Heterotopias of Emerging Same-Sexuality: Spaces and Places of Consumption Among Young Female Consumers “Coming Out of the Closet”

Andreas Pantazopolous, Bradford University, UK
Shona Bettany, Bradford University, UK

Living within the high tension zone of the negotiation of non-traditional identities is to navigate intensely charged flows of power and knowledge in which consumption objects and activities can act as grounding and/or transformatory nodes. The consumption activities and objects enfolded into the “coming out of the closet” process, taken here to mean ontological oscillations both generative and constitutive of the negotiation of a non-heterosexual identity, have profound parts to play in formations of subjectivity. In this paper we explore how such consumption activities and objects co-emerge with negotiations of sexuality among young women engaging in same-sex relations for the first time. In doing this we not only develop the knowledge base around young female consumers during sexual identity process negotiation, but also present the concept of heterotopias (Foucault 1986) as a challenge to the accepted process models of “coming out of the closet” and which has the potential to inform consumer research and progress consumer theory on this group.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15488/volumes/v37/NA-37

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com.
EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumer research has exhibited an interest in non-heterosexual consumers since the early 1990s. Penaloza (1996) suggests that some features of the gay and lesbian market have been presented as more than attractive for marketers, labeling them a "dream market". Gay and lesbian consumers, it is argued, spend in a more symbolic way, perhaps because of a felt need to promote, negotiate or display their sexual identity (Kates 2000) by buying products/brands that communicate to their peers masculinity/femininity (Rudd 1996), exclusiveness (Wardlow 1996), superior status or/and a radical lifestyle (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) and are less price-sensitive and looking for the “intangible” aspect of the goods (Tuten 2005). Although this market was viewed as a relatively new one by consumer researchers, Penaloza (1996) concluded ten years ago that things were rapidly changing and a wide spectrum of businesses started serving the needs of this group; media, vacation companies, legal, medical, financial, communications and community support services. Same-sex union agreements and the constitution of adoption rights to lesbian couples affect these consuming patterns (Borgerson et al 2006, Johnson and Piore 2004) and offer new opportunities to businesses making an understanding of non-heterosexual consumption important.

Chasin (2000) and Kates (1998) suggest that most consumer research focuses on gay men’s consumer behaviour, and lesbian women are somewhat neglected by the literature. This might be due to the perception that gay men have a much higher disposable income than lesbian women and the persistence of the myth of the “gay spender” (Kates 1999). Gay consumption is often stereotypically associated with hedonistic lifestyles and self indulgent conspicuous over-consumption (Hennesey 2000) and there is a proliferation of images in advertising and the media of white, middle class, articulate, attractive “straight looking” gay men who spend a significant amount of their income on non-utility goods (Penaloza 1996, Borgerson et al 2005). Where research has attended to lesbian consumption, this has been usually in the form of presenting lesbian women as an already existing category or segment to be studied (Wilkes and Lavernes 2002). We would argue that there is a need to develop consumer research understanding of female non-heterosexuality and to move beyond notions of viewing this phenomenon as an already existing market segment towards studies that explore the part consumption has to play within the complexities of the negotiation of female sexuality.

Living within the high tension zone of the negotiation of non-traditional identities is to navigate intensely charged flows of power and knowledge in which consumption objects and activities can act as grounding and/or transformatory nodes. It is accepted in consumer research that material objects and consumption activities are enfolded into the construction of narratives of belonging and identity, (Belk 1988, 1995, Bonsu and Belk 2003, Holt 1995, Wallendorf and Arnould 1986) particularly during moments of transition and transformation (Zwick and Dholakia 2006). It has been noted in addition that this seems particularly prescient in negotiation of non-heterosexual identities (Perriera 2008). The consumption activities and objects enfolded into the “coming out of the closet” process, taken here to mean ontological oscillations both generative and constitutive of the formation of a non-heterosexual identity, have profound parts to play in formations of subjectivity.

In this paper we explore how such consumption activities and objects co-emerge with negotiations of sexuality and identity among four young women engaging in same-sex relations for the first time.

This work emerged from an initial phenomenological study that aimed to map consumption activities onto processes of “coming out of the closet” (that is, to “reveal” ones identity as a non-heterosexual) in female university students to explore the consumption activities engaged in during stages of this important identity negotiation (Pantazopoulos 2007). During this study recurring questions about the adequacy of the frameworks of action implied in “coming out of the closet” emerged. We found that many of our participants upon first questioning their sexuality at university were exposed to the dominant Cass process model (Cass 1979) which is employed on many university websites and through university counselling services as an explanatory framework of the processes involved in coming out as gay or lesbian (Fig.1). The Cass model carefully maps out stages in this process, from initial confusion about sexuality, leading to exploration, guilt, disclosure, pride and finally assimilation into a fully exposed gay or lesbian sexuality. Our research found that this model jarred somewhat with actual experiences and accounts of the negotiation of sexuality and the sexuality “play” engaged in by our respondents to the extent that we felt that the model was too simplistic to explain the data. Moreover, the concept of “coming out of the closet” itself seemed ontologically too simplistic to account for the complexity of our research findings, and was incommensurate with contemporary theoretical frameworks around identity negotiation. Furthermore, in our research, the assumptions underpinning the idea of “coming out of the closet” were woven into negotiations of sexuality by our participants such that it became an important actor of normality in the cultural terrain. This led to a reappraisal of our initial research which sought to map consumption activities onto process stages, and recognition that an alternative theoretical approach was necessary. In developing our theoretical contribution we instead utilize Persson and Richard’s (2008) alternative conceptualisation to “coming out of the closet” based on Foucault’s (1986) notion of heterotopias to explore the spaces enacted through our participants consumption activities and suggest this alternative conceptualisation as a way for consumer and marketing researchers to better understand this valuable and interesting sub-cultural group.

We found during out study that respondents produced multiple heterotopias around their emerging sexuality, summarized here as “heterotopias of nowhere”, “heterotopias of gay space” and “heterotopias of the body”. These heterotopias were imaginatively and creatively deployed and occupied by these women and facilitated sexual identity play, interwoven with consumption activities such as engaging in the consumption of drugs and alcohol, a photography hobby and the purchase and display of particular items of clothing. We suggest that the concept of heterotopias has much to recommend it as a replacement or enhancement to the traditional “coming out of the closet” model that has become habitually invoked as a universal metaphor for revealing a range of identities and conditions that might be viewed as carrying a social stigma. We argue, following Person and Richards (2008), that in the absence of careful analysis, applying this metaphor as conceptual shorthand homogenizes experiences of negotiating “stigmatized” identities, and may...
hamper our attentiveness to the cultural specificities of lives and stories. Heterotopias, because they do not carry the negative burden of the assumption of gradually coming to terms with a stigmatized identity, can be used to build more sensitive accounts of identity construction among groups traditionally targeted by these models.

REFERENCES
Butler, J (1990), Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Routledge, London.