

“We Are Here and We Are Still Queer!”

Being Gay and Elderly in Denmark and Italy.

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To my family,

both original and “extended”.

Abstract

A decreasing birth rate and an increasing life expectancy are the causes of the current 50-plus “population boom”. However, although this group of people is getting bigger, few attempts have been made to date in order to better understand it. While marketers segmented consumers under 50 through billions of possible variables, they keep in approaching them as a monolithic block of people when they reach their 50th birthday. Negative approaches or stereotypes on “grannies” are the tools normally used.

Through the interpretative research method, and particularly through in-depth interviews and an emic approach, I tried to understand seniors better, investigating their consumption habits and their identities. In order to narrow the scope of the research I choose the gay sexual orientation variable for its ability to “delimitate” a specific sub-culture.

In the outcome, while gay seniors showed to maintain their gay identity also in old age, three main phenomena emerged:

1. A values’ shift, from a predominance of sets of externally related items to sets of internally related ones.
2. A suffered discrimination, originating in a mismatch between three age concepts: biological age, self-perceived age, and socially perceived age.
3. An acted discrimination towards other older persons, displayed as a first reaction in front of a mirroring situation.

On the marketing side, gay seniors showed interest both in gay related products and in mainstream related products, however, efforts in creating, designing and advertising them better are most needed. A particular mention should be made to the leather and bear gay subcultures: by showing a more “laid down” approach and an open aversion towards mainstream and gay shared values (youth, beauty & re.), they turned out to be a friendly, attractive and “ready-to-use” environment for gay seniors.

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Introduction

Recently, several national and international institutions highlighted the phenomenon of “global ageing”. In fact, the increase in life expectancy and the decrease in fertility are going to create a huge group of retired people. This explains a revived attention to seniors as consumers of a new market, which drove the attention of many scholars and marketers, interested in describing their identity and their consumption patterns. The latter contributions to this field highlighted the need for a better understanding of the diversity of this large group of people. While segmentation was abundantly used in describing consumers under 50, the approach to those very same consumers shifted to dealing with them as a monolithic and undifferentiated block of unpaired people as they passed the 50th birthday threshold. This research is a contribution to the understanding of diversity among seniors.

While many variables could be used in order to focus on a particular senior population, I decided to focus on gay (male) sexual orientation, both to the possibility to exploit an emic approach and to give a contribution in a field where research is still scarce. I was attracted by the fact the elderly and gay men share the consequences of bearing a social stigma. Both groups are therefore leading a parallel struggle for a greater social acceptance.

The objectives of this research are twofold:

- First, I describe the identity of Danish and Italian gay men over 54, with a particular focus on the persistence of gay related lifestyles also in the old age.
- Secondly, I describe their specific consumption habits concerning gay related and mainstream products.

On the first objective, I found men over 54 feeling younger than their actual age. The fight for the predominance among three concepts of age (chronological, social and self-perceived) was definitely won by the self-perceived one. Over-54 gay men feel and act younger than their actual age. Social stereotypes are ideally and materially rejected by very active persons who do not want to give up with their life as they reached an “inner peace” by their accumulated experience. Life is beautiful and easier, because less attention is paid in old age

on others, or in caring about social judgments. The set of interests and activities undertaken by my interviewees shows a shift from “outward” to more “inward” values.

Relationships get deeper through the consolidation of a “chosen family”. At the same time, and probably because of a self-mirroring fear, the interviewees express a strong refusal (and even act a discrimination) against the “unpaired and needy” image of old age (“He’s not me”).

The gay community is pervaded by a “be young or drop dead” prejudice, sometimes causing an exclusion feeling. Apart for this feeling, over-54 gay men still appreciate the gay community, feeling more at ease in their social moments. Trying to avoid mainstream gay places, the sample demonstrates a re-orientation towards specific subcultures (the leather one in Denmark and the bear one in Italy) characterized by anti mainstream gay culture, other than using age related social web sites.

On the consumption side, advertisings always undergo very strong criticisms from the sample. “Empty promises” or “pushy” approaches are totally rejected, whereas an ironic and blinking tone is almost always appreciated. On the other hand, advertisings aimed at seniors demonstrate to miss the hit completely. In fact, the image of the senior consumer emerging from these advertisings did completely match the discriminating and negative imagery built by contemporary society (again, “be young or die”), whereas people over 54 prefer to identify with an image of themselves younger than their actual age. As a consequence, there is a big gap in mainstream imagery between the under-50 young and healthy person, and the unpaired-and-needy-grey-man stereotyped. The lack of products/imagery designed for “young people over 50”, although not directly reported by my sample, is very strongly criticized when the sample was stimulated on the topic.

As a conclusion, this research outlines three main phenomena among gay men over 54:

1. A value’s shift.
2. A twofold suffered discrimination.
3. An acted discrimination.

The first phenomenon is a general shift of the locus of the self from outward to inward; i.e. from externally related features (beauty, appearance, youth & re.) to internally related ones (deeper relations, conversation, silent places & re.).

The second one is a continuous discrimination coming from the gay world and the mainstream world alike, acted through the rejection of the “young over 54” people. This discrimination surfaces both in the social image of the elderly and in the indifference of the consumption world towards them.

The third one is a discrimination acted against the people appearing in the negative imagery suggested by society (“I am not that old, he’s not me!”) that can be seen as showing a self-mirroring fear.

1. Project Description: problem statement, research question, research objectives

During the last years, the biggest demographic issue seemed to be the world population's ageing. Birth-rate has been falling for many years and the new generation's size is shrinking (UN, 2007 and Eurostat, 2008). The biggest demographic group is still the baby boomers' group and researches have been focused on this "new emerging market". Unfortunately, for many years baby boomers were considered as a single social group, having the same issues (health) strictly linked to their increasing age (Day and Al., 1987-1988: 24). With no apparent reasons, scholars inferred that, with the coming of 55th birthday, the age variable gets powerful enough to overcome all the descriptive variables used before. In their opinion, only health problems became important issues and, also because of marketing prejudices (Tréguer and Segati, 2004: 149), people over 55 were no more multi faceted consumers, but mere "old consumers".

However, after depicting this group as constituted by a "new" but standard consumer, it seems that scholars started again to think about the possible presence of specific needs and therefore of specific identities (Kohlbacher and Herstatt, 2008). Scholars shifted from the mass consumers to specific groups of people thanks to the following leading question: "*Why the "being old" variable should nullify the peculiar needs people showed before they grew old?*" (Kohlbacher and Herstatt, 2008: 310; Day and al., 1987-1988: 24;).

I tried to extend this question to: why the age variable should overcome and not just be added to "before 55" identity variables?

Since it is not possible to answer to such a broad research question, I chose to narrow it to just a particular variable defining a particular social group: gay people.

Therefore, by taking the Danish and Italian gay male groups and investigating people 54 and over through in-depth interviews, I tried to answer to the following research question:

- Do "senior gay people" have still common identity/consumption patterns?

Being more specific, I tried to explore gay consumers over 54 as a social group, in a cross-cultural perspective, focusing on their identity (research objective no. 1) and on their consumption patterns (research objective no. 2).

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 An ageing society: facts

A powerful and dramatic image depicting the impact of the ageing trends on the world economy was reported by “The Economist” in its “Special Report on Ageing Population” issued on June, 25th 2009:

“When the IMF [International Monetary Fund, editor’s note] earlier this month calculated the impact of the recent financial crisis, it found that the costs will indeed be huge: the fiscal balances of the G20 advanced countries are likely to deteriorate by eight percentage points of GDP in 2008-09. But the IMF also noted that in the longer term these costs will be dwarfed by age-related spending. Looking ahead to the period between now and 2050, it predicted that “for advanced countries, the fiscal burden of the crisis [will be] about 10% of the ageing-related costs”. The other 90% will be extra spending on pensions, health and long-term care.”

Is this all going to happen tomorrow? Of course not. The Economist, again, states:

“By about 2020 ageing will be plain for all to see. And there is no escape: barring huge natural or man-made disasters, demographic changes are much more certain than other long-term predictions (for example, of climate change). Every one of the 2 billion people who will be over 60 in 2050 has already been born.”

According to the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations (Population Division), two phenomena are at the basis of the growing importance of the senior segment:

1. The increase in life expectancy.
2. The fall of birth rate.

“As a result of declining fertility and increasing longevity, the populations of a growing number of countries are ageing rapidly. Between 2005 and 2050, half of the increase in the world population will be accounted for by a rise in the population aged 60 years or over, whereas the number of children (persons under age 15) will decline slightly. Furthermore, in the more developed regions, the population aged 60 or over is expected

nearly to double (from 245 million in 2005 to 406 million in 2050) whereas that of persons under age 60 will likely decline (from 971 million in 2005 to 839 million in 2050).” (UN, 2007: vii)

Taking a glance at the most developed countries the phenomena get even worse:

“Fertility is also below replacement level in all 45 developed countries or areas, which account for 19 per cent of the world population. In 27 of them, including Japan and most of the countries located in Southern and Eastern Europe, fertility remains below 1.5 children per woman. Since 1990-1995, fertility decline has been the rule among the vast majority of developed countries and is leading to rapid population ageing.

Another factor contributing to population ageing is the reduction of mortality at adult ages. Global life expectancy at birth, which is estimated to have risen from 58 years in 1970-1975 to 67 years in 2005-2010, is expected to keep on rising to reach 75 years in 2045-2050. In the more developed regions, the projected increase is from 77 years today to 82 years by midcentury, and in the less developed regions life expectancy is projected to rise from 65 years in 2005-2010 to 74 years in 2045-2050.” (UN, 2007: xi)

2.1.1 The European Situation

If we focus on Europe we shall discover that the adage “old Europe” does not just refer to European historical heritage.

According to Eurostat (European Union Statistical Institute), immigration is the cause of the current increase in European population. However, this phenomenon is going to end by 2035.

As a matter of fact, the EU27 populations is projected to grow older, with median age projected to rise (from 40.4 years in 2008 to 47.9 years in 2060). Moreover, the share of people aged 65 or over in the total population is projected to increase from 17.1% to 30.0% (84.6 million in 2008 to 151.5 million in 2060) and the population aged 80 or over is projected to almost triple (21.8 million in 2008 to 61.4 million in 2060). (Eurostat, 2008)

Using the statistical measure of new born rates and life expectancy accounted before as the main causes in the phenomenon of ageing population, the picture is even sharper.

Figure 1: Increase/decrease in live births (in %) in Europe in 2007 (Eurostat, no. 81, 2008: 3)

NB: calculated as (live births 2007 – live births 2006) / (live births 2006)

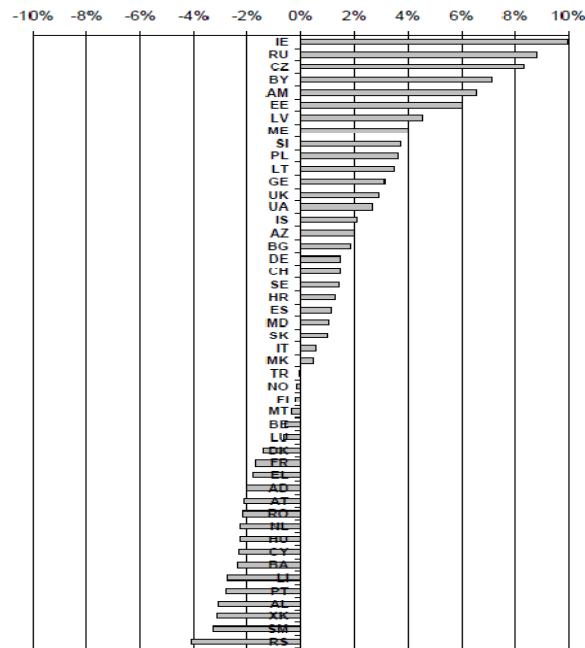
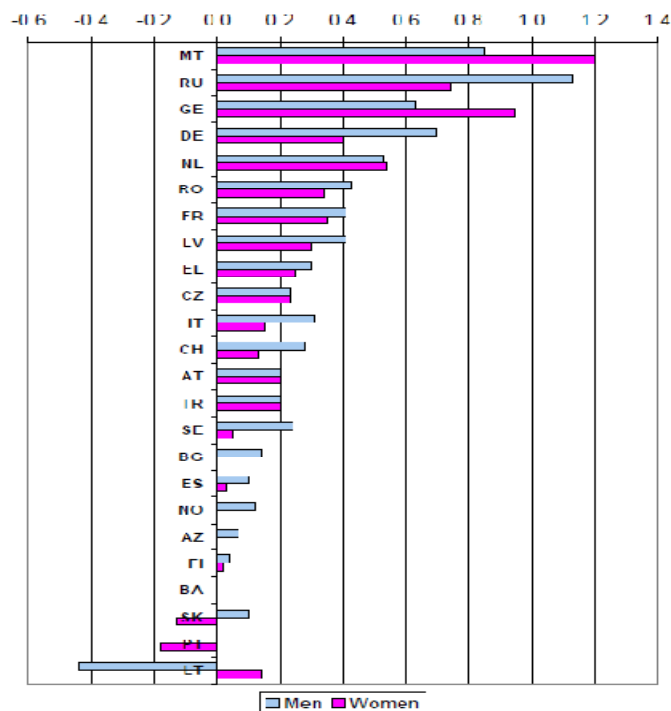


Figure 2: Increase/decrease in life expectancy at birth for men and women in selected European countries in 2007 (Eurostat, no. 81, 2008: 3)



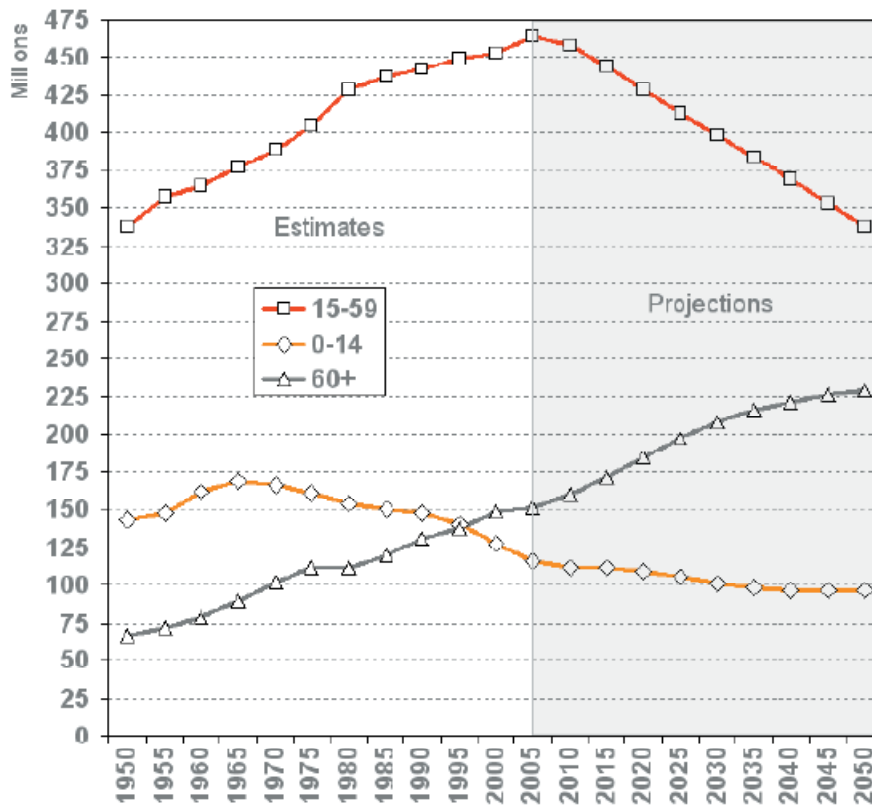


Fig. 3: European’s population by age group, 1950-2050 (UN, 2007: 1).

2.2 Senior People: a matter of words

The data show how much the senior target will impact on the demographic profile and, consequently, on the economic environment. However, the “economic environment” is not just a matter of numbers. If it is true, like “The Economist” predicted, that at this pace, welfare is going to be the strongest voice in a country’s balance sheet, it is also true that seniors are going to be “the next big thing” happening in the marketing world. After all, if the ageing of the baby boomers was predictable, a senior boom is going to be a more than probable reality. But what is exactly “age”?

2.2.1 Age, One Word, (At Least) Three Meanings

“How old are you?” is a question everybody keeps hearing since his/her childhood. The answer to this question is both what statisticians classically use for their studies, and what we can call “chronological age”. Chronological age is usually defined as the number of the years lived, or as the distance from birth, and it stands from all other variables in terms of frequency of its use.

However, despite its common usage, it is not the most useful way to describe the concept of age of a human being dipped in a socially-built reality. We do not have to involve semiotics to find out that signs (words) have multiple meanings. The concept of age, in particular, has been split by scholars in three concepts, all three of them more complicated than common sense would suggest:

1. Biological age.
2. Social age (or socially-attributed age).
3. Cognitive age (or self-perceived age).

While biological age refers to human's "flesh and blood" dimension and therefore to the biochemical side of getting old, the other two dimensions refer to the socially-built reality.

Barak and Schiffman (1981), summarizing other contributions about it, define social age as:

"the age of an individual as defined in terms of social roles and habits. It implies that age expresses an individual's place in the social structure; which is indexed by such variables as socioeconomic status, occupation, education, race and sex. Social ageing is also concerned with the different roles a person takes while passing through the life cycle. There is a continuous role change that takes place and the patterned sequencing of these roles reflects some of the changes in an individual's life. Tied to this role alteration is a subjective perception of appropriate and inappropriate age-specific, society-determined norms that are an integral part of the variable roles." (p. 602-603)

At this point already, the concept of age loses its narrow meaning, gaining new shades and possible interpretations. "Cognitive age" helps to widen this meaning, and puts forward a subjective dimension in the, otherwise, totally externally defined concept.

In their study, Barak and Schiffman (1981) built the non-chronological age measure of cognitive age through the four dimensions of personal age suggested by Kastenbaum et al. (1972): the age a person feels, the age a person thinks s/he looks, the age a person perceives him/herself to act, and the age a person perceives to be reflective of his/her interests. "Perceived age" is therefore a product of how people see themselves in relation with society.

Another aspect is “psychological age”. Although it is sometimes described as overlapping with “cognitive age”, psychological age refers to the psychological maturity of an individual. In an ageing-scared society, which is completely redefining the concept of “youth”, the “psychological maturity” of someone could be mismatched with the “acceptance of being old”, leading to a complete misunderstanding of this measure.

Understanding these measures of an evolving concept of age should help marketers to totally change the way they approach the phenomenon for a better understanding of this booming target.

2.2.2 The Current Approach

In modern society, being old is considered a stigma or, at least, something to conceal. Discovering the reason for this phenomena is beyond the scope of this paper; however it is surprising to notice how even marketers were unable to escape from such a narrow vision.

Tréguer and Segati (2003) provided abundant examples of firms, refusing to address their products to proven profitable markets of elderly people, because of the imagery linked to the words “old” and “senior”. Managers’ self-mirroring fear could be one of the causes of such a blindness.

In the past advertisers, falling prey to stereotype-oriented approaches, experienced negative outcomes: by ridiculing old age and the senior segment, they failed in gaining any *captatio benevolentiae* (Tréguer and Segati, 2003; Keane, 1984).

If we really want to approach this market, the only way to do it properly is, as always, to understand it, trying to answer to some questions.

2.2.3 What Is a Senior?

Tréguer and Segati (2003) define “senior people” as the population 50-plus. Why people so young? For several reasons:

- For marketers, the mass-market consumer dies as s/he reaches 50 years (by convention, the “principal responsible of purchase” is considered the person aged from 18 to 49).

- For demographics scholars, a series of particular events happens around the 50th year of age (parents die, mortgage is totally repaid etc.).
- It is just easy to consider the 50th year of age as a hypothetical threshold for a progressive increase in health problems manifestation (commonly said: ageing).

It is easy to understand that the use of age as a threshold must be handled carefully in order to become a useful criterion. As people become seniors, they still remain consumers, however, for the reasons just mentioned, they might very likely start to change their consumptions or their consumption habits.

We must also take into consideration that the “age threshold” differs depending on the product/market we are considering, as well as on the culture the consumer is dipped in. Taking as an example a school backpack producer, a totally different consumption pattern (up to the “death” of the consumer as such) takes place when the person grows beyond school age. On the other hand, because of the redefined boundaries of maturity in modern culture, someone who passed his twenties can still easily buy “Hello Kitty” branded products¹.

Because of these differences, we cannot really approach seniors as a monolithic block of people. If marketers segmented this population through dozens of variables before they reached our age threshold, it is illogical to think that now, because they passed it, differences (those variables) be no longer worth to be taken into consideration (Day, Davis, Dove and French, 1987/1988).

Summarizing, the senior population can be described by the following features:

- Three concepts (not necessarily matching) of age.
- Relevant change/perspective to change, in everyday life (retirement).
- Relevant change/upcoming change in physical condition (health degeneration).
- Maintenance of everybody’s diversity.

¹ This example introduces the difference between functional and symbolic needs and the existence of meta-products. A concept we will explain later in the definition of the gay sexual orientation variable.

2.3 Consumption and Identity

Since the research question involves “identity” and “consumption” categories, it is now necessary to outline some theoretical background about these two concepts.

2.3.1 What is consumption?

It is nowadays taken for granted that “consumer goods have a significance that goes beyond their utilitarian character and commercial value. This significance rests largely in their ability to carry and communicate cultural meaning.” (McCracken, 1986:71). More specifically, objects “contribute to the construction of the culturally constituted world precisely because they are a vital, tangible record of cultural meaning that is otherwise intangible.” (McCracken, 1986: 73). If goods are therefore a way through which cultural categories are “substantiated”, consumption becomes a way through which the goods plus their cultural meanings are transferred to the consumers (McCracken, 1986: 80).

But how can we define consumption itself? According to Holt, in order to understand what is consumption, we have to differentiate between the structure of consumption and the purpose of consumption:

- Structure of consumption: “consuming consists both of actions in which consumers directly engage consumption objects (object actions) and interactions with other people (interpersonal actions).”
- Purpose of consumption: “consumers’ actions can be both ends in themselves (autotelic actions) and means to some further ends (instrumental actions).” (Holt, 1995: 2).

Crossing these two dimensions it is possible to find four metaphors describing consuming:

1. Consuming as experience (autotelic purpose AND object structure): relates to the “experimental, hedonic, aesthetic, autotelic, and subjective dimensions of consuming” and relates to “consumption practices in which these emotional states are embedded” (Holt, 1995: 2).
2. Consuming as integration (instrumental purpose AND object structure): describes how consumers acquire and manipulate object meaning, how they are able to integrate self and object and integrate object’s symbolic properties in it.

3. Consuming as classification (instrumental purpose AND interpersonal structure): describes consuming “as a process in which objects , viewed as vessels of cultural and personal meanings, act to classify their consumers”.
4. Consuming as play (autotelic purpose AND interpersonal structure): describes how people use consumption objects to interact with fellow consumers.

Even if these metaphors describes four different and apparently distinct way of consuming, if we refer to the post modernity as our frame of reality, we must take in consideration the possibility (and, actually, the high probability) to observe these four phenomenon as all or partly mixed together in a single consumption act.

For example, if we refer to the act of “reading a book” we could interpret it as :

- experience: the book is consumed as a way of self enrichment.
- classification: the book is physically exposed to a public, for example in the consumer bookshelf in a very visible place of the house.
- integration: the book is used in building a particular self image.
- play: the content of the book is used as “code” of interaction or as a discussion’s topic.

How can this be possible? According to the postmodern frame, Firat (1995) and Firat and Shultz (1997) the possibility of having multiple different consumption experiences at the same time can be identified as a direct consequence of the postmodern framework and especially consequence of condition known as “fragmentation”² (Firat, 1995 and Firat and Shultz, 1997).

But why is the action of consumption considered important for an individual? If we go back to McCracken essay the answer become clearer: because consumer goods, as well as the way they are consumed, “serve as media for the expression of the cultural meaning that constitutes our world.”, our “self-definition” or, better, our identity (McCracken, 1986: 78, 80).

² Fragmentation as the “omnipresence of disjointed and connected moments and experiences in life and sense of self – and the growing acceptance of the dynamism which leads to fragmentation in markets” (Firat and Shultz, 1997: 186).

2.3.2 What is identity?

What we call identity or “self-concept” is not just one and single strictly-defined entity. On the contrary “Research in psychology [...] suggests that the self-concept is a multifaceted entity comprised of a variety of selves.” (Patrick, MacInnis and Folkes, 2002: 270). More precisely, we can imagine possible selves as connected to concept as goals, aspirations, fears and hopes. Possible selves are therefore “images of whom we wish we could be (ideal self), who we think we might become (expected self) and who we hope to be or fear becoming” (Patrick, MacInnis and Folkes, 2002: 270).

This definition fits very well with the post modern framework we are considering. Concepts at the basis of the post modern reality as “hyper reality”, “fragmentation”, “reversal of consumption and production” and “de-centring of the subject”, they all help in seeing identity as a “multi-faceted” entity, not just an unchangeable monolith as represented by modernity (Firat, 1995).

But how is identity built? Following consumer behaviours and consumption sociology studies, products have a central role in building our selves.

McCracken defines the process of “self-definition” as “the systematic appropriation of the meaningful properties of goods. [...] In normal situations, [...] the individual uses goods in an un-problematical manner to constitute crucial parts of the self and the world.” (McCracken, 1986: 80). According to Firat (1995), describing the postmodern condition of reversal in production and consumption,

“It is [...] in this (re)presentation of sel-image(s) through one’s consumption that the consumer begins to conceive “the self” as a marketable entity, to be customized and produced, to be positioned an promoted, as a product. The ultimate consequence of this is the decentering of the subject [...] in the sense that this subject is no longer one but multiple and changeable according to the situation she or he encounters.” (Firat, 1995: 42)

Thanks to this fragmentation, the consumer has no longer to be stuck with one single lifestyle but he can now quickly move through different ones. “In effect, the market may be constituted of tribes which allow greater freedom of movement within and among them

than did any class, sub-culture or segment.” (Firat and Shultz, 1997: 91). Moreover he can now build his own “lifestyle” through mix and match consumption.

With these premises, we can define “identity” as a fragmented and multiple entity (Firat, 1995; Firat and Shultz, 1997) describing a human being and defined also by objects and situations (Belk, 1988; Kleine, Kleine III and Allen, 1995).

But why identity and consumption are related? As McCracken explains: “Goods may be seen as an opportunity to express the categorical scheme established by a culture. Goods are an opportunity to make culture material. Like any other species of material culture, goods allow individuals to discriminate visually among culturally specified categories by encoding these categories in the form of a set of material distinctions. Categories of person divided into parcels of age, sex, class and occupation can be represented in a set of material distinctions by means of goods. Categories of space, time and occasion can also be reflected in this medium of communication. Goods help substantiate the order of culture.” (McCracken, 1986: 73).

2.3.3 Mixing the three concepts together

After these theoretical premises, I can now better define my research object through the next assumptions:

- world’s population is ageing, especially Europe;
- people are not a monolithic subject but they change along years;
- this “change” resides in their identity as well as in their consumption patterns since the two of them are strictly co-related.

But, as reported in the Project Description, many scholars already admitted that senior people cannot be comprehensively depicted by just the age variable. For this reason I narrowed this research to senior people with gay sexual orientation.

What is “sexual orientation”? According to Barbagli and Colombo (2001):

“With the expression “sexual orientation” we identify the direction through which an individual directs his erotic energy (towards a same-sex person, an opposite sex

person or both). As indicator of this orientation we usually consider the feelings (or, better, the desires).” (p. 16)

The reasons why I chose this specific variable are the following:

- Because gay people are a minority (therefore I thus narrowed the research universe).
- Because it has been proved that gay people have specific consumption patterns and a specific shared identity or subculture (Peñaloza, 1996).
- Because since gay and senior people have been both stigmatized (Tréguer and Segati, 2003), they also probably faced similar social struggles.

This last reason deserves a further explanation.

2.4 Minorities common struggle

Senior people and gay people have been both stigmatized by mainstream culture, resulting in marginalization for both (Tréguer and Segati, 2003). Although for different reasons, since they possess characters socially considered as a stigma, I hypothesized they faced at least three similar social struggles.

2.4.1 Struggle for Social Acceptance

As reported by Peñaloza (1996), gay people experienced a social movement struggle along the whole 20th century. The contemporary milestone is considered the New York “Stonewall Rebellion” in 1969. Taking a closer look at current European legislation, homosexual acts are legal, and most of EU member states allow same-sex unions³.

On the contrary, seniors are just starting the struggle for social acceptance. Their generational cultures emphasized the young/new as a value, and they now have to fight against the value system they contributed to create (Tréguer and Segati, 2003). In a post modern world, a “reconciliation of the opposites” is not impossible. In my interviews statements like “Some young persons are older than me, inside” were often reported, but the real fight consists in having such a redefinition of that the word “young” means accepted by mainstream culture.

³ http://www.ilga-europe.org/europe/guide/country_by_country

It is here important to highlight an important phenomenon. The cultural unwritten law of considering being young/new as a value was particularly powerful and overstressed by gay culture.

This fostered the phenomenon of so-called “ageism”, a “put-down” attitude based upon older age. The *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* (Dynes, 1990: 24-25) defines it as follows:

“Ageism: this new term encompasses a cluster of attitudes that have become increasingly common in modern industrial societies. Ageism is prejudice of young people against the old expressed in the perpetuation of stereotypes; ridicule and avoidance of older people; and neglect of their social and health needs. Such attitudes frequently appear among male homosexuals, much less among lesbians. The word ageism, which came into use about 1970, is modelled on the older terms racism and sexism. [...]

In the 1960’s and 70’s the cult of youth that had long flourished in the gay male community was reinforced through symbiosis with the Counterculture. As a mass movement the Counterculture was made possible by post-World War II prosperity, which gave younger people disposable income in amounts that could only be dreamed of by their forerunners. [...]

As a result of the confluence of all these factors, psychological counsellors report seeing gay men, some as early as their mid-thirties, who have internalized ageism, regarding themselves “as over the hill”. [...]

In considering and crossing the two variables, we have to consider how difficult it is for this new category of consumers (and, of course, for marketers) to overcome such unwritten cultural laws, and how much satisfaction (and maybe brand/product loyalty) they will grant to the firm that will legitimize a new value system more suitable to their reality (i.e. their cognitive age).

2.4.2 Struggle for Social Visibility

In gay history, the struggle for gay civil rights already used along the years a “visibility approach”, meeting with an accusation of “flaunting” by scandalized people (Peñaloza, 1996: 18). Taking the Italian situation as an example, it is astounding to realize how the gay

issue is accepted in selected milieus, whereas it is still a complete taboo in several other ones. Despite a gay and a transgender M.P.s in the Italian Parliament from 2006 to 2008, and a massive presence in television, no big-brand company invests money in targeting the gay market in Italy (Terzi, 2006).

However, seniors must face an even dimmer reality. A quick glance at mainstream media, as well as at the papers published on the topic, highlights a presence of negative approaches or stereotypes on “grannies” (Tréguer and Segati, 2003).

2.4.3 Struggle for Consumption Acknowledgement

Social reactions against the acknowledgment of minorities typically target also their recognition as specific consumers and therefore as consumption targets.

The objection always goes as: “What is the difference between a product for “X” people and a product for a normal ones?”.

We can easily substitute the “X” with “gay” or “senior”. And actually, at first sight, the only products coming into our minds in this case are very few and referring to a very narrow market (e.g. porn movies for gay people and diapers for seniors). But, as explained before, since we live in a meaningful world, words/products are not read/used just through their mere functions: a symbolic dimension often occupies the biggest part in the consumption process (Levy, 1959). Visconti’s model of gay/mainstream product categories (2008) better explains the symbolic and functional span of “gay” products.

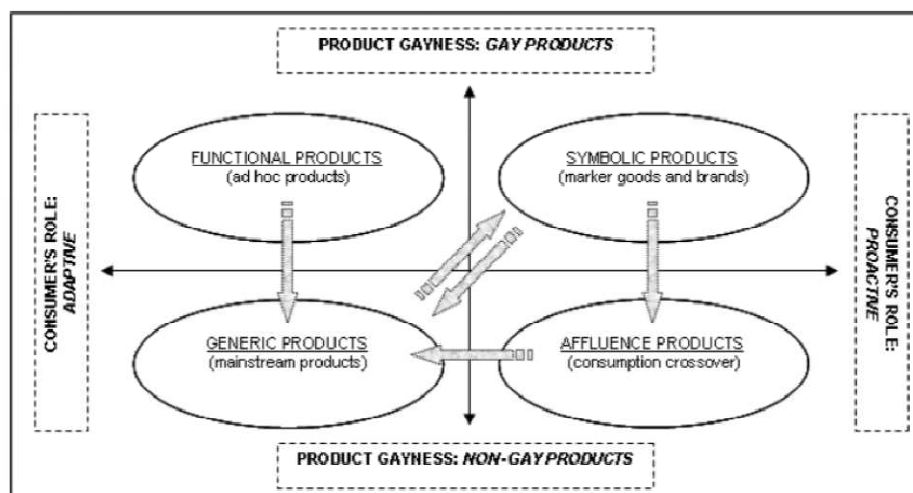


Fig. 4: A dynamic model of gay/mainstream product categories (Visconti, 2008: 123).

3. Research Method

This study was conducted with two main research goals: to examine the identity of the group and to examine the consumption pattern of the group.

The research was mainly conducted through the “ethnographic interview” method, focusing on consumption experience and market-oriented ethnography (McCracken, 1988; Anrould and Wallendorf, 1994).

As for the interview conduction, particular attention was paid to Thompson, Locander and Pollio’s method (1989: 138).

Twenty interviews have been conducted in Denmark and Italy (10 per country). Since my mother-tongue is Italian, I do not know Danish and most of the Danish population can speak in English, English was used as interview language in Denmark.

The geographical scope of the analysis is limited to Copenhagen for Denmark, and Milan and Brescia (and their districts) for Italy.

All interviewees were gay men over 54.

The investigation covers 5 months of field activity (July 2009 through December 2009). In accordance with the goals, I used an emic approach (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989: 140) as well as the knowledge I acquired through the full year I spent in Copenhagen as exchange student, and the years I spent in Milan.

Informants were recruited by networking through friends and casual acquaintances. The referring persons were asked to act as intermediaries in establishing the contact (snow balling technique).

The interview was designed (outlined) and conducted through a «general-to-particular» method. I started with generic and biographic-based questions to end with more emotional and sensitive ones.

The structure of the interview was followed as loosely as possible, allowing interviewees to set the pace. As new themes emerged, it was possible to explore them more deeply and to use them in the next interviews (Attachment: 6).

Interviews were audio recorded and converted into verbatim. The interviews were conducted both at the informant's dwellings and in public settings, depending on the informant's preference.

The interviewing process generated 167 pages of single-spaced transcripts.

During the research I used visual stimuli (5 advertisements) covering a wide range of advertising approaches. The visual stimuli were collected through the American website www.commercialcloset.org (4 out of 5), and a Danish gay magazine (1 out of 5).

Since being/looking old is a taboo topic in modern general and gay society (Tréguer and Segati, 2004: 149), I tried to choose a range of advertisings covering the most diverse uses of the word «old», in its direct or related meanings.

The first advertising is a social campaign issued by GayCity.Org (see appendix, attachment 1). It shows the image of a man about 70 years old. The man is smiling, standing in a pool, wearing swim goggles. There is a close up of his face; his chest and the pool are blurred. «Being old» is represented through a direct image of a single man with the underlying meaning of valuable/good. Keyword in the body copy: «older».

The second advertising was issued by «the preferred advisors for senior housing». It shows a heterosexual and a gay couple (the second one holding a rainbow kite in their hands). The focus is on couples as the only target (see appendix, attachment 2). The «being old» idea is represented as the end/start of a new and different cycle of life, clearly separated from youth. Clear links are made in the body copy between being old and specific/negative needs (e.g. assisted living). Keyword present in the body copy: «senior».

The third advertising deals with «active adult communities for America's gay and lesbian elite». Again, the visual stresses the idea of the couple, even if the image suggests an external main character: in fact both the lesbian and the gay couple are staring at the camera. The visual suggests openness to the other: one of the couples is interracial. A party/happy life/luxury feeling is suggested by summer clothes, big smiles and white wine in everybody's hand. An elegant font was used for the text to suggest refinement (see appendix, attachment 3). «Being old» is represented through images of party-acting couples in a mixed scenario (presumably one gay and one lesbian). The concept is represented as a

real possibility to achieve a new status (from working life to party/relax life) or simply continuing the «party life» of younger people. Keyword present in the body copy: «adult».

The fourth advertising promotes a tequila. Three young guys lay on a sofa eating popcorns. The guys are watching TV. The colours are warm. The upper half of the visual is occupied by the product and the pay off, reporting a wordplay suggesting a benefit in being older: «A little bit older, a whole lot bolder» (see appendix, attachment 4). «Being old» is not present through images nor direct word meaning. The concept is represented as an abstract good quality but linked to a specific kind of thing (liqueur). Keyword in the body copy: «old/bold» as wordplay.

The fifth advertising is about a gay social network. The visual is very clean, colours are cold. A young guy is looking at the camera, smiling, holding a notebook, wearing a pair of glasses. The pay off says: «Perhaps he is online right now...». A «what if you see someone your age in his place?» question was asked during the interview about this advertising (see appendix, attachment 5). «Being old» concept is totally not present. The product is not linked to a possible over-55 audience. No keyword are present.

Another source of secondary data was the research of advertising aimed at the senior target in gay papers, both Italian and Danish (the monthly magazines «Pride» and «Clubbing» for Italy and the monthly magazine «Out&About» for Denmark). The research covered the last 4 years. This particular research conducted to zero results.

Composition of the sample.

Name	Country of Residence	Age	Working/Retired
Thomas E.	Denmark	66	Retired
Thomas	Denmark	74	Working Part-time
Renato	Denmark	64	Retired
Karl	Denmark	62	Working Part-time
Jorgen	Denmark	62	Working
Jens	Denmark	65	Working
Jam	Denmark	55	Working
Erik	Denmark	55	Working
Erick S.	Denmark	62	Working
Bjarne	Denmark	58	Working
Alessio	Italy	55	Working
Domenico	Italy	62	Retired
Giuliano	Italy	64	Retired
Gianni	Italy	61	Retired
Giovanni	Italy	59	Retired
G.	Italy	71	Retired
Luciano	Italy	62	Working
Mario	Italy	60	Working Part-time
Piero	Italy	55	Working
Pino	Italy	67	Retired

The analysis started at the end of the data collection as a process of coding, categorizing and abstracting the data (McCracken, 1988; Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989). Coded data were compared, contrasted and reduced to emerging themes. Both redundancy and variety were used as criteria to build theoretical insight (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994: 494). The «findings» section integrates the themes in a unified discussion.

4. Findings

As anticipated in the project description, the findings will be presented through the category of identity and consumption. Even if they ideally refer to sociology and marketing, they must not be intended as separated categories.

4.1 Identity in Gay Men Over 54

4.1.1 Age: Biological, Perceived and Imaginary

All the interviewees stated to feel younger than their biological age in a measure of, at least, minus 10 years. The lack of energy has been stressed by almost everybody as the main change about their body, while “getting ugly” was reported by only a few of them.

It is interesting to notice that only one interviewee, the one who focused on sexual contacts as his current-age main activity, strongly stressed to feel ugly because of his age.

“Well, regarding my body it is very sad to perceive that I am old, while I am walking through the room or when I get up from bed. It is agonizing to feel the ageing, to perceive it for the first time as a progressing process, that is very agonizing, it makes me feel very desperate.” Gianni, 61.

“Have it shorter” was the solution to the energy lack for most of the activities. The sample showed to be totally unwilling to match the classical third age stereotype of people renouncing to have a normal life. On the contrary, they showed to maintain the “young age” activities they liked. Getting old is experienced as a very real process, very inevitable, maybe even very complicated by some disease but, at the same time, also as something that can be managed. Being old is definitely not “the end of the world”, and proved not so scary as it was anticipated in youth. The verb “to renounce” was totally absent in their dictionary.

“Well, my body is beginning to seriously deteriorate. Because of the age, because of my HIV and so on. Earlier on I liked to walk for hours in the woods and I can’t do that anymore so I take shorter trips. But for me that’s not... it doesn’t close anything down, it just changes things.” Karl, 62.

“When I was close to be 50 of age I could feel in my body that I had to do some adjustments in my life if I wanted to get old, because I was tired and it was not like it was before [...]” Bjarne, 58.

Summarizing their self-perception, they did not see themselves as diverse because of their old age (why should they?), they just became more mature gay men. Since changes were naturally incremental, they did not experience the vertigo of change.

“I think it’s a normal process. Things that you can do at 25, when you are 40...You don’t have interests... You have other priorities, I think so... I think it’s so funny you don’t say: “Ok, now I’m old, I’ve to change”: it happens! And also my work when I was 40, then I changed, but now when I reached 60 I didn’t change the place but my daily tasks... I said then I have to change but it’s not because of the age... it’s because of you. For me it has been a more automatic change.” Jorgen, 62.

An inner peace is the great goal accomplished by almost everyone. As reported above, interviewees stated to care less about age and normal concerns characterizing their younger age (e.g. people’s opinion).

“I think I’m more... I’m feeling more peaceful in the inside.” Renato, 64.

“I mean, when I was 30 a refusal hurt me more than now, and I almost think I had more refusals when I was 25/30 than now. Maybe it is also because now I can judge people better.” Luciano, 62.

Experience is sometimes reputed to be the most powerful reason of this inner peace. The sample appeared to have a better understanding of life and a deeper understanding of the “social game”. They now know better, how and with whom, than when they were 25.

“No, it’s because I’ve a good health and I don’t feel old. Of course I can see when I look in the mirror that I am not 25 years old any longer but... I don’t feel old. Actually many young people are older than me inside because... I know so many things I didn’t know before so... I can make my opinions and when I look at the world I can... it’s easier for me to see what is bad and what is good because I’ve experienced so much.” Jens, 65

“As for frustration connected with my age... well, yes, I can feel it, even if I do not make a drama about it. As for gay life... nothing to say, because I am talking about the body, which is deteriorating, but this is a problem which is the same for everybody. As for the gay side... nothing comes into my mind, also because, if we consider human realization, my life has been like an ascending parabola. Wisdom, which increased over the years, gave me a lot of courage I had not before.” Piero, 55.

Age is perceived as no longer a taboo. An age crisis was reportedly experienced in a younger age: for some around their 40th birthday, for some later.

“The only drama I remember was when I was 40, I thought: “This is the worst day in my life” but since... [getting older] it didn’t disturb me [further]... 50... 60...” Thomas, 74.

The “forever young” ideal of modern society, which is particularly stressed in gay culture, shows through the interviews only indirectly. A “this is it?” feeling was very perceivable when interviewees were asked about describing age changes: becoming old when they were 30 was scarier than being old now. The much debated age problem appeared therefore to be more concern for younger people.

The interviews also revealed a “point of no return” approach to age: when interviewees passed a certain and personal age threshold (the age crisis) anxiety related to age increment disappeared. They still experienced some discomfort facing the mirror and their image, but they no longer experienced anxiety about the overall problem.

We can affirm that the age crisis corresponded to the realisation of no longer belonging to the category of the socially defined “winners”. “Is it over? So I don’t want to play anymore” was the feeling showing through the interviews. As an interviewee put it: “I care less about people’s opinion now”, which can be interpreted as: the interviewees stopped to care about rules defining who is a winner and who is a loser in social shared reality.

In contrast with this inner peace there is a strong refusal to recognize themselves in the widespread imagery of advertising concerning elder people. When asked about products advertised for their age group, most of them could not remember any. When insisting on this category, some Italians recalled only products with negative associations (e.g. lack of

autonomy, lack of social relations or lack of health). Moreover they virtually pushed away those images associating them to some generic and distant “older than me” group of people.

“Well, if I should take a look at according with my age class, I should watch the advertisings for the Polident [washing tabs for false teeth, editor’s note] and... things like that! Eheh! But, thanks god, I do not feel... although I had some accidents with dentists I still do not feel... [the need for it]” Mario, 60.

“Oh my god! It is all about negative stuff! Incontinence, deafness... that is the only kind of stuff targeted to the elderly. There is nothing pleasant. Nobody says “trips for seniors!”. You’d first die, before you can find any such ad! Such as, I do not know, some pubs, some places where they invites seniors and they say “Come, you will have fun!”... No, just illness and things like that!” Pino, 67.

A curious phenomenon comes here to light. It seemed, in fact, that the sample made the same mistake of the younger generation. As the younger, they identified inability and bad characteristics belonging to ageing with a group of people older than them. The only difference here is the age, the “bad group” is significantly older than 54-75.

If we take the biological age as the natural reality (the reality of physics), the sample appears to belong to a no-man’s land of the built reality (i.e. the reality built by social perception/reinterpretation). They are not young anymore but they are not so old as they are depicted by the consumption’s word. At the same time they have different needs, belonging to a “x-minus-10” [the self-perceived age] years old person with a physical ability of an “x” years old person. However, they are socially perceived as persons with a physical ability (or, better, inability) of an “x-plus-something” years old. The mismatch between these three ages is probably at the foundation of the exclusion feelings we will report later.

4.1.2 Coming Out and Commitment with the Gay Community

“[I’m out] about to everybody. And to be honest with you, after a few months after coming out I had to tell everybody.” Renato, 64.

“Gay yes, out no, I mean, not in my family, because my mother does not live with me, so I think it is unnecessary now... even if this is a situation where it would be easy to get to conclusions...” Mario, 60.

While everybody said to be “open” about his own homosexuality, a large part of the Italians specified to be open in the sense that others “might know”. More specifically Danish people demonstrated to be more active in voluntarily disclosing their homosexuality. This choice could be quite directly connected to the more advanced status of civil gay rights struggle in Denmark.

“At work I came out of the closet in the ‘70s. It was the trend of the moment to come out, it was fashionable.” Thomas E., 66.

Over 54 gay men showed an ambivalent approach towards the gay community. Very few of them though completely refused the idea of being related to the gay community. Some of them strongly criticized the gay community for different reasons. Again, the difference in status of civil gay rights struggle seems to be the discriminating variable between the two countries.

In Denmark people concentrated their critics on the disillusion they experienced with an expected solidarity within the gay community. Summarizing their experiences, they felt to have been left apart. “Having used” by the gay world was a complain which was not matched with the recognition of having been active actors, and users, of the same world.

In Italy instead, where the law currently does not even allow heterosexual civil unions, most of the critics were targeted to the Italian Gay Association, the main gay voice in the political Italian arena.

“Eh... is there a gay community? Eh eh... No, that’s a bit harsh to say... In my opinion there is not really a gay community. There is a young community, there is a community of older people who close themselves around themselves, there is Sabaah for example [a gay Danish association supporting LGBT people with ethnic backgrounds other than Danish n.d.r.], which I think is also the good, but there is not “community”, if you see what I mean...” Karl, 62.

“Is there the gay community? I can’t see it, they just look after bullshit. Italian gays are totally immature, they go shopping for Dolce&Gabbana, which made the most anti gay statements ever made, which support this government even if it is the most reactionary we ever had, and so on.” Mario, 60.

It is also true that people who totally denied the existence of a gay community were the same ones who had never any political involvement in any gay association or debate.

Anyway, the majority of the interviewees stated they felt committed to the gay community and the cause of civil gay rights, but also admitted they were not doing anything for it apart from participating to important public events such as the gay pride parade. Most of them said to be willing to do more if only they knew where and when. Again, this “if only I knew where and when” shows a feeling of exclusion whose causes deserve to be investigated. A wrong communication from the associations, internal psychological barriers or the fact the sample does not recognize himself in the concept of “gay community” could be the most logical causes.

4.1.3 Everyday Life

Due to the wide range of the age variable and the different Italian and Danish legislation it is not possible to outline a common and meaningful trend about people and their work. Nonetheless, whether working or retired, the sample appeared to lead a very busy life.

None of the interviewees was complaining about too much spare time or lack of activities. Some shared interests emerged, though, since cultural activities (reading books, followed by going to concerts, watching movies and visiting places) are the most quoted in both countries. Physical activity (walking, gym and swimming) is widespread only in the Danish sample, but the year I spent there showed me its diffusion all over the Danish people. With those interests the interviewees recreated a sort of “working schedule”. Most of them did not leave any space to random activities. As said above, “reading” was the most frequently quoted solitary activity, cinema and dinner were the common activities with friends. A special mention must be reserved to “conversation” with friends. Summarizing, the main efforts were directed to a sort of an inward growth, through the cultural activities, rather than an outward one. As a matter of fact, even gym was an experience lived more as a social gathering place rather than a place to improve one’s body’s appeal.

D: “We spend our days almost always in the same way, we can say they are monotonous. We get up in the morning, we do the housework, we go for grocery shopping... During the first part of the afternoon we have generally more spare time, and we spend it reading or promenading. Sometimes by feet, sometimes we take the

car, we go out and we go visiting stuff... We like to visit museums, sometimes, or visit unseen places, but not very far from home. Even towns, sometimes, or small cities, not very distant. This is it, concerning the weekly life, generally there are not so many alternatives.” Domenico and Giuliano, 62 and 64.

“[...] I go to work every day and after work I row in a canoe club in XXX and I see friends and I have friends for dinner and I date and I have regular lovers and... that’s it!” Bjarne, 58.

“Oh... yes, I wake up very early and I do the same things every day, procedure things, that takes me one hour. I like to go to the gym and I like to swim... <as> often as I can I go to the ocean and I bike a lot and I make food, I’m a very good cook.” Erick S., 55

“[...] if we consider a typical day... during the morning I do some sport or I go to the swimming pool, or to the gym. Then, during the afternoon, I rest, read, go for grocery shopping... and during the evening I meet friends or I go out.” Thomas E., 66.

Only a few people completely re-oriented their life after they retired, either by increasing their involvement in a previous interest or by studying and applying themselves to a completely new field. Reorientation was acted by this group after a “urge” feeling. Again, the supremacy of an inward growth was stated against any other external locus of interest.

“[...] when I got in my late 50’s... I’ve got strong concern... almost excited that I needed to do something in my life before I got too old... and what came out of that was to do some academic world. I needed to do a PhD in theology, and I looked around Europe where I could do the best with my languages and so on... And I went to the UK, where I got the best deal... Financially and everything it was free there, so I’ve got my PhD in UK in 2006, and I’ve spent another year in UK doing postgraduate work in theology... Then my money was out.” Renato, 64.

It is interesting to notice the different paths the interviewees followed in redirecting their activities. While the last interviewee followed the rule of the internal growth described before, the forthcoming interviewee, experiencing pressing sexual urgencies, applied himself to a strictly sex-related activity.

“Yes, well, in my opinion, I need money in order to travel, go to hotels, spend my weekends in a hotel in Milan, live in Madrid, in Berlin, spend winter at the Canary Islands, I need money to pay all these things so I increased a lot my consumptions and I spend... mmm... quite a lot of money. I am doing everything I was not able to do before! Even if this can be like a real job! Because travelling is tiring: staying there, moving... I did not do it before, I have to do it now.” Gianni, 61.

It is also interesting to notice that this interviewee was the same who experienced discomfort with his external image and one of the few who admitted to put into action a kind of virtualization of his image (through beauty related activities) in order to comply with a younger society.

“Well, luckily I successfully become more “virtual”. I cut my grey hairs, I dye my goatee... Therefore, if someone looks at me in a back room [cruising places patronized, editor’s note] he cannot see my wrinkles and he can even find me interesting, attractive & re. And maybe he does not realize I am almost 62 and he thinks I’m 50, 48, 49.” Gianni, 61.

It is curious to notice the total absence of a “guilt feeling”. The “sexual fraud” is not something to be worried about, it is instead perceived as normal, something to be proud of.

While not directly cited, a feeling of “I am not dead already!” emerged. The interviewees showed to fill up their days in order to have always something to do.

“It’s normal, when you stop working you don’t have the same amounts of human contacts anymore. In general because work provides lots of stimuli. This means that, when you stop working, you have to invent them, and force yourself in order to have those stimuli. If you don’t do that, there is the risk you get isolated in your private life; this is why I tend to go out every morning, so I can meet somebody, nowadays life is life with others. It’s the same about... sexual contacts... it becomes more difficult... and this is, of course, a loss. This is something you have to get used to... you have to live with it, I think... eh eh...”. Thomas E., 66.

The characteristics of the new area of interests reported above (culture, friends etc.) and the behaviour we shall report later (sex meetings mediated by Internet, gay life lived through

subcultures) reveal a clear shift in the actions aimed at building and sustaining the identity: from a predominance of sets of external related items (young, body, appearance etc.) to sets of internal related ones (culture, conversation, relations etc.). This is in direct opposition to the values of mainstream gay culture. Gay life (seen as completely overlapping mainstream gay culture) is therefore seen as “something for young people”. This feeling will be lately expressed as “exclusion” or “exile”.

“Well, at this point of time I don’t do a lot of gay life. When I was in my 30’s I would have gone out, participating in something at least once a week or going out with some friends in the weekends... always there was being something happening. Right now my priorities are a little different.” Renato, 65.

Yet, as we shall see later, gay life is not totally a “forbidden land” for gay men over 54. Thanks to some gay subcultures (specifically bear and leather), gay life has still a part in their life.

4.1.4 Social Relations and Sexual Life

Most of the interviewees created along the years a “chosen family” (Thomas Elkjer, 66). Excluding some interviewees living in a couple, which used the word “family” exclusively for their partners, most of the others indicated one to three “very close” friends.

“I’ve one friend with whom I spare and I share all my thoughts and so on and that’s enough for me. [...] I’ve one friend to whom I know I can say everything: what I’m feeling, my frustrations, when I’m sad and... That’s enough for me. I couldn’t imagine not to have such a friend.” Jorgen, 62.

In those chosen families the physical bonds deriving from the experience of living together, which is common in traditional families, is substituted by institutionalized rituals consisting in virtual meetings (e.g. phone calls) or real meetings (e.g. going to a specific bar, or to a weekly dinner).

“I’ve two to three very very close friends who I talk with every day, almost, and I visit them fairly regularly. Which is once or twice a week.” Karl, 62.

G: "Then, we have some friends who call us every day. A friend from Milan, a friend from... Teramo, who actually should have called us already..." Domenico and Giuliano, 62 and 64.

Friends appeared to be both homosexual and heterosexual, even if the majority of the interviewees said to have more gay close friends.

While the predilection of chosen rather than family bonds could be inferred also for straight people over 54, such a preference shows to have stronger causes in the gay population. In heterosexual families, new generations play a very important role in naturally bonding the individuals together. And since adoption and artificial insemination still play a very marginal role among gay couples, very rarely such bond exists. And since in old age is rather normal to have lost both parents, that not everybody has a partner to get old with, and that second or third level family bonds are usually weaker, we can easily understand why for gay people building chosen bonds is more imperative.

Yet, taking examples from my transcripts, reality appears to be (not surprisingly) more complicated. For almost everybody, the "chosen family" was a mix of friends and relatives. Interviewees who had sister(s)/brother(s) said to be very attached to them or, in some cases, to have a close relation with a nephew/niece. In those cases, being the uncle/friend was experienced as a very strong bond.

"There is my partner... which is also my husband (well, not in Italy! Eh eh!), and my niece too." Piero, 55.

"Family: I have a sister, which left tonight for Australia. I have a niece in Milan I am very attached to. So, if something should happens to me... Then I've some other nephews in Lombardy but not in Milan. As for friends, there is one who lives close to my place, he lives with another guy, but we are friends, we see each other almost every day." Pino, 67.

Involvement of heterosexual friends with their family is often the reason reported to justify the higher frequency of meeting with gay friends:

"Maybe I see gay friends more than my ordinary friends... Yes, because a lot of them are singles, like I am. Because my other friends, they have children, and so on, and

they have many other activities, so they don't have the same spare time I have.”
Jorgen, 62.

Sex is still seen as a normal part of everybody's life. Although it was not so important as before, even the more “peaceful inside” interviewee admitted to experience sexual urges, from time to time.

“Well... sexually speaking I'm not interested in one-night-stands any longer, or anything of that kind. Of course I've my needs and sometimes... eh eh...” Karl, 62.

Almost everybody reported surprise in approaching their sexuality as elderly. Specifically, they were so “dipped” in the young culture (which denies any sexual appeal, or even a sexuality, for older people) that when they got older, the discover of being a “very interesting target” was astonishing. Furthermore the classical widespread stereotype of the elder who only likes younger people is rejected. In this field, the web sites mentioned before and friends play an important role in finding a partner.

“You see, I discovered there was a new gay life when I reached 40. I discovered (and I am such a pessimist), a segment, I mean, people quite young, around 25-30/40, interested in older people. It was a world I never met before, I never got in before. I was sure that, at some point in my life, because I like people who are much younger than me, they would have no longer been interested in me. When I found out that there was such a big “market”, I started to look for it. It's a particular segment... I cannot say it is big like the mainstream one, but it exists! We can say that, after my 40, I started to have more fun than before. This is my personal experience.” Piero, 55.

“[...] Now I know that there's no limit of age, I mean you don't have to think: “For now love and all his thing the time is finished for you...” Because I didn't know so many who liked older! This is something very positive!” Thomas, 74.

“I fuck more. I have more sex than before, to say it coarsely.” Mario, 60.

Here, again, caring less about people's opinion eased the life of over-54 people.

“I couldn't... I wouldn't gay that... I feel that my sexuality is getting better with my age than before than I had the age and the possibility.” Thomas, 74.

Yet something can still go wrong. Younger admirers showed to expect senior people to be over aged, collapsing into a single stereotype (the old man with wrinkles & re.) a very diverse group of people, acting as there was a publicly shared image about a mythical “old men” group. That fantasy includes images of visibly elderly people, or persons embodying the stereotype of “old daddies”, an image and a role some interviewees did neither have, nor accept.

“It is that people don’t believe that I have the age I say...: “No, you are much younger!”. And maybe sometimes a guy is maybe 45 and he wants “grown up man”, and he sees my age and he says: “Oh, you are the type because you are... the dad”, and things like that and he comes and usually we have fun together. Sometimes he comes and he says: “Oh no, you are not the age you said, you are younger, sorry, sorry, I thought you were older”.” Jorgen, 62.

The interviewees were therefore discriminated twice. They were not young enough to be part of the mainstream gay world, but they did not even have the look of what an elderly should be in the eye of a younger person. As reported above, a frustration feeling was sometimes reported about those clichés.

Anyway, the relation between elderly who like younger people and young people is often problematic. A (logical) frustration is showed in refused elderly, but an ambivalent feeling was also reported in senior people who had a younger partner for years. In this latter case, the gap between the external image and the internal vision of themselves played, again, a dominant role.

As reported in the section 4.1.3, senior people normally established the pre-eminence of the inward self-image over external appearances/judgments, but in this case, the clash between internal image and the social (external) opposite/winning image, because of the continuous confrontation with a younger partner, can be overcome only through some further struggle.

“When I am with him [his boyfriend, editor’s note] I cannot feel my age anymore. When I see myself embracing him in the mirror, I see myself as a little bit older, but when I am with him I do not feel old anymore.” Giovanni, 59.

4.1.5 Feeling of Exclusion, New Socialization

Only the Danish part of the sample openly reported a feeling of exclusion from what they considered “the gay community”.

“That’s one of the things that frustrate me in the gay community: you have to be young! Which is totally nonsense, in my opinion!” Karl, 62.

“There’s one thing that occurred to me... coming into a bar and looking around and some young people looking away from you, just because you are old. I’m trying to get used to it, but I find it difficult to accept. I understand why, but I still don’t understand why he can’t just look me in the eyes, and then don’t look a second time. But why don’t they want to look even once!” Renato, 64.

But in these cases the need of new socialization is solved by putting a virtual media between them and the others. Specifically, by means of both mainstream and specific gay oriented web sites.

“When you get 55 plus you feel that you are invisible when you go out... You are not so attractive on the market any longer, but as I told you... I think I can get what I want on that website... SilverDaddies.” Jens, 65.

The exclusion feeling has to be attributed to two causes, one related to the community’s culture and the other related to the mainstream gay venues’ settings. The first one is the total indifference showed by the crowd of gay mainstream places. The second is the inability of gay venues’ settings to support the changed needs of gay over 54 (e.g. conversation).

The former need relates to culture, therefore there are no short term decisions that can be acted in order to ease such a feeling. We cannot force younger people to speak to older ones as we are not judging this behaviour. A “solution” could be a social campaign under the patronage of gay associations or some national organism (i.e. see appendix, attached 1, showed to the interviewees as conversation material).

However, the latter need refer to the physical setting, therefore short term decisions could be acted in order to ease the exclusion feeling. Here the “solution” could be tailored through a focused survey aimed at defining these particular needs.

“Yes but Oscar for me... I’ve been there but it’s a long long time ago, to have a beer together with some people, but... I don’t feel... Your eyes don’t get in contact... I like places where you can talk <to> each other, there were 2 or 4 sitting there for themselves... They don’t.... <have> interested in coming...” Thomas, 74.

“Yes, both gay places and... But not discotheques, just cafés, because... I want to have contact with them and talk with them but no one of them, are my sexual partners... they are just friends. [...] It’s mostly Café Oscar... there’s also a café in Frederiksberg, called Café Intime, and... it’s not so focused on young people so... But if you want to make sex strategy, I think the best is to go to SilverDaddies and all the others, because I can feel I’m more invisible than I was before.” Jens, 55.

The part of the Danish sample not experiencing (or in order to avoid experiencing) this “exclusion” adopted three further solutions:

1. Patronizing no sexually oriented public places (mainstream) but **only** with friends.
2. Patronizing gay mainstream places but **only** with friends.
3. Patronizing gay places oriented to sub niches of the gay niche target. The sub gay niches reported were specifically the leather ones.

“Yes, I do that, but in another way than when I was younger. When I was younger I went to the bars to find a guy but... that’s not a good strategy for me any longer. I really can feel I’m plus 55, it’s more difficult, so... it’s better for me to use web sites. There’s a very good website called...” Jens, 65.

“During the week end I go... there is a club for leather men that... I find there... Because I don’t like normal <gay> places during the week end because they are almost all for younger people. But there is always this club for... we can say it has a bigger audience.” Thomas E., 66.

On the other hand the Italian group did directly express exclusion feelings. This could be linked to the fact they were not patronizing gay mainstream places. As a matter of fact, they showed the tendency to patronize, in the gay scene, only places with an over 30 crowd, and publicly targeted to the “bear” target.

Why these two specific subcultures? And why leather in Denmark, and bear in Italy? In order to answer to this question we have to clear up the differences between the two subcultures. Using Wikipedia (English version) and my emic approach, here there are two very synthetic definitions.

4.1.5.1 Leather Subculture

Wikipedia states:

“The leather subculture denotes practices and styles of dress organized around sexual activities and hedonistic eroticism ("kink"). Wearing leather garments is one way that participants in this culture self-consciously distinguish themselves from mainstream sexual cultures. Leather culture is most visible in gay communities and most often associated with gay men ("leathermen"), but it is also reflected in various ways in the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and straight worlds. [...] many people associate leather culture with BDSM (Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, Sado/Masochism, also called "SM" or "S&M") practices and its many subcultures. But for others, wearing black leather clothing is an erotic fashion that expresses heightened masculinity or the appropriation of sexual power; love of motorcycles and independence; and/or engagement in sexual kink or leather fetishism.”⁴

As my personal experience, people who embraced this subculture ostentatiously rejected mainstream gay culture symbols such as camp, effeminacy etc. Besides, leather culture refuses the “only for young” rule, showing more respect and assigning sexual dignity to the gay population over “40”.

Moreover we can say that the presence of BDSM features allow the relation between an older and a younger person, usually banned in the gay mainstream culture. By so saying, I am not implying the prevalence of any specific roles defined by age. I am just stating that the slave/master relation allows partners to break the distance normally present between two people having a large age difference, since it bases the relation on a set of rules which are different from those that the mainstream gay culture provides.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leather_subculture consulted on February the 5th, 2010.

4.1.5.2 Bear Subculture

Wikipedia states:

“Bear is LGBT slang for those in the bear communities, a subculture in the gay/bisexual male communities and an emerging subset of LGBT communities with events, codes and culture-specific identity. It also describes a physical type.

Bears tend to have hairy bodies and facial hair; some are heavy-set; some project an image of working-class masculinity in their grooming and appearance, though none of these are requirements or unique indicators. Some bears place importance on presenting a hyper masculine image and may shun interaction with, and even disdain, men who exhibit effeminacy. The bear concept can function as an identity, an affiliation, and an ideal to live up to, and there is ongoing debate in bear communities about what constitutes a bear, however a consensus exists that inclusion is an important part of the Bear Community.”⁵

As my personal experience and as reported above from Wikipedia, also this subculture rejects (at least formally) effeminacy and its symbols. Importantly, those symbols are often associated with mainstream young gay guys (especially fashion victims). The same category to which mainstream gay places are told to cater to by my interviewee. Furthermore, bear subculture welcomes the “daddy type”.

Again from Wikipedia:

“Daddy bear - is an older guy sometimes looking for a daddy/son relationship with either a younger Bear, Cub, Otter, Wolf or Chaser.”

A detail worth mentioning is that in its Italian version only, bear culture is well known for encouraging a more talkative ambient setting, and for being more “laid down” than the mainstream gay culture, the latter reported to be very arrogant and patronized by very unwelcoming patrons.

“Well, about bears... just imagine the classical bear, rugged, more or less furry, but the most important thing is that they look... satisfied/happy... So maybe they give you

⁵ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bear_\(gay_culture\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bear_(gay_culture)) consulted on February the 5th, 2010.

this impression of strength, power but then, you talk with them or see them from away and you realize they are... sweet... These are the main characteristics. I can tell you, I don't go crazy for them. They are nice if they are nice, but my boyfriend likes them particularly. I mean, even if he just sees them walking, they inspire sympathy to him. Maybe just because they look like real bears, and they are voluminous... they waggle while walking... that's it. The environment is nice, well, yes. [...] We can say that the target is quite mature. I would say it is a laid down place, I mean, we do not go there in order to cruise, we are laid down. If there is some particular happening like a happy hour, than we go there... but not just for that." Alessio, 55.

It is here also more interesting to note in the quotation above the motivation of patronizing. The interviewee clearly stated not to "go crazy" for bears, but to strongly like the environment.

After pointing to the differences between the two subculture we can try to answer to the following question: why "leather" in Denmark and "bear" in Italy? While bear subculture is more widespread in southern Europe than the leather one, which on its run is more widespread in Northern Europe. In fact, there are no leather bar in Milan, nor any bear bars in Copenhagen, therefore our sample showed to adapt their needs to the most welcoming subculture in their own town.

As for exclusion feeling, another source of it had to be stimulated in order to surface for both Danish and Italians. The consumption world (both heterosexual and gay) was not initially perceived by the sample as excluding. However, that happened only because they did not consider themselves as different from the widespread stereotype of the 20-30 years mainstream target. Yet, after being stimulated by reproductions of American advertising aimed at gay senior people, the exclusion feeling surfaced. It seemed they suddenly awakened from the illusion of being represented by the usual type of people depicted by advertising, realizing they were not. At the same time they could not mention any advertising for elderly they could recall. This indirectly confirmed they do not recognize themselves in that imagery, while they would, instead, recognize in the younger one.

Their feeling could be summarized in the sentence: "A really old person is not me. He is someone my age plus, at least, 1 year." As a consequence the interviewee will never be old

enough to feel represented by that imagery. The same phenomenon reported in the section 4.1.1 resurfaces here. Despite the “internal peace”, again the bad characteristics belonging to ageing are pushed towards an external group of people. The difference between this process acted by the young generation and the over 54 one is that, in the latter case, the lower age limit of the “bad group” is at least higher than 74 years old (the oldest person of the sample was 74). In both cases, the cause for this phenomenon can be found in the need to exorcise various physical inabilities, or even death.

While asking “What if you saw someone in your age group in that ad?”, the sample started to wonder why it was not already like that.

“In the straight context it’s easier, I think. I have joined a major association in this country that is for senior citizen over 60, and I’m very happy to be there because they put out a newsletter and have different advertising of discount... That’s very nice, because there are people of my age as models... so I feel pretty much at home there...When it comes to gays... I find there’s little space for people over 60. Very little, actually. And in advertising <it> is minimum. So I feel I’m slightly in exile when I look at gay advertising... I feel like... an outsider.” Renato, 64.

It is interesting to notice that the interviewee above, even not considering normal advertising for elderly as representing, found a real group of people in his age “very nice”. In general, all the interviewees demonstrated to befriend people of their age without feeling stressed by any kind of “self-mirroring” age matters. This can demonstrate how advertising targeted to the elderly could be ill-conceived, not allowing a real self-identification with the people in them.

Another possible cause of the hidden “exclusion feeling” shown above, can be explained through the “alienation theory”. Alienation theory suggests that, when a person shows a particular characteristic (in this case age, but it could be any social stigma, such as a gay sexual orientation & re.), society establishes a set of parameters that indicate his/her role in society.

According to Burnett (2000: 77):

“Alienated people find themselves living in a society that has already determined who they are (e.g., black, female, retired, disabled, gay) and what they are (e.g., lacking enterprise or intelligence, lacking rationality, being generally useless, or behaving immorally). [...] Unfortunately, over time the alienated individual often accepts his or her assigned role and cooperates willingly – behaviour referred to as “learned helplessness.”

Moreover, Schmitt and Moody (1994) and LaForge (1989) used alienation theory to explain why elderly do not complain about unsatisfactory consumption situations.

Through these studies we can further notice how strong is the refusal expressed by the sample about mainstream-imposed stereotypes. Not only they do not identify themselves in the current “elderly-aimed” advertising, but they also do not show uncomfortable with “normal” (displaying young and beautiful people) advertising.

4.1.6 Vision about the National Setting and the Younger Generations

The biggest differences between Italy and Denmark surfaced when asking about the national setting. While the Danish used words like “tradition of free speech, same rights, openness, very liberal, open minded” referring to a broad context, Italians just had pejorative words. “Moral degrade” was a common way to describe the current Italian situation. Most of them reported the delay in the gay civil right struggle as the main cause for anger against their country.

As for the younger generations (people in their 20’s and 30’s) the sample manifested a feeling of understanding or even of worry for them. The sample felt the world to be both an easier place to live in, because of the Internet, but also a harder one, because of AIDS. The outburst of AIDS, in particular, was remembered as a great problem affecting the sample’s approach to sexuality, and almost everybody pity the younger generation about it.

“Well... nowadays the biggest difference between the young generation is and mine is AIDS. This lies heavy on your way of being. For example, now it is normal to start a sexual life later than before. Instead, I started when I was very young, but I was not

the only one at that time. It was normal for heterosexual as well as for gay people.”
G., 59.

The era before AIDS was recalled as a kind of golden era of “free sex”. All the other sexually transmitted diseases were not even mentioned, showing how much the outburst of AIDS was experienced as a trauma.

“I think... I have the advantage. When I had their age I could do everything that I wanted. Of course you have safe sex and so on but... talk to them sometimes over chat and so on, they have a lot of problems that we didn’t have, because... For example AIDS that was not...

It came later in my life, but not before I had tried what I wanted to try. But now you can chat with people and very often they ask me... And sometimes I’m a little bit scared for the kind of problems they have. So... I didn’t know these problems when I was 20... it was free love and... so on... It was nice.” Jorgen, 62.

Experiencing life as a continuous flow, the sample described the younger generation as always craving for the week end, and criticized it for their alcohol “abuse”. Mobiles, clothes and I-pod are the products most commonly mentioned while talking about the younger generation.

4.2 Consumption

4.2.1 Media Consumption

Television is not the favourite media for gay people over 54. Newspapers, magazines, books and movies are the most cited media by both groups. The Internet is a part of the standard package of the Danish sample and it is used like an all-in-one media (news, social network, radio etc.).

“Media? I listen to the radio everyday through my computer, and I also watch the news as often as I can and I listen to music. I’m very fan of listening to classical concert<s>, opera and so...” Erik S., 55.

“Internet and television. When I come home... To be polite, now my pc is switched off, but when I come home the first thing I do when I come home is turn on the pc.

Three hours per day, maybe. My television is a part of my apartment. Maybe it's running, but very often I do a lot of other things, then I can hear it. Very often in the beginning of the evening I press the record button so when I go to bed I can decide if I want to see <it later>. I'm more active, I'm more present with my computer than with my television. Television is more like a background." Jorgen, 62.

It is interesting to notice how the use of the computer is firmly perceived as indistinct from the use of Internet. It is also interesting to underline that the use of Internet is always quoted as a part of daily rituals, like the morning one.

In the Italian sample the access to the Internet is not so spread as in the Danish one. However, those people who use it are very heavy users. People who do not use it are willing to start, and all of them are strongly thinking about taking some lessons.

D: "We do not have internet yet, but we are thinking about it. Being something new, I found always difficult to approach it. It always happens when it comes to digital stuff! We are a little scared... but we have to take this decision!" Domenico and Giuliano, 62 and 64.

Gay papers are always experienced as background media, and little attention is spent over them. If we take for true what the sample stated and I reported in the section 4.1.2 (they feel committed to the gay community), this could mean that gay papers spend less space on gay political events than in other topics. Since gay papers follow mainstream gay culture, again, the thesis of an exclusion by the language and the imagery is confirmed.

"Yes, I take the free gay press sometimes, while patronizing some gay places, I take them when they are for free, I never buy them. [...] I take a look to them because I am curious... or just to be up to date." Luciano, 62.

Another confirming clue is the fact that Danish people experienced as a pleasant surprise, at the time of the interviews, the reception of a new issue, after many years, of the house organ of the national LGBT association of Denmark in Copenhagen.

4.2.2 Relation with Advertising

The relation with advertising is two sided. In both national groups, people who experienced a strong fear to be influenced by advertising stated to feel annoyed by it and to try to avoid it in all ways (moving to the kitchen while on television, switching the channel, skimming etc.). The satisfaction of the needs in these cases is strongly stated to be linked to the personal needs.

“I’ve this thing about advertising that if it touches me then I don’t want to have anything to do about it because they are manipulating my emotions and still I’m affected by... I can’t get rid of it...” Bjarne, 58.

“Because I buy things when I buy thing, not because of advertising but because I know exactly what I want.” Karl, 62.

In general, the sample stated to precisely know what they want, not to need any kind of “suggestion” and not to want to lose time shopping.

On the other hand, people who did not experience fear about advertising said to watch it without problems. Ironic and smart advertisings are appreciated by everyone, even if the brand recall is almost never present.

“No, I really do not pay attention to it, never. If there is some advertising that impresses me, it is because it’s witty, smart & re. In that case I laugh, I remember it.” Gianni, 61.

Gay advertising is perceived as distant and oversexed. A “what if” question about over 54 people in gay advertising was always welcomed with interest and approval, and sometimes even enthusiasm. Of course all of the interviewees were aware of the importance of sexual appeal in advertising, but a charming man over 40 was often cited by the interviewees as a possible very interesting alternative to the muscular-young-guy (current) testimonial.

“Yes, it would catch my attention and in a different way because here I just think “oh, another one of those...” But if it was a sort of Sean Connery... elderly... Marlon Brando... uh...” Jam, 55. [about the possibility to see people over 54 in advertising, editor’s note]

The “old times” in advertising were often mentioned. The sample, Italian and Danish, said to miss or to have felt more at ease with advertisings in their youth. It is possible to infer from the interviews that the language/imagery used now is aimed at young people, so that the elderly have difficulties in understanding/accepting it. This, with the fact they do not feel represented by current elderly-aimed advertisings, confirms that this group of people belongs to a “no-one’s land” in the socially built reality.

4.2.3 Mainstream Products

No one reported to buy age-designed products. Almost everybody expressed a difficult relationship with shopping. Almost everybody hated shopping for clothes, whereas food “shopping” for social occasions was an appreciated activity.

“What a boredom! I go shopping exclusively when I have to buy something and I know already what to buy. I am so sure about my taste that sometimes I make mistakes! Because I am too much in a hurry! As everything in my life, unfortunately. I already know what I have to buy: I go for it, I kill it and I come back!” Piero, 55.

D: “We buy less clothes compared to a long time ago. When we have to buy them, we wait until we really find the thing we like, at least this is what I do. Maybe we can visit five shops without buying anything, until we find something we really like or it suits us. We are more prudent compared to before, we think more before taking a decision.”

G: “It is also true that, compared to before, it is more difficult to find something that suits us. We always find stuff for perfect and slim bodies... if we try something it has always some problem in fitting. Because what we like does not fit us! So we have to adapt ourselves to buy what we can find...” Domenico and Giuliano, 62 and 64.

“No. I only like shopping for food. I shop myself or with family or friends...” Erik, 63.

This confirms again the thesis of the value shift from sets of external related items to sets of internal related ones (showing the reject of the “old” rules belonging to the mainstream (gay) culture). In fact, while clothes shopping belong to the outward, food can be associated to inward growth since sharing a dinner with friends was often cited and linked to this kind of shopping.

The only interviewee who said to love to shop specified to like to do it only “with my friends and also with my grandchildren.” (Thomas, 74).

Mainstream product advertisements winking to the gay target were, surprisingly, very often recalled by the Danish group when asked to remember gay ads. This happened also to scared-by-advertisements subjects, suggesting a very interesting way to communicate with this hard-to-reach target. Even if the sample reported not to have changed its consumption behaviour because of any special campaign, they always found these kind of advertising very interesting and funny and they were always able to recall the specific name of the brand. They did not recall any brand name in all other questions concerning experienced advertisements.

“I remember IKEA some years ago... had some... which I thought was great... they were not specific about it but there was no doubt that in the kitchen they were gay...” Bjarne, 58.

“Not for a gay product but I remember Politiken [the most important Danish newspaper, editor’s note], a newspaper. I remember some years ago an advertisement with two gays who were standing in the kitchen preparing food, and then things developed and then it was cut. It was a definitely gay advertisement but not for a gay product, it was an advertisement for the newspaper. But I had Politiken before and I had Politiken after.” Karl, 62.

4.2.4 Gay Related Products

When directly asked about gay product consumption, most of the sample showed not to understand or to refuse this specific category. Some answered abruptly with a “no”, some others asked back “What a gay product is?”. An indirect approach, though, was more successful. Exploring the habits related to meeting with friends, the majority of the sample admitted to have favourite gay bars. Meeting rituals with fixed time and places were often reported.

“I don’t think I do any special gay activities. [...] I don’t visit actually gay places very often. [...] I very often meet friends at Oscar [a gay bar in Copenhagen, editor’s note] or so... It will be every week will be in a gay place. It’s Oscar where we meet, we have

coffee after work and... should we meet and eat something... But could also be a lot of other places which are not gay, but... Once a week I think I will go to Oscar.” Bjarne, 58.

Curiously a prevalence of sub targeted gay places appears in the list of favourite places. In particular in Italy a gay bar for “bear” people was recurrently cited in tandem with the (very appreciated) feature of a “friendly environment”. Both groups appreciated or dreamt of having “more quiet places”, places where “having a conversation”. This was in open opposition to the current “young” gay bars setting.

“Well, since some years, on Saturdays, we use to go out and we go to a gay place called King [a gay bar targeted to bear people in Milan, editor’s note]. We have a couple of friends there, I mean, there is always somebody we know there, therefore we stay there chatting...” Alessio, 55.

“Eh, I told you already, I like it because it is very familiar, warm, sober but familiar, and from time to time they show some of that old videos of the 70’s and 80’s... you know, at my time when...” Giovanni, 59.

“[...] it depends a little bit, because it’s important for me to have a very deep conversation with somebody maybe; I would prefer not to go to a place like Oscar because it can get quite noisy when it fills up, and all the people are chatting and laughing...” Renato, 64.

As said in the paragraph 4.1, interviewees showed a shift from sets of external related to sets of internal related ones in building and sustaining the identity.

Moreover the two subcultures (bear and leather) are known for their opposition to the values of the mainstream gay culture. In the bear one, being fat may become a sign of pride, killing the “perfect body” law of compliance, in the leather one the standardized all-leather clothes kill the concept of the changing “must-have” fashion law. The fact that a setting encouraging conversation could be found only in Italy (and especially in bear bars) can be related to the special feature of the bear subculture of easing a laid down attitude. The BDSM/leather culture, instead, is not really renowned for its talkative interaction code.

Moreover in Denmark the interviewees reported to patronize Oscar (a mainstream gay bar) as being the less discouraging place for conversation with friends, and the leather clubs were quoted for the over “x age” friendly ambient.

Continuing on the gay related products’ topic, almost everybody reported having a profile in some social network. Gay web sites targeted to over 50 people, to bears or just age friendly gay web sites were the most quoted ones. Sex was reported to be the most common outcome of these profiles, while bars appeared to have only a social gathering function.

Other gay products mentioned belonged to the sphere of culture, such as books and gay bookshops (the latter being often mentioned for their offer of events and other “experiences”), movies and, by a smaller group, porn products. Again, a shift from the outside to the inside is showed.

Curiously, drugs enhancing sexual performances (such as Cialis) were mentioned by just one interviewee, while “lack of sexual power” was mentioned by almost everybody answering about the “most frustrating things linked to the age” question. Just two of the interviewees mentioned plastic surgery as an interesting or already tested option. I cannot infer whether there is a feeling of guilt or shyness as the origin of this silence. For sure, the only two people reporting these kinds of consumption reported a feeling of pride about the sexual performances reached thanks to them, but they were also the only ones mentioning sex as one of their principal concern.

Very few in the sample totally excluded the “modern gay world” from their life, quite as very few stated to be hard users of sex places like cruising areas and saunas.

A mixed feeling of both interest and fear emerged when talking about retirement communities for the gay elderly. The first impression about an actual advertising showing a retirement centre for gay elderly people was fear. Although the people depicted in the advertising shows young features and were obviously in a funny setting, after reading the advertising’s body and understanding the “real” nature of the product, interviewees showed again the “pushing away” reaction. Again, the feeling “he’s older than I am!” appeared. Surprisingly, though, after the strong first reaction, the interviewees started to wonder about a possible future for them in that setting. Even with an “only if” approach (including “I

was unpaired/alone” and other negative situations) they all stated to be interested in it. As principal reason they reported a “pleasant feeling” in being in a community where people would have been gay too. This similarity was seen as encouraging human relations.

The only mention of a gay product designed for elderly people was a discotheque reported by Domenico and Giuliano.

D: “<The discotheque> Andromeda in Soragna! In the province of Parma. It is in a environment patronized by gays, not young ones: generally they are older than a certain age. Even if there are some young gays. It’s a kind of environment where... there is not the average gay, the one wearing fashion clothes... They are people older than a certain age... [...] Most of the crowd is aged between 25 to 70! As for music... there are all kinds of music! Old songs, new songs... [...] But most are older than 50. There are also younger people, because they fancy older persons.” Domenico and Giuliano, 62 and 64.

Surprisingly, this was the only reported “product” aimed at a crowd “older than 50”, as well as the only one where consumers had not to adapt themselves to a pre-existing existing subculture (see: bear and leather), retaining their own characteristics.

4.2.5 Age Related Products

For age related products we refer to the section 4.1.5. Again, while the Danish did not recall any product marketed to over 54 people, Italians recalled only negative products. The products recalled were reflecting various handicaps. False teeth or tools helping people to stand up were often cited. A strong pushing away feeling was showed by strongly stating they did not need them yet.

We can try to infer a possible interpretation of this phenomenon using the social networks as well as the advertising experiences reported by some interviewees. By their report, it appears to exist a public shared image of people over an “x” age. This shared image is over aged and over impaired. The facts are:

- There is no positive imagery for any recalled advertising directed to/including over “x” people: real people over “x” absolutely do not recognize themselves in that image (“not me” cases).

- In some cases admirers of over “x” people demonstrated not to have a mismatch between the virtual image of elderly people residing in their mind and the real elderly person (“no, you must be younger” cases).

We can again deduct that even if the group of over “x age” people is socially perceived as “a whole”, it is definitely not internally homogeneous: it is much more complex than the image “common sense” built about it.

The reason for this phenomenon may lay in the fact that nowadays people are living longer and enjoying a better health, whereas common sense still sticks to an old view of elderly people. This implies that the existing over “x age” group, nowadays, cannot be dealt as a homogenous target.

While we cannot (and we are not interested in) force society to review this categorization, marketers should review theirs in order to get a wider view and create/satisfy new sub targets/needs.

5. Conclusions

Senior people are going to be “the next big thing” from a demographic and consumption perspective. For this reason, I abandoned the stereotypical view of “senior as a whole” and I used the sexual orientation as second variable to better understand a more specific part of this population.

5.1 Consumption Pattern

As consumption plays a key part in building identity we need now to answer the question about the persistence of the relation between sexual orientation and an over 54 person’s behaviour.

From the analysis above, two hypothesis are possible:

1. the sexual orientation variable tends to lose its influence on the behaviour while age increases: there is evidence of a lower sexual activity.
2. the sexual orientation variable maintains its influence, but in a different way. How? Since we cannot reduce sexual orientation to just sex, as proven in sections 4.1.4 and 4.2.4, we can say that the sexual orientation variable maintains its influence on the behaviour, but it is expressed through different codes/actions. As the *bear* and *leather* subculture examples suggest, there are other ways through which gay people over 54 express a gay sexual orientation (identity and culture).

Although both of these hypothesis need further scrutiny, in an overcrowded market the perspective of a growing sub-group should not be discarded without the necessary studies. This research of mine was explorative and its aim was not to exactly define the set of most interesting products/services for marketers. My goal was to draw a generic portrait of the over 54 gay male identity and therefore its field of interaction and consumption. Doing so, we discovered three possible categories of products that should be better explored in order to achieve further marketing hints:

1. **Gay products:** This product category, in the two countries selected, were almost absent. The only (partly) satisfied need reported was the functional need of socialization. Two different approaches in answering this need were reported by the current environment: the creation of an “ad hoc” product (discotheque for gay men

over 54) and the exploitation of already existing elderly-inclusive subcultures (bear and leather) and, obviously, their settings in real life (bars and discotheques). Being more “laid down” or “less noisy” are the characteristics often reported as missing from mainstream gay places.

Research should focus on answering to the question about what can be considered as a “functional product” for a gay man over 54, and what can be considered as a “symbolic product” (Levy, 1959 and Visconti, 2008), in order to tap unexplored needs to meet in this category.

2. **Mainstream products:** In this field, the advertising demonstrated to just miss the hit. In recalling products obviously aimed to aged people, the sample denied even the possibility of being part of that category, even refusing to recall the products. If it is true that, in the past, people over 54 had more health problems and were needier, it is also true that nowadays the situation improved. Marketers, therefore, need to re-define the target without using “common sense”. An imagery of people in between the young-and-beautiful and the needy-and-unpaired categories should be created and displayed in order to better reflect this growing group of people. Lacking this representation it is very unlikely that they may start paying attention to new products. This product category is linked to the “generic product category” as defined by Visconti (2008).
3. **Shameful products:** All products not aligned with the current mainstream moral reside in this category. Interviewees showed to use this category when they reported products *en passant*, when they whispered or they used the “I know someone who did...” method. Prostitution, porn, sex enhancing capacity drugs and plastic surgery were the most commonly quoted. While prostitution may not, obviously, be marketed, marketers ought find creative ways to advertise the rest of them, which appear to be a very interesting, untapped field. Some of the products belonging to this category could be linked to the “affluence product category” as defined by Visconti (2008).

Following the categories above, we can try to outline some possible marketing strategies in approaching the elderly gay segment:

- an inclusive strategy (including older persons in existing advertisings, but through a revised imagery).
- the creation of *ad hoc* products from expressed needs (e.g. less noisy bars).
- the exploitation of unexpressed needs (e.g. by using lead users).

How marketers and advertisers should approach this new market? The only “golden law” in marketing should be understanding the consumer. According to what we just learned, the first information we must acquire about this population is its cognitive age (the self-perceived age/image). If we can understand how a person sees herself/himself, it is very likely we can understand how s/he wants to be depicted in advertising (Milliman and Erffmeyer, 1990).

Following this primary guideline (using cognitive age in representing them rather than their chronological age), here are some deductive guidelines coming from my interviews, as well from previous research:

- Do not: Mix up senior marketing with senior imagery (Tréguer and Segati, 2003).
- Do not: Ignore ageing consequences (Tréguer and Segati, 2003): e.g. do not misuse fonts that may be cool, but prove unreadable for most older people.
- Do not: Use stereotypes (“grannies”, comic approach or effeminate/butch people) (Tréguer and Segati, 2003; Keane, 1984).
- Do not: Use the negative approach (Tréguer and Segati, 2003).
- Do not: Hit the wrong generation (Tréguer and Segati, 2003).
- Do: Use a blinking approach.
- Do: Use an ironic/smart language.

5.2 Identity

Over-54 gay people revealed to have a peculiar identity. They are very active, they usually solved sexual orientation matters before and live a life full of activities. The age crisis is generally solved around their 40’s, their perceived age is almost 10 years younger. An “interior peace” is often reported as a big achievement. Experience and a lower importance given to people’s judgment are always reported as the key of this interior peace.

In socialization, quality is always preferred to quantity. Bonds get deeper (“chosen family”) and social gatherings (virtual and real) tend to be ritualized. While the frequency of social gatherings in gay settings varies, it still remains consisting, however almost everybody in the sample reported the need for “more silent/lounge venues” in place of the existing ones.

The need for a more friendly environment is solved by the sample by patronizing places sub-targeted to the “bear” category (in Italy) or to the “leather” one (in Denmark) subcultures, considered as more “laid down”.

While almost everybody patronizes those bars and has a profile on a gay social network, the categories “gay products” and “gay consumption” are not understood. A “not-me” perception is also linked to the mainstream idea of “an aged person”, and of the age-related products sponsored.

The relationship with advertising is ambivalent: funny/ironic/winking ads are perceived as good, while the rest are perceived as pushy.

An exclusion feeling is clearly perceived on the gay side, probably because it is strictly related to social relationships. On the mainstream side this feeling is overcome by the refuse of identification, as mentioned above.

We can here summarize three principal phenomena:

- Values’ shift. The daily activities reported by the sample showed a general change in the nature of the values’ system. The efforts aimed to build/sustain their identity, progressively shifted from a predominance of sets of externally related items (youth, body, appearance etc.) to sets of internally related ones (culture, conversation, relations & re.). This can be seen in direct opposition to the values of the mainstream gay culture, and it is directly reflected in their approach towards specific gay subcultures (in the sample: bear, leather).
- Suffered discrimination. The suffered discrimination takes origin from a mismatch between three age concepts: biological, self-perceived, and socially perceived age. Taking the biological as “x”, the self-perceived becomes “x minus 10”, the socially perceived becomes “x plus something”. People over 54 show interests and perform activities compliant to their self-perceived age. On the other hand, probably because

of a self-mirroring fear, the mainstream world perceives over-54 people as a whole “old and unpaired” group, without making any differentiation. The same can be reported for the consumption world (advertising).

- Acted discrimination. Probably because of the same fear, people over 54 acted, as their first reaction in front of a mirroring situation, the same discrimination to an even older person.

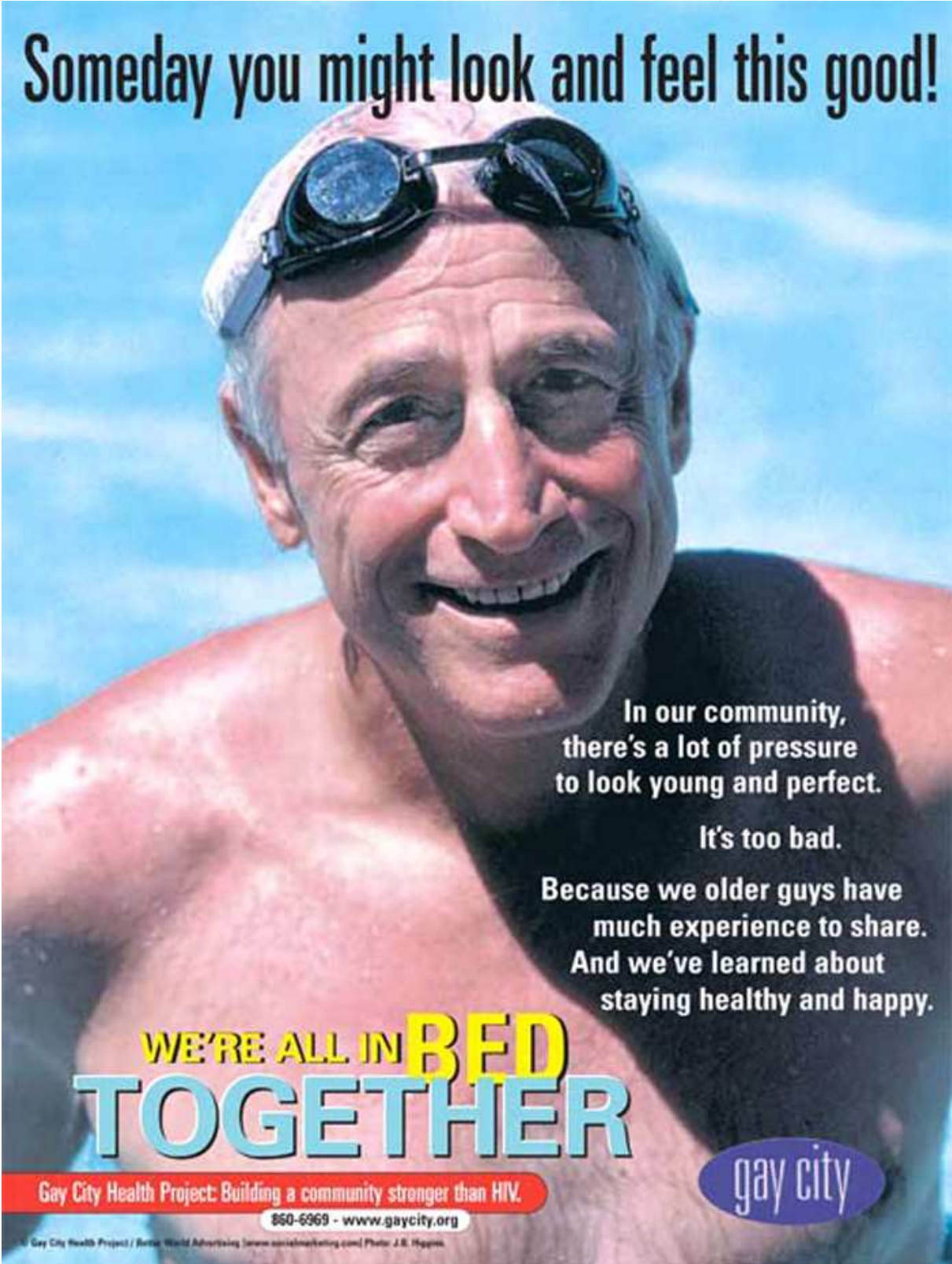
While this study gives just a quick overview of this segment, at the same time it offers a wider sight on diversity among elderly population. Senior people appear as complicated as “junior” people, or even more.

The unpaired-and-needy-grey-man stereotype is no longer true. Scholars must push away common sense in order to discover a complete new universe of existing consumers. A cognitive age conflicting with the chronological age, deriving from a healthier and longer life, revealed to be the most important explanation factor of this new segment’s behaviour. For over-54 people, cognitive age becomes the real age. But this self-built reality and the ability of living a normal life (a young man’s life) originating from it, does not find any match in the production-built reality. There is a big missing area in the mainstream imagery between the young man and the unpaired-and-needy-grey-man stereotype. An area that should be occupied with a new concept of senior, deriving from her/his identity and her/his needs.

Refusing to research about the senior population and to provide the new imagery it needs, means missing the opportunity of being part of the next big thing happening in the demographic and consumption perspective.

Appendix

Attachment 1



Someday you might look and feel this good!

In our community,
there's a lot of pressure
to look young and perfect.

It's too bad.

Because we older guys have
much experience to share.
And we've learned about
staying healthy and happy.

**WE'RE ALL IN BED
TOGETHER**

Gay City Health Project: Building a community stronger than HIV.
860-6969 - www.gaycity.org

gay city

Gay City Health Project / Better World Advertising (www.socialmarketing.com) Photo: J.B. Higgins

Attachment 2



CUSHMAN & WAKEFIELD: THE PREFERRED ADVISOR FOR SENIOR HOUSING

NATIONAL REACH. LOCAL EXPERTISE.

Just as different people have different needs, different investors are interested in different assets. Whether it's any sector of Senior Housing - age restricted, assisted living, ccrc, skilled nursing - Cushman & Wakefield is the provider of choice to the senior housing investment community.

Your trusted advisor to sell, purchase, value, and finance the full continuum of senior housing anywhere in the nation, from New York to Los Angeles and Chicago to Miami. We offer the power of a formidable capital markets team of investment brokers, bankers, and agents.

For more information, please call our Senior Managing Directors of the Senior Housing & Healthcare Group, Michael Berne and Norman LeZotte, at 800.376.3133.




**CUSHMAN &
WAKEFIELD®**

Attachment 3

Palm Springs Living

ACTIVE ADULT COMMUNITIES FOR AMERICA'S GAY AND LESBIAN ELITE



Gay Owned and Operated

You've waited long enough. *beau monde*® is ushering in the dawn of active adult communities designed **just for you**. Truly unique – our communities boast world-class amenities, finely appointed residences and the opportunity to make some of the best friendships you will ever have. Welcome.

Introducing

liberty

a *beau monde*® desert community
in the heart of Palm Springs, California

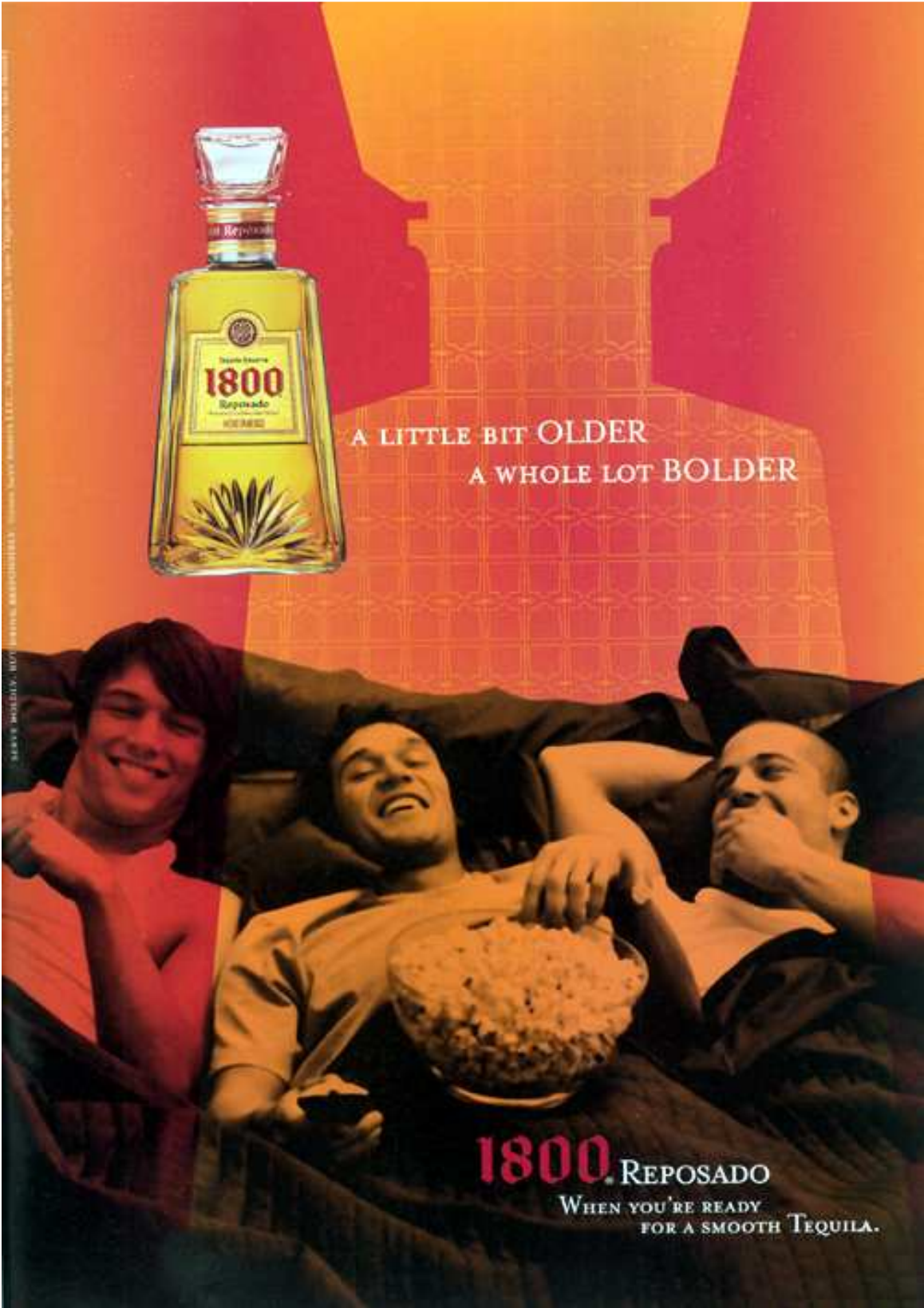
Now accepting priority wait list deposits!

Beau Monde does not discriminate on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, color, national origin, genetic make-up, sexual orientation, marital status, and otherwise subject to change.

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www.beaumontliving.com

beau monde
THE LUXURY TO BE YOU

Attachment 4



Måske er han online lige nu..?

boyfriend.dk er Danmarks største community for homo-, bi- og transseksuelle



Attachment 6

Begin

Research Introduction

- The topic of my research is to explore a new segment: the gay baby boomers [baby boomers instead of elderly in order to prevent embarrassment/closure]
- Why?
 - They are going to be the biggest population's group in the next years. Why? Because demographically:
 - The new born rate is lowering
 - Life expectancy is getting longer
- How I am going to use your data:
 - Only the audio will be recorded
 - All the audio tape will be strictly confidential
 - I am going to use the audio only for creating transcripts
 - I do not need to use your real name

Start registration

Part 1: Facts

- Can you please introduce yourself through a brief description?
- Think about a normal week. Which are the activities you do during the week? Can you describe a normal day? And a normal week end?
- What did you do last week? Week end? Activities that differs?
- How would you describe your family? Which are the people more close to you? (Boyfriend? Do you live with him?)
- Which kind of media do you consult usually? How often? What about gay media? Connected with your age? Gay ones? → Media connected with your status, age, and lifestyle?
- Which is the last thing you bought? How would you describe your relation with shopping?
- Let's talk about your coming out process:
 - Who knows about your homosexuality? Are you publicly out?
 - If not everyone, who yes/no? Describe the contexts where you are open and where not.
 - → try to explore the relationships with the relatives
- What about the coming out process of your friends?

Part 2: Reasoning

- What about your age?
- Did your life change with the coming of age? How? Can you give me some practical example?
- About your body? Can you make me some practical example?
- And what about the gay life experience with the coming of age?

- Let's talk about gay life. How do you relate to the gay community? Committed? Tell me about your friends, how did you know them? What do you have in common with your gay friends? (values, interests, experiences...) How old are your gay friends? The youngest and the oldest? Do you have gay teenagers friends?
- Do you have straight friends?
- Which are the activities you usually do with your friends? Which ones do you exclusively do with your gay friends?
- If I ask you to think about a person of your age: How do you think would be his normal day? And what about his needs?
- What differences with a younger person?
- What differences with a gay person?
- Now let's talk about you as gay consumer. How would you describe a "gay product"?
- From your definition: Which "gay product" you usually buy?

Part 3: Emotions

- Considering now yourself as a Danish/Italian, could you tell me which are the values that, in your opinion, differs to other Italy/Denmark?
- Gay Danish/Italian?
- You and a gay person in his 20's?
- What is the most frustrating thing you have experienced and that is connected with your current age? (in your life/in the shopping experience)
- And with your age AND with your homosexuality?
- How do you see the new gay generations? What do you think about them? (teenagers/people 30ish)
- FREE ASSOCIATION: CANCELLED
- In your opinion/experience, which are the products advertised for people of your age?
- And which are the products people of your age use and they are not advertised?
- Let's talk about your relation with advertising:
 - Which are the advertisings you like most?
 - Which are the ones you don't like?
 - Can you give me some examples?
 - And what about advertisings related to your age?
 - Have you ever seen some?
- What about gay advertising? (Like most? Don't like? Examples?)
- In your opinion or experience, which is the representation of mature people in advertising? Do you remember some example? Can you describe them?
- Which was the last advertising you have seen and you thought it was directed to senior people? On which media? Can I see/have it? Both gay and not?
- In your opinion: senior people in gay adv are represented? If yes: Some examples? (If not: What do you think about the lack of presence of mature people in advertising? Do you know why? Which are your feelings about it? What would you like to see?)
- If you would be able to create an advertising for people of your age, with product would like to sell? How?

- Now let's have a look to some advertisings: can you describe what do you see? How is your overall perception about it? Would you like to do some changes?
 - [Show Adv with Keyword in a context fully relevant (explicit adv to the elderly)]
 - Senior alone
<http://www.commercialcloset.org/common/adlibrary/adprintdetails.cfm?QID=4038&ClientID=11064>
 - Senior in a socialization context
<http://www.commercialcloset.org/common/adlibrary/adprintdetails.cfm?QID=3304&ClientID=11064>
<http://www.commercialcloset.org/common/adlibrary/adprintdetails.cfm?QID=3934&ClientID=11064>
 - [Show Adv with Ambivalent use (keyword not supported/in contrast with the image meaning)]
 - <http://www.commercialcloset.org/common/adlibrary/adprintdetails.cfm?QID=1432&ClientID=11064>
 - [Show Adv with only young people]
 - Oscar/boyfriend.dk? Would you like to see a version with somebody of your age?
 - After this: in your opinion, why older people are not represented?

Part 4: Direct Questions

- Which age do you feel to have?
- What is your name? You can give me a false name too.
- What is your age?
- E-mail?

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