Brazilian Gays: Understanding the Construction of the Homosexual Identity Through Consumption

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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1000053/la/v1/LA-01

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ABSTRACT
The focus of this study is the Brazilian gay (male homosexuals) subculture. Our objective is to explore the changes that occur in the ways gays interact with the world of products during the process of "coming out of the closet". This analysis is important to understand the construction of the homosexual identity. Ten long in-depth interviews were carried out with gays residing in Rio de Janeiro between October 2004 and January 2005. The results suggest that products and services are actively used by gays in order to deny, camouflage, and reinforce their homosexual identity.

INTRODUCTION
McCraken (2003) sees culture as ideas and activities through which groups socially construct their own realities. The study of how individuals build these meanings through the purchase and ownership of goods has become a crucial point in understanding the consumer, particularly when they constitute cultural subgroups. Still according to McCraken (2003:11), groups who live at the margin of society such as gays are "meaning providers" and become trendsetters for the dominant culture. This is reflected in products, music, the arts, and most of all, fashion.

These groups have been the target of several academic studies, which intended to investigate the gay market (Branchik 2002, Fugate et al. 1998, Halsop and Moore 2002) and the gay consumer (Nunan 2003, Kates 2002, 2004). Thus, the object of this research is to investigate the ways gays relate to products and brands. Based on the works of Kates (2002, 2004), we assumed this group could be observed and described as a consuming subculture. Thus, the changes that took place in the consuming habits of gays during the process of "coming out of the closet" (or simply "coming out", i.e., assume a homosexual identity) were observed. We consider that the whole process of coming out as a rite of passage. Schouten (1991) argues that, in rites of passage, products and services are transformed into ritualistic consuming artifacts, impregnated with great symbolic value.

Researchers in the consumer behavior area have displayed a special interest in investigating how brands affect the process of social construction of subcultures. For example, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) investigated the group of Harley-Davidson owners using an ethnographical approach. The term subculture can be understood as the values, symbols and meanings of a group as opposed to a larger culture (Morgan 2000). In this study we will follow Kates (1998) and Nunan (2003), who define subculture as an ideology coherently articulated on an set of meanings, beliefs and behaviors, in addition to being a complex form of shared social interaction and participation.

THE GAY MARKET
Some studies argue about the existence (Branchik 2002, Halsop 1998, Peñaloza 1996; Kates 2002, 2004) or not (Fugate 1993) of the gay market. Some works have related the development of the gay community to the process of urbanization and the development of great metropolitan areas, more open-minded about sexuality (Aldrich 2004, Branchik 2002).

Kates (2002) investigated how gays use consumption to define the boundaries of their subculture, the product meanings for the group, and how their members use consumption practices to be recognized among themselves and differentiate themselves from the dominant straight culture. This study has shown that affiliation to the gay subculture was associated to a social identity and to consumption practices. Other studies confirm the ritual (Haslop 1998) or political dimension (Peñaloza 1996) in the use of products and services. On the other hand, Fugate’s study (1993, p. 51) indicates some unwillingness from the mainstream business to position their products to the gay market, resulting from fear that brands associate their image to this segment.

Summarizing, the gay market has developed side by side with the gay community, influenced by gays’ need for identification among themselves. This identification was often based in the use of some specific products and brands, which became associated with the group. Social movements related to homosexual causes went on reinforcing the constitution of the gay community.

CONSTRUCTION OF THE HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY
A crucial point in the life of the homosexual is the process of coming out of the closet and, consequently, the construction of a homosexual identity. It is necessary to raise some issues before analyzing the process of construction of a homosexual identity.

The stigma that involves homosexuality affects both the formation and expression of the homosexual identity, and the formation of the homosexual identity involves a gradual acceptance of homosexual "label" to oneself.

To Hall (2004), the post-modern subject assumes different identities in different moments, identities that are dynamic and constantly moving. So, according to the author, as systems of cultural significance and representation multiply, we are faced with different possible identities.

In the present work, we define identity as an organized group of characteristics of an individual representing his self in respect to a specific social situation (imaginary or real). So, identity is about the insertion of the individual into a social category (as of race or sexual orientation). When displaced from the social situation that activates the identity, it becomes latent (Cass 1984, Nunan 2003, Troiden 1984, 1989).

Identity is a label which people attach to them, and that represents the self in a social situation (Nunan 2003, Troiden 1984). An individual who ranks himself in the homosexual category activates this homosexual identity in specific social activities such as a gay parade, and leaves it dormant in other situations such as when working in a predominantly straight environment. This way, the homosexual identity is only one of several identities that compose the individual’s self-concept. The homosexual identity refers to the self-perception of an individual as a homosexual relatively to a social situation (Cass 1984, Troiden 1984).

Several theories on identity formation have been proposed in the last decades, many of them proposing a model of "stages" through which the subject would pass along the construction of the

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*The authors would like to thank EBAPE-FGV for the financial support provided to undertake this study.*
homosexual identity (Cass 1984; Eliason 1996; Troiden, 1984). One of the most influential models in the psychology literature, proposed by Cass (1984), states that the formation of a homosexual identity follows five stages: confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride and synthesis.

The model elaborated by Troiden (1989) and adopted by Nunan (2003) proposes that the formation of homosexual identity passes through four typical stages: (i) Sensitization: occurs when the individual starts to feel marginalized and different from the others; (ii) confusion: the possibility of homosexuality causes internal conflict. In this stage, individuals use strategies of escape, camouflage and (partial) acceptance of sexuality. (iii) Identity Assumption: when homosexuality is accepted as identity and revealed only to other homosexuals and close friends. This is one of the first stages of the process of coming out of the closet. Important events occur in this stage, such as the first contact with gay groups and places. (iv) Commitment: in this final stage, homosexuality is accepted as a way of life, and the homosexual identity is finally perceived as comfortable.

As the individual goes from one stage to the next, his self-concept goes from mostly negative to mostly positive. At the end, the individual feels at ease with his homosexual identity, adopting behaviors consonant with this new identity (Kates 1998, Nunan 2003, Troiden, 1989).

COMING OUT OF THE CLOSET: A RITE OF PASSAGE

The coming out of the closet can be analyzed as a rite of passage by which the individuals go through the process of constructing a homosexual identity. It is a critical process in a gay’s life, in which he learns about the values and behaviors of the gay culture and assumes a homosexual identity for himself and others (Cass 1984, Kates 1998, Nunan 2003, Turner 1974, Troiden 1989). According to Trevisan (2000), the individual chooses not only to desire homosexually in a private sense, but also to become socially homosexual. Note that while one cannot choose to be or not homosexual (Cass 1984, Troiden, 1989), the decision of coming out and adopt a homosexual identity is a matter of choice (Kates 1998, Nunan 2003).

The term rite of passage, defined by the anthropologist Van Gennep (1969, apud Turner 1974), relates to the incidents that happen when an individual passes from one present situation or structured social position to another situation or position still unknown. Throughout this transition, the individual is in a state of communitas, an intermediary and undefined social position, and there remains while he does not assimilate his new social condition, i.e., while he does not assume his new identity, behavior and roles inherent to his new social position.

According to Van Gennep (1969, apud Turner, 1974), the rite of passage is characterized by three distinct stages, namely: separation (the removal from the previous fixed point in the social structure); margin or liminality (the moment characterized by an ambiguity in which the individual remains on a cultural dominion with few attributes from the past and the future); and reaggereation (the reinsertion of the individual in a position other, in which attributes belonging to a certain system are awarded to him). These stages can be compared to the process of coming out as proposed by Troiden (1989) and previously mentioned in this work. Sensitization is analogous to the separation process, confusion is similar to the margin stage, and the supposed identity and commitment could be compared to the reaggereation stage.

In the present study, we consider that the process of coming out of the closet, as a rite of passage, consists of three stages. It is important to stress that this process reflects the psychological development of a social identity (the homosexual identity in this case), a growing acceptance of the homosexual identity as part of the individual’s self-opinion and finally as a progressive process of revelation of a stigmatized social status (gay) to the various publics: friends, family, other gays and heterosexuals. According to some authors, this process is closely related with the change in the individual’s pattern of consuming (Kates 2003, Nunan 2003, Trevisan 2000, Troiden, 1989).

Kates (1989, 2002) shows in his study that the act of consuming presents variations between these stages. That is, the products consumed and the experiences lived in this stage play an important role in creating and maintaining a homosexual identity.

METHODOLOGY

We have conducted in-depth long interviews with a semi-structured script (McCraen 1988) with ten male homosexuals from Rio de Janeiro. Informants were recruited with snowball sampling technique. This technique was used by Kates (1998) and Troiden (1989) in their studies of homosexual groups.

The interviews were digitalized and, later transcribed. The work on the transcriptions and recordings consisted on identifying categories important to the understanding of the structures underlying the speech. This process led the authors not only to insights on the discourses, but also to the rereading of the theory. At every interview, a new categorization and rereading of the literature was carried out, in a circular process. This way, one interview fueled another, which generated new insights, which fueled the interviews to come. We discontinued the process the moment the interviews no longer supplied any new information.

Even considering the methodological limitations, the insights generated helped in balancing its shortcomings. Even so, it is worthwhile to mention the possible methodological flaws in this work. The chosen research method requires that the researcher had a significant interpretative capacity to approach the contents that were observed. In fact, the researcher is never completely naïf in the field, and so, his view is inevitably directed towards what he considers relevant. In addition, it became clear in some interviews that when the informant is very aware of himself, he tends to rationalize their answers and, therefore, to mask the object of analysis of this research.

ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

The categories presented as follows emerged spontaneously in the interviews. We explored how the subjects used the various cultural meanings of the world of products on the discovery and acceptance of the homosexuality. Next, we will present the most striking categories that were identified, organized in accordance with the stage in the process of coming out of the closet.

Discovery

The first stage in the process of coming out of the closet is what we call discovery. It refers to the moment in the life of an individual that begins with a feeling of discomfort and ends in becoming aware of his homosexual condition. Four categories appeared in this stage: conflict, denial, search for information and ambivalence.

Conflict: the first point that appears recurrently in the discourses is the internal conflicts generated by the discovery of the possibility of homosexuality. Almost all informants used similar terms and expressions to address the conflict that characterizes this moment.

“I thought that it was not a natural thing, you understand?”
One of the forms used to negotiate internally the conflict generated by this feeling of displacement was to generalize the homosexual condition to the rest of the people in the world. One of the participants even said, “deep down, everyone is always gay”. This tendency to generalization will give place, in the future, to a deep awareness of the difference between the homosexual and heterosexual groups. However, observe, what rules this stage is the feeling of displacement, very often not completely identified. Even before the subjects imagined themselves as homosexuals, they already felt excluded, different, under pressure to dominate and control their impulses:

“I was never very interested in girls (...) I was forced to remain calm (...) because the more freely I expressed, more I would place my position in the family at stake.”

**Denial:** The conflict between a discourse that deals with genders in a binary fashion (male/female) and that proper to the homosexual condition, considered as deviant by Kates (1998, 2002), forces the individuals to stumble upon the negative gay stereotype. According to this stereotype, “to be gay” would be related to feminine behaviors or to use products related to the feminine world. See the report below:

“I heard that to be queer, you had to have unusual manners, you had to wear skimpy clothes, you had to have a kind of pre-established stereotypes and that used to shock me.”

As a reaction to this view, the subjects use products, especially fashion as an instrument of dramatization (Miranda 2001) to deny this possible homosexuality and reinforce masculinity. After all, the exposure of deviant behavior can generate punishment (Goode 1990). It is interesting to note that the informants present a negative aspect of themselves, and frequently use words that mean punishment or prison, “locked”, “imprisoned” and “suffocated”. It is interesting to note that one of the forms of punishment can come from the participant himself, i.e., there is a self-punishment behavior. See the passage below:

“I didn’t accept myself. (...) While I did not assume the fact that I was gay, I was very tacky. So I bought my tacky clothes in the gaudiest store I could find, you know, pleated pants...”

The term “tacky”, or “cafonha” in Brazilian Portuguese, is used several times during the course of this interview. It is interesting to note an emic term which emerged in the interviews: all informants refer to the heterosexuals as “gaudy”, or “careta” in Brazilian Portuguese, and the terms gaudy and tacky (or cafona and careta), in spite of not being synonyms, are very compatible in Brazil. The product that was mentioned, pleated pants, is typically related to the heterosexual world, is a strong significant to heterosexuality. That is, the self-punishment sometimes typical of this stage consisted in disguising oneself with the clothing of the more socially acceptable gender orientation.

Search for information: The suspicion of homosexuality and the risk of being characterized accordingly with the gay stereotype lead the informants to search for information on issues connected to homosexuality. Several products such as books, magazines, films and web sites in the Internet are consumed in order to understand and overcome this moment’s conflicts. This search for information is a form of bringing down the aforementioned negative stereotype.

“Always sought to understand what was happening, why I was gay. Then I searched in encyclopedias, and then there were some magazines about sex life in the newsstands, which I bought and collected, you know. I read a lot. I was reading everything with the word ‘homosexuality’ in it just to know what it was. Because then I began to realize that it is not only about making love with another guy, it is a broad range of behaviors and tastes and preferences that have nothing to do with an archetype people hold somehow...”

Products, therefore, are not only part of the imaginary of this group and help in the construction of their identity. In some cases, products are direct and literal carriers of the group’s ideals.

**Assimilation:**

This moment is marked by identification with the group and construction of a homosexual identity still restricted to the gay group, and only revealed to its members. Stories related to this moment are rich, eventful, and full of insightful information: the first contacts with the gay culture, the assimilation of gay standards, the sheer valuation of aesthetics, the intensive use of codes for both reinforcement and camouflage of the gay identity.

**Between two worlds:** Informants vividly describe memories of the moment when they lived between two worlds. In this manner, they were influenced on one hand by the standards of the heterosexual world they were still part of, and on the other by those of the gay world they were having the first contact with. According to Turner (1974), individuals enter a borderline state due to the absence of a mature identity or a reference of their social position. Feelings such as fear of being discovered, curiosity and ambiguity dominate the reports at this point.

“In the beginning you are scared stiff of everything. You don’t want anyone to know, you don’t want them to see you on the street with a man, you are doing something and it is wrong, then you think everyone is watching.”

This feeling of ambivalence and borderline extends to the social relationships to such an extent that relationships with groups of friends undergo a clear period of redefinition. With new friends, it is natural that the habits of consuming goods and services also change. See the passage below:

“(...) Then I went out with my straight friends, and later, when it was already morning, instead of going home, I’d go to the door of Le Boy and after a while I started to go only to Le Boy, and I sort of found my new friends.”

At this moment it is possible, in fact, to see the first clear references to the use of products as a significant of the homosexual condition, but still mixed with reports of attempts at disguise. The strategies of both identification and differentiation are completely based on a syntax attributed by the members of the group to products: clothes must reveal the body, the cut looks more informal and leisure-like, tennis shoes, jeans. Clothes identified with the straight world are also identified with work, not leisure.

First contacts: According to Haslop et al (1998) the gay venues such as bars, nightclubs or a gay spots on the beach are proper locations for expressing the gay subculture. See the following passage:
“One day a gay friend called me to go out. He said: I’m taking you out to a place: (...) Beach, Ipanema, Farme de Amoedo! (laughter) I found myself, it is my world!”

This form of expression also occurs through consumption of products. As we will see in the discussion of another category further ahead, several brands were mentioned by the informants as strong symbols of the gay condition. But, at this moment, the kind of consumption that seems more present is that of space dedicated to this group, i.e., a service.

“The first time I went to a gay party, I felt like I was free, you see? I felt like I was in my place, not like in the street where you can’t hug, you can’t kiss. Nowadays, I practically only hang out on gay spots, 90% are gay spots.”

One of the most relevant moments observed in the interviews are the first contacts with gay environments. According to Troiden (1989), these first contacts with gay bars and nightclubs seem to determine the cultural assimilation and construction of the homosexual identity. The feeling of identification and freedom to go to a gay environment is present in all discourses. This can be clearly perceived in the report of one of informant who said he felt “happiness, I think what I felt at the time was this thing with independence, that I have a space”. Imitation: After his first contacts with the gay community, the subjects enter a stage of assimilation of the gay culture standards. This process of cultural assimilation is described by Van Gennep (1969, apud Turner 1974) as transitional, in which the individual passes through experiences that help him finally incorporate a new status. According to Kates (2002), the first outings to gay environments comprise an important rite of passage, so that the gay can acquire a new status after a period of separation and liminality. During this period, the construction of the homosexual identity actually begins.

Here, the presence of brands is fundamental. The brands provide a code required to identify the members of the group. See the presence of brands and leisure venues on the following passage.

“If you live in the gay world, you end up focusing in the labels people wear, you want to be accepted, then you end up looking for expensive labels, and you end up doing your worst for you to feel like inside the group, because all the people seek to be on a same standard of consumption, or hang out in the same place, the best, the hippest. I’ll do my worst to find a way to go, or such is the clothes people are wearing, so I’ll buy”

It is not only the brand name that is important, but also the price of this brand. In truth, the high price of these brands is mentioned in several reports. In one occasion, one informant said he would never be able to pay more than 800 Reais (US$300) for a pair of Diesel jeans. The same informant mentioned the name Diesel more than sixteen times in the space of eighty minutes. The fascination for the designer brands is enormous. The symbology of products and brands is the subject of the next topic.

Product symbolism: An intense process of assimilation of cultural standards, mostly of aesthetic nature, happened in all informants’ lives at the beginning of their socialization with the gay group. At this moment, products that have their symbolic meanings associated to gays are seen by the community as “out of the closet” (Kates 2002), and usually become positive references, captivating this public. See the following report:

“I like to stay in gay hotels when I travel. (...) I like the sensation of having my breakfast with my boyfriend, and if I want to kiss him, if I want to touch his hand (...), things we don’t do anywhere else because they are embarrassing to other people.”

At this stage, we observed an almost exaggerated importance given to fashion labels merchandised in the Brazilian market such as Osklen, Triton, Forum, Diesel, Puma, Foche, or Yes Brasil. We also observe that excesses may happen: some of the informants say they buy clothes to look like gays. Excesses apart, all informants mention they dress in line with the gay group. See the following report:

“the gay place is more "fashion", the trendiest shirt, more colorful, also a more fashionable pair of tennis shoes, a pair of jeans a bit tighter.”

Therefore, it is not only the category of products, brands, or places that are associated to the gay group. The way these elements are used also gain their own grammar, And which must be known not only by members of the group, but also by companies that want to reach this group.

The relationship between quality and price goes way beyond the boundaries that are usually expected. Money buys escape from the conventional, and this provides pleasure. Anti-conventionalism is expensive. See next:

You’ll hardly ever see a gay wearing his shirt tucked in, shoes matching the belt, understand, you’ll see him with the latest tennis shoes in fashion, a Nike or Puma, an expensive tennis shoe, sometimes not even because it looks good, but also because of the price. An expensive pair of tennis shoes that gives you pleasure in wearing it, if you have a pair of tennis of R$ 100.00 and another of R$ 500.00, it is much more pleasing to wear the one costing five hundred. A pair of jeans, bleached pants, with some detail such as large pockets, a tight T-shirt that reveals the body, more colorful, red, yellow, pale blue, understand?

Body and fashion: The aesthetic standard related to the gay culture, mentioned in all interviews, is very uniform across the informants. This standard stresses a cult to the body, valuing of brands, and dressing styles. The influence of the gay culture in the gradual change of consuming habits is quite evident and ubiquitous on the interviews. Many informants reported that their new companies motivated them to look for a gym, use cosmetics, and buy specific types of clothes.

“I think that griffes, expensive clothes, are gay symbols because gays usually need to buy expensive clothes, labels and such. I also think the exacerbated cult to the body is a gay symbol. I’m not saying that straights don’t have such behav- ior, but I think that it is typical of gays, take my word.”

There is a clear interaction between body and clothing aesthetics, as if one were the extension of the other. There is some concern in choosing clothes that reveal the body below them, and this affects the perception of the clothes’ quality. The fact that the gay public is more demanding is frequently mentioned, not only concerning tangible products, but also services. All this is part of the “vanity” as a personality trace, positively valued in all interviews. See the passage below:
Clothes for gays are trendy, tighter so as to model the body. Vanity makes us keep the body in shape to be able to show it off, to look attractive, (...) The gay likes nice labels, likes to be well dressed, he is vain.

Acceptance:

Some of the informants seem to be in a stage of life where the gay identity is already fully accepted. Such stage is characterized by feelings of tranquility and peace of mind. The analysis seems to suggest that, although aesthetic gay standards are still followed and keep the same symbolic strength, they are no longer followed with such determination. After all, this is an individual with a fully defined homosexual identity. Gay friends are of utmost importance, for they are all from the community, but the fact of belonging to this community is no longer incompatible with the presence as a gay in other non-gay communities. This serenity, endorsed by a stable identity affects consumptions patterns. See the following report:

“(…) I began to feel more confident to close contracts with clients, to look for better jobs and to bargain for a better salary and everything else, (…) and at the end I was consuming more of things that I really wanted.”

Since the constant reinforcement of the gay identity, or the effort of trying to look straight on the work place, are no longer priorities, the use of giraffes loses a bit of its former meaning. The informants in this stage even show an ascetic attitude—even of rejection-relative to gay spots and products. One could even say that there is a reversal of the prior meaning attributed to these spots and products, as they identify the neophytes. Note that this is consistent with what Schouten & MacAlexander (1995) detected among bikers: once group membership is consolidated, members feel free to use the symbols of membership when, where and how they want.

Invisibility: Informants recognize that both the gay world and the gay way of life are seen as an invisible reality to the dominating straight culture. However, they see the gay group and its way of life as trendsetter. This point seems to be consonant with McCraken (2000) when he says that groups responsible for radical changes on the symbolic meaning of products are those who live at the margin of society. The report that follows is very revealing:

“(…) to be gay is to be on the edge, but as a complement to society. I think that the gay is like the swamp in the ecosystem, it is there on the outside, but serves as an important channel for recycling.

It was repeated in the course of all the interviews that gays with a mature identity are capable of identifying other gays, but cannot being identified by heterosexuals. This seems to offer them not only the protection of a code, which is perceived only by insiders, but above all other things, the pride of having their own code. We must recognize that, based in the interviews, this code lies largely in meanings attributed to products and services.

CONCLUSION

The current work had the object of investigating, with an interpretative perspective, how homosexuals residing in Rio de Janeiro relate with products and services during the construction of their homosexual identities. Companies have seen homosexuals as a profitable marketing objective, but do not seem to recognize richer information about their way of life, information that only an interpretative approach of research could provide. The stereotype of the high-class gay with a plentiful bank account and lavish consumption habits can even be true, but is an extremely shallow description of the group. Knowledge on structures related to product meanings can be much more illustrative and useful to the executive interested in investing in this segment. The current work attempted to interpret some of these structures.

First, we corroborate the conclusion of Kates (1998, 2002, 2004): the world of goods and services, in fact, offers to the group an extremely rich code for member identification. This code helps members of the group in constructing their homosexual identities, facilitating the access of these members to services, reducing risks (mainly psycho-social) related to this identity, and differentiating (excluding outsiders).

The relative loss of the power of seduction of the groups and services as symbols is a fact already perceived previously in studies that focused other different cultures, such as in Schouten & MacAlexander (1995) among the owners of Harley-Davidson. Brands are particularly important in the moment “coming out of the closet”, but lose part of their fascination later on. It is, therefore, possible to segment the group in terms of identity construction stage. Stereotypical products or venues might find their public among neophytes, while brands with a longer commitment to the gay community might be more properly directed to mature gays. It is necessary, nevertheless, to develop instruments to evaluate what is a person’s stand in the stages of identity development described in this text. This remains as a suggestion to further studies.

The use of the gay aesthetics must be very careful, since the group members seem to suffer a lot of influence coming from the group itself, but not from the media. They consider themselves as trendsetters: successful labels within the community are usually adopted by heterosexuals later, in a strong movement of interpersonal communication. The group aesthetically closer to the forefront in the habits inspires the adoption of new brands, products and venues by the groups immediately below in innovation. This way, brands adopted by gays can end up being abandoned by the gay group, which goes out in search of something new. They value this condition of innovators. This way, it might not be advisable to adopt the strategies of mass communication when positioning brands for gays.

For future works, we suggest that the same relationships that were the targeted in this work be investigated among different groups of homosexuals. Older men, couples, people from the CDE economic classes, transsexuals, lesbians, “bears”, the public is extremely diversified, and the characteristics from these different groups can be very distinct.

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