

'GWM ISO GAM': Mediated identities and ethnicity fetish

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the notion of space as a medium that allows the construction of social relationships. One such space is the internet. This paper considers the ways that gay Caucasian men who are exclusively attracted to men of Asian ancestry use the internet – particularly, internet personal advertisements – to construct social relationships with the men to whom they are attracted. The paper is a preliminary report of a study in progress into the ways in these men construct and give meaning to their attraction. The study uses the theoretical framework of fetish. Scripting is accepted as one way of making sense of the world. The paper suggests that gay men who have a racially-based fetish undertake significant intrapsychic scripting in order to symbolically construct reality to establish an identity and social relationships that meet their particular needs.

INTRODUCTION

This paper represents part of a larger study I am undertaking in a Master of Education by Research in the Faculty of Education and Social Work, The University of Sydney, under the supervision of Associate Professor Gerard Sullivan. I acknowledge Dr Sullivan's support and encouragement.

This paper is a preliminary report of a study of exclusive attraction based on race using the theoretical framework of fetishism. In particular, the study seeks to determine the basis of exclusive attraction of some Caucasian men to men of East Asian ancestry, and the ways and spaces in which such men understand and give meaning to their attraction. The study is not at a stage that definitive findings can be reported. This paper, nevertheless, raises issues relevant to the research and broadly outlines the context in which the study is located.

The paper also explores the concept of queer space – specifically gay space – in the context of the internet. It also considers the notion of space in the construction of identity and social relations by Caucasian men who are exclusively attracted to men of East Asian ancestry. The use of the term East Asian ancestry avoids extended discussions about race, ethnicity and nationality, although these are acknowledged as significant.

CONSTRUCTION OF SPACE

Space has traditionally been described in terms of geographyⁱ. Hodgeⁱⁱⁱ, however, states: 'Places are more than locations on maps. ... they are cultural creations with various meanings to the different people who experience them'.

Even queer space and gay space, more often than not, fall into the traditional typology and are described in terms of their geography and use. Markwell, for example, suggests that the:

gay identity of ... cities [Sydney, among others] derives from a combination of recognizable gay spaces and places—neighbourhoods and territories in which material and symbolic expressions of homosexuality are clearly visible.^{iv}

The queering of neighbourhoods is a familiar phenomenon of the late 20th century, with the Oxford St and King St precincts in Sydney being obvious examples. According to Rushbrook^v, 'In North American and European cities, gay and lesbian residential and commercial zones have become increasingly visible', a phenomenon not overlooked by the commercial interests of the cities that host them. Hughes^{vi}, in a move away from a reliance on geographical constructs, notes an important quality in the definition of space, stating that gay space is 'seen as iden-

tifying a gay lifestyle with a particular pattern of consumption, the commodification of sexuality'. Hughes says, the creation of gay space gives rise to:

tensions and opposition. Sexual coding of a part of a city or a beach destination as gay transforms it into a zone of contradiction and of oppositional social movements.^{vii}

Contradiction and opposition are important to the discussion in this paper – less so in terms of space, *per se*, than in the ways that people use and make meaning of space.

Brenner^{viii}, discussing globalisation, critiques the perpetuation of understanding of space, even in the literature on globalisation, as geographical. He asserts that increasingly interconnected social relations on a global scale demonstrate that:

space no longer appears as a static platform of social relations, but rather as one of their constitutive dimensions, itself historically produced, reconfigured, and transformed.^{ix}

Globalisation, as Markwell^x says, is characterised by, among other things, the denationalisation of culture and lifestyles, the disruption of time–space relations through advances in media technology and transportation and, of course, the internet. These are important factors in the construction of space, which can no longer be seen only in terms of geography. It is with this understanding of space – as a medium that allows the construction of social relationships – that the discussion will proceed.

FETISHISM AND IDENTITY

My study seeks to answer the questions: What is the basis of exclusive sexual attraction of Caucasian men to men of East Asian ancestry?, Can exclusive attraction based on race be understood as a fetish? and How do Caucasian men exclusively attracted to men of East Asian ancestry understand and make meaning of their attraction?

The literature relating to Caucasian–Asian homosexual relationships suggests that the topic can be explored from a range of perspectives. Psychology, history, power studies, race theory, partner selection, scripting and more are relevant to the exploration of the topic and certainly will be considered in the study.

Dictionary definitions of fetish include 'an object or nongenital part of the body that causes a habitual erotic response or fixation'^{xi}. As Moyaert^{xii} points out, Freud acknowledged that fetishistic interests play a part in normal sexual love between people, in that overvaluation of the love object or their separate bodily parts, can awaken sexual interest in the individual's admirer. However, that the body and its parts are integrated into a broader understanding of the love object and the striving for a normal sexual relationship means that such a relationship is not fetishised. What we are concerned with here is the:

overvalued object [that] functions as a substitute for the normal sexual object: it takes the place of the normal object, assumes its role and assimilates its sexual significance.^{xiii}

A broad reading of the literature, and with reference to Marx, Freud, Lacan and Derrida, suggests that, put simply, fetishism is

the investment of meaning in something that is a substitute for something else.

The word fetish, or *feitiço*, was first used by Portuguese traders in West Africa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to refer to small, material, seemingly useless objects used by the native peoples in their worship^{xiv}. Kaplan^{xv}, referring to fetish objects in what she calls 'primitive' cultures, says that by associating an object with a particular meaning:

... some essentially unknown, intangible, spiritual, and ambiguous "someone" or "something" that seems to have a will and energy of its own, is transformed into something tangible and concretely real and therefore capable of being controlled and manipulated.^{xvi}

Gemerchak, starting with reference to the religious nature of fetish objects, takes meaning into the psychological realm, stating:

Fetishism used to be a question of gods. ... Now fetishism seems to be a question of the gods' disappearance, in more than one sense a crisis of faith. The fetishism commemorates the crisis, marking the space of this disappearance. Fetishism is no longer seen as the immediate presence of an embodied force, but is rather a fetishism *de la chose perdue* [of the lost thing], a nostalgia for lost essence and significant relations, and a displacement of this fetishized essence onto an object-screen.^{xvii}

Pietz^{xviii} states: 'The fetish is always a meaningful fixation of a singular event; it is above all a "historical" object, the enduring material form and force of an unrepeatable event'. It is this understanding that is of particular interest to this study.

Marx was the first to use the notion of fetish in other than religious terms, nevertheless drawing on understandings of the mysticism and meaning of the fetish, then applying it to economy. Marx proposed the phenomenon of commodity fetishism, which occurs when an object is removed from its original setting, where it has use value, and enters the market place, where it has exchange value. During the transition from one state to another, the human element in the production of the object (labour) disappears and the thing itself appears, substantial and separate, or 'real and final'^{xix}.

Freud, Lacan and Derrida all agree with Marx that fetishism is the investment of meaning in something that is substituted for something else. Each expounds on the subject in different but complementary ways; however, it is Freud's understanding of the relationship between trauma, disavowal and fetish that I hypothesise is the most salient to my discussion. For Freud, trauma occurred when the male child saw for the first time that his mother had no penis, leading to fear of loss of his own penis, 'the organ of his body that is so heavily invested with his own narcissism and self-worth'^{xx} and one which is essential to identity. By fabricating an artificial sense of certainty, that is, by denying the apparent loss of the woman's penis, the male child memorialises it, and, recognising that he still has a penis, over which he has control, the male can now construct the woman as an acceptable sex partner^{xxi}.

Kaplan, on trauma and fetish, says:

... from the perspective of the manifest–latent inter-

play that characterizes psychic reality, memories of childhood trauma ... might be, and often are, retro-active memories constructed in the present in order to screen out ... traumatic elements.^{xxii}

Following this, the fetishist engages with trauma through disavowal – the construction of a fetish which simultaneously disavows ‘a lack and assert[s] a presence, but as well ... incarnate[s] a lack’, simultaneously veiling and unveiling an essential presence^{xxiii}.

Kaplan^{xxiv} states that disavowal is ‘the psychological defense of having it both ways’ and ‘is the sine non qua (*sic*) of sexual fetishism’, which allows the fetishist to disregard reality and continue to believe in an imagined construct. Interpreting Freud, Kaplan^{xxv} suggests that the (heterosexual) male fetishist wants simultaneously to be a man and a woman. This can be further interpreted to suggest that the Caucasian man who is exclusively attracted to men of another racial ancestry wants to retain his identity, which is oppositional to the racial identity of those whom he desires, but, at the same time, wants the racial identity of the other in order to complete his own – desired and desirable – identity. This is not to suggest in any way understandings of superiority–inferiority, but instead a crisis of identity, which is resolved (intrapsychically scripted, to be discussed later) through the discontinuation of the mirrored image.

In Peter Jackson’s novel, *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin*, the unnamed Australian protagonist washes his hands in a washroom in Thailand:

Apart from shaving and combing my hair, I don’t need to look at myself in the mirror. In men’s rooms I wash my hands without looking in the mirrors hung up over washbasins, and it’s increasingly easy to forget my Western, *farang* features.^{xxvi}

Later, during what appears to be a successful relationship with a Thai man, he feels ‘purged of *farangs*, including the man who still dogged [him] in reflections from shop windows and taxi rear-view mirrors’^{xxvii}. The themes of reflection and identity are strong within the novel and beautifully illustrate the concept of discontinued mirror images.

IDENTITY AND SCRIPTING

Continuing the discussion of identity, a useful way to consider the construction of identity is to invoke Simon’s^{xxviii} notion of scripting. Scripts, according to Simon^{xxix}, ‘are essentially a metaphor for conceptualising the production of behaviour within social life’. Such behaviour involves scripting on three levels: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripting and intrapsychic scripting.

The broadest level of scripting occurs as cultural scenarios – settings that ‘instruct in the narrative requirements of specific roles’^{xxx}. They provide for entry, performance and exit of the self and others, prescribing roles and behaviours. Increased individuation of actors within a scenario, however, leads to a breakdown of the cultural scenario, which must then be resolved at the level of interpersonal scripting, or further.

Interpersonal scripting occurs when an individual shapes his or her role(s) in order to construct an identity or role consistent

with desired expectations. In this event, roles are scripted, adapted or improvised by the individual(s) in order to create interpersonal consensus.

When the cultural scenario does not resonate with the individual, and either the individual’s perceptions or the cultural scenario are problematised and cannot be resolved by interpersonal scripting, then he or she explores a range of options through intrapsychic scripting. Simon^{xxxi} calls this an ‘internal rehearsal’, aimed at achieving a resolution that satisfies the individual’s needs. Creating and exploring options for behaviour creates fantasy through ‘the symbolic reorganization of reality in ways that make it complicit in realizing more fully the actor’s many-layered wishes’^{xxxii}. Intrapsychic scripting brings into question the ‘I’ itself. Simon suggests that questioning the ‘I’, in terms of what is and what one aspires to, assists the development of a self, ‘seemingly autonomous in its interests and desires’^{xxxiii}. However, as Whittier and Melendez point out:

[i]ntrapsychic scripting ... is entangled with cultural meanings. Of particular salience are those relating to gender, race, class and age, among others.^{xxxiv}

If we consider intrapsychic scripting to be the symbolic reorganization of reality, it can be confidently suggested that fetishism and exclusive sexual attraction on the basis of race are both possible outcomes of intrapsychic scripting.

To return to the broadest level of scripting, the cultural scenario, one such scenario that is potentially relevant to a study of the ways in which behaviour in social life is produced by Caucasian men who are exclusively attracted to East Asian men is the internet.

THE INTERNET AS CULTURAL SCENARIO

As a cultural scenario, along with many other purposes, the internet provides a range of both synchronous and asynchronous ways for people seeking partners to interact. Despite the increased potential for deception, the anonymity that the internet provides is one of its greatest attractions for people seeking social relationships^{xxxv xxxvi xxxvii}. Self-disclosure and consequent closeness and intimacy occur more quickly because of the lack of the ‘gating features’ usual in the establishment of in-person close relationships – physical appearance, age, race, visible shyness or social anxiety. To this can be added location – online relationships are not bounded by geography, and time – interlocutors have more time to construct communicative messages that present themselves positively^{xxxviii xxxix}.

Rather than undertake a broad discussion of computer-mediated communication, this report focuses specifically on internet personal advertisements as a meeting place for Caucasian men who are exclusively attracted to men of Asian ancestry and the objects of their attraction. Internet personal advertisements follow a set of rules, some explicit, as set out in terms and conditions and the requirements of the format in which the advertisement is published. Other rules are established largely by the online personal advertising community and relate, particularly, to what is expected and accepted of self-disclosure. Among these is an expectation of truth; however, evidence among the online community indicates that truth is a relative concept. Gibbs *et al*^{xl}

refer to 'identity manipulation' by which people select features, not necessarily true, that aim to ensure success.

While there has been considerable study of the use of the internet as a medium for people seeking partners, there is little that informs its use by Australian Caucasian men who use the internet to find male partners of Asian ancestry. A study by Murphy, Rawstone, Holt and Ryan^{xli} of 450 'gay community attached men' in Sydney and Melbourne who used the internet to find sex partners found that 60 per cent had met casual partners through gay chat sites. The study did not include race as a variable. A recent New Zealand study of 2269 gay, lesbian and bisexual men and women, of whom 491 (21 per cent) were born overseas, found that among Asian-born participants in the study, '34.7 per cent had used the internet to make first contact, compared with 10.6 per cent of other immigrants'^{xlii}. The newspaper article in which the finding was reported does not mention figures for other racial groups; nor does it indicate the racial preferences of people in the study. However, given that a significant proportion of gay or bisexual Asian men use the internet to make contact with sexual partners, it is suggested that Caucasian men seeking contact with men of Asian ancestry similarly use the internet, although this is not to say that gay and bisexual Asian men are necessarily seeking Caucasian partners.

Can these findings be applied to the Australian context? Comparisons of internet access and usage between Australia and New Zealand show that have access to the internet is available in more households in Australia – 56 per cent in 2004–05^{xliii} – than New Zealand – an estimated 25 per cent^{xliv}. A reported 2003 study of internet usage in 32 countries^{xlv}, however, showed that 75 per cent of 1000 New Zealanders surveyed had used the internet in the last month compared with 64 per cent of the same number of Australians. Considering the many places that the internet can be accessed – including libraries, internet cafes, hotels, as well as from home, it is suggested that the findings from the New Zealand study have application to the Australian context in terms of use of the internet to make contact with potential sex partners.

This report presents preliminary results a small study of 75 personal advertisements published by Caucasian men seeking partners of Asian ancestry between August 2005 and August 2006 on Pinkboard, a Sydney-based personals website predominantly used by gay men and lesbians. The study sought to determine what advertisers disclosed of themselves and how what was disclosed enabled construction of an identity that was potentially conducive to success.

The headlines of these advertisements appear in order of publication among many others, so they must imitate newspaper headlines and try to grab the interest of the reader. There is wide use of the acronyms GWM (gay white male) and GAM (gay Asian male), generally upper case but also lower case. Many headlines are simple and to the point, for example, 'Seeking fun with GAM at City Hotel', 'Aussie tradie for Asian boys' or 'Looking for GAM'. Others include information that advertisers believe will appeal to a particular audience or will separate their advertisement from others, for example, 'GWM seeking Thai guy', 'GWM seeks gam for nudist fun over festive season' and 'Mature GWM daddy looking for asian (*sic*) son for relationship'. There are also others that are explicit in what is sought, such as 'ISO (*in search of*) horny Asian top 2 fuck my Ozie (*sic*) ass'.

Self-disclosure, according to Gibbs *et al*^{xlvi} 'is a multidimensional construct that varies along dimensions such as honesty, amount, conscious intent, and positive or negative valence'. Analysis of the 75 personal advertisements showed that advertisers self-disclosed, in descending order of occurrence, in terms of age; physical presentation; race; as seeking sex; interests and attributes; as seeking a relationship, which was equal with location; occupation; by publishing a photo of a part of the body; and by publishing a photo showing the face.

The categories of age and physical presentation are a relatively standard inclusion in online personal advertisements and frequently take the form of age/height/weight. Some who did not reveal their age numerically used the word mature.

Advertisers usually identified their race by the acronym GWM, meaning gay white male. Three identified by cultural origin – English, Scottish and Italian. A few used the word Aussie and two Caucasian. Approximately one third of advertisers did not identify by race suggesting a level of ethnocentricity. As Yi^{xlvii} says, 'Whites, because of the privilege that their race has accorded them in society, may not have as much reason to question the racial status quo'.

Slightly less than half were explicit in their search for sex, often preferring to use the argot: fun.

A third referred to personal interests and attributes unrelated to sexual activity.

One quarter mentioned a specific location, either by region, city or state as essential to contact.

One quarter stated they were seeking friendship or a long-term relationship.

Just less than one quarter mentioned their occupational, educational or financial status, frequently described as professional, with one identifying as a manager and another as a tradie.

Seven self-disclosed by publishing a photo showing a part of the body, usually a bare chest or erect penis. Six published a photo showing their face.

Overwhelmingly, advertisers were seeking a partner younger than themselves.

This analysis is only indicative of what is self-disclosed by such advertisers. It does not indicate the success rate, nor does it indicate how advertisers were perceived. As stated, age and physical presentation are more or less standard, if important, inclusions. What is surprising is the number of advertisers who described themselves by employment or financial status; however, this would need to be further explored in relation to the number of advertisers seeking a relationship, although the two are not mentioned in all advertisements where the variables occur. What it reveals, however, is the ways in which advertisers construct themselves in order to achieve a desired outcome, promoting their 'best traits and [minimizing] the less desirable ones, if they are mentioned at all'^{xlviii}.

On one level, advertisers adhere to the rules of the cultural scenario. They include relevant information, such as age/weight/height, but then select those attributes or behaviours – termed 'selective self-presentation'^{xlix} – that they believe will create interpersonal consensus and lead to contact. On another level, they satisfy their individual needs which, for some, may

be aspirational and based in a symbolic reorganization of reality where the essential – Asianness and/or relative youth – is fixed in opposition to the race and/or age of the advertiser. The essential is awarded a status such that it represents something or things that, in itself, it is not – it is ‘a sign for something else’ⁱ. Fixation ‘blocks the sign’s referential function and implies some confusion regarding the object of the attachment’ⁱⁱ.

Among humans, homophily (sameness) dominates attraction, contrary to the adage that ‘opposites attract’ⁱⁱⁱ. Gay men who are exclusively attracted to men of a different racial ancestry do not adhere to this tenet. This being so, for Caucasian men who are exclusively attracted to men of Asian ancestry, it can be suggested that, because an oppositional racial identity does not mirror the racial identity of the gay Caucasian man, he disavows important elements of his own identity. In other words, in the mirror of his partner’s face, he both sees what is – Asianness, and what is not, his own racial identity. This disavowal of his own racial identity establishes the oppositional racial identity as a fetish.

CONCLUSION

It is important to acknowledge, as did Freudⁱⁱⁱⁱ, that, within the bounds of what may be regarded as normal behaviour, where one exhibits a particular attraction to another, there is always an element of fetishism, such that their being, or parts of their being, excites a sexual response. Similarly, it is recognised that not all homosexual Caucasian–Asian relationships are necessarily based on fetishism.

There is a deal of work to determine the validity of the thoughts presented in this paper. Whether trauma is an element in the lives of Caucasian men who are exclusively attracted to Asian men is yet to be seen and whether findings will lead to any greater understanding of exclusive attraction based on race cannot yet be determined. For the present, it cannot be claimed that the exclusive attraction of Caucasian men to Asian men can be construed as fetishism; but whether the findings from the research confirm this or not, I believe that study of such men is overdue and their role in both the broader gay community and society generally is undervalued.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Kevin Markwell, ‘Mardi Gras tourism and the construction of Sydney as an international gay and lesbian city’, *GLQ*, 8, 1–

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^{iv} Markwell, ‘Mardi Gras tourism and the construction of Sydney as an international gay and lesbian city’, p. 87.

^v Dereka Rushbrook, ‘Cities, queer space, and the cosmopolitan tourist’, *GLQ*, 8, 1–2, 2002: 183–206.

^{vi} Howard L. Hughes, ‘Marketing gay tourism in Manchester: New market for urban tourism or destruction of ‘gay space’?’, *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 9, 2, 2002: 152–163.

^{vii} Hughes, ‘Marketing gay tourism in Manchester: New market for urban tourism or destruction of ‘gay space’?’, p. 154.

^{viii} Brenner, ‘Beyond state-centrism? Space, territoriality, and geographical scale in globalization studies’, p. 42.

^{ix} Brenner, ‘Beyond state-centrism? Space, territoriality, and geographical scale in globalization studies’, p. 40.

^x Markwell, ‘Mardi Gras tourism and the construction of Sydney as an international gay and lesbian city’, pp. 82–83.

^{xi} fetish (n.d.). Dictionary.com.Unabridged (v 1.0.1). Retrieved 12 November 2006, from Dictionary.com. website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/fetish>

^{xii} Paul Moyaert, Christopher M. Gemberchak, (2004). ‘Fetishism and the vicissitudes of the object in sublimation according to Freud and Lacan’, in Christopher M. Gemberchak (ed), *Everyday Extraordinary: Encountering Fetishism with Marx, Freud and Lacan*, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004, p. 53.

^{xiii} Moyaert, ‘Fetishism and the vicissitudes of the object in sublimation according to Freud and Lacan’, in Christopher M. Gemberchak (ed), *Everyday Extraordinary: Encountering Fetishism with Marx, Freud and Lacan*, p. 51.

^{xiv} Christopher M. Gemberchak, ‘Fetishism, desire and finitude: The artful dodge’, in Christopher M. Gemberchak (ed), *Everyday Extraordinary: Encountering Fetishism with Marx, Freud and Lacan*, p. 19.

^{xv} Louise J. Kaplan, *Cultures of Fetishism*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, New York, p. 4.

^{xvi} Kaplan, *Cultures of Fetishism*, p. 4.

^{xvii} Christopher M. Gemberchak, ‘Preface’, in Christopher M. Gemberchak (ed), *Everyday Extraordinary: Encountering Fetishism with Marx, Freud and Lacan*, p. 7.

^{xviii} Emily Apter, ‘Fetishism and Materialism’, in Emily Apter and William Pietz, (eds), *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1993, p. 3.

- ^{xix} Gemerchak, 'Fetishism, desire and finitude: The artful dodge', in Christopher M. Gemerchak, (ed), *Everyday Extraordinary: Encountering Fetishism with Marx, Freud and Lacan*, p. 29.
- ^{xx} Kaplan, *Cultures of Fetishism*, p. 26.
- ^{xxi} Gemerchak, 'Fetishism, desire and finitude: The artful dodge', in Christopher M. Gemerchak, (ed), *Everyday Extraordinary: Encountering Fetishism with Marx, Freud and Lacan*, pp. 37–38.
- ^{xxii} Kaplan, *Cultures of Fetishism*, pp. 125–126.
- ^{xxiii} Gemerchak, 'Fetishism, desire and finitude: The artful dodge', in Gemerchak, C.M. (ed), *Everyday Extraordinary: Encountering Fetishism with Marx, Freud and Lacan*, p. 38.
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- ^{xxvii} Jackson, *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin*, Bangkok: Floating Lotus Books, 1994, p. 70.
- ^{xxviii} William Simon, *Postmodern sexualities*, London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 40–58.
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- ^{xxx} Simon, *Postmodern sexualities*, p. 40.
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- ^{xxxii} Simon, *Postmodern sexualities*, p. 41.
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- ^{xl} Gibbs, Ellison and Heino, 'Self-Presentation in Online Personals: The Role of Anticipated Future Interaction, Self-Disclosure, and Perceived Success in Internet Dating', p. 156.
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