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The Dream Market: An Exploratory Study of Gay Professional Consumers’ Homosexual Identities and Their Fashion Involvement and Buying Behavior

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the clothing purchasing behavior characteristics occurring in gay professional consumers according to their different identity management--- 1) disclosure to gay others, 2) disclosure to heterosexual others, and 3) resistance rituals (i.e., not identifying with gay men) (Kates 1998) in downtown Toronto. The study further explores the impact of marketing mix factors on clothing consumption. Ten in-depth interviews were conducted with gay professionals. The results of our exploratory study revealed that all informants belong to the category of disclosure to heterosexuals and they seemed to be more self-centered and brand loyal toward product selection. Finally, marketing implications and limitations are also presented.
INTRODUCTION

Finding the demographics simply too alluring to pass up, more and more mainstream marketers are headed straight for the gay market. Due to the difficulty of identification of gay men and homophobia, gay consumers remain an under represented market segment and are still undervalued and underrepresented in research, especially in the field of consumer studies. Extended research is not only limited but also provides little insight into the current characteristics of gay consumer behavior. Still, in the shadow of America’s influence, most available studies concentrated on gay consumers in the United States. Maybe they assumed that gay men should be highly homogeneous in North American. The number of gays, considered as 10% of the population in the USA by some researchers, the population seems to be still underestimated. Whatever the number, this sizable population has been put into a profile that is young, affluent, well-educated, brand conscious, interested in fashion and style, and willing to spend money (Schwartz, 1992).

Many researchers have studied gay men in the context of social psychology literature, but only a few have explored the characteristics from the angle of consumer behavior. Gay men have much distinction in many aspects, although they also share some similarities with heterosexual men. Homosexual identity is perhaps the biggest obstacle in doing any research on homosexuals. Thus, few studies were done to reveal various purchase patterns related to different identity management. Whereas, nobody could deny that disclosure to different groups of people will largely decide the purchase behavior of gay men (Kates, 1998). Thus, this kind of research will be very valuable and insightful.
Purpose of the Study

This study explored the clothing purchase in relation to one facet of this issue in particular, namely purchase behavior of gay professional men in Toronto, Canada. Specifically, the purpose of the current study is to explore the clothing purchase behavior characteristics, specifically with regards to the impact of marketing mix factors on clothing consumption. Given the scant literature on gay consumers in clothing consumption it is the hope that this paper will serve as a catalyst to marketing researchers and become a useful reference to marketing practitioners. In addition, this study discusses implications for marketing strategies and makes recommendations for further marketing research of gay consumers. Finally, the researchers hope to underscore the point that marketers should not look at the gay consumer market as one single cultural entity. Instead, marketers need to realize that there are different subcultures within this dream market.

Problem Definition

We want to explore the clothing purchasing behavior characteristics occurring in gay professional consumers according to their different identity management--- 1) disclosure to gay others, 2) disclosure to heterosexual others, and 3) resistance rituals (i.e., not identifying with gay men) (Kates 1998) in downtown Toronto. We define gay professional consumers as white-collar professionals such as accountants, lawyers, researchers, and doctors.

Research Questions

1. Which identity management (s) is/ are among gay professional consumers according to Kate’s classification?
2. What are the purchasing behavior characteristics toward product, price, place, and promotion, according to 1) office wear, 2) street wear, and 3) club wear consumption among gay professional consumers?

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Gay Market in North America**

Homosexuality is defined as a sexual orientation to persons of the same sex. The term can also be defined as sexual activity with another of the same sex (Houston, 2000). In this study, homosexuality is defined as a sexual attraction to or a sexual relationship with persons of the same sex (Princeton, 1997). “Homosexuality is a way of being, one that can completely influence a person’s life and shape its meaning and direction” (Grahn, 1984). Today, through the substantial spending opportunities offered by the gay community, marketing scholars and practitioners are starting to recognize homosexuality as a way of life.

The beginning of the gay consumer market started at the end of War World Two. Gay neighborhoods have developed in the heavily urban areas of many large, North American cities such as New York, San Francisco, Toronto, and Montreal. Today, these cities contain a greater proportion of gays and lesbians- 15% to 22% of the city population. In addition, these urban areas are proliferated by commercial establishments such as gay bars, bookstores, restaurants, travel agencies, and clothing stores. Thus, the gay consumer market goes beyond the ordinary retailers and services industries. Many gay men take luxury cruises together, wear provocative T-shirts which both homosexual and heterosexual men are free to read, march in gay and lesbian Pride celebrations, and purchase and use deviant products and services such as leather outfits, body piercing and makeup (Kates, 1998).
The “Dream Market”, the gay and lesbian community is considered by many to be an untapped goldmine, with population estimates reaching 19 million in the United States, and estimates of spending power topping $514 billion (Armstrong, 1997). Global companies targeting gays and lesbians have expanded beyond the traditional clubs and bookstores to comprise virtually a full-service market that includes media, merchandise catalogs, travel companies, legal, medical, financial, and communication services.

Several factors supporting the viability of marketing to gay consumers include size, buying power, demographics, psychographics or lifestyle characteristics, for example travel and personality differences, and the culturally prescribed social importance of apparel and grooming aids. Accounting for the number of gays and lesbians in the U.S and Canada has proven to be quite difficult and controversial. The numbers vary widely because of various measures in various types of studies. Studies come from a number of disciplines, including sexuality, psychology, health care, and most recently market research (Penaloza, 1996). The most famous study is the 1948 Kinsey Institute study, which found the ratio of heterosexuals to homosexuals to be 10:1. This study was replicated in 1993, with similar findings in The Janus Report on Sexual Behavior (Janus and Janus, 1993). On the other hand, in studies by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, 2.8 percent of adult males and 2.3 percent of adult females identified themselves as homosexual (Rogers, 1993). These fluctuating figures may be attributable to the use of varying definitions of gay and lesbian, as well as data collection methods. It can also be due to the controversial issue of homosexuality in North America society, measures might be conservatives in their estimates. The bottom line is that the gay and lesbian community is emerging as a target market of great potential. Still, very little is known about this consumer group – both in academic and business contexts.
Gay Identity Management

Consumers are not functionally oriented and are significantly affected by the symbols encountered in the identification of goods in the marketplace (Levy, 1959). Following Levy’s argument, a number of self-concept models were formulated to describe, explain, and predict the precise role of consumers’ self-concepts in consumer behavior. Grubb and Grathwohl (1967) specified that self-concept is valuable to the individual, and behavior will be directed toward the protection and enhancement of self-concept (Sirgy, 1982).

Unfortunately, there is ambiguity and confusion to precisely conceptualize self-concept in the consumer behavior literature. Two major types of conceptualization to self-concept have been discussed (Sirgy, 1982):

- The single self-construct tradition. The self-concept has been treated as a single variable --- the actual self-concept, which means the perception of oneself (e.g., Birdwell 1968). Some researchers even have restricted it to perceived sex-role (Golden et al. 1979). More recently, Schenk and Holman (1980) have employed the constructs of the situational self-image, which is defined as the result of the individual’s repertoire of self-image and the perception of others in a specific situation.

- The Multiple self-constructs tradition. Two different dimensions occurred. Some researchers have discussed that the self-concept must be treated as having two components --- the actual self-concept and the ideal self-concept, which is defined as the image of oneself as one would like to be (e.g., Belch, 1978). Other researchers have gone beyond the duality dimension. Sirgy (1979, 1980) proposed actual self-
image, ideal self-image, social self-image, and ideal social self-image, where the social self-concept has been defined as the image that one believes others hold and the ideal social self-concept as the image that one would like others to hold.

Levy (1959) initiated the discussion of actual self-image and product-image congruity and proposed that consumer behavior is a function of self-concept/product-image congruity. The main attention was focused upon the image projected by various products (Sirgy, 1982). They assumed that consumers preferred products with images that were congruent with their self-concepts.

While the discourse of reproductive normality, which has dominated Western thought for the past 200 years, the homosexuality has been seen as deviant or dirty (Visano 1987, Kates 1998). Significantly, coming out --- disclosing one’s gay identity to others, is really to be in --- inside the realm of the visible, the speakable, and the culturally intelligible (Fuss 1991) and is an open challenge to the dominant sexual discourse (Kates 1998).

In Kates’ (1998) study, he found the concept meaning of “passing”, which refers to the set of activities in which people with discreditable identities engage in order to conceal their socially awkward, deviant, or objectionable stigmata such as race, sexuality, or unemployment (Goffman 1959, 1963), occurs as the ritual construct in gay men. Kates reported that many of the informants considered products very useful in deceiving others (and sometimes, even themselves) regarding their sexual identities. These particular consumption rituals or sets of ritual are really elaborate and involved. For months or even years, informants seriously and intently performed those rituals, which allowed them to deceive others and even themselves to escape or deny their sexual orientations (Kates, 1998).
Moreover, most of the informants gained some small measures of self-acceptance of their homosexuality while realizing that no one else would accept it (Kates 1998). During these periods of forming a gay identity, Kates found that many of the informants purchased various products, usually of an informational nature: books, magazines, and newspapers of a gay nature, and often, film and print pornography. It was a critical concern for the informants to hide these products lest they be found, since the symbolic meaning of the products would inform significant others (e.g. parents) of their secret that they themselves have not fully accepted.

Homosexual identity formation occurs in four typical stages (Rudd, 1996): (1) Sensitization. It often occurs before puberty when a person has general feelings of marginality and perceptions of being different from same-sex peers. (2) Identity confusion. It often occurs during adolescence, when thoughts of possible homosexuality cause inner turmoil and uncertainty. (3) Identity assumption. A person accepts homosexuality as a self-identity and presents to others of the same sexual orientation during or after one’s adolescence. (4) Commitment. Individuals adopt homosexuality as a way of life, and present that identity publicly, though the degree of disclosure may vary (Troiden, 1989).

Kates (1998) also described these four stages of development of homosexual identity formation as the coming out process in a similar way. This process usually entails some form of exploration of gay consumption venues and meeting other gay men (Troiden 1989) within the subculture, whether in an urban or even a suburban setting (Lynch 1987).

It is important to note that coming out and the very existence of open gay subculture challenges and breaks down the homophobic, rigid gender roles, and hegemonic masculinity (Kates, 1998). Ironically, in response to the stigma of femininity, a hyper masculine style of
dress and behavior was adopted by many gays in the 1970s (Kates 1998, Kleinberg 1992). Kates (1998) explained this phenomenon as acquiescence to hegemonic masculinity by gays themselves, even once they have come out. In Browning’s (1993) research of contemporary gay culture, he found that the homosexual group often used consumption venues and activities to express their hostility and anger toward straight society (Kates 1998).

Goffman (1951) suggested that products possess symbolic properties, which are somehow congruent with an individual’s self-concept (Kates, 1998). Consumer objects, activities, ads, places, and situations may be considered signifiers which are arbitrarily and historically associated with underlying ideologies, ideas, emotions, and thoughts, and with other objects (Mick 1986, Kates 1998, McCracken 1988). As Kates pointed out, brands and products acquire significant sociocultural meanings over time, which provide links between people and a marketer’s offerings. He also argued that deviant consumer behavior, by its nature, is very symbolic and must convey negative messages to various audiences (including the self audience) who, in turn, pass judgments upon the behavior and the individual.

In Kates’ (1998) study of gay men’s consumption, he identified a number of significant manners in which informants ritualistically managed their gay identities. He found that all the important consumer rituals in his report involved elements of identity management. In his study, all of the informants decided to confront the “awful truth” about their gay identities. Generally, it is not a viable option to go to parents, doctors, teachers, and clergy to learn about homosexuality except for a few informants. Thus, they engaged in various consumer behaviors in order to learn. It was found that certain products were considered symbolically useful for the informants’ exploration and development of the new gay possible self, such as gay-themed novels and clothing (Kates 1998). In addition, he pointed out that it is more
accurate to claim that by the very nature of self-concept change, any product that becomes associated with this transformation becomes high involvement through a process of subjective or cultural meaning transformation.

Kates (1998) identified three types of identity management: disclosure to gay others, disclosure to heterosexual others, and resistance rituals (i.e., not identifying with gay men). According to Kates, the gay identity is socially negotiated continuously in many cultural contexts, creating a dynamic, inner dialectic within informants, since a gay identity is still considered by many to be a deviant one. By disclosing their gay identities to others, informants are taking a social risk --- the loss of valued human connections with significant others, such as family, friends, or co-workers. As Breakwell (1983, 1986) suggested, these may be considered interpersonal or inter-group strategies of identity management (Kates 1998,). Often, once the newly out gay men feel comfortable with their new social worlds and with being gay, they make the decision to come out, using blatantly gay consumer stigma symbols such as T-shirts or pink triangles, for instance (Kates 1998). Goode (1990) maintains that certain activities’ meanings are normalized and the change in the overall self-concept incorporates an overall acceptance of the new, deviant gay identity (Kates 1998).

Research on Gay Consumers

Clothing, as one of the biggest purchased items by gay consumers, is not only a relevant variable in social cognition, but also a key component in symbolic interaction, through which individuals interact socially on the basis of objects or symbols used to define the social situation (Rudd, 1992). Thus, clothing of gay men is a clearly recognized identity to understand personal, social characteristics, intentions and attitudes.
Stabiner (1982) started his research on clothing from the gay men’s demographic factors. He highlights the major reasons for retail targeting of gay men that include the large market size, the higher income and spending power, the extensive use of clothing and grooming aids when socializing, and the higher proportion of fashion innovators and opinion leaders in the gay consumers. The biggest contribution of this study lies in the exploration that in gay men, characteristics of fashion innovativeness and fashion opinion leadership tend to exist largely as compared to the general population, and this characteristic is related to certain lifestyle features and personality features (Rudd, 1992).

In the series of studies examining clothing as a particular item within the gay consumer market segment, Snezek (1986) explored variations in clothing-related behavior between 50 homosexual men and 50 heterosexual men with respect to shopping behavior, style preferences, and cologne use/preference. She found some distinct differences in all three areas, as well as some similarities. Compared to the preferences of classic styles in 11 categories in heterosexual men, homosexual men preferred trendy clothing styles in 5 out of 14 categories. In addition, the shopping behavior and attitudes between these two groups were much different, as was cologne use and scent preference.

**METHODOLOGY**

Gay professional men, who have more discreitional income and time than gay students, could be more representative and more typical. Further, for gay students, the relatively simple campus situation would inevitably hide some genuine purchase preferences and tendencies, whereas gay professional men can provide an actual purchase behavior of “real consumers” outside a controlled campus situation. Thus, research in the gay professional consumer would be more insightful that is more consistent and practical.
The in-depth interview was used in this research. Since we assumed that gay consumers were sensitive to their disclosure to others, the face-to-face interview was considered more appropriate in our study. Three interviewers conducted the interviews. One interviewer was openly gay. The other two interviewers identified themselves as straight. The interviewers were required to observe and audiotape the interviews.

Ten informants were chosen for the interviews. McCracken (1988) suggested that eight respondents are sufficient for in-depth interviews and further noted that the sample need not be chosen to generalize to the world, but rather to get a detailed description of the phenomenon under study. A Convenient sampling method was used. Samples were gathered in different places, some informants were interviewed at their home and others at a coffee shop. The informants were offered one cup of coffee or a small gift depending on the location of the interview as a thank you for their participation in the interview. The actual interview was recorded to easily and effectively review and analyze the data.

A pre-test was conducted before we conducted the actual interviews. The purpose of the pre-test was to test the instrument for comprehension of constructs and definition of terms. The interview guide was pre-tested with a gay student from the Queer Club at the University of Guelph. After the interview, the informant spent about 10 minutes discussing the process and the questions with the researchers.

Semi-standardized interview was chosen to allow interviewees as much freedom as possible to express their views. First, the interviewers developed and generated structure questions, which helped to lead the interview in sequence. Second, interviews explored and probed far beyond the standardized questions.

The researchers sought to explore the clothing purchasing behavior in product selection process among gay professional consumers. The interview schedule was designed to gather
data in relation to: 1. Gay professional identity management; and 2. Purchasing behavior characteristics.

**Evaluation**

The principles for a set of humanistic criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) were used to examine the qualitative study. Hirschman (1986) indicated that to determine the *credibility* of the interpreted information, the researchers need to submit the interpreted information for review by the informants on whom the interview is based, to ensure that the interpreted information is valid. Some informants were contacted by phone to meet this criterion. To assess the *transferability*, the researchers compared the interpretation with those constructed in other social contexts especially homosexuality and consumer research studies (Hirschman, 1986). The findings of this study supported the findings in other published literature. For example, gay consumers preferred brands that have strong presence in the gay community. Multiple interviewers were used to assess *dependability*. The interviewers were used in this study to increase the internal consistency and temporal stability. To be confirmable, interpretation was drawn in a logical and unprejudiced manner from the data gathered and the rationale employed (Hirschman, 1986). An outside auditor with a consumer research background reviewed the documents, field notes, methodological diary, and other supportive evidence to confirm that the conclusions reached flowed from the information collected.
ANALYSIS

Gay Identity Management

Since we wanted to explore the clothing purchasing behavior characteristics in relation to the gay professionals’ identity management, we needed to find out to which type(s) of the gay identity management our informants belonged.

During the course of our interviews, we used the three types of identity management proposed by Kates (1998) as the options for our informants to choose. In addition, we asked some questions about their coming out experience to gain more detailed information about the forming process of their identity management, although their current identity management was our major concern.

All of our informants belonged to the second option: disclosure to heterosexual others.

“Every person I know in Toronto, knows I am a gay (Ken 35).”

A common characteristic among all informants was that they did not talk about their sexual identity directly with their parents. In disclosing to colleagues, they also showed some differences. Two of them seemed to have some concern about their disclosure to colleagues.

“The only people that don’t know are some people from work…because it is not really their business…if they asked, I would say something. Nevertheless, I would not offer them information because, you know, I can be limiting my career there. (Jonah 32).”

On the other hand, others did not worry about it.
“Colleagues, I just in this company 3 months ago, I have not told anybody and nobody ever asked me. But I don’t think I have a problem to tell them I am gay (Ken 35).”

The rest of the informants did not talk about their thoughts or any concerns on it and they seemed to be easygoing.

Gay Consumers’ Purchasing Behavior Characteristics toward Product, Price, Place and Promotion

The informants were asked to give rationales for their purchase intentions and actual behaviors of office wear, street wear and club wear. All informants identified themselves as being openly gay. However, their purchasing behavior characteristics toward clothing consumption were shown to be dramatically different. The interviews revealed an interesting and consistent variance in informants’ preferences toward a more fitted and slimmer cut for office wear, street wear and club wear. Price appeared to be an important attribute for the informants when making a purchasing decision and the price range was different among individuals. Gay professional consumers are active shoppers and they enjoy purchasing sales items of their favorite brands. Further, commercial and media advertising have less influence on their clothing purchasing decisions. They are influenced by their own observation of what other people wear on the street, especially in the gay ghetto. For place, gay professional consumers like to shop wherever their favorite stores are located. They prefer to shop in the downtown shopping districts.

Attitudes toward Product.

Our analysis of gay professional consumers’ clothing consumption behavior indicates that they are realistic consumers who are very price sensitive. A majority of the informants
prefers clothes that are body revealing, fitted and stretchy. In addition, they fancy darker shades of color such as black, navy and gray not the shiny and bright colors that the public acknowledged. All the informants agreed on the definition of a “gay product” as tight, transparent and mushy. The informants, defined club wear as tight, fit, and sexy muscle shirts or ten-tops that gay men wear to night clubs which are normally considered as “meat markets”. Moreover, a preponderance of the informants harmonized that club wear is considered as a higher involvement purchase than office wear. For the reason that most informants spend more time in trying different outfits at stores so the informants can make sure that the outfit would make them look provocative and distinctive in the night clubs. Our interviews suggest a wide range of brands that attract gay consumers such as Kenneth Cole, DKNY, Banana Republic, Mexx and Body Body Wear.

From our interviews, gay professional consumers tend to focus more on club wear and less on street wear and office wear. In addition, occupation plays a big role in terms of determining what type of clothing gay professional consumers should wear to work. Recently, companies are going business casual. Jonah who is a senior tax manager indicated that street wear and office wear are the same.

“Street wear and office wear are the same thing; I do not have clothes that I wear to work that I don’t wear out of work. I have one or two pieces of club wear that are especially for clubs, but I wear my office wear to clubs too.” (Jonah, 32)

Other informants such as Barry, Richard, Craig and Ken also agreed that office wear and street wear are equivalent. Street wear is considered by the informants as casual wear or informal wear that people put on when they are not at a work environment. Some described it as weekend wear. Because companies are less rigorous and more flexible on what you
wear to work, employees are allowed to dress more casual at work. On the other hand, financial institutions such as the major banks are generally more conservative and employees are required to wear dress shirts and ties to work. Zeda, who is a senior financial analyst at a bank, indicated that he has to dress up for work, though interestingly, he has two different wardrobes of office wear.

“I own two styles of office clothing, one is more conservative in color and style and the other one is more flamboyant which includes slimmer cut, shinny and bright colors for both shirts and pants. My style is more glamorous, in another words normal businessmen would not wear them.” (Zeda, 28)

On the other extreme, Alan who is a teacher indicated that he would purchase special clothes just for work. He thinks that working with kids can increase the chances of your clothes being ruined and he would separate his work clothes from others.

“I am a teacher, for office wear I do not like to spend money on them. I would purchase shirts from Zellers or The Bay, mostly low end brands or products that I do not care if they got dirty.” (Alan, 31)

Occupation serves as a focal factor directing gay professional consumers what to wear to work. All the informants concluded that club wear represents gay culture and they share the similar notion about club fashion. A majority of the informants liked to wear muscle tank tops to show off their body, for the purposes of being noticed by other men.

“For club wear, I tend to buy clothes that can show more of my body. I prefer something very tight on my body and show lots of skin…sexual connotation is the key. I like something very seductive, and I want to get lots of attention from other men.” (Zeda 28)
Six out of ten of the informants agreed that a black sweater is like a chameleon, it is very flexible and it can be worn in different occasions from work to club.

“I like clothes that can cross, I call it black like sweaters seem to be good because you can wear them for business or you can wear them for clubbing if you want to, and they are a little fit.” (Jeff 30)

These informants are very knowledgeable about style and they can precisely articulate the differences among office wear, street wear and club wear. Tight, fit, and sexy muscle shirts seem to be popular among gay professional males. They like to wear shirts that are more provocative and distinctive to attract other gay men.

**Gay Products vs. Non-Gay Products.**

In order to get a better understanding from our participants about the meaning and the differences between a gay product and a non-gay product we asked our participants to define them. All the informants share and identify a similar value system and fashion orientation about gay product. Body Body Wear is a brand/retail store that all the informants agreed as a gay brand. The store consists of clothing that is tight, flashy and stretchy.

“Gay products tend to be more fitting. An example will be Body Body Wear. That store carries merchandise that fit the gay lifestyle. Eddie Bauer is considered a store where most straight men would shop. Gay clothing is tighter for the top and leaner or more androgynous cut for the pants, transparent and mushy for the top are critical (Zeda 28).”

Other participants immediately spotted the rainbow colors, which are considered as a symbol of homosexuality. Captivatingly, tight clothing is replacing rainbow color as the symbiotic identification of gay products among gay consumers.
“Rainbow color, something like stretchy, flashy, tight, that kind of materials. To me gay clothing is, one type is rainbow color; second is tight; third is the style. Gay clothing is usually more stylish. So I define stylish clothing as gay clothing (Ken 35).”

Most of our informants came out of the closet later in their life. Hence, a majority of them has experiences as a consumer living in a heterosexual lifestyle. Craig, who is an editor for a major publication, has been working and living in Toronto for thirty years. He illustrates that gay products are products that a typical heterosexual men would not buy or wear.

“I would say gay clothing is often tighter and a little bit flashy and it is usually a little sheik and more fashionable. The gay products are swing wears; clothes average straight men would not buy (Craig 35).”

Attitudes toward Brands.

Brand name often arose as a focal concern in the gay community context. A majority of gays do not like people labeling them as “brand queens”. The term has a negative connotation in the gay community, as the public would identify “brand queens” as materialistic, superficial and shallow. Therefore, some of our participants repeatedly communicated their discomfort with having a brand logo on the exterior of their shirt. They would prefer that the brand logo be inside the shirt so people would not notice it.

“I don’t like clothes that have names on it, even if I bought a brand name clothing, I’d rather have the tag inside than outside. I do not want to look like a Label Queen or something. My favorite brands consist of Club Monaco, Esprit, and Banana Republic. Brands that appear to be expensive
and have a snobby appeal to them. It is wiser to have same quality products without people necessarily knowing –oh this is that brand that would be more interesting (Jeff 31).”

Although this tendency obviously reflects the preponderance of the gay communities’ influence on the gay consumers’ self identity, it also provides insight into how negative messages in the community can affect gay consumers’ clothing consumption behavior.

For consumers who have some knowledge of the common tactics of fashion merchandising, reproducing well known brand-name images or highly promoted “looks” stands as the antithesis to developing one’s own style. Hence, majority of our informants cultivated and reformulated their garments with their own fashion style. The brand name label does not influence participants such as Shawn, Chris, Zeda, Alan, Ken and Jonah as they are more influenced by the merchandise and the style that are carried in the store.

“I am not a brand person, and I don’t buy them for brands. I buy clothes for comfort and design. I do not have any brand that I like in particular but I would buy some Polo shirts. I like Abercrombie and Fitch, American Eagle Outfitters, the similar style, college style, T-shirts and jeans kind of clothing, but kind of expensive. But they are good in style (Ken 35).”

Gay consumers seem to weight the style and design more than the brand of the fashion when making a clothing purchasing decision. The informants’ tastes and preferences toward fashion are still different among individuals. A great number of the participants favor Kenneth Cole, Banana Republic and Mexx.
**Attitudes toward Price.**

One noteworthy point of the study is that gay consumers are neither superficial nor materialistic. They are realistic consumers. They are very price sensitive when purchasing clothing. Most of them do not consume clothing on a regular basis. They will wait until the sales season to do their shopping. A majority of the informants are willing to pay more money for shoes than shirts or pants. This dynamic is illustrated in the following quote from an informant. Shawn in particular is a smart and experienced shopper. He knows his fashion.

“My price range is under one hundred dollars for clothes and one hundred and fifty for shoes. I do not think it is logical when buying clothes that is over one hundred dollars when I only wear them for one year at most. I learned that I could buy a shirt that people would think I spent lots of money on it. In fact, I only paid eighty dollars for it. It is like buying something from Zara and people think you brought it from Gucci. I have a great sense of style and choose things people would assume I spent lots of money on them (Shawn 31).”

Personal disposable income can normally justify a person’s purchasing power. It is logical to conclude that Ken who is a senior statistician would spend more money for a pair of shoes compared to Alan who is a teacher at a public school. Most of the informants are still very value oriented. They want to make sure clothes are purchased at a bargain price. Moreover, the informants were still willing to spend extra money on clothes that they perceived as lovable.
**Attitudes toward Promotion.**

Informants’ attitudes toward promotion were considered the outcome of a number of factors, which included their price sensitivities, their purchase criteria toward different kinds of clothing and their self-identity. The on sale products absolutely draw all the informants’ interests and appreciation, but it does not mean that such interests will definitely produce actual purchase behavior. Meanwhile, most informants show less interest in media advertisements. It seems that the advertisements in the media play little direct influences on them, but the advertisements targeted directly at gay consumers will make them feel comfortable and generate interests.

**Attitudes toward Media Advertising.**

Seven out of ten informants expressed that media advertisements have less influence on their purchase intention and behavior, especially as a direct influence. Such a situation results from their strong confidence to their own tastes and related to their criteria to purchasing clothing:

“Normally, I will not use media as an information channel to help me decide what kind of products to purchase, because I already have a sense of knowledge about what kind of clothing I like, so if I like something or I need something, I would go to my favorite store and check it out. I rarely rely on media for product purchase.”(Chris, 31)

Only three informants clearly expressed that media advertisement do have an influence on him:
“I would say that TV is very, very persuasive in showing…you know…if you buy this you will be like this; I think TV is good; also print advertising is good as well as billboard… I would like the cover of the magazine, because I always look at covers on magazines.” (Jonah, 32).

He also mentioned that visual advertisements are more effective than audio ones. In terms of various media, TV had the least influence on most informants because “I don’t have a TV”, “I don’t really watch TV”, and “I don’t think I watch a lot of it”. For print ads and outdoor ads, such as billboard, it seems that they are more effective than TV ads, because consumers can choose not to watch TV to avoid exposure to ads, but for print ads and outdoor ads, consumers will be influenced unconsciously and the ads will make the exposure unavoidable:

“I read the newspaper, but I make a conscious effort to avoid looking at ads…it must be the billboards, or outdoor ads, I cannot avoid…” (Jeff, 30)

Just because they choose a different way of life compared to the majority; they feel more comfortable about opening up to other people. Unconscious independence is rooted in their perspectives and to some extent “to be different” is guiding some of their behaviors. Thus, we can understand why the media advertisements have less influence on them and some of them even try to avoid this kind of influence.

In terms of the content of advertisement, those targeting gay consumers will absolutely be more attractive than common advertisements, and such an attraction may or may not create an actual purchase:
“Yeah, I think if they are ads toward gay consumers, I will be more likely to buy, I think …the advertisement would be more sexual, in which case I would have intention to buy it if I like it…” (Jonah, 32)

**Attitudes toward Distribution.**

Seven out of ten informants live in the gay community near Church Street and Wellesley Streets in downtown Toronto. The other three informants live outside the gay community. However, all of them frequent the Eaton Center (the main shopping center) to shop for their clothing:

“Yeah, Eaton Center…I also go to the Bloor Street, because they collect all the other brands into one place, similar to Eaton Center…you have to go to different stores to get different brands, that is why I go to our district, not because they are gay, just because they have all the collections…” (Ken, 35)

The Eaton Center, where is located near the downtown gay community is the nearest shopping center to our informants and it contains most of the brands available in Canada. Therefore, based on the geographic location, the psychological meaning, and the practical meaning to meet demand, the Eaton Center is the most attractive place to go.

It is interesting that our informants do not often or like to do shopping in the gay community, hence, most of them purchase club wear there:

“I am living in the gay ghetto, but I try to avoid it, almost avoid it if I can. I feel if I want a shining shirt of low quality, that is where I look for, but I don’t usually shop, certainly not for clothing around here.” (Jeff, 30)
From the above passages, it is reasonable to make such a conclusion that the places they often go to purchase clothing is closely related to their self identity management. That is the fairly open identity makes them choose most of their clothing, especially the office wear and street wear to be more “masculine looking”. This factor twinned with their own tastes of clothing result in less clothing purchase from the featured gay stores or from the gay ghetto. It is also reasonable to perceive that the location of stores near the gay community will be mentally close to them and produce a higher visit frequency.

**CONCLUSION**

The current study employed ten informants of gay professional consumers, with the interviews to explore their clothing consumption behavior in relation to their gay identity. The results suggested that, although all informants were belonging to the category of disclosure to heterosexuals others, their purchasing behavior characteristics toward clothing consumption were shown to be slightly different among individuals. However, working environments have quite a lot of influence to office wear selection. When asked on the questions of price, it seems that they presented the price range in relation to their personal disposable income. However price sensitivity was common to them all. As a result, they all showed interest in the products that on sale were. Meanwhile, the influence of media only served as a minor factor when they were buying clothes, except for advertising geared toward gay consumers directly. The result is consistent with a study conducted by Burnett (2002) which indicated that homosexual consumers prefer to read newspapers targeted at them. The Eaton Center, due to its geographic location, the psychological meaning, and the practical meaning to meet demand, was the most popular place for shopping clothes as our
informants indicated. At the same time, the gay ghetto lost some of its attractiveness to these openly gay professional consumers.

**MARKETING IMPLICATIONS**

Recognizing the direct influence of fashion and gay related media on openly gay professional consumers’ clothing purchase decision is a key contribution of this research. Marketers are critically important agents of the professional gay consumer market. Often marketers overlook this enchanting market segment and assume this market is similar to the mainstream or within the subgroup.

In order to effectively market products to professional gay consumers, marketers need to enter into the world of niche marketing. Niche marketing is drastically different from the old world of mass marketing, especially since smaller market segments are segregated from the total market, and a marketing strategy is implemented for each segment. From the study, our informants shared some similarities and differences toward clothing consumption. In this sense, marketers can look at the gay market as a group of niche segments by occupation, age, gay identity, marital status, and income. Marketers can then develop strategies to capture these markets.

The diversity of fashion preferences and subjectivities evidenced in our interviews suggests the complexity of gay subculture. However, we still found the gay professional consumers share some similarities in tastes and preferences toward clothing consumption. Based on our intensive interviews, we suggest fashion marketers to focus more on club wear, because gay men are willing to spend more money on them as they want to look more
attractive and sexy for other gay men. It is critical for fashion retailers and marketers to design clothing that are fit, tight, and stretchy from office wear to club wear.

Professional gay consumers are realistic shoppers and they adore items that are on promotion. Fashion marketers should have sales promotion in the store throughout the year to relentlessly entice gay consumers to shop at the store. Professional gay men emerge as very price sensitive, but they are willing to spend more on quality shoes as evident in the study.

The use of highly targeted media is effective in reaching niche audiences such as the professional gay consumers. The study proposes four effective approaches to help marketers utilize this market segment. Direct marketing offers an excellent solution to the alienation problems of marketing to the homosexual market. A majority of professional gay consumers live in downtown and normally clutter in one area such as on Church Street.

A majority of our informants do not watch television and they spend majority of their leisure time reading magazines or on the Internet. Marketers can advertise in gay oriented magazines and publications.

Another media advertising approach is indoor billboard advertising such as washroom advertising. A majority of the professional gay consumers spend time with their friends in gay coffee shops, bars or clubs. Therefore, washroom advertising in the bars and clubs can send a direct message to them. Television advertising on selected gay themed programs such as Will and Grace, Queer as Folk, and Sex and the City can be valuable. Our findings also indicated that advertising targeted toward the gay consumers explicitly can be more attractive and be felt more close to gay consumers.
Gay consumers tend to shop at major shopping areas, where their favorite stores such as Banana Republic, Mexx, and Kenneth Cole are located. If retail newcomers want to target the gay consumers, the stores should be located in those areas. Further, stores located close to the gay ghetto will objectively be visited more often. High-quality clothing should not be sold in stores in the gay ghetto, because gay consumers do not associate gay fashion to be high in quality. Club wear and underwear are more suitable to be sold in the gay ghetto.

In the gay ghetto, owners of night clubs and businesses should learn more about their customers, because not all gays share similar interests, attitudes and behavior. Gay business owners have to adopt a segmentation strategy in their overall marketing planning. Our study has shown that there are gays who are more body and image conscious and there are those who are more conservative and less “out”. A different marketing strategy such as differentiated product or service offerings to those gay subgroups would definitely maximize the efficacy of companies’ overall investment. Gay operated businesses are still a bit behind in marketing planning as they see the overall gay consumer market as one undifferentiated unity.

There are other subgroups of gays which consist of those who do not live in the gay ghetto or those who belonged to the other two gay identity groups which are ‘disclosure to gay others’ and ‘resistance rituals’. Marketers have to be more cautious in the use of their communication mediums to target those consumers. Internet communication or direct mail might be more appropriate to reach those groups of gays. Another indirect method of communication is public relations such as sponsorships or donations to gay-related events like AIDS research or the support of equal rights. This indirect approach of communication
can instill a favorable image of those companies in the minds of gays who are not “out” in the mainstream. The favorable image could eventually lead to consideration or purchase intent of products or services offered by those sponsored companies.

**RESEARCH LIMITATIONS**

Obviously, all the informants are very open to their gay identity, which supply one chance for the researchers to explore this group more explicitly and at a deeper level. However, this study did not cover the other two gay identity groups, which are ‘disclosure to gay others’ and ‘resistance rituals’.

All of the ten informants are between 28 and 35, so it is difficult to generalize their characteristics to the younger gay professionals and older ones. Seven out of ten of the informants are living in the gay community in downtown, Toronto, while only three are living out of the gay community. It is reasonable to assume that similar living location does produce some extent of homogeneity in their purchase characteristics. For example, most of them like to shop at the Eaton Center.

**REFERENCES**


