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In general there is a scarcity of marketing research that focuses specifically on male fashion consumption. In a similar vein, the concept of male fashion consciousness is largely being ignored by consumer research and marketing disciplines. This paper hypothesizes that the increased use of homoerotic imagery in fashion magazines might have an impact on fashion consciousness of males through recourse to the reconstruction of British masculinities. In doing so, it defines the abstract intersections of extended ambivalent performance spaces in which it relocates the three typologies of maleness: New Man, New Lad and Metrosexual and further posits that the growing acceptance of homoerotic imagery in an overtly mainstream setting has given birth to the concept of the Zero-masculine era.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, Aidan and Ross (2005) explored the reasons why the concept of male fashion consciousness is largely being ignored by consumer research and marketing disciplines. The key assumption scholars made is that men are disinterested in fashion. But Aidan and Ross’ analysis suggests that attitudinal, behavioural and social shifts are taking place that challenge these assumptions. They claim that the increased use of homoerotic fashion imagery in contemporary UK fashion magazines during the last two decades is one of such shifts and it might have had an impact on re-construction of British masculinities.

AIMS

Qua Aidan and Ross (2005), this study posits that there is a link between the shifting masculinities and fashion consciousness of males. It aims to relocate male fashion consciousness in gay fashion advertising, particularly through the use of homoerotic imagery in mainstream fashion magazines. It tries to achieve this by creating a new discursive space for fashion, which allowed men to explore new identities that challenged the stereotypical assumptions of their culture. By doing so, it posits the existence of performance spaces (notional and actual) where gender cues are enacted, which draws on Žižek's performative notion of ideology.

METHODOLOGY

This paper tries to apply Žižek’s theory of performative gender [with a minor link to Judith Butler] in fashion communications practice and it takes as axiomatic the following assumption:
There is no innate gender behavior only the enactment of a performance, which over time is naturalized to become the former.

In other words, it aims to stress that the performative connection between enactment and gender is not the same thing as a direct determinism. The articulation of a discursive reason for a performance is not necessarily didactic or even understood at a conscious level. Performity suggests rather that men and women take their gender cues indirectly from culture they find around them i.e. from fashion advertising, which become the discursive boundaries of a performance spaces for an acting out of male and female roles. This means that the law of gender only exists in the performance: in Butler’s words “there is no doer behind the deed” (Butler 1991, 78).

HISTORICAL, THEORETICAL AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

What has ensued is an ambiguity in what was once a clear division and definition of gender roles, which it has been sometimes said, is hazardingiously injected into the veins of the baby boy by the blue blanket. In the past what it was to be a man could be candidly defined as “being a man means not being a woman” (Kimmel, 1994: 126). In relation to this, Craik (2000: 176) makes the perilous observation that “the discourse surrounding men’s fashion resolves around a set of denials”, which intensely foreordain that “men dress for fit and comfort, rather than for style; that women dress men and buy clothes for them; that men do not notice clothes, and that men who dress up are peculiar [one way or another]”. (ibid.)

In Culture of Fashion, Breward (1995) summarised the two main approaches challenging these assumptions. The first front is a critique of contemporary and historical constructions of masculinity, and the second approach is an increasing interest in the consumption pattern, self-image and material culture of young men. Breward (1995:216) states that “masculinity is not a given, it is too created and manipulated through film, magazines, advertising and, of course, clothing”. Also since the second front “has concerned it self with illusory word of journalism and advertising, focusing more closely on the problems of appearance and identity” (ibid.), both Craik’s (2000) suggestions and the opponent approaches to hers have considerable relevance in explaining the gay impact on men’s fashion through reconstructions of masculinity.

Moving on, in the world of Foucault (1978, 1985, 1986) people do not have a real identity within themselves; that is just a way of talking about the self a discourse. An identity is communicated to others in your interactions with them, but this is not a fixed thing within a person. It is a shifting, temporary construction. Therefore this paper proposes that homosexual discourse can be seen as a shifting construction that is communicated through shifting degrees of fashion consciousness within performance spaces.

The Foucauldian conception of power is that it is not explicit; rather, power is a technique or action, which individuals engage in. Power is not possessed; it is exercised. And where there is power,
there is always also resistance. This paper then advocates that if this is true then men do not have power implicitly but they are the ones that exercise it. This is why young heterosexual men mainly resisted the idea of male fashion and men have feigned disinterest in fashion since the 19th century (which was re-enforced and protected by the risk of losing the right to exercise such power) mostly as a weapon of patriarchal empowerment over women. Through the continuous recreation of dress codes - women were gradually assigned the role of the fashionable gender of the species (Craik 1974, 176).

Up to the early years of the 1980s, male conformity to the dictates of the non-style-consciousness mode was binding. This non-style-consciousness mode gave men an unmarked status (Jacobson, 1990). The power of maleness in this sense was not overt, but it was considered to be authentic. In fact in this sense to express oneself through one's appearance was in this formulation considered a sign of weakness. However, mediated culture has made the notion of the reflexive self a common currency. Notions of power dressing do not find their application along gender or social lines. Dress for success is a meaningful notion both for shop assistants and presidents. This suggests that as long as a masculine discourse is wrapped up in feminist signifiers the so-called ‘feminine’ behavior will be tolerated.

Roper and Tosh (1991:2) claim that the masculinity (like femininity) is a relational construct, incomprehensible apart from the totality of gender relations; and that it is shaped in relation to men’s social power. In that respect men accepting fashion, as being the norm would mean losing power over women, as they would then be considered the same as women who stereotypically are perceived as being predisposed to excessive interest in their appearance. The idea here is that the objective of women’s and gay fashion is to encourage admiration of the body from others, whereas heterosexual men seek to enhance and maintain their active male roles whilst also seeking hidden admiration from other men- the dominant ideological power domain.

According to Žižek, “the ideological form emerges out of the performance of certain actions, which in turn inspires the creation of discourse” (1989: 19). Žižek argues the repeated performance of any action become habitual. This initially results in the internalizing of that action so that one is not longer conscious of performing it take driving a car as an example of this. But then the performance also creates a space of abstraction around it. It begs the question, "why am I doing this?" and in trying to answer this question one creates the very discourse, which over time becomes the justification of the action; genealogically speaking the naturalized law. In this sense it can be hypothesized that the use of homoerotic fashion photography in contemporary UK fashion magazines would have an impact on fashion consciousness of males through reconstruction of British masculinities.

Furthermore we also know that homosexuality is defined in the space of dominant ideological relations as a deviant form of heterosexuality.

Homosexuality antagonizes heterosexuality because it deconstructs it, in other words it exposes the constructed
nature of heterosexuality it self: heterosexuality as an incessant and panicked imitation of its own naturalized idealization, [the fact that is] is always in the act of elaborating itself is evidence that it is perpetually at risk. Butler (1991:724)

In relation to the logic above, this study posits that fashion consciousness can be perceived as antagonizing heterosexuality because male fashion as well deconstructs traditional ideas of masculinity.

THE RISE OF THE SYMBOLIC

I begin this section with a riddle: since the 19th century men have feigned disinterest in fashion which was re-enforced mostly as a weapon of patriarchal empowerment over women. Since the 1970s and the rise of feminism, men have grown more concerned with their appearance. So you would think an open and shut case: a patriarchic power decreases the male pose of disinterest in fashion is eroded. But there is nothing in the logic of patriarchy that justifies this phenomenological shift. For if power is signified by a disinterest in clothes, why did men become more concerned with appearance. Why didn't woman become less concerned?

The answer to this riddle can be accounted for if one considers the rise of media and the increased trade in symbolic goods. As society's reliance on agriculture and industrialisation have waned, so the consumption of symbolic goods has risen. In this sense the natural categories including those of man and woman are potential obstacles to the progress of the symbolic. If a society is ever more reliant on symbolic exchange such as fashion then it makes sense that the more successful people are the ones who are conscious of and can use their appearance to their advantage. In the sense that they project an image of success. Neil Postman (1985) makes a very good point in respect to American presidents.

It is implausible to imagine that anyone like our twenty seventh president, the multi chinned, three hundred-pound William Howard Taft, could be put forward as a presidential candidate in today's world (Postman, 1985:7)

Contemporary politicians look like the older versions of models that you would find in the Abercrombie and Fitch catalogue. Male grooming is implicit in their immaculately groomed appearances.

In the logic of semiotics, there is no natural. Every sign takes on its meaning in relation to another sign through convention and habit. Therefore every performative act by a male of stereotypically feminine behaviour means that it takes on some of the signifiers of femininity. The subversive truth of signs is that signs are all we are in terms of our gender. This is borne out by Butler’s observation that heterosexuality is a panicked institution always in the process of elaborating itself.

How the feminisation of men is contested or embraced is often a potential source of amusement. The exortation of a Gillette promotion "to face skincare like a man" is a case in point. Here masculine and feminine signifiers have been deliberately
conjoined. To a confirmed hetero-
normative the effect must be almost 
Orwellian. (See Image 1 here.)

APPEARANCE
MANAGEMENT IN GAY 
CULTURES

In general gay men have been found to 
strongly value aspects of physical 
appearance such as body build, 
grooming, attractiveness, and dress 
(Kleinberg, 1980). Appearance has been 
found to be an important factor in gay 
socialisation, both in terms of attraction 
and communication (Marmor, 1980). 
Therefore, the gay male actively creates 
and monitors his appearance in relation to 
cultural standards of attractiveness. These 
standards are learned through 
socialization and revised as the individual 
compares himself to other members of 
the cultural space to which he belongs 
(Richins, 1991).

The reasons for a focus on physical 
appearance among gay cultures can be 
explained in many ways. Hagen and 
Symons (1979) proposed that it is due to 
the relation between appearance and 
sexual behaviour. Clark (1977) suggests 
that it is the socially conditioned 
attraction of some homosexual men to a 
narrow range of body types, which results 
in an increased focus on physical 
attractiveness over other personal 
characteristics.

According to Sergios and Cody (1986), 
there is always the threat of rejection if a 
gay man does not live up to some 
socialized standard of attractiveness by 
his sub-gay culture. As a result, more 
than ever men are struggling with the 
same enormous pressure to achieve 
physical perfection that women have 
dealt with for centuries, now being 
identified as the Adonis complex. 
Fashion brands are imposing [via media 
representations of various ideals of 
maleness] physical perfection and 
deciding what are the socialised standards 
of attractiveness. In achieving these 
standards, most [gay] men become 
victims of the Adonis complex.

The last two decades have produced new 
types of men, and also the range of gay 
pigeonholes that were created looks set to 
continue. The image of gay men, 
stridently calling for gay liberation, 
gradually morphed into a mustachioed 
clone, then into a muscle-marry, pierced 
and goatee and finally ‘the more hairy the 
better’ generation that now symbolize the 
gay images, suggesting that on the scene-
queer social space, fashioned body 
enunciates identity.

Fraser (1981; 25) has emphatically 
argued that “fashion significantly defines 
the modern culture, lending it a 
materialistic bias where appearances are 
of greater significance than substance. 
Fashion is a distorted imitation of 
life...concerned with surfaces, images 
and appearances”. This paper suggests 
that fashion supports consumption at least 
as much as consumption consolidates 
modern culture.

We adopt the definition, “fashion is the 
process of adopting symbols, primarily to 
provide the individual an identity relative 
to others” giving much credence to the 
symbolic interactionist perspective 
(Reynolds 1968 in Miller et al 1993:143). 
Also in relation to this, Higgins 
(1998:132) suggests that citizens of the 
gay community see fashion as an object 
of attention because “…consuming 
fashion involves reacting to others’
purchases, developing a definition of style in a peer group”.

From these suppositions one comes to the conclusion that there might be a vital link between the fashion conscious body and the individual identity. If identity is the visualisation of an acculturated body in performatice spaces, the fashioned body, therefore, could be said to be the prime symbol and the determinant of the gay-self.

**PERFORMANCE SPACES**

Žižek (1989) claims that the monetary exchange created the necessary conditions for abstract thinking. He justifies this by arguing that symbolic barter as opposed to the actual exchange of goods predisposes those who are doing the bartering to think in terms of symbols, thus the exchange itself was not thought but it has the form of thought (Žižek, 1989: 18).

This performative sense of ideological abstraction is what Žižek argues creates the space where philosophical reflection can thrive. Žižek advances the formula that the performative action itself opens up a territory for abstraction. In other words what was first arbitrary becomes habitual then it is ritualised and eventually naturalised into the way things are. *In this sense Žižek likens the operations of ideology, not to the performance itself, but to the stage in which the form of truth is acted out before we can even take cognisance of it (ibid. 19).*

Since dress is always located spatially and temporarily, when getting dressed one orientates the body to the situation, acting in particular ways upon the surfaces of the body, which are likely to fit within the established norms of that situation. Therefore within the borders of symbolic exchange, it is argued here that fashioning the gay body is one of the tools used in presentation and creation of the homosexual construct of self-identity within a gay sub-cultural context.

In the context of advanced capitalism, cultural spaces need to be analyzed critically to acknowledge not only who act within the performatice space(s), but also who profits from them (D’emilio, 1983). For this reason this paper frames the discussion here around two analytical categories: gay consumer and gay citizen which then should be linked to two non-analytical performance spaces. First one is a space in the form of community-constructed environments as actual consumption space such as bars, clubs, stores, and neighborhoods in which sexual expression may or may not be restricted [a commercial zone functioning
in the same way as enclaves of masculinity function, take for instance the football stadium].

This market place (consumption space) assumes the role of a village-square, a place for meeting and cultural exchange as well as ongoing creation and negotiation of shared identity. Gay people gather as neo-tribes, a small community to which people are intensely, if temporarily attached by means of shared self-images. These scenes are bound by shared consumption rituals, which create and perpetuate the myths of style and creativity.

Alternatively it may take the form of abstract, transitory, or experiential spaces in which one feels comfortable expressing or acknowledging his sexuality. This space takes the form of an experiential enclave of masculinity in which one feels comfortable expressing or acknowledging his sexuality (Freitas et al, 1996) and while there, it provides refuge and confirmation of same sex desire and culture (Rudd, 1996). Such experiential performance spaces may range from recognising another gay in a public place, to hearing a news report about gays or catching a glimpse of homoerotic advertisements, what we call an abstract notion of queer space in terms of re-constructing contemporary British masculinities through consumption of the homoerotic image per se.

While these latter spaces are less geographical than they are no less real in their consequences. They are temporary, volatile and less subject to expansion. While there, they provide refuge and confirmation of same sex desire and culture. These are spaces that are symbolic and cultural and that open from the use of codes and styles.

This paper’s focus here is on the conceptual intersections between these two spaces as what bounds signs and codes of such fashioned queer looks and appearances at various levels as well the space(s) in which they are captured, staged, negotiated (Cass, 1984) (depicted in figure 1) as these areas act, to borrow Lacan's term act as the point de caption, which stabilizes the kinds of cultural legitimation of some of the expressions of homosexuality and confers a fixed signification for all its other elements (Žižek 1989). This is in turn juxtaposed to the undeniable remnants of reservation and even hostility the mainstream culture may harbor about homosexuality as the transgressive other. (See figure 1 here.)

Unlike other types of cultural communities where the focal point may have been domestic, urban or institutional spaces such as churches, town halls etc. (Warde, 1994), the gay community’s meeting places have always been the sites of consumption where it is possible to break established codes deliberately or not through constant negotiations of fashionable style. Thus the boundaries between heterosexual citizen/consumer and gay consumer /citizen have always been blurred, of which the main result has been a kind of cultural legitimation of some of the expressions of homosexuality through fashionable style strongly influenced by marketing communication channels.

Borgerson and Schroeder (2004) suggested that marketing communications depict consumer society as a font of personal freedom, choice and satisfaction, where citizen and consumer
are almost interchangeable expressions of identity. Perhaps such interchangeability of expressions of identity resulted in abstract intersections of such non-analytical ambivalent extended spaces where both gay and heterosexual citizen and consumer have enjoyed various degrees of freedom through consumption of fashionable style.

At this point, we strongly corroborate Borgerson and Schroeder (2002), who contend that advertising iterates identities and symbolic meaning in the form of discourses, which reveals both the themes and the formal relationships, or imagined bases according to which cultural categories are organised (Barnard, 1996). Gay-selves could then be established, mobilized and harmonized in these intersecting discourses through appearance management. Freitas et al., (1996) believe that style (especially fashion) provides heuristic possibilities for understanding the interdependencies among issues of visibility, identity, community, and cultural spaces. In these spaces (notional and actual) the style and interaction are constantly negotiated and iterated, as symbols acquire new meanings and thus suggest new responses (Rudd, 1996).

We propose that male fashion consciousness can be better theorized through the notion of iterated styles in the abstract intersections of the two spaces described earlier and iteration expresses a continued pattern without assuming that there was at some point in time an original or ideal of which the continued instances are simply re-iterations. In this way, the iterative normatively of homoerotic images contribute to the construction of idealized categories of male, gay or heterosexual—that circulates in culture (Borgerson and Rehn 2004).

**INTERSECTIONS OF EXTENDED SPACES**

Until very recently gay men were considered to be more stylish and fashion conscious than their heterosexual counterparts, but today this distinction is not as easily marked. Modern man is depicted as being sexually aware of his body not just as a machine but also as an object of sexual attraction enhanced by his choice of clothes and ways of wearing them (Craik, 2000). Kimmel (1994) argues that this is because the motivation behind men’s actions and behaviour is to gain approval of other men (129).

In the 1980s, the New Man myth which was created and reinforced by the media heralded a regime where male style-consciousness and tolerance for homoerotic imagery in advertising became increasingly intertwined, enabling men to treat other men as objects of desire (Chapman, 1988). Nevertheless, the manipulation of recognizably homoerotic imagery was usually accompanied by moves to ensure that male models (are) presented as images of desire for women alone. According to Mort (1988), homoerotic fashion photography in Arena and the Face were designed not just to advertise clothes, but as narratives to be cruised.

However, this concept is challenged by the 1990s New Lad phenomenon, which Nixon (1996) only discusses under the premise that such visual coding opens up a space that attracts gay as well as straight men. As a result, homoeroticism has sanctioned an increase in male narcissism, where gay male vanity has
become normalized. Mort (1988:201) agrees, describing how New Men advertising fractured traditional codes of masculinity. It is but a small step from seeking approval in terms of self-image to seeking it in terms of sexual appreciation and satisfaction. This behavioral shift enabled advertisers to use more and more homoerotic imagery in their attempts to reach both straight and gay fashion conscious men.

Coming back to the New Lad theme, changing societal norms, cultural and sexual evolution and other sociological developments have been held responsible for the change in what it means to be a man. The post 1990s male is not as easily ‘pigeon-holed’ as he has been in the past. The macho/playboy, the gender-bending pop star and the homosexual, all constitute some form of masculinity on a slide scale.

The visual culture of lad’s magazines often included images of scantily clad women on the cover and lots of news-stories about (macho, working class sports such as) football. This can be paralleled with how male grooming products were marketed in the UK in the 1970s. For example the first male hairspray commercial was called ‘Cossack’, and had lots of macho Russian iconography- hirsute men with mustaches on rearing horses, who dismounted and started preening themselves by applying the hairspray in front of a mirror.

A more cautious approach is taken by Edwards (1997), who suggests that only the perception of male sexuality has shifted, not sexual practice itself. We argue, qua Nixon, that the sexually ambivalent visual sphere of homoerotic imagery and male body objectification has had a queering effect on notions of contemporary masculinity and male identity formation. But, qua Edwards, that this identity is based upon fashion marketing communication in general and homoerotic imagery in particular.

The assumptions behind such a claim may be articulated as follows. The narcissus may love him self. But if that self is male, then he will love in other men those things he desires in himself. Indeed in the sense that the self is always under construction, the narcissus may covet characteristics that he admires in other males, for example a gym-toned body, in order to motivate himself to go to the gym. This behavior pioneered in gay culture with the notion of the clone. However such a formulation can be criticized because it assumes a monolithic stability between the signifier and the signified, which is immutable to modification, as a more reciprocal and reflexive fluidity is posited in the notion of performity whilst an undoubted tension is introduced into the heteronomatively masculine state of affairs in adopting either feminine or queer performative strategies.

It is not true to say that this is a one way street that automatically leads to the queering of males, when it could just flow in the other way and lead to the heterosexualising of male narcissism. We suggest at this point that measuring the direction of flow would be a useful gauge in assessing the contemporary modifications of power in the Foucauldian sense.

Moving on, the Metro-sexual men [a term coined by British journalist Mark Simpson in 2002] is a good example for what Edwards suggests, for, as Simpson
agrees, metrosexual men are not averse to adoration from both sexes and the root of their desires normally lies in narcissism not sexual orientation. This definition per se implies that metrosexuals are heterosexual men who indeed adopt a gay life style despite, Simpson’s attempts to label the term as a non-gender specific one or even as androgynous in terms of sexual orientation. However in terms of fashion consciousness, the point is that homoerotic imagery opens up a performance space [that is the intersection of actual sphere and a notional queer sphere], where identity can be negotiated and can be used to explain how monolithic ideas about masculinities can be challenged. It can be detected that this negotiation does not necessarily embrace a homosexual lifestyle. As long as it is an overtly heterosexual discourse it does not seem to be a particular issue when it comes wrapped in gay signifiers.

A good example of the way this has worked since the 1970s is provided by looking at footballers. George opened up his own fashion boutique in the 1970s and dressed flamboyantly. However Best was also the premier footballer of his generation and in photographs off the pitch was often surrounded by beautiful women (many of whom Best boasted that he bedded). Therefore, Best is a good historical example of how the law of the hetero-normative can be challenged at the same time as being endorsed. Today we can compare Best to David Beckham who epitomizes the approach that lad’s magazines take, i.e., it is okay to be a peacock as long as you are a footballer and are seen to be heterosexual. In this respect it is interesting to compare him with Will Young who dresses conservatively yet is openly gay. Where once there existed a clear division of gender roles, today we have ambiguity. What is now presented is the idea of the ‘normative’ man suppressing or resisting fashion as anachronistic. One can perhaps now say that all individuals irrespective of gender are subject to some degree of fashion consciousness, even if that subjectification takes the form of a denial.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This paper posits that the growing acceptance of homoerotic imagery in an overtly mainstream setting has given birth to the concept of the zero masculine and zero feminine also (although the focus of this discussion is confined to the former). The two concepts should not be regarded as a judgment on male sexuality- quite the opposite in fact. It is a way of viewing a person’s sexuality without a gender label being attached. In this sense it is similar to postmodern conceptions of the subject where “subjects recognize that they are constituted and that they may, with the proper mediations of others, reconstitute themselves and their world so that subject constitution becomes its designated goal and social end”. (Poster 1995: 12). Within the borders of this new type of masculinity [that is defined by sexuality rather than gender], it is now possible to introduce a new typology of 21st century maleness-zero sexual. It connotes this attitude of gender transparency as Butler (1999: 3) states

“However parodic practices based in a performative theory of gender acts that disrupt the categories of the body, sex, gender, and sexuality and occasion their subversive resignification and proliferation beyond the construction of
sex as a hierarchical binary frame imposed by the heterosexual matrix”.

Judith Butler’s work supports the notion that “the consumption of symbolic meaning, particularly through the use of advertising as a cultural commodity, provides the individual with the opportunity to construct, maintain, and communicate identity and social meanings” (Elliott 1997, p. 285). This view primarily advocates that advertisements make identities available to consumers as raw materials for identity construction (Borgerson and Schroeder, 2004) in the intersections of such extended spaces. As a result, we propose that fashion consciousness can be better understood if examined in terms of sexuality rather than gender.

In this regard, Butler’s and Zizeck’s performative theories of gender offer a radical and fruitful critique of fashion consciousness research. Radical because she addresses the conservatism of scholarly work on fashion and fruitful because their ideas allow us to account theoretically for shifting masculine identities, which could prove very profitable in terms of fashion communications and marketing if properly understood.

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**Figure 1: Zero-Masculinity**

+Vanity/Homosexual masculinities

- Vanity/ Heterosexual masculinity

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**Abstract & theoretical queer space**

**Extended queer sphere**

**Extended consumption sphere**

**Fashion imagery driven actual consumption space**

- Ambivalent Extended Spheres
  - Gay urbanites
  - Heterosexual urbanites
  - Metro-sexual
  - Zero-masculine

1980

1985

1995

2005