

**CONSUMING CHAVS:
THE AMBIGUOUS POLITICS OF GAY CHAVINISM**

ABSTRACT

Paul Johnson's (2008) paper 'Rude boys', published in an earlier issue of *Sociology*, scrutinizes critically the commodification of the male chav for consumption by middle-class homosexual men. This phenomenon, which Andrew Fraser (2005) calls 'chavinism', takes a number of different forms; pornography, sex lines, club nights etcetera. In part as a response to Johnson's arguments concerning the ways in which chavinism 'further devalue[s] the individuals and groups' it depicts, creating a form of 'symbolic violence' (p. 67), our paper speculates further on the ambiguous implications of this minority consumer culture. To do this, we develop Bob Connell's (1992, 2002; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' to discuss what gay chavinism might mean for 'hegemonic homosexuality'.

Keywords: chavs, chavinism, class, commodification, consumption, gay men, gender, hegemony, sexuality

INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses 'chavs', 'chavinism' and consumer culture in the context of the British gay scene. Having entered British public discourse perhaps as early as 2002, 'chav' has rapidly become the "new terminology in which socially marginal groups are characterized, classified and understood" (Hayward and Yar, 2006: 10), replacing

predecessors like 'underclass'. But whereas the underclass, during the 1990s especially, were understood to be those members of the working class who consistently failed to participate in paid employment (ie, in *production*), chavs are more usually defined by virtue of their supposedly debased consumption activities. Arguably the most salient characteristic of chavs, then, at least as they are constructed and produced through popular cultural accounts, is these distinctive consumption habits. Chavs are imagined as young working-class men and women, usually white, with a taste for particular kinds of sportswear, branded goods and ostentatious diamond and gold jewellery, whose vernacular mixes R&B slang with text message code.

But despite the fact that 'chav' is usually a pejorative, Fraser (2005) identifies a preoccupation with the male chav on the British gay scene – a growing appetite amongst gay men for seemingly downwardly mobile sexual experiences – which he labels 'chavinism'. Chavinism takes several commodity forms, including gay men buying clothes in order to dress as chavs, listening to or watching recordings of chavs having sex (eg, by downloading onto a mobile phone) or even seeking 'real' sex with tracksuit-wearing, baseball-cap-sporting youths (eg, by going to 'chav nights' at gay clubs, in cities such as London, Manchester and Brighton). Thus chavs, themselves depicted in popular discourse as avid, brand-aware consumers, have apparently become commodities for *others'* consumption; in this case, gay men who supposedly hail from the middle classes. It is this translation of a particular kind of sexual fascination into commodity form which constitutes our object of inquiry.

Our analysis leads us to pose a number of interrelated questions. In the context of the gay male populationⁱ, what can chavinism tell us about how commodity relations mediate the politics of sexuality? How might the class dynamics of chavinism (re)structure the possibilities of homosexual experience, as currently delimited by ‘hegemonic homosexuality’? How might it impact upon relations between the different class fractions amongst British gay men? To what extent should chavinism be considered a harmless postmodern game of dressing upⁱⁱ, just another new style for gay men? Or is this postmodernist take on consumer identity both naïve and complicit in the continuing reproduction of material and symbolic inequalities within the gay population?

Crucially, we are preceded here by Paul Johnson’s (2008) fascinating piece in this journal, where he argues very much in the latter vein. Johnson suggests gay chavinism’s

‘most pernicious aspect ... is that while the male chav has value in one context, value created by his use as a sexual object, such value is based on a continual assertion of his worthlessness. The chav remains an object - before, during and after his use – of disgust, filth and repudiation.’ (p. 79)

Thus, for Johnson, the representations on which chavinism turns generate a kind of symbolic violence which reproduces the existing socio-economic hierarchy – the middle-class ‘haves’ over the working-class ‘have nots’. We are sympathetic to many of his conclusions. However, for us it is impossible to answer any of the questions we pose above once and for all, given that any decision about the politics of anything

depends on audience, context and timing, and no cultural complex is progressive or reactionary in its entirety. Culture *is* saturated with politics, and chavism is an irredeemably political set of practices. But its precise import in any given location is extremely difficult to define; and we see more, potentially, to chavism than Johnson sets out. Here we try to raise some of the wider issues we think are pertinent to understanding this phenomenon as a form of consumption, in part through a conversation with Johnson, in order to lay the conceptual foundations for future empirical work.

Indeed the analysis Johnson provides, based on the representations used to sell chav commodities to gay men, would we believe be usefully supplemented by discussion of what he describes as ‘the subjective experiences of how or why people might identify as chavs or use chav culture’ (2008, p. 67). Relatedly, and as opposed to Johnson’s unpicking of the relationships between representations of class identity and social control, our discussion belongs within the domain of consumption studies. As it stands, the literature on marketing to and consumption by the gay population overwhelmingly portrays the Western male homosexual consumer as ‘hyper-mobile, affluent and privileged’ (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004, p. 44). As such it perpetuates the myth of an undifferentiated gay ‘community’ and positions an a priori gay consumer culture in supplementary relation to its heteronormative counterpart. For us this commentary typically reduces gay consumer behaviour to a set of unproblematic cultural and aesthetic knowledges and practices. Analysis of the ‘gay chav’ as a consumption object is interesting not least because it has the potential to undercut these hegemonic constructions of gay men as consumers.

We also view gay chavinism as a contemporary example of the enduring activity of cross-class sex associated with the development of capitalism and the re-enactment of discursive ‘bourgeois projections of proletarian excess and failures of bodily control’ (Henderson, 2007, p. 201). So in some ways, as Johnson (2008, pp. 69-70) points out, gay chavinism is nothing new in its ‘homoeroticization of working-class subjects’: it is the 21st century equivalent of older constructs like ‘rough trade’ⁱⁱⁱ. However what is new, we argue, is chavinism’s *commodification* of same-sex desire via a particular articulation of working-class identity and the mapping of that desire in *public culture* in highly *visible* and *organized* ways, including the aforementioned club nights and phone lines. Gay chavinism is therefore an instance of Žižek’s (1997) multiculturalism; of contemporary capital’s appropriation of ethnic difference (which he defines as any form of ‘otherness’) in order to generate surplus value.

The above established, Part 1 of this paper discusses the relationship between sexuality, consumption and class. We then present a bipartite analysis of the gay chav. Part 2 foregrounds social class as an analytic lens on gay chavinism, and Part 3 layers this account with the interconnected categories of gender and sexuality around which articulations of gay male identity are likewise organized. Here we speculate on chavinism’s equivocal potential in regard to relations within and beyond the gay male population. Our discussion presents a theoretical framing of a particular spatial and temporal commodification of the class/sexuality nexus for future empirical exploration.

PART 1: SEXUALITY, CONSUMPTION AND CLASS

‘Knowing’ the gay male consumer

Driven primarily by economic concerns with gay male consumers as a ‘new’ and potentially lucrative market segment, Western marketing professionals have invested a great deal since the early 1990s in trying to capture the ‘gay market’ (DeLozier and Rodrigue, 1996; Fugate, 1993; Oakenfull and Greenlee, 2005). The fabrication of this market niche has in turn attracted the attention of a diverse academic audience.

Qualitative consumer researchers, for instance, have sought to differentiate ‘gay’ consumption from its ‘straight’ counterpart. Conceptualizing the former as subcultural, this scholarship identifies the values, practices, self-images and feelings that gay men^{iv} apparently share, and the role of brands and other facets of consumer culture in their reproduction. Consumption is seen to play an integral role in the coming-out experiences of many gay men, and in subsequent processes of socialization into the gay scene, such that these consumption rituals are said in part to create their sexual identities (Freitas *et al.*, 1996; Haslop *et al.*, 1998; Kates, 2002, 2003, 2004; Keating and McLoughlin, 2005; Klawitter, 2002).

This literature frames the typical gay male consumer as affluent, savvy, quick to adopt new commodities and brand-aware. It develops what has become known as the ‘pink pound thesis’, which seems to be based on an essentializing view of an integrated gay consuming self expressing its ‘fundamental’ needs through the marketplace. Such studies also emphasize the importance of the visual domain of consumption - dress, speech, fashion and style, bodily rituals and habits - in signifying in-group

membership amongst gay men and a separation from mainstream culture (Freitas *et al.*, 1996; Rudd, 1996). Given the long history of oppression and invisibility experienced by the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) population, stylizing oneself as gay is read here as more than a concern for aesthetics. In other words, activities aimed at celebrating publicly same-sex desire are interpreted as a political tactic to disrupt the heteronormativity of everyday societal institutions.

Although we agree that consumption plays a vital role in the production of gay identities, care should be exercised in the interpretation of visibility as it relates to sexuality (Author B, 2007). As Foucault (1979) famously argues, visibility of any sexuality in modernity is made possible by the discourses which define and regulate its legitimate boundaries. The discursive incitement to sex represents a will to knowledge among social actors which, despite claiming to reveal the truth of sex in all its diversity, most often serves to marginalize a range of sexualities in sometimes very subtle ways. Sexual ‘experts’, marketers and academics included, therefore have the power to enable *and* constrain particular expressions and experiences of sexuality. We will suggest that the ‘pink pound thesis’ is a key exemplar of this process because it fashions what we call ‘hegemonic homosexuality’. But first we elaborate on the relationship between class and consumption, to demonstrate that gay male consumption as understood within this thesis fundamentally relies on class distinctions.

Connecting class and consumption

Following Bourdieu (1984), we understand social class as structural *and* symbolic, as an objective material reality, affecting access to valued social resources, as well as a subjective identity. As such these two aspects of class cannot be meaningfully separated. Bourdieu identifies class as an arbitrarily imposed definition with real social effects, so that our socialization in a particular socio-economic location shapes not only our values but also the composition and volume of capital we possess; economic (income, wealth, inheritance), social (connections with others and group memberships) and cultural (physical dispositions and skills, educational qualifications). The various instantiations of these capitals are more or less valuable depending on the context/s we inhabit and move between. Our social location also influences these movements, and hence our ability to capitalize on the ‘assets’ we already have. Class is therefore a form of economic *and* cultural structuration, reproduced in the intellectual, physical and emotional dispositions of a consumer’s ‘habitus’ (also see Johnson, 2008, p. 71).

For Bourdieu (and many others), consumption has always been an important manifestation of social stratification, and of actual and aspired movement up and down the social ladder. Chavínism can be conceptually accommodated here in the following ways. First, it arguably makes visible the socially stratified nature of the gay population: thus it is a class issue. Chavínism works with the structural and symbolic inequalities shaping relations between different strata of the gay population. Further, it potentially articulates middle-class concerns to expand (sexual) dispositions in the process of constructing and commodifying working-class male

sexuality. Second, chavinism exemplifies a desire for downward class mobility, however temporarily. Third, although class and consumption are well-trodden conceptual terrain, the intersection(s) of sexuality with class is much less well studied - although equally complex.

Queering class and classing queer

The 'pink pound thesis' as elucidated above typically constructs gay male consumers as well-off, discerning, fashion-conscious early adopters, a portrayal which is produced and reproduced within heterosexual and homosexual populations alike. For example, Sender (2001) demonstrates how *Advocate* magazine, targeted at gay consumers, has systematically created its ideal-type reader based on the construction of a 'dominant gay habitus' for an 'openly gay, professional-managerial class' (p. 73). Extending Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, we suggest that this prototype has become hegemonic; that it is an 'admired' model of homosexual 'conduct', embodying 'the currently most honoured way of being' a homosexual man (Connell, 2002, p. 90; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832).

As such, this hegemonic homosexuality relies upon '[c]ultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalization, and the marginalization or delegitimation of alternatives' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 846). It (re)creates a particular social hierarchy amongst homosexual men. This hegemony is also 'historically concrete' (Connell, 2002, p. 89), specific to the contemporary consumerist West, and subject to contestation and change. Relatedly and importantly, it is only one amongst many potential homosexualities currently in existence.

Gay male consumption from such a vantage point also appears to epitomize ‘first world’ citizenship and productive ‘middle classness’. As Taylor adds, though, any such acceptance of homosexuality by the heteronormative mainstream is both uneasy and fragile – such that ‘respectful, consuming citizens ... can be “just like you”; if not heterosexual then definitely middle-class’ (2005a, p. 485). Hegemonic homosexuality occludes the fact that gay men are just that – *homosexual*. It ‘cleanses’ the gay male identity of sexuality, pointing instead to their supposedly particular aesthetic, their professional occupations and their accomplished, urbane ‘knowingness’. Straight society is, we assume, able to ‘handle’ this version of homosexuality because it means that there is no direct confrontation *with* sexuality. Its more positive characteristics notwithstanding, then, such as the degree of affirmation and social freedom it potentially confers on gay men (see for example Peñaloza, 1996), hegemonic homosexuality can simultaneously be understood as homophobic (Connell, 1992, p. 748; Binnie and Skeggs, 2004, p. 44).

Inevitably these hegemonic, abstract depictions also neglect socio-economic variations amongst gay men (Skeggs, 1999, p. 215, following Warner and Whittle). They hinge on the assumption that a bourgeois aesthetic is shared by and equally accessible to all gay men, gliding over social stratification in the gay population. Although Taylor (2005a, p. 488, following Brickell and Evans) correctly points out that gay men may be more ‘assimilable’ within contemporary capitalist society than lesbians because their gender provides easier recourse to the wherewithal to pursue an ‘appropriate’ lifestyle, Badgett (1997), for one, provides compelling evidence that their purported universally affluent status is a myth. US statistics portraying gay men

as wealthy are, she suggests, based on survey data collected from samples of high income, highly educated gay people only - certainly not the whole population. So hegemonic homosexuality is '*not* assumed to be normal in the statistical sense' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832 – emphasis added): instead it establishes a series of ideals or aspirations for gay men as a social group.

This argument suggests that homosexuality is 'acceptable' in the wider cultural terrain only under highly circumscribed conditions, which raises questions about any pursuit of equality for the LGBT population through the market. Indeed some commentators insist the market necessarily appropriates and thus neutralizes any oppositional ethos in gay and lesbian social movements. As such Chasin (2000) describes the celebration of 'gay success' in marketing as a form of selling out. Ingebretsen (1999, p. 125) goes further to claim that gay people, like other historically oppressed groups such as Jews, are increasingly linked with money in ways which superficially signal social acceptance. But he warns these links also pacify gay political agency, reduce same-sex desire to a palatable form of commodified transgression and foster economic paranoia amongst socially dominant groups, thus perpetuating homophobia. Thus 'Accommodation, like membership, has its privileges, but it exacts its prices as well' (Ingebretsen, 1999, p. 135). Understood as a form of class transvestism, such ambivalence might also be associated with chaviness.

Class transvestism

As Butler's (1999) seminal analysis of drag implies, it is important not to exaggerate the seditious properties of any form of transvestism. She concludes that drag (gender

transvestism) is subversive only in specific locations – its political impact depends on both the performance itself and its reception. Gagnier (2000, p. 42, following Schocket) extends Butler’s reluctance to overstate the destabilizing possibilities of transvestism – here in terms of class. Gagnier suggests that

‘class transvestism occludes economic relations and reconstructs class as culture, but culture as voluntary rather more than, as in taste, a product of one’s particular history and environment ... class culture can [thus] be read as difference and absorbed into “pluralism”. This is, of course, the problem of “multiculturalism”: it can be treated as a mere celebration of diverse “cultures” rather than also being embedded in political and economic inequalities.’

Taylor (2005b, p. #4.1) critiques queer theory on a similar basis; its neglect of inequalities – *as structured not least by class* – in the resources available for the construction of alternative identities, so not everyone is able to successfully refashion themselves on a whim. The key issues here are the political effects of class transvestism of whatever sort, and the extent to which this form of passing – Johnson’s (2008, p. 76) ‘choosing [one’s] clothing and leisure activities as if it involved living in a dressing up box’ - is accessible to all. These questions, in particular relating to the commodification of style, lie at the heart of our analysis of chavinism.

PART 2: THE CHAV IN CLASS SOCIETY

The chav and commodification

‘Chav’ is now a commonplace socioeconomic signifier in the British cultural lexicon. Widespread coverage in newspaper articles, websites, television programmes and books demarcates the chav by its apparently distinctive demographic, attitudes, behaviours, consumption patterns and language. Chavs are imagined to be mainly white and to live on council estates; to be poor, usually young and either unemployed or working in a manual, poorly remunerated occupation such as hairdressing, cleaning, security or checkout cashier. The ‘typical’ chav is also prone to violence, takes drugs, smokes cigarettes, drinks excessive amounts of alcohol, eats junk food and is sexually promiscuous.

Further, chavs are constructed as highly brand-conscious and having a particular penchant for Burberry, Nike, Louis Vuitton and Adidas, as well as sportswear like football shirts, tracksuits, trainers and baseball caps. To accessorize, they wear ‘bling’ – gaudy diamond and gold jewellery - and they are avid consumers of tanning products and mobile phones alike. The apocryphal chav also has their own vernacular; a mixture of abbreviations from text message code (eg, ‘u’ for you or ‘l8’ for late) and imported US R&B slang (eg, ‘check it’ for ‘look at it’ or ‘diss’ for ‘disrespect’), plus liberal use of expletives.

Chavs are depicted, then, as having a particular style, and the rise of the chav as a cultural category is directly connected to the commodification of this style. Thus

“chav culture” has developed around an identity and fashion style which is both popular *and commercially viable*’ (Johnson, 2008, p. 66 – emphasis added). One way in which we can make sense of this – Fraser’s chavinism writ rather larger - in British consumer culture is to connect it to Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of cultural intermediaries, and their role in the circulation of ideals of style and cool. These intermediaries are always searching for the latest ‘undiscovered’ symbolic item (Klein, 2001), and the characteristics of certain socio-economic, sexual or ethnic groups have as a consequence oftentimes been commodified – as also captured in Žižek’s (1997) discussion of multiculturalism. Similarly, MacCannell and MacCannell argue that late capitalist society appropriates not just labour, but also marginal lifestyles, transforming them into commodities and selling them back to the people who originally ‘owned’ them – such as gang members’ apparel being transformed by jeans and sportswear manufacturers into ‘*simulacra* of a hip hop urban existence’ (1993, p. 138).

By contrast, chav style is *not* sold back to those who ‘created [it] in the first place’ (*ibid.*) – ie, the marketing of chav-as-commodity is not intended for the chav market, insofar as this market exists at all. Instead, following Skeggs (2004), the various accounts of the chav can be seen simultaneously to create and mark the chav body with characteristics which become a detachable resource only for *non-chav consumers*. For this to work, the chav has to be ‘kept in its place’, such that the gaze of the cultural intermediaries creates an asymmetric symbolic economy. In other words, the extent to which chav style represents cultural capital in Bourdieusian terms is highly socially stratified.

Moreover, 'chav' as an identity marker – *unlike* 'black', 'working-class' or 'gay' - is a 'collective label stuck on from the outside' (Hume, 2004, p. 2). Although identity politics often turn on authenticity in other arenas of difference, we suspect few people would self-identify as chavs^v, pathological and abhorrent as they are assumed to be. Indeed the point is repeatedly made that it is publicly acceptable to hate chavs, with Hume suggesting such sentiments are especially virulent because it is 'impossible to express prejudice against traditionally vulnerable minorities' (2004, p. 2) in a putatively politically correct society like the UK (also see Johnson, 2008, pp. 77-78). Kudos therefore attaches to the *ironic* consumption of chav artefacts.

So, although 'they' have been commodified in all the ways described above, chavs are still fair game for criticism. According to Binnie and Skeggs (2004, pp. 45-46, following Haylett; also see Skeggs, 2005, p. 970), in fact, 'white working-class culture is the abject constitutive limit by which middle-class multicultural citizenship is known and valorised'. Chavs-as-cultural-category, then - a particularly abject exemplar of 'working-classness' - are feckless, aimless and pointless. They are 'known' less by their (un)employment than by their supposedly pathological consumption habits; drinking, drug taking, smoking and the purchase of certain branded consumer items. Chav consumption is both '*excessive*' and '*aesthetically impoverished*' (Hayward and Yar, 2006, p. 14), and chavs are thus imagined as the antithesis of what we described earlier as 'first world' citizenship and productive 'middle classness'.

But chav discourse is not simply an example of the middle class constructing, problematizing and oppressing a particular segment of the working class: it is not just

the middle class who deploy the chav label, and aspirations to class mobility do not only work upwards. In terms of the former, chav culture can act as the ‘abject constitutive limit’ for *respectable* working class identity, as demonstrated by the ‘Real Geordies’ quest to distinguish themselves – despite many apparent similarities - from the ‘Charvers’ in Nayak’s (2006) ethnography of ‘the affective politics of class’ (p. 828) amongst these two groups of young men in Newcastle upon Tyne. And in terms of the latter, Skeggs (2005, p. 975) describes the ‘wannabe’ quality of certain contemporary middle class behaviours as follows:

‘working-class attacks on the restrained, boring middle class have produced the desire for the unrestrained, hedonistic working class, institutionalized in the term “mockney” (mock cockney), used to apply to people like Jamie Oliver, Guy Ritchie, Nigel Kennedy and Mick Jagger, who speak a form of working-class language, while clearly embodying every other aspect of the middle class ... ’

Thus far, though, our analysis has privileged a class lens to explore the phenomenon of gay chavinism. We now layer onto this discussion the categories of gender and sexuality, exploring their intersections with class in this particular instantiation of gay male consumer culture, and the implications. First we provide a brief sketch of gay chavinism.

PART 3: GAY CHAVINISM AND THE AMBIVALENT POLITICS OF GENDER STYLING

Chavinism on the British gay scene

‘Chavinism ... has become endemic on the gay scene ... You only have to read the titles of the wank-line telephone numbers to get the picture: “Me gang play with our dicks outside the Late Shop”, “Let DSS bloke shag me for a crisis loan” and “Got me ring stretched for an oh-zee of weed”. Just an average night in Bermondsey or Wythenshawe then. Poverty, it seems, has never been so sexual, destitution so downright dirty. Away from the queeny fashion scenes and the muscle mary world of steroids and shrunken scrotums, a huge, downwardly mobile subculture is developing.’ (Fraser, 2005, p. 36)

As Fraser notes above, and Johnson establishes in a more scholarly sense, the chav has apparently been welcomed with open arms by the British gay male population. Even a cursory glance through the gay male media in the last few years, especially key outlets like *Attitude* magazine (where the Fraser piece appeared), indicates the rise of the chav as a category for organizing and experiencing the commercialization of male same-sex desire. Best evidence is the proliferation of advertisements for chav-centred telephone lines, containing titillating images and explicit copy.. Examples of sex lines we have found include ‘S**k me scally dick’ and ‘Pull me trackies down, spank & shag me’.

The Internet sites of the companies responsible offer additional services for sexual satisfaction, including images and clips of chavs having sex, and Internet chatrooms. Similarly, Triga Movies and Pinnacle Vision market celluloid fantasies of sex with working-class lads, including the October 2007 release 'ASBO Twinks'. There are also chav club nights, for instance at London's Vauxhall Tavern and G-A-Y; although it may predominantly be middle-class professionals sporting tracksuit bottoms and baseball caps who turn up at these events, hoping to get a bit of the other in seeking new sexual thrills.

In the piece cited above, Fraser narrates his experiences of going to two such club nights in London. The article provides the closest thing we can find to a primary empirical account of gay chavinism, and two facets of his account stand out. First, there is his constant worry about passing as a chav, and the concerted attention he gives to dressing and acting the part. Fraser describes his shopping trip for Nike- and Adidas-branded goods before going out, and notes that his boyfriend, whilst thinking he looked relatively authentic, feared he would give himself away when he walked. In fact he enjoyed plenty of attention, which he attributes to his apparently aphrodisiacal garb. Second, at the 'Rude Boyz' club night, described as 'council house cruising at its most hardcore' (Fraser, 2005, p. 36), he recounts some of the comments made by the middle-class professional types he met. These included David and Josh, a couple from upmarket Islington. They were keen on a threesome with 'Burberry capped' Rob, saying they '[w]ouldn't mind going back to his council flat' (Fraser, 2005, p. 37) – although Rob in fact worked in PR and hailed from equally affluent West Dulwich.

Given these examples of gay chav commodity forms, we, like Johnson, are struck by the commonality of themes used in selling the 'chav experience'. Key features – all of which we noted in our discussion of the merchandising of chav style – are hypersexuality (including incest); drug and alcohol abuse; aggression and violence; unemployment, poverty and living on benefits; the council estate; and dress and appearance. Next we expand our analysis based on two avenues indicated by this list. First, we develop the idea of gay chavinism as style (of dress, bodily disposition etc.) and analyse this using a gender/sexuality lens. Second, we contemplate the broader question of the politics of chavinism as minority consumer culture.

Gay masculinity and the politics of style

'Being a chav for the night is a novel, not un-sexy thing, but it's essentially fancy dress. Don't get me wrong, I'm all for leering at men in tabards on bin trucks but they're sexy precisely because they *are* straight and they'd smash your bleedin' face in if they knew what you were thinking. Internalised homophobia? Fancying our oppressors? Probably. Who cares ... ' (Fraser, 2005, p. 36)

Fraser makes two important observations here – first, that chavinism in part is a form of class transvestism, a bodily style used to cross class boundaries and create new identities, however temporarily. But it is not just class identities that are being 'switched' in this move: gender/sexual identities are likewise at stake. As Fraser observes, desire for the male chav turns around a particular kind of masculinity; pugnacious, violent, but *above all straight*.

Here class intersects not only with sexuality but also and importantly with gender, in that the 'harder' forms of masculinity which chavinism invokes are strongly, even inextricably, aligned with the working class (also see Johnson, 2008, p. 76). We should also recall Connell's (1992, p. 736, 2002, p. 95) insistence that, all sociohistorical diversity aside, hegemonic masculinity is 'explicitly and exclusively heterosexual' and, in some of its variants, produces 'contempt and fear of effeminate and homosexual men'; not to say homophobic violence. Gay chavinism, then, could be interpreted as an acting out between gay men of desire for a heterosexual male aggressor, pivoting ambiguously on the promise of rough sex and the threat of violence (even queer bashing and rape). Indeed, and to recall earlier discussion, its predecessor 'rough trade' is often thought of as involving sex with straight men, especially those with the potential for brutality.

In exploring the contradictions of gender and sexual identities further, Gough's (1989) account of the development of gay male styles in North America and Western Europe is helpful. The emergence of gay chavinism, and the heterosexuality it mobilizes, belongs within this trajectory. As Gough suggests, the identities of gay men have traditionally been strongly gendered as feminine, and this tying together of gender-sex-sexuality persists as a mode for their self-expression. But Gough's central point is that the 'predominant styles of gay men have become increasingly masculine' (1989, p. 119) since the 1970s, such that sportsman, leatherman/biker, cowboy, skinhead, construction worker and squaddy have all been added to the gay male repertoire. All these styles mimic highly masculine pursuits and occupations, and several are also working-class in their associations. Gough comments that this proliferation of more

masculine styles likewise expanded gay male desire for the masculine *as a gender* as well as for the male body *as a sex*.

But these developments are not unproblematic. Although they challenge the reduction of gay male sexuality to effeminacy, Gough posits that these newer forms of homosexual desire objectify masculinity as if it existed apart from the person. This abstracted desire substitutes itself for the person, becoming a kind of asexual fetish. In gay culture just as in its heteronormative counterpart, then, masculinity becomes an ultimately unattainable commodity that is ‘oppressive not simply for dictating a certain norm but for demanding something which cannot be achieved’ (Gough, 1989, pp. 121-122 – also see Connell, 1992, 2002; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). These styles also reassert traditional roles which subordinate women to men, and perhaps imply a certain admiration for militarism and fascism.

Relatedly, Kates’ (2003) ethnography of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras notes the ironically over-the-top character of the various male bodies on display, and remarks that these ‘[s]ubversive consumer practices may uncover and problematize gendered norms by parodically accentuating them, humorously delegitimizing their claims to authority’ (p. 10). In part, then, Kates presents the festival as a progressive social event, indexing a sense of gender freedom. However, he also notes the paucity of *imperfect* bodies on show at Mardi Gras – most are a toned and buffed celebration of a specific type of masculinity. Following Butler, Kates suggests that this articulation of gay identity may exemplify the parodic reproduction of heterosexist masculine norms of ‘competition, violence [and] dominance’ without in any way undermining them - despite its ‘progressive stylistic guise’ (p. 8). Moreover, despite

Mardi Gras's liminality, it is simultaneously a site where people can 'let off sexual steam' *whilst the mainstream remains untouched* – just as Bakhtin originally observed with regard to how the poor used the carnival as a way of coping with their wretchedness. In sum, the gender and sexual politics of the gay male styles discussed by Gough and Kates are deeply equivocal.

If chaviness turns in part on the desire of gay men to pass as and/or to act out sexual fantasies about ('hard', 'tough') working-class, heterosexual men, an additional issue appears when we consider how these straight men relate to same-sex desire. Here Žižek's (1997) discussion of the Yugoslav People's Army and the question of why this army – or any other - resisted accepting gay men and women as members is pertinent, albeit from a different institutional context. During his own service Žižek witnessed extreme forms of homophobia, where anyone discovered to be gay was subject to various forms of abuse and summarily dismissed. Yet the culture of the People's Army was 'excessively permeated with an atmosphere of homosexual innuendo' (1997, p. 32). Žižek describes, for instance, standing in line for food, where it was commonplace for the men to stick an uninvited finger into someone else's backside, withdraw it quickly and then laugh about it with everyone else.

Typical accounts of why gay people are discouraged from joining up are framed in terms of 'threat' – that they potentially undermine the 'phallic and patriarchal' sexual economy of army relations (Žižek, 1997, p. 32). But Žižek dismisses this explanation, and argues that the army *fundamentally depends on homosexuality for its existence*. In other words,

‘the Army community itself relies on a thwarted/disavowed homosexuality as the key component of the soldiers’ male-bonding ... This fragile coexistence of extreme and violent homophobia with a thwarted, that is, publicly unacknowledged, “underground” homosexual libidinal economy, bears witness to the fact that the discourse of the military community can only operate by way of censoring its own libidinal foundation.’ (1997, p. 33)

Extending Žižek’s point, we might interpret gay chavinism as a gender style which rehearses the same libidinal repression of same-sex desire around which notoriously homophobic and patriarchal institutions like the army are culturally organized, in that chavinism’s almost literally unspeakable object of desire is the laddish, homosocial, working-class *but also and necessarily* bellicose, straight, homophobic man. As Fraser remarks, ‘they’re sexy precisely because they *are* straight and they’d smash your bleedin’ face in if they knew what you were thinking’. Taking Žižek together with Gough and Kates implies that, whilst gay chavinism may well expand transgressively the repertoire of homosexual desire, it also potentially reinforces highly problematic elements of hegemonic (/ heterosexual/ homophobic) masculinity.

SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION

We now draw together our speculations on gay chavinism as minority consumer culture before sketching out a potential empirical agenda. First, chavinism perhaps subverts hegemonic homosexuality in its invocation of the abject cultural category of *chav* as sexually desirable, indeed worth spending serious money on, whether as commodity (eg, *chav* pornography) or as temporarily borrowed identity (dressing

down as chav). The chav identity revolves around ‘tasteless’ consumer goods, unemployment, violence, heavy drinking and drug taking, and hypersexuality. Chavinism is therefore potentially disruptive of *both* class *and* sexuality as categories of difference. Just as gender transvestism might unsettle assumptions about the rigidity of the male/female divide, so chavinism perhaps undermines assumptions about the gay man as desexualized, cultivated, bourgeois consumer *par excellence*. It may valorize a currently ‘non-admired’ or ‘dishonoured’ form of same-sex desire, as well as indexing the potentially homophobic nature of hegemonic homosexuality. As such, it represents one possibility for contesting this hegemony, and the exclusions, silences and hierarchies it reproduces amongst gay men.

This is even more likely if we assume that some of the men taking part in or buying chav porn or going to chav club nights self-identify as both gay and working-class - if not necessarily chav. Given the absence of any systematic empirical work in the area, we cannot yet say whether – or how - the discourse of chavinism is reproduced or contested by working-class gay men themselves. However, some of Taylor’s (2005c, p. 378) working-class lesbian respondents certainly felt excluded from ‘scene spaces’ because these were predicated on the aforementioned high-octane consumption practices, as reflected in widespread deployment of ‘designer dress codes and stringent door policies’. Thus the opportunity to ask whether working-class gay men recognize themselves in ‘Chav plc’, and whether they desire upward mobility and the tastes of their middle-class counterparts, we would argue, at least offers a similar avenue for discursively pluralizing gay male experience and challenging the prevailing ‘reification’ of ‘gayness’ (Connell, 1992).

On the other hand, any such pluralization renders yet more precarious the assimilation of (certain kinds of) gay men into the heteronormative mainstream, in the same way as AIDS activism 'dislodged certain gay men from their tenuous position within the dominant classes by transforming unmarked individuals into members of a stigmatised group' (Cohen, cited in Binnie and Skeggs, 2004, p. 44). Equally, gay chavinism potentially rearticulates the familiar construction of the male libido as utterly unselective about its objects of attachment or the consequences of its practices (Hollway, 1989), reproducing a masculinity which turns on force and violence and a libidinal economy based on the repression of homoerotic bonding. Chavinism can be read as an unexamined acceptance, even celebration, amongst gay men of the hegemonic understanding of male desire as irrepressibly aggressive, bringing together gay and straight men in an odd complicity. This is of especial concern given homosexuality's discursive associations with indiscriminate and pathological forms of desire such as paedophilia. Gender speaks more forcefully here than sexuality or class, with chavinism becoming a cultural form uniting all men in relation to the others of hegemonic masculinity.

Relatedly, chavinism can be seen as reasserting patriarchal gender structures, which begs questions about gay men's complex relationship with feminism. Jacobs (1997) argues that, whilst gay men and women may share an interest in challenging Rich's (1983) 'compulsory heterosexuality', divergent economic interests also point to a growing chasm between them:

'the growing significance of the nonfamilial structures of women's economic subordination have brought gay men's economic interests more into line with

those of other men, and into greater conflict with those of women in general.

Gay men's willingness to articulate these interests is increasing as sexuality is perceived as less of a determinant of gender identity.' (Jacobs, 1997, p. 178)

Chavinism might not belong within this economic line of reasoning, but perhaps there is a parallel cultural argument to be made; one where sexuality is masked by the gay desire for masculine *gender*. After all, as Connell remarks, 'even effeminate gay men may draw economic benefits from the overall subordination of women' (1992, p. 737).

We could also agree with Johnson that gay chavinism conceals material class inequalities whilst seemingly making them more visible. Class is not simply a matter of choice: it is more than culture, more than values and demeanours. The middle-class gay man who seeks out chavs for sex, buys chav porn or goes to chav club nights is arguably gambling with the benefits that his socio-economic position affords him in the normal run of things. But chavinism could simultaneously be read as not much more than a walk on the wild side; and Skeggs (2005, p. 971) and Johnson (2008, p. 75) both comment that an important aspect of the commodification of class difference is the marketing to the bourgeoisie of safe ways of temporarily venturing into dangerous terrain.

Thus chavinism can be considered a licensed, short-lived transgression for the professional middle classes, who can re-stylize themselves for kicks but do not need to *reside* low down on the social ladder. After all, middle-class gay men are unlikely to ever watch their lives 'slide out of view', as the Sheffield band Pulp once put it,

like those whose supposed trappings they have borrowed for a sweaty Saturday night out clubbing. Gay chavinism can therefore be interpreted as fixing and essentializing the working class anew, for carnivalesque middle-class sex tourism.

It is also true that, as Fraser (2005, p. 37) avers, the gay class tourist is unlikely to succeed in passing as chav. Still, any such failure will probably not cause him many difficulties – unless he strays beyond the commodified zone of chavinism into the material realities of the council estate. Johnson (2008, p. 73) extends this to argue that the *inauthenticity* of a chav performance by a middle-class man (re)constructs him as ‘a successful consumer of the chav commodity rather than as the object itself’. This is the converse of our argument that chavinism cuts across the class dimension of hegemonic homosexuality: here the ‘product’ *has to* remain other to the consumer in order to be appealing, so chavinism actually *relies upon* hegemonic homosexuality. We might even see a kind of incorporation at work here, suggesting that hegemonic homosexuality absorbs elements of other versions of homosexuality so as to reconfigure and bolster itself, as Brittan (1989, pp. 184-187) asserts with regard to hegemonic masculinity. In this reading, Johnson’s hierarchy of ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ remains entirely unscathed.

Overall, whilst the political consequences of social actions (consumption included) are difficult to ascertain at any analytical stage, we would provisionally suggest that chavinism, as a sexual fantasy organized by the commodity economics of astute cultural producers, contains a number of contradictory elements. But to go any further at this stage risks putting the conceptual cart before the empirical horse. The questions of how self-identified professional *and* working-class gay men relate to chavinism;

what the experience of 'dressing down' is like; what the motivations are for it; how the relevant class and gender dynamics structure the possibilities of homosexual experience or overlap to produce constellations of entitlement and marginalization articulate complex issues associated with meanings, experiences, desires and subjectivity at the intersections of class, gender and sexuality.

In short, any construction of homosexuality, 'hegemonic' or 'subordinate', is *always* fashioned in relation to its others and, in lived empirical reality, is *always* cross-cut with other identifications, like gender and class. Thus these constructions bear further scrutiny via the systematic collection of primary empirical data, so that we are able to explore gay men's 'practical relationships to collective images or models' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 841) of homosexuality and to understand their gendered, sexual and class consequences.

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ⁱ We use this term instead of 'community', given that the latter implies homogeneity amongst those it describes. One of our central arguments is that this is not an appropriate assumption about gay men in the UK – or indeed anywhere else.

ⁱⁱ Or perhaps more accurately 'dressing down', if it is indeed professional gay men who are engaged in this activity.

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Rough trade' is a term from 'Polari', the British gay slang. It originally referred to a casual sexual partner but evolved in later usage to suggest that the 'trade' in question is a man of lower socioeconomic status – hence 'rough'.

^{iv} The almost exclusive focus in this literature is on gay men, rather than lesbians, as consumers.

^v Notable exceptions to the self-identification rule include journalist Julie Burchill, who produced a documentary for Sky One, screened in February 2005. There she celebrated her chav roots and complained about the vilification of chavs.