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# **Consuming My Way Gay**

## **An Autoethnographic Account of Coming Out as Consumptive Pedagogy**

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Keywords: LGBTQ, consumption, autoethnography

**Abstract:** As LGBTQ people “come out”, one of the critical ways they learn about what it means to develop an LGBTQ identity is through consumptive acculturation. This autoethnographic account of a white, middle-class, gay man learning to consume gay is presented in three vignettes: the gay bar as marketplace, the use of material goods as signifier of sexual orientation, and the online marketplace of gay relationships.

### **Introduction**

In this paper, I will explicate my own experiences of coming out as an experience of learning to “consume gay”. The purpose of the study is to describe, examine, write, and theorize my own experiences of coming out as a queer man as first, learning experiences, and second, consumptive experiences. In this paper and presentation, I will show how coming out is an experience shaped by learning in the capitalist marketplace.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This autoethnography will tie together two veins of theory in adult education and other social science literature, first, the literature of consumption, consumerism, and capitalism in the learning experiences of adults and second, the coming out experience as an experience of both proclamation and sharing and a learning and development experience for sexual minorities.

Grace and Hill (2010) write that “queer persons and citizens are still immersed in the difficult battle for mainstream presence and place” (p. 15). Grace and Hill (2010) continue with a call for work that decentralizes the predominant focus on heteronormative society, education, and development. While individual sexual minority people, such as the author, have been coerced through controlling discourses and structures to behave in heteronormatively-compliant directions, there is still a strong sense of individuality, hope, and even despair that guides the coming out experiences of sexual minorities, such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer individuals. The experience of coming out is an alienating experience and a joining experience at the same time. The person coming out is alienated from expectations and dominant discourses while joining in the “queer social”, the body of queer people. This experience of resisting the dominant discourses of heteronormativity is often dismissed and disqualified under the veil of a number of further controlling mechanisms.

One of the less apparent ways adults are educated and mis-educated is through their participation in capitalist structures and consumer markets. This learning structure is so pervasive that education is even treated as a consumer good (Usher, 2008). According to Usher, “what is consumed . . . has an exchange or sign value, a meaning that signifies something about the consumer in the context of a social system that is based on a sign economy” (2008, p. 34). Sandlin (2008) contends that that market is a chief educator of adults and calls for adult educators to study the consumerist messages behind the market as an educator.

## **Research Design**

Autoethnography, as a social science research method, is “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). As such, this autoethnographic account develops connection between an individual life experienced by the author and socio-cultural theory and concepts. Autoethnography places the “self with others in social contexts” (Spry, 2001, p. 710).

Autoethnography fits this topic well, as a research method focusing on the experiences, reflections, and thoughts of an individual within a particular sort of experience and linking it together with social theory and social context. Numerous autoethnographic articles have been published regarding the experiences of sexual minority individuals. The experiences of sexual minorities are often highly contextual, and because of the often-shameful views in the families of sexual minorities coming out, the experience of coming out is often experienced as an isolating experience, for families as well as the individual coming out. Isolation and shame lead to a variety of experiences that are often hidden as family secrets. Autoethnography offers opportunity to address these usually-hidden experiences.

In autoethnography, the individual researcher examines his or her own experience through self-reflection and creative expression, such as narrative storytelling and prosaic discourse. This autoethnographic analysis will utilize the author’s experiences in narrative form – and share both story as data and analysis of the experiences. Thematic analysis commensurate with other qualitative research methodologies will be used to analyze the data.

## **Organization of This Paper**

This autoethnographic account will focus on three vignettes exemplifying three thematic areas in which learning to be gay and coming out are guided by consumptive practices. These four areas are:

- The gay bar as marketplace
- The online marketplace of gay relationships
- The use of material goods as signifier of sexual orientation

Further, each of these areas is established as a realm of social control on gay lives and relationships. The marketplace is a heavy power in the lives of gay men, especially through the coming out experience. During the coming out experience, a new form of information sharing is established – one in which there is a rapid increase in learning about being gay and sharing with others the truths about the individual’s sexual orientation. The information sharing is controlled through the iron cage of the marketplace.

### *The Use of Material Goods*

My friend Kevin had picked me up – and as usual was wearing sleek, slender clothing and fancy sunglasses. They always looked so good and right on him. He was a slender guy-and I was not exactly underweight. Kevin had a car and knew where all the important gay places in Minneapolis were. He had the right clothes, the right car, and a good paying job. Kevin even had a fancy case to hold his cigarettes – it was metal, had an engraved design and snapped open and shut with precision. After Kevin picked me up that day, we went to Loring Park, the site of my first gay pride festival.

I was overwhelmed at the array of items that had rainbows affixed to them in one way or another – whether in beads on earrings, necklaces, clothing, placemats, stickers, tablewear, even

dog collars and dog dishes. It seemed as if someone had taken a rainbow and had blown it to smithereens, splattering the colors on everything. I was also surprised by the number of people wearing items with rainbows on them. It seemed the booths went on forever – and no one could get enough rainbows.

I had just received my first official credit card in the mail. I had only the best intentions of paying back what I spent now – I figured I could spend, spend, spend, and I would somehow fall upon the big money to pay it all back. I had a \$500 limit – and began to spend – I walked back to my friend Kevin’s car with bags of rainbow items. I knew these were *my* people selling these things to me – and this was an important step in being gay. Having these things would make it so no one could ever mistake me for being straight.

One of my proudest and most useful purchases was a set of “fruit loops”, otherwise known as pride rings. This was a set of 6 anodized aluminum rings, showing off the metallic colors of red, orange, yellow, green, blue and purple. These colors are the same used in the 6-banded gay pride flag and so many other rainbow items that gay people use as symbol. They were threaded onto a silver-colored chain that looked like the chain on the “dog tags” worn by members of the military. I quickly learned that every good coming-out gay man needed a set. I wore my fruit loops all over, including work, class, out shopping, and sitting at the coffee shop.

At the time, this was one way I could scream to the world my new identity. Of course, I assumed the whole world was waiting and ready for me to come out as a gay man. I thought I could speed this process along, and get on my merry way of having a fabulous gay life. I was afraid some other gay men might not understand that I was a member of the family too, so the material symbols of gay life were meant to show this to everyone. I was newly out on the marketplace as a gay man-so I consumed gay and set myself up to be a marketable good, a fresh young gay man.

### **The Gay Bar**

I had only heard rumors of gay bars. I knew they existed, but really had no idea what to expect – whether to expect to see sex acts or to see groups of clearly homosexual men sitting around drinking pink cocktails garnished with little paper umbrellas. I knew I wanted to see it, but was really scared. I thought maybe there was a chance someone checking the identification at the door might publish the names of all the men who entered or maybe a reporter, complete with television camera would be there *exposing* the gay bar, only for my parents and grandma to see on the local prime-time news.

David had a boyfriend, sort of. His boyfriend was an older guy, who was in his late 20’s and so dreamy, I thought. Of course, I had never had a boyfriend and I was in love with the idea of having one. David and I were still only 19, and could not get into the bars during regular hours. In Minnesota at the time, the bars quit serving alcohol at 1:00 AM. As long as they weren’t serving alcohol, the bars could stay open as dance clubs. One gay bar in particular, the “Gay 90s” had an after-hours dance party on Friday and Saturday nights that would go until 5:00 AM. At midnight the lines would start forming, and would lead around the corner, hundreds of feet. All sorts of young people were in line, from those who were dressed in tight club clothes, to those who were wearing very little, to those who were doing business as they waited in line, either prostitution or drug dealing, to those who were in jeans and t-shirts and looked sort of like me.

The corner of 3<sup>rd</sup> Street and Hennepin Avenue in Minneapolis, where the Gay 90s was located, always smelled like urine. Now, with those people waiting in line, it smelled like

cigarettes and drunks. There with David and his boyfriend, I could feel my stomach bunching up. I had my cash ready for the door. Entry cost five dollars – and from what David told me they would yell at you if you did not have exact change or have your money out and ready. Listening to the conversations around me was like listening to an only slightly recognizable dialect. I could hear the words, but they made little sense to me. Guys were calling each other *sister*, *mom*, and *girlfriend*. They were referring to each other as *family*, although I doubted they were related to each other. In my fear, I held my five-dollar-bill even harder.

I noticed women that seemed far taller than most women I had ever seen. I had only heard that men dressed as women in public – and decided that these “women” had to be drag queens. Some had rather elaborate costumes, with really big hair. Other drag queens were wearing low-cut, tight, short dresses.

There was more hubbub. I seemed to lose myself in my noticing. I realized that I probably had big eyes and my mouth was hanging open. People were headed out of the 90s and other bars onto the streets. It was 12:55 and the bars were no longer serving alcohol. Groups, pairs, and singles were heading out of the bar. Most notably was some of the drag queens were leaving the bar – they seemed to have furs, fancy clothes, and outrageous make-up. I thought the older men and women leaving the bar were so fortunate to be over 21 and able to get into the bars. I wanted to be like them, able to drink and have fun!

Finally, the side door came open, there was some yelling that I was unable to make out. The line snaked its way into the building. I could hear the thump-thump of the music as we got closer to the door. Finally, I peeked my way into the door, following those in front of us. I could see steel grating between the in-door corridor and the out-door corridor. It reminded me of some sort of dog kennel. I got up to the door, where I could see a guy at the window and some sort of huge security guard. I heard him yell to some in front of us, “Five dollars, don’t keep the line waiting!” I could smell smoke and noticed that the inside of the bar was very dark. The lighting I could make out seemed to be covered by the blue haze of all the cigarette smoke.

The music was like none I had ever heard before. I focused on handing my money to the guy in the window, who marked my hand with a marker and then we were inside. It was so loud and packed. There was little room to move. Lots of men had their shirts off – even in the coolness of the Minnesota spring, it was so hot inside. The men with their shirts off were sweating all over and bopping up and down. David’s boyfriend was yelling to a guy there and I could the other guy talking about chickens. For me, this did not make sense. I knew they were talking about me as a chicken. Later, I discovered that this meant I was “fresh meat”, young and inexperienced in the gay scene. Here, at the Gay 90s, I learned that I was an object for consumption and that I had the power to consume others, through the flesh being shown on the dance floor. As one of the places where gay men can truly be themselves in public, gay bars maintain a unique monopoly on the consumptive lives of gay men.

### **The Online Marketplace of Gay Relationships**

When I started university in Fall 1995, the World Wide Web was still in its infancy. I had learned how to use it in a writing class and immediately used the Web to find out more about the gay world. There was a very rudimentary chat website I used to chat with other guys. I was amazed that there were other guys my age who were also gay. I would sit in the computer lab, in the back row of the lab so no one else could see me, chatting for hours until the lab closed each night at midnight. The “room” in which I chatted was not

I also learned how to use a program called Internet Relay Chat. The advantage to this program was that it was possible to find channels that were specific to interests and geography. I used the room *#gayminnesota* frequently, where I began to meet others gay men in the Minnesota area. What I quickly learned is that I had “stats”. The standard question I would receive in a private message from another user is “stats?” By observing others, I found out that I rattled off a series of information, which included my age, weight, hair color, eye color, size and characteristics of various body parts, and information about sexual behavior and preferences. Having to reduce my personal characteristics to a set of numbers and letter seemed very dehumanizing. Without even seeing my face or meeting me, others would decide whether I met their standards or not.

I used the stats given by others to decide whether or not to meet them. We did not have all the online pictures at that time to see what the others looked like. In order to meet the guys, we might speak to each other on the telephone, and then describe what we looked like or what we would be wearing, and then would meet somewhere in public, such as a restaurant or coffee shop. I recall the nervousness of trying to figure out who I would be meeting – and accidentally greeting the wrong guy – someone who was not there to meet me. Sometimes a guy would lie about his stats, clearly being older or younger than his stats indicated. There always seemed to be awkwardness. We would try to figure out if we wanted to hook up and go home with one another. I always tried to be polite, even if I was not attracted to the guy nor had any intention of ever contacting him again. The parting words were always something like, “Well, I’ll talk to you later” even though I doubt either of us had any intention of doing that.

At times, I would be adventurous and at the pleading of the other guy, I would meet right at his home, apartment, or dorm room. These were clearly meetings with the intent of sexual activity. It seemed that in all of this online matching-up that I was trying to be a highly saleable item and would work to sell myself to the guy. My own self-worth was tied to me being viewed as desirable by other men.

### **Consumption**

Part of coming out as a gay man, for me, was learning to consume, in a gay way. Many of my coming out experiences were learning to properly position myself as both a consumer and an object to be consumed in the marketplace. In this case, the marketplace is largely a middle-class, white male dominated marketplace. This marketplace is the same one that sells advocacy through powerful groups such as Human Rights Campaign and encourages gay men to live lives centered around the gay community at gay bars. This gay marketplace is also apparent at pride events that were, at one time, organized as a show of counter-cultural solidarity, protest, and support but now have become giant marketplaces, where the largest advertisers are alcohol companies, home finance companies, gay travel companies, and tobacco companies. Alongside these advertisements for alcohol, tobacco, and bars are the so-called solutions to alcohol and tobacco addiction. In one way, we are told to consume, but then when these ways of consumption become problematic, we are sold the solutions to our own over-consumption.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study further demonstrates Sandlin’s (2008) contention regarding the marketplace as a chief educator in the lives of American adults. It exposes the coming-out experiences, which are only partially exposed to heteronormative publics as experiences still controlled largely by heteronormative structures in the marketplace. This study also brings together consumerism as a

study area in adult education with queer issues in adult education, both of which, according to chief theorists remain under-developed. Finally, the study shows the power of autoethnographic research in exposing truths about marginalized groups in adult education, making the unusual more mainstream.

Adult educators who work with socially marginalized groups must be aware of the power of the marketplace in the production of modern gay (and further, LGBTQ) identities. The marketplace is a powerful educator of adults, especially those seeking information about their minority sexuality. The marketplace can serve to reinforce the heteronormativity rampant in society.

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