject**

Locating the development of gay identities with the rise of capitalism, historian John D’Emilio argues that while there have always been same-sex sexual practices, modern gay identities and communities were made possible by material conditions that allowed for self expression (D’Emilio, 1983; 1992). Stemming from economic changes during the end of the nineteenth century, homosexual desire coalesced into a personal identity mainly due to changes in labor that allowed workers to live independently outside of the family unit (D’Emilio, 1998). With this change, migration to large cities such as New York, Chicago, and San Francisco allowed for the development of stable centers of gay life where acceptable forms of cultural expression could develop. By this reasoning, capitalism in the United States made possible both gay identity and the

beginning of a community whose engagement in commercial life served as a means of identification, cultural expression, and political activity.

In the early twentieth century, the use of consumer goods as a form of identification by homosexuals became central to the advancement of the subculture. While other minorities are easily distinguishable due to physical characteristics, the increasing homosexual minority developed methods of identification utilizing fashion as a means of remaining unnoticeable to outsiders. Thomas Painer, a gay male from the 1930s, described how a complex system of “Green suits, tight-cuffed trousers, flowered bathing trunks, and half-length flaring top-coats” were cultural signifiers (Chauncey, 1994; p. 51) that allowed homosexuals in the United States to identify and communicate with one another in various public areas such as in parks and on the street.

Similarly, many gay GIs during WW II utilized consumer goods in variety shows that headlined them as female impersonators to cope with constant suspicion around their sexuality. Robert Fleischer of the 473<sup>rd</sup> Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion noted, “there wasn’t a woman in the show...we made all our own costumes” complete with dresses, make-up, wigs, and sheer stockings (Bérubé, 1990; p.67). Drag and the use of what became later known as ‘camp’, or exaggerated form of fashion and effeminate coded language, provided a refuge for many gay soldiers whose kept their identities concealed for fear of being discharged from the military. In contrast to the use of red-ties during the 1930s to attract sexual partners, the transformation of fashion and language by gays in the military allowed for forms of identification that centered upon community and relationships. Thus, consumer goods were not only used as a means of communication, but also as a cultural code to evade hostile political, legal and religious social forces that restricted the public declaration of homosexuality.

Tying to how gays utilize consumer goods a form of cultural expression, the 1969 Stonewall Riots, which came as a result of police raids on gay bars, spawned what many scholars deem the start of the modern gay civil rights movement. Paralleling this shift, gays began to use consumer goods and consumption as a form of outward public expression through protest, resistance, and visibility. Using fashion as form of cultural expression, drag functioned as a type of political protest to gender and sexual norms. Chanting slogans like “Gay Power” and “Save our Sisters” at demonstrations, gays cultivated empowerment through political displays that drew from earlier eras’ use of commodities as forms of expression and identification. For example, ‘Out and Proud’ gay political rhetoric was often paired with various commodities ranging from homemade ‘freedom rings’, tattoo art, and a wide range of goods. In practice gays created and transformed commodities, and the meanings associated with them, into palatable forms of cultural and political expression, resistance, and visibility.

Paying particular attention to the growing homosexual minority as consumers, advertisers also began to imagine many as fashionable, young, educated, childless, and affluent men (Badgett, 1998). In the absence of any other information, “the tension between the stereotypes of the trendsetting, free-spending gay man and the immature, flaming homosexual became quickly entrenched in marketing discourses” (Chasin, 2004;

p. 29). While these discourses began to focus on effeminate and flamboyant characteristics to depict gay consumers, gay liberation during this time also produced an identity that for some men could only be characterized as hypermasculine. 'Gay clones' in their self-presentations and behavioral patterns, transformed the image of the effeminate homosexual by unhinging gender style from sexuality through the consumption (Levine, 1998). Masculine forms of dress, physique, and recreational activities adopted by many gay males demonstrated how a wide-range use of consumer goods, fashion, and consumption by various members of the gay community provided a broad basis for their eventual representation as connoisseurs of consumption.

During the late 1980s and 1990s many homosexuals embraced an assimilation formula, adopting conformity in return for participation in privileges of class and sex (Adam, 1977: p. 296-97). Much of this shift from politics of liberation to a politics of assimilation stemmed from the rise of the Religious Right and HIV/AIDS in the late 1980s. As a result, new national gay rights organizations, such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), adopted policies of assimilation advocating 'sameness' and engagement in the marketplace through 'spending power' with the goal of obtaining greater civil rights and freedoms.

Serving as an exemplar of the contemporary consumption-based tactics of large GLBT non-profit organizations, the HRC publication 'Buying for Equality' provided consumers with an index ranking various major US corporations by gay friendly policies. Based upon a color-coated rating system (i.e. green -favorable, yellow – somewhat favorable, red –unfavorable), the HRC publication urges consumers to "support products from companies that support equality" and receive green ratings (Buying for Equality, 2008). For gay rights organizations the publication is not only a method to galvanize support for companies that have gay friendly policies, but also expand financial support from corporations focused on increasing profits. This move represents a shift in the nature of gay identities away from a solely political category that requires activism to a consumer category that demands spending. Thus, gays are drawn into the consumption-based tactics of empowerment that rely heavily upon simultaneously (re)producing representations of themselves as connoisseurs of consumption.

In addition to an increase in the presence of gay characters on television and the influence of the 'gay dollar', the creation of metrosexuality by the American marketing industry in 2003 constituted the ultimate expansion of the gay male as a connoisseur of consumption. Drawing from cultural representations of gay men, British writer Mark Simpson generally described metrosexuals as men whose lifestyle, spending, habits and concern for personal appearance make them "decidedly single, definitely urban, dreadfully uncertain of their identity (hence the emphasis on pride and the susceptibility to the latest label) and socially emasculated" (Simpson, 2003). Unlike Simpson, whose aim in creating the term was to offer a slightly satirical critique on the effects of consumerism on masculinity and sexuality, marketers redefined it to fit a heterosexual audience with the goal of creating a new niche market segment. What metrosexuality provided was a heterosexual version of the all-consuming gay male that relies on social and historical connections between gay identities, politics, and consumption. Thus, the

modern spectacle of the gay male was not only central to entertaining and instructing others on proper spending, as in the case of popular media representations, but also the recent exportation of a preferred, corporate-approved identity to other segments of the population.

While consumption provided for forms of cultural expression, identification, and political tactic throughout the twentieth century, it appears that at the beginning of the twenty-first consumption-based definitions of gayness serve as an exemplar of the ever-expanding influence of consumer capitalism in everyday life.

### **Commodification, Subjectivity, and Social Change**

The formation of the connoisseur of consumption in popular culture demonstrates how social and historical links between consumption and social identities are utilized by the modern culture industry to create palatable practices, lifestyles, and forms of cultural knowledge to encourage spending. While the effect of standardized gay identities is multifaceted, it is clear that the historical and cultural development of the community around various forms of consumption has impacted politics, forms of visibility, and subjectivity. While scholars have often described gay consumers as active agents who seek to influence change through political tactics and cultural expression (e.g. Kates, 1997, 2001, 2002), analysis of the historical and structural influences of consumer capitalism on gays demonstrates how they also remain bound to structural forces that appear to encourage specific forms of consumption.

Through an examination of the relationship between consumer capitalism and the practices of gays, this article proposes that social scientists should explicitly recognize the production of a new consumer archetype used to encourage knowledgeable spending – the connoisseur of consumption. While I locate this consumer type within the context of the gay community, it is reasonable to think that corporate entities aim to mold all consumers into connoisseurs. So how do we escape from becoming a part of this phenomenon? Should communities continue to embrace consumption as a form of cultural identification, expression, or political tactic? Overall these questions and numerous others must be raised to assess the various consequences that arise from the commodification of difference.

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