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Metro / Fashion / Tribes of men: Negotiating the boundaries of men's legitimate consumption

Diego Rinallo

Introduction

Today, fashion speaks to men. This development represents a cultural revolution respect to previous articulations of fashion discourse, that used to focus on women to the exclusion of men. For years, when targeting fashion-conscious men, marketers have produced representations of male beauty and appearance shaped by gay aesthetics. The resulting convergence in style between straight and gay men resulted according to some social observers (e.g., Colman, 2005) in the decreased reliability of the 'gaydar', the emic term employed in the gay subculture of consumption to refer to the ability to identify sexual orientation from style-related consumption (Kates, 2002).

When read in terms of subcultural theory, the filtering of gay aesthetics into the mainstream is problematic. The commodification of the stylistic choices of

a subculture into mainstream fashion is said to result in active resistance by members of the subculture, who adopt new styles (Clarke, 1986; Gottdiener, 1985; Hebdige, 1979). Marketers that co-opt and soften elements of a subculture to make them more appealing to mainstream consumers incur 'the risk of alienating hard-core members, corrupting the subculture, and diluting its original appeal' (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995, p. 59). With explicit reference to gay consumers, Kates (2002) highlights the oppositional nature of their subcultural consumption practices, which are renegotiated through boundary work in relation the heterosexual, mainstream culture. Under this perspective, marketers' metrosexualization of straight consumers 'should' result in gay consumers' active boundary maintenance. However, the research findings here proposed do not support this idea and suggest alternative outcomes of subcultural style commodification.

In a world of fragmentation, an increased similarity between straight and gay men – at least with respect to attitudes towards fashion and appearance – is hardly surprising. Postmodern tribes are defined as 'a network of heterogeneous persons – in terms of age, sex, income, etc. – who are linked by a shared passion or emotion' (Cova and Cova, 2002, p. 602). While only a minority of consumers, the so-called 'fashion victims', could be considered as a tribe à la Maffesoli (1996) in a strict sense, marketers of fashion products could benefit from the application of one of the basic tenets of tribal marketing, that is the fact that consumers value goods mostly for their contribution to establish or reinforce bonds between individuals (Cova, 1997; Cova and Cova, 2002). Fashion, after all, is about the creation of social bonds, as it ensures consumers that they will fit into a given social setting (Thompson and Haytko, 1997).

This book chapter examines recent developments in the marketing discourse around masculinity centred upon the so-called 'metrosexuals', that is male consumers living in or near metropolitan areas who adopt the aesthetic sensibility often associated with gay men (Simpson, 2002), and contrasts them with the lived experience of fashion-conscious straight and gay men in Italy. My approach is similar to the one adopted by Holt and Thompson (2004, p. 425), as I analyse the construction of masculine identity 'as it moves through two moments of cultural production – mass culture discourse and everyday consumption practices'. Unlike previous studies in consumption culture theory on men's consumption and media representations of masculinity (Belk and Costa, 1998; Holt and Thompson, 2004; Kates, 2002; Patterson and Elliott, 2002; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004; Sherry et al., 2004), however, I investigated both straight and gay men following developments in the sociology of masculinities. Gender dynamics, it is argued, can be usefully analysed *within* as well as *between* genders (Connell, 1992; Carrigan, Connell and Lee, 2002).

This chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, I examine the cultural production of the metrosexual by advertising agencies, marketers and other marketplace actors in the context of the traditional discourse of men's fashion. Secondly, I provide methodological details about my informants, data gathering

and analysis procedures. In the sections that follow, I report my research findings regarding:

- (i) reading strategies of media representations of men by straight and gay consumers;
- (ii) the symbolic horizon of straight men's consumption and the renegotiation of the boundaries of gender-legitimate consumption;
- (iii) gay consumers reactions to the filtering of gay aesthetics into straight men's consumption.

I conclude by theorizing on alternative outcomes of the commodification of subcultural style and by arguing that the approach adopted by most marketers to entice straight men are flawed as they do not take into consideration the basic principles of tribal marketing.

Marketplace actors and the cultural production of fashionable masculinities

Fashionable representations of masculinity have to face centuries-old cultural taboos. As sharply noted by Craik (1994, p. 176), the discourse of men's fashion has long been centred upon a set of denials:

that there is no men's fashion; that men dress for fit and comfort, rather than for style; that women dress men and buy clothes for them; that men who dress up are peculiar (one way or another); that man do not notice clothes; and that most men have not been duped into the endless pursuit of seasonal fads.

The idea of fashion-unconscious men may be traced back to early fashion theorists, who observed the diffusion, in the decades following the French Revolution, of the so-called 'Great Masculine Renunciation' (Flügel, 1930), that is the principle that men should dress in the same, dark uniform as other men in order not to call attention to themselves as objects of beauty, and leave the more varied and elaborate forms of ornamentation that were prevalent among the aristocracy to the use of women. The construction of fashion as a woman's preoccupation has made men's interest in fashion and appearance at the very best 'suspect' of effeminacy or, even worse, of homosexuality (Crane, 2000; Davis, 1992); a fair suspicion, as fashion has long been a primary method of reciprocal identification for gay man (Cole, 2000). In more recent years, however, mass media representations of masculinity have fostered a renegotiation of gender boundaries (Bordo, 1999; Patterson and Elliott, 2002).

In the 1980s, men's lifestyle magazines proposed to their audiences (and advertisers) a 'new man', more in touch with his feminine side and not afraid of caring about his physical aspect (Mort, 1996; Nixon, 1993, 1996). In the 1990s, as the 'new man' was criticized for being unrealistic, a new generation of men's lifestyle magazines proposed a new representation of masculinity, the less feminine and soft 'new lad' (Crewe, 2003). In the first years of

the new millennium, history repeated itself with the media hype surrounding metrosexuals (Simpson, 2002). In June 2002, journalist Mark Simpson authored an article on the online magazine *Salon.com* in which he introduced his audience to the 'metrosexual', a term he had previously coined (Simpson, 1994) to refer to male consumers living in or near metropolitan areas, who spend significant amount of time and money on their appearance and lifestyles and who, although most often straight, tend to embody the aesthetic sensibility frequently associated with gay men. The tone of Simpson's writing on the subject reminds the so-called 'compensatory consumption thesis' (Holt and Thompson, 2004) popularized by many scholars and social observers (e.g., Kimmel, 1996): men, whose identity is threatened by major economic and social changes in society, seek to 'symbolically reaffirm their status as real men through compensatory consumption' (Holt and Thompson, 2004, p. 425). In Simpson's words, metrosexuality refers to a man 'less certain of his identity and much more interested in his image . . . A man, in other words, who is an advertiser's walking wet dream' (Simpson, 2002, p. 1).

In light of Simpson's sarcastic remarks, it is ironical that the term metrosexual was soon after employed by the multinational advertising company Euro RSCG, which issued in June 2003 a research report that represented metrosexuals as an existing and viable market segment. Interestingly, while in Simpson's original definition the sexual orientation of a metrosexual is irrelevant, Euro RSCG's (2003) report and the subsequent media hype have constructed metrosexuals as straight men. In a curious case of synchronicity, in the same months the newly launched television show 'Queer eye for the straight guy' started representing the consumption practices stereotypically associated to gay men as 'disarticulated from its referent and resignified as metrosexuality' (Miller, 2005, p. 112).

Sustained by Euro RSCG's publicity and the media craze surrounding it, metrosexuality enjoyed substantial worldwide visibility. Mass culture representations of metrosexuality have recently included countless articles on the news media all around the world (e.g., Hackbarth, 2003; St. John, 2003), a few books (Flocker, 2003; Hyman, 2004), a tarot deck, and a 2003 episode of the television show *South Park*. Fashion designers, including Dolce and Gabbana and Giorgio Armani, were among the first of countless marketers to launch metrosexual-inspired new products and collections. The term metrosexual was voted by the American Dialect Society the 2003 word of the year for its domination of the US discourse, and now accounts for more than 1,800,000 hits in popular internet search engines as google.com. Several tests are now available on the Internet to help men measuring their degree of metrosexuality.

After a couple of years of undisputed attention, the metrosexual was deposed by his self-nominated successor, the übersexual. According to the term's creators, the descriptor 'über' was chosen 'because of its connotation of being the greatest, the best'. Übersexuals are thus 'the most attractive (not just physically), most dynamic, and most compelling men of their generations. They are supremely confident (without being obnoxious), masculine, stylish, and committed to uncompromising quality in all areas of life' (Salzman,

Matathia and O'Reilly, 2005, p. 76). Similarly to what happened in the 1980s and 1990s when the new lad substituted the softer new man, here again the metrosexual was substituted by the harder – but equally style addict – übersexual. As fashionable masculinities rise and fall, marketplace actors remain behind the media halo surrounding 'cool' definitions of masculinity. Ms. Salzman is one of the authors of Euro RSCG International's (2003) report on the metrosexual and both of her co-authors are involved in the advertising business at multi-national agencies that investigate/construct trends in consumer society to better serve their corporate customers.

Today, marketplace organizations employ the media arena to 'sell' their own version of masculinities, and are doing so at an accelerated pace. For marketers in many consumer goods industries, straight men are the other half of the sky, as female consumers represent a mature market unlikely to show dramatic growth in the years to come and gay men, in spite of their increased visibility in society and great potential as a market segment, are still a minority. This is not a new development: 'new men' and 'new lads' were both a creation of glossy men's magazines that aimed to sell their advertisers a valuable target group (Crewe, 2003). Today, the cultural production of masculinities is a diffused process that sees the cooperation of countless marketers, advertising agencies, market research companies, news media and magazine publishers that, as moved by an invisible hand, conspire to reassure straight consumers of the appropriateness of caring about their look. To use Simpson's (2005, p. 1) sharp comments, marketers 'imagine the way to persuade billions of men to buy more product is to keep telling them there's nothing faggy about being . . . faggy'.

When we move through the circuit of culture from mass media representations of masculinities to the consumption practices of real men, the developments here described appear problematic. According to some, a number of today's men have an attitude of indifference to having their sexual orientation misinterpreted, as they embrace consumption practices neither straight nor gay but lying in between, in a grey area of 'gay vagueness' (Colman, 2005). While continuously reassured by marketers of the manly nature of, say, wearing pink shirts, shaving their bodies or going to spas, straight men have, however, to face centuries-old prejudices against these consumption practices. The risk they incur is the same faced by dandies in the eighteenth century: being perceived as effeminate or homosexual. The heterosexual characterization of metrosexuality by Euro RSCG may be seen as an antidote to the difficulties in promoting these 'risky' practices to straight male consumers. Similarly, the launch of the übersexual may be seen as a move towards further reassuring straight male consumers of the gender-appropriateness of the same consumption practices.

Method

To analyse the construction of the male identity in the sphere of consumption, I generated textual data from both straight and gay male consumers through

Table 6.1 Age and occupation of informants

Straight informants		Gay informants	
Age	Occupation	Age	Occupation
22	Undergraduate student	21	Undergraduate student
24	MSc student	23	MSc student
25	MSc student	24	MSc student
25	MSc student	25	MSc student
26	Research analyst	27	Sales representative
29	Sales representative	30	Fashion executive
33	Teacher	34	Public relations executive
37	Bank executive	38	Photographer

long, phenomenological interviews (McCracken, 1988; Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989). My informants were 16 fashion-conscious men, aged 20 to 38 years old, living in or near metropolitan areas in Italy, equally split between sexual orientations. While informants were selected having in mind the metrosexual's profile, none of them actively identified himself as one and, in a few cases, were not even aware of the meaning of the term. Background varied in terms of upbringing, education, occupation and level of fashion consciousness. Gay informants also varied in terms of the visibility of their sexual orientation to significant others (family, friends, co-workers). All participants in the study were assured of anonymity and are here identified through pseudonyms. Table 6.1 provides a list of informants together with key background information.

Interviews were semi-structured and lasted from a minimum of 90 min to – in two cases – more than 4h. 'Grand tour' questions regarding the informant's background were followed by open-ended questions regarding the topics of the present study: media representations of masculinity and informants' consumption practices related to fashion and, more in general, physical appearance. At appropriate moments during the interviews, a photoelicitation technique (Heisley and Levy, 1991) was employed: to enrich narratives and overcome difficulties in speaking of gender-related issues, I exposed informants to selected representations of masculinity taken from men's lifestyle magazines. All interviews were videotaped, transcribed and subsequently analysed and interpreted following the methodological procedures outlined in Spiggle (1994).

When men look at other men: reading strategies of straight and gay consumers

A central concept in scholarship about the practices of looking is the gaze, which was brought to prominence by Laura Mulvey (1975). The feminist

film-maker and writer employed psychoanalysis to suggest that the convention of popular narrative cinema position women as the passive object of a 'male gaze'. The female body, in other words, is offered as a spectacle for the pleasure of male, heterosexual viewers. The resulting objectification of women thus reproduces the disadvantaged positions of women in patriarchal societies. Mulvey's ideas are echoed by art historian John Berger (1972) who, in his analysis of the classic Western tradition of images, suggests that men tend to be depicted in action and women as object to be looked at.

Changes in mass culture representations of women and men led, however, to reconsider the concept of the gaze, to account for the male body as object of the gaze and the pleasure of female spectators (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001). Among others, Bordo (1999) astutely noted that men are now portrayed as passive objects of a sexual, desiring gaze offered to an undefined other: male of female, straight or gay. In consumer culture theory, Patterson and Elliott (2002) referred to this phenomenon as the 'inversion of the male gaze' and proposed that men can adopt multiple subject positions in the consumption of media representations of masculinity, resulting in processes of negotiation and renegotiation of the male identity. Adding to this debate, Schroeder and Zwick (2004) suggested that certain upper-class men have always paid attention to their appearance and contended that the gaze has expanded, rather than merely inverted, to include new possibilities for male identity within the boundaries of gender opposition.

Men may thus consume visual representations of masculinities in many manners. Figure 6.1 synthesizes my informants' most common reading strategies in dealing with the idealized images of male beauty proposed by men's lifestyle magazines and other cultural products. An interpretive strategy

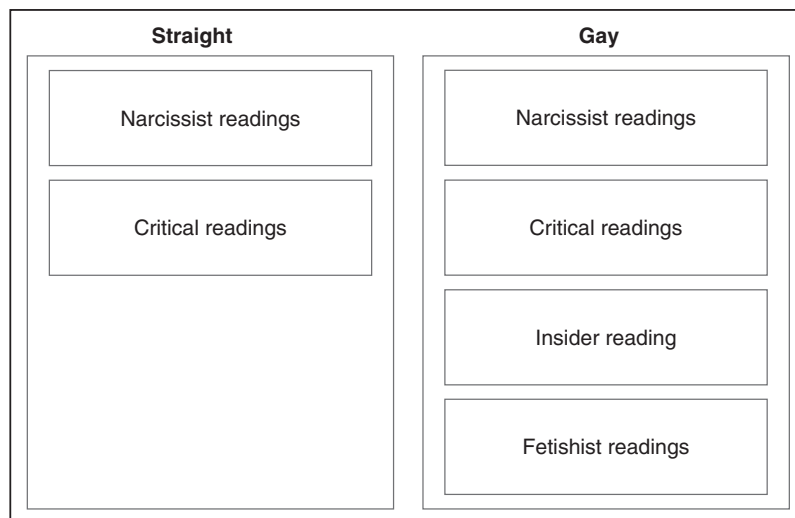


Figure 6.1 Male consumers' interpretive strategies.

shared by straight and gay men consists of *narcissistic readings* (Patterson and Elliott, 2002). A narcissistic reading of male imagery entails desiring what one would like to become:

Well, his [an ad model's] physique is very sculpted . . . but I'm becoming like that myself, just give me time . . . His tattoos are too cool, I'd like to have one . . . Of course, if I had the physique he has, tattoos would look much different on me . . .

(Davide, 24 years old, straight)

Davide admires the statuesque beauty of the advertising model's sculpted physique. He compares his own body with the model's – a contest that cannot be won – and admits he is not built enough for tattooing. The model however embodies an aspiration ideal which (perhaps unrealistically) is not considered impossible to attain (Hirschman and Thompson, 1997). Davide's words evoke the image of a statuesque physique adorned with tattoos which becomes the object of somebody's admiring gaze. Such gaze may be female, but not necessarily as other (straight) men may be an equally possible audience:

The gym's locker room . . . is the place where a man shows the Narcissus inside himself . . . because locker rooms are full of mirrors, you know? Because there you undress, step out of the shower and look at yourself . . . you gaze at yourself, you admire yourself, you look at how you are and how you could improve . . . I spent a lot of time in front of these mirrors . . . Often, we stand in briefs and tell each other 'look at the arms . . . the thighs . . . the quadriceps'. [In these moments] everybody likes himself and wants to be appreciated by the other guys . . . Even among guys . . . It may seem odd but . . . Do you understand? Even among guys . . . [They tell you] 'Look, what a nice chest you have' and inside yourself you say: 'Wow!'.

(Massimo, 26 years old, straight)

Massimo and other informants' narratives speak about narcissistic pleasures: looking at the mirror, they see a body in transformation as their muscles grow bigger and their physique becomes increasingly similar to those of distant advertising models and more approachable gym mates. Informants realize that there is something queer in the way they look (and occasionally touch) each other in this male-only environment. Massimo explicitly notes the 'oddness' of a situation where men admire each other's physiques and feels the need to specify that he and his gym mates are not naked when involved in this activity, as to exorcise a homosexual interpretation of his words.

Another reading strategy of male imagery in advertising shared by both gay and straight consumers consists of *critical interpretations* (Hirschman and Thompson, 1997; Patterson and Elliott, 2002). Ads' models are rejected for being 'unreal', 'made of plastic', 'identical to each other' and even pitied

for an 'empty' existence devoted to maintaining their beauty. In the words of informants a semiotic opposition is created between the majority of 'normal', 'real' men and the few ones who can act as models for adverts:

Oh my! This is a man unattainable by men . . . If you watch television, if you look at magazines they [models, actors] are all over-muscled, over-buff, thin, and beautiful, painfully beautiful. These guys are far from reality because they spend all their day at the gym, follow a super balanced diet . . . They don't do anything else in their life! They take care of themselves . . . And, honestly speaking, I don't like the fact that they shave themselves . . . they pluck their eyebrows . . . this kind of things . . . I don't find that necessary at all.

(Gabriele, 22 years old, straight)

The rejection of models' lifestyle, made of endless hours at the gym and dietary restrictions, is strengthened through an ideological inversion of their status within an ideal hierarchy of masculinity. Models occupy top positions with respect to beauty: 'normal' men may only aspire to be 'in the middle'. Supporters of the 'compensatory consumption' thesis would argue that marketers' cultural production of masculinity compels male consumers to partake in such hierarchy and motivates them to move upward through narcissistic consumption. Through critical interpretations, however, male models are knocked off their pedestal by consumers who invoke the male gaze to objectify – and feminize – the excessive pursuit of beauty, particularly when it involves doubtful practices such as shaving one's chest or plucking one's eyebrows.

Critical and narcissistic readings often coexists in the same informants and denote consumers' ambivalence towards mass-mediated masculinities. Like in the myth of Narcissus, men look at the media to see reflections of their own male identity. But media representations are distorted mirrors: as the 'impossibly thin' female models may cause low self-esteem and eating disorders in women, the equally impossibly muscular and beautiful male models may cause feelings of discomfort and inadequacy in men.

Gay consumers' relationships with media images of masculinity (see again Figure 6.1) are characterized by interpretive architectures generally more complex than those of their straight counterparts. For gay informants, a possible interpretive response consists of *insider readings* (Kates, 2004): adverts are perceived as directed at gay audiences without appearing to do so. Unlike ads with explicit homoerotic elements, these ads interpellate gay men in ways which are not evident to most straight consumers. Insider readings by gay informants are frequent in the case of ads featuring two or more male models:

Look at this image . . . There is a lot of attention to the physical aspect of the guys . . . The choice is peculiar . . . It's a situation of strong intimacy . . . It is not openly gay . . . but it suggests an intimacy between the guys.

(Alex, 34 years old, gay)

Insider readings are personalizing interpretations (Hirschman and Thompson, 1997) that reflect gay consumers' experiences and needs. Gay consumers employ the gaydar, that is the capability to understand from subtle signs whether a person is gay or not, to detect gay subtexts in advertising messages. This does not imply that advertisers actually inscribe such subtexts in their ads. On the contrary, the commodification of gay aesthetics in the production of fashion imagery often produces 'biased' insider readings. Another reading strategy of gay consumers dealing with images of male beauty consists of *fetishist readings* (Patterson and Elliott, 2002) that, in most (but not all) respects, mirror those of straight men dealing with media representations of women:

Sincerely . . . I'd like to have his address . . . or rather I'd like him to have mine! . . . What do you want me to say? He's beautiful, beautiful, beautiful . . . He is a sex god . . . Good for a night of fire.
(Paolo, 30 years old, gay)

Media masculinities are looked by gay consumers with a desiring gaze and may be the starting point for erotic or romantic fantasies or 'mental film making'. An ad's model may thus be objectified as 'sexual toy' – playing the role of the gazer's 'hunter' or 'prey'. In the words of gay informants, however, fetishistic and narcissistic readings often intertwine as models are both object of the gaze and recipients of the gazer's identification. For gay consumers, images of men are thus blank screens that evoke a variety of subject positions within the realm of voluptuousness. A variety which is denied to most straight men.

The risky consumptionscape of straight men

When speaking of fashion and physical appearance, informants highlighted the clear existence of do's and don'ts. The interpretive model proposed in Figure 6.2 makes sense of the imagined barriers that straight men dare not cross and the mechanisms that enforce respect of these barriers. As well as by the psychological perspectives on the gaze previously discussed, the model is informed by Michel's Foucault's (1977) ideas on the functioning of power in society. With reference to Foucault's work, Schroeder and Zwick (2005, p. 23) note that 'advertising imagery constitutes ubiquitous and influential bodily representations in public space, incorporating exercises of power, surveillance and normativity within the consumer spectacle'. Our look is subjected to the approval of beloved ones and important others: parents, partners, friends and acquaintances, co-workers and superiors. Surveillance thus entails the *panoptical gaze* of others: a gaze that reprimands those who do not conform to it and that we eventually interiorize.

Accordingly, for straight men, the consumptionscape is made of a 'safe area' – where the narcissistic gaze may be exerted in security – and of

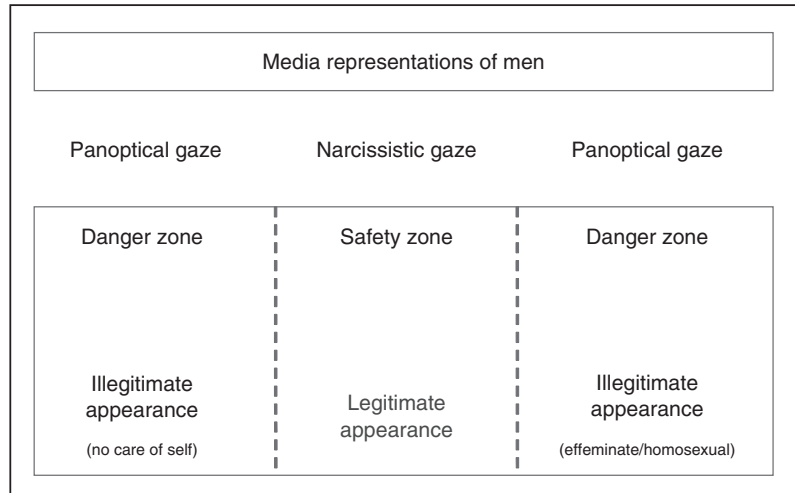


Figure 6.2 The cultural production of straight men's consumption landscape.

'danger zones' – where consumption is riskier as regimes of surveillance sanction illegitimate consumption.¹ Legitimacy is the 'generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity [here, a consumption practice] are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions' (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Consumption practices may be stigmatized for being untidy, sloppy, not refined, old fashioned. Other practices may on the other hand be too refined or fashionable, to the point of being gender-inappropriate for men. Most of the time the barriers between legitimate and illegitimate consumption are invisible, as they are deeply embedded in consumption habits and illegitimate products are normally avoided. Crossing the frontier however causes visible discomfort and, often, the need to justify 'questionable' consumptions:

I employ a moisturizing cream . . . but I'd never use an eye contour cream. . . These are women's stuff. . . I associate them to women. . .
(Gabriele, 22 years old, straight)

In the words of informants, the lower bound of the 'safe area' is rarely questioned: a minimum level of tidiness and aesthetic sense is taken for granted. The prominence of fashionable masculinities in mass culture induces however consumers to continuously renegotiate the legitimacy of consumption goods and practices beyond the upper bound. For Gabriele, using a moisturizing cream – a risky business for other informants – is a legitimate manly activity. An eye contour cream, on the contrary, is not. As suggested by Schroeder

¹The idea of 'danger zones' in the context of working women's ideal business image was previously suggested by Kimle and Damhorst (1997). I am grateful to Susan Kaiser for bringing this reference to my attention.

and Zwick (2004, p. 23) 'masculinity is – semiotically – irrevocably connected with, opposed to and in relation to femininity'. Practices that violate norms of masculinity are thus viewed as effeminate:

Come on! Gay guys are not the only ones who can wear jeans like those . . . or wear clothes which are peculiar . . . But once in a while I buy something a little fanciful and my friends say: You can't wear that . . . It's faggy . . . But as a joke . . .

(Davide, 24 years old, straight)

Trespassing these imagined frontiers may cause consequences. Pushed by marketers, style innovators may sometimes experiment with 'peculiar' aesthetic choices. Negative sanctions by friends and acquaintances – even if limited to a disapproving gaze or, as in the case of Davide, irony – thwart their diffusion. Cultural barriers are however permeable and consumers often notice that practices which are fairly common today were unconceivable for men when their fathers were their age (e.g., pink shirts) or even a few years ago (e.g., shaving one's body, plucking one's eyebrows):

I've always used an after-shave . . . but not creams . . . I've always kept creams away from me . . . Until I was 20, for me creams were women's stuff. Then, one summer my mom insisted I put a protection cream on before going out in the sun . . . 'Try it, try it', she said, and I: 'Leave me alone . . .'. Then she gave me a Shiseido after-sun. I brought it on vacation and my friends: 'how nice, how nice' – because it made the skin shine . . . if you were sun-tanned it made you shine . . . Now I'm starting using a cream for my face . . . not an anti-wrinkling cream . . . let's say a regenerating one . . . Because I always have these shadows under my eyes . . . My girlfriend wanted me to buy one that costs more than 20 euros . . . but I said 'wait, let's start buying a less expensive one . . .'

(Massimo, 26 years old, straight)

With the exception of manly after-shaves, Massimo used to resist the use of creams (all creams) as they belong to the realm of female consumption. His process of acculturation takes several years, during which Massimo is exposed to positive sanctions by friends in the case of a sun protection cream, whose results nurture his narcissism. The more recent episodes show a process of boundary work, that is of renegotiation of the male identity to include certain forms of consumption in terms of product attributes, price levels, distribution channels – and not others. A cheap, 'regenerating' cream bought in a supermarket does not threaten Massimo's gender identity the way an expensive, top brand anti-wrinkle cream bought in a cosmetics shop would. Lack of legitimacy may regard not only products and brands, but also their distribution channels, price levels, and modes of consumption.

The gaydar is dead: long live the gaydar!

For many gay informants, it is no more possible to infer a man's sexual orientation from his look. According to older informants, the 'problem' is heightened in the case of younger men. The gaydar is thus less reliable than it once used to be and subtler forms of radar have to be developed. As appearances may be 'misleading', for many gay informants recognizing another gay men is 'a matter of glances' or a 'sense of sudden connection':

According to me it is not possible to say whether a guy is gay or not from appearance only . . . not any more . . . Particularly young people . . . Look at them: they all look alike: same sunglasses, low-waisted jeans, colored t-shirt and sweaters . . . That is, you can't be 100 per cent sure when you say: he is gay, he is not . . . In short, gay guys who are 60, 70 years old are much more visible when they are in Ibiza with their white pants, their shirts, the gold chains this thick, things like that But not young people . . .

(Dario, 38 years old, gay)

Previous research shows that gay consumers actively construct subcultural boundaries between gays and heterosexuals through consumption and develop negative consumption stereotypes about the style of straight men (Kates, 2002). However, appropriation of subcultural style by the heterosexual mainstream, according to my informants, is not causing the active consumer resistance suggested in other contexts (e.g., Hebdige, 1979). The adoption of 'gayer' style is possible but not as common as expected:

Today there are fashion shows where men wear the gown . . . If one [a gay guy] wants to be more visible, he can . . . Yes, if one wants to put make-up on, he can, he knows that if he exaggerates people will take notice . . . If a queer wants to show himself up, all he needs is to put mascara on, you'll hardly find a straight guy who does that. This is a more extreme thing to do . . .

(Alex, 34 years old, gay)

In the context I explored, gay consumers, rather than resisting the commodification of gay aesthetics, are enjoying the semiotic ambiguity of men's style, which is now decoupled by sexual orientation. The gray area of 'gay vagueness' seems to be more appreciated by gay consumers than their straight counterpart. Gay consumers, while still discriminated by society at large, have long considered superior their own sense of style – and stereotyped straight men for their inferior physical appearance (Kates, 2002). The diffusion of gay aesthetics to the mainstream is thus applauded as a sign of 'civilization' of

straight men and an acknowledgement of the role gay subculture plays in society:

Gay people have always been very creative. Look at the arts: Leonardo, Caravaggio and so many other Renaissance masters were homosexuals. In fashion, it's not a secret that most designers are gay . . . For centuries, the unique contribution of homosexual people to society has gone unnoticed, simply because people were afraid to come out and say: 'I'm gay'. Today, fortunately, this is not true anymore and the media credit us with being superiorly endowed individuals in the realms of creativity, art and fashion – not social misfits or sexual deviants . . .

(Paolo, 30 years old, gay)

Discussion and conclusion

In this chapter, I analysed the production of masculine identity in two stages of the circuit of culture: mass-mediated marketplace discourse and men's consumption practices. Fashionable media representations of masculinities lure straight men into appearing beautiful according to inspirational models codified by advertising and to indulge in consumption practices long employed by gay men to build the symbolic boundaries of their subculture. To completely adhere to such beauty ideals, straight men should, for example, wear tight briefs, pluck their eyebrows, shave their bodies, employ creams and even cosmetics. Such practices, while encouraged by the discourse of fashion and advertising, are still considered of dubious legitimacy among straight men. Even the style innovators among them refrain from their adoption, as they are still subject to the regime of surveillance of the panoptical gaze in their social interactions.

Under these circumstances, subcultural theory would predict gay consumers' resistance to marketers and the heterosexual appropriation of important signifying consumption practices. However, quite the contrary appears to be happening. Straight men (i.e., the mainstream society) are resisting marketers' commodification of gay aesthetics and actively engage into boundary work to legitimize consumptions which are still 'suspicious' for men. The boundaries – or, better, the upper bound – of the 'safe area' of the consumptionscape (see again Figure 6.2) are thus subject to an ongoing process of negotiation and renegotiation as consumers invoke marketplace discourse on masculinity to placate the panoptical gaze. Gay men, on the other hand, seem to enjoy the diffusion of the 'gay vagueness' trend in society and appreciate it as a sign of 'civilization' of straight men and as a mechanism through which they can gain standing in society. These findings contribute to theory on subcultures of consumption as they propose alternative outcomes of the commodification of subcultural style. *Mainstream resistance* and what may be termed *subcultural revenge* are possible responses to marketer appropriation of the marker goods employed to express affiliation by discriminated subcultural groups.

How can we judge the collective marketing strategy employed to construct the metrosexual and other recent fashionable masculinities in terms of the principles of tribal marketing? Research has long shown the existence of two basic models in the diffusion of innovations (Strang and Soule, 1998): 'external source' or broadcast models, that refer to diffusion *into* a population; and internal or contagion models, that refer to diffusion *within* a population. Marketers' construction of masculinities seems to heavily rely on mass-mediated discourse, that is on external sources, neglecting at the same time the influence flowing within the adopting population of men. The panoptical gaze is however a powerful force to deal with, as it is interiorized and enforced by the net of relationships consumers are embedded in. To conquer straight men, marketers should take into consideration the risky nature of fashion adoption: for example, they should employ 'next door boys' in lieu of impossibly beautiful models in their adverts and propose 'safe' retail channels and price levels, in order to minimize the likeliness of critical readings. Moreover, the exploitation of opinion leadership phenomena and the reassurance of relevant others (women!) about the legitimacy of fashionable consumption seems to be of utmost importance. As Cova (1997, p. 311) reminds us, 'the link is more important than the thing', that is consumers value products or services to the extent that they facilitate social relationships. A lesson that the producers of the next fashionable masculinity should hold dear.

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