

Living In Double World: Harmonizing Homosexuality And Masculinity Through Symbolic Consumption In Private Space

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ABSTRACT

This article demonstrates the interpretation of a selected homosexual's narratives of his consumption patterns and taste which emerge as a refuge from any social stigmatization. These reconstruct a sense of masculinity while cherishing their homosexuality. The investigation emphasizes various experiential aspects of interior decorative activities of his secret room which is treated confidentially and demarcated from more open rooms. The interpretation indicates that the decoration is employed to sacralize the room which is used for the escapism and romantic ritual purpose. Moreover, the conflated decorative styles of loft and vintage, as reflexive of camp consumption, are discussed in line with an affirmation of masculinity and an embrace of homosexuality. Hypermasculinization is also explored since it creates a cultural superiority over the heterosexual mainstream to achieve the homosexual masculinity.

THEORETICAL POINT OF DEPARTURE

Considerable literature determines that gay men have developed depression as they have experienced social stigmatization (Kilmartin 1994). Gay men, for instance, are socially punished by abusive comments, social ignorance and discrimination and sometime unprovoked violence (MacInnes 1998). Accordingly, many gay men do not truly express their homosexual self in the public arena in order to protect their social privileges which could not be acquired if revealed. As such, closet gay men do not associate with stereotypical homosexuality or femininity because they not only intend to minimize the social stigmatization but also attempt to enjoy the advantages of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1992). In this regard, gay men have a tendency to initiate the strategies which enable them to conceal their homosexuality and compensate for the perceived lack of their masculinity through hypermasculinization.

Stigmatization of Gay Men

Gay men are substantially more stigmatized by oppression and marginalization from various institutions in society (Weeks 1985). Even though a particular gay man has never engaged in stereotypically homosexual activities and institutions, these stigmatized circumstances and social punishment from both lived experience with significant other at home, schools and various social institutions and mediated experiences through different media products are learned (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). The gay men's consciousness of social marginalization becomes intensified particularly when they involve in the circumstances where hegemonic masculinity is paramount and, consequently, homophobia is a stereotypically predisposition. Under this phenomenon, they both are socially expected to have and struggle to maintain a traditional set of masculine attributes. As such, males who engage in sets of habits, demonstrations, behaviors and consumptions that oppose to social expectations and beliefs of conventional masculinity or, particularly in the Thai context, appear to correlate with effeminate attributes are characterized as homosexual. Homosexual is apparently regarded as a condition abhorrent to the mainstream culture (Connell 1992). These constant reminders of heteropatriarchy attest to the masculinist discourses that denigrate femininity and, apparently,

homosexuality (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Encountering this paradoxical circumstance, gay men experience tensions because they have to maintain the equilibrium of the dualism of homosexuality and heterosexuality through constructing a self that could be harmoniously situated in these binary oppositions. Consequently, if their balancing strategies are found unproductive, they then experience social oppressions in which they are socially stigmatized and disqualified for various social rewards (Meyer 1995).

Public Concealment of Homosexuality and Symbolic Consumption

A minority's confrontation with social stigmatization is theoretically affirmed to deteriorate their ego development (Caldwell et al 1989) and, in turn, contribute to the development of emotional distress (Potoczniak et al 2007). Moreover, since homosexuals are seen as a social construct that deviates from the mainstream culture. Because of this, they receive less or no support from social institutions and they potentially have a strong tendency to conceal their homosexual identity in public space in order to preserve social privileges awarded only for traditionally masculine individuals (Potoczniak et al 2007). The strategic concealment of the homosexual self is conceptualized as the development of the set of behaviors which are substantially associated with traditional masculinity and, apparently, disassociated with what is labeled as femininity and homosexuality (Kates 2002). By this regard, these strategic practices can be facilitated by consumption symbolism (Wattanasuwan 2005) which is used to represent symbolically masculine meanings and disassociate from homosexuality and femininity.

Gay men's public exposure can result in a tension because of lower self-esteem (Caldwell et al 1989). This tension is empirically attested, by research in psychology (Villemarett-Pitman et al 2004) and consumer behavioral science (Hirschman 1992; Elliott 1994). Tension contributes to the development of the addictive behavior which potentially leads to the consumer's hyperconsumption. By this regard, gay men, in order to protect their self-esteem, may become highly sensitive about their homosexual appearance particularly in public and, subsequently, are likely to hypermasculinize their self. This would secure their perceptually threatened masculinity. This practice can be done by engaging in consumption and activities in which masculinity is either implicitly or explicitly symbolized. The hypermasculinization also relates to the compensatory consumption (Grunert 1993). In Thailand, the homosexual is regarded as a man who not only has an ultimate relationship with a man but also incorporates a set of effeminate behaviors. In order to compensate for their homosexuality or the perceived lack of their masculinity, gay men are likely to involve in as many exaggerating consumptions and activities symbolically reaffirming masculinity and disassociating from homosexuality and femininity as possible. As such, the manifestation of their masculinity becomes maximized and their socially fragile femininity and homosexuality is minimized.

Sacralizing the Masculinity

Empirically, it posits that the status of commoditized objects can be enhanced through the sacralization process, the process