Chapter 7

Effeminacy and Expertise, Excess and Equality: Gay Best Friends as Consumers and Commodities in Contemporary Television

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Introduction: Selling and Buying the Gay Best Friend

In December 2003 *Vanity Fair* magazine dedicated its front cover to 'TV's Gay Heat Wave'. Featuring the stars of American series *Will & Grace* (1998–2006), *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003–2007) and *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005), the cover celebrated what seemed a milestone in mainstream media: at least nine gay-centric television shows in prime time, in a period of unprecedented visibility for gay and lesbian characters and personalities. This was, to a certain extent, an unexpected side effect of the cultural focus on gay men after the spread of AIDS in the West in the 1980s:

> While the AIDS crisis claimed many lives, it served as a catalyst to open conversations about sexuality and gender that had heretofore been difficult if not impossible and, consequently, the turn of the millennium ushered in a newfound examination of what had been defined as "gay," and perhaps not so positively, this queered space began to make "gay" a commodity. Interestingly, it would only be 10 years after the height of the AIDS crisis in America that the number one television sit-com would highlight the lives of two "gay" men and two "straight" women (all white and "upper-middle-class") in a manner that captured many of the stereotypes historically associated with gays and the women who adore them (Poole, 2014: 280).

Certainly, from the late 1990s and into the early 2000s, in key television markets around the world, there was growing salience and popularity of gay-focused television shows, with particular emphasis on identities and relationships structured clearly along the lines of sexuality and class. This emphasis has informed subsequent programmes such as *The New Normal* (2012–2013) and

the widely popular *Modern Family* (2009–present), now ostensibly negotiating the tensions and overlaps between the commodification of 'gayness' and the normalisation of gay male roles, functions and identities.

This discussion focuses squarely on the figure at the centre of this 'wave', the gay male best friend. Hoffman (2011, online) argues that 'contemporary culture has become saturated with the gay best friend', citing the 2010 issue of *Teen Vogue* that lists 'a gay best friend' as one of 'the must have items' for fashion conscious (presumably straight) teenage girls. The prominence of the gay male best friend is considered throughout this chapter, in terms of a relationship to discourses of consumerism. As a 'possessable, commodified identity' (Hoffman 2011, online), the gay best friend in contemporary popular television has emerged specifically in consumer culture where the meaning and experiences of gayness are 'created, maintained, and negotiated by markets'. Gay best friends are thus represented as companions, confidants or even sidekicks, as go-to men for matters of fashion, grooming, décor, and in more recent incarnations as the funny, 'modern' and 'normal' members (and makers) of families. By speaking to specific cultural and political phenomena that 'produce' him/them within popular understandings, this examination tracks the gay best friend across a range of texts as an effeminate consumer, the expert consumer, excessive consumer, and in more recent incarnations, the 'equal' consumer, reflective of changing social contexts.

This first part of the chapter surveys narratives of gay male friends and consumerism, both fictional and 'real', across four key programmes: *Will & Grace*, *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *How to Look Good Naked* (2006–2010). In all four shows, gay characters and figures appear as both icons and agents of consumption, committed to the celebration of self through image and style. The second half of the chapter critiques the wider significance of this pattern, extending these tropes into explicitly politicised contexts; figures from *Queer as Folk*, *Modern Family* and *The New Normal* are taken alternately as the embodiment of non-normative excess, as signifiers of a heteronormative capitalistic order, and as reflections of contradictory and complex notions of acceptance.

The cover of *Vanity Fair* in 2003 implied a victory of sorts, insofar as mainstream television had at last showcased gay and lesbian characters in new and exciting ways – or at least not as victims, villains or deviants, as had been the case historically. However it is argued here that, in their framing of the gayness (as friendly/helpful, useful, objectified and/or normal) the polysemy of the television texts discussed in this chapter appropriates what appears progressive, emancipatory rhetoric into largely conservative narratives that ultimately support and sustain heteropatriarchal norms, values and institutions. This does not disavow the significance of such programmes in an evolving mediasphere, but tempers general assumptions that, in the representations of

gay men on television informed discursively by consumerism, popular presence alone automatically constitutes transformative socio-political change.

Fag Hags and Shopping Bags: *Will & Grace* and *Sex and the City*

Will & Grace premiered on NBC in 1998 and soon became an international ratings and critical success (Schiappa et al., 2006: 16–17). The comedy centres on Will Truman, a successful, handsome, homosexual attorney and his female best friend and roommate, Grace Adler, a flighty, neurotic, straight interior decorator. After a failed relationship in College before Will's coming out, the two maintain a close personal bond, and a chic Manhattan lifestyle without the messy complications of romance and sex. As such, *Will & Grace* debuted a fresh take on how domestic bliss could be realised. The show also featured what some critics considered their scene-stealing satellites: Grace's secretary Karen Walker and Will's flamboyantly camp friend Jack McFarland. The first American prime time show to feature a gay character in a lead role, *Will & Grace* actively contested some of the most stable tenets of broadcast television. At the same time it rests on at least one culturally dominant stereotype: the over-identification of gay men with style, good taste and grooming.

Of the two gay characters, Will is arguably the 'straighter'; a respected lawyer, and owner of the apartment where he lives, projecting a conventionally appealing masculinity. Conversely Jack, a frustrated (and usually unemployed) actor reliant on Karen's patronage, exudes a more theatrical and obvious gayness, which occasionally embarrasses the more reserved Will. Pertinent here is the homology that persists despite the occupational differences between Will – a highly regarded and accomplished professional – and the perennially out-of-work Jack: both conform to the airbrushed archetype of the hyper-preened gay man, both frequent the same upmarket restaurants, bars and gymnasium, and both articulate an acute sartorial sensibility. Where Will's style is *GQ*-corporate, Jack's is super-starched and preppy, yet both proffer a steady stream of unsolicited (and often unkind) fashion advice and commentary to the more rakishly attired Grace. For her part, Grace rarely challenges their advice, and often defers to Will when deciding what to wear. In the show's premier episode, Will and Grace's late-night phone banter, staged to cue connotations of 'pillow talk', quickly becomes a chat about shopping, symbolically marking their relationship as based on shared consumer interests, and importantly as one unlike most television male-female pairings (Silverman, 2013: 264–265). As Quimby (2005: 716) notes, 'Will and Grace's friendship is the kind that shares the excitement of counting the days until the Barney's sale'.

The playfully grotesque friendship between Karen and Jack possesses an even more pronounced emphasis on image and superficiality. A wealthy and

arrogant socialite who revels in excess – of alcohol, designer clothes, pills and put-downs – Karen's 'job' as Grace's secretary is little more than welcome relief from her loveless marriage; that she married for money (and therefore does not have to work for it) is a given. This privilege furnishes not just her lifestyle but Jack's as well, who is clearly in awe of her diva style. On their first meeting, the two concur that in her exuberant femininity, specifically her prominent bosom and Chanel shoes, Karen is indeed 'fabulous' (Wolf, 2013: 290). Both Will and Jack suggest 'socio-economic status' as 'a major quality of the gay best friend character' and, in Jack's case in particular, the 'often unclear or illogical' source of the gay friend's wealth (Hoffman, 2011, online).

Premiering in 1998 on HBO, *Sex and the City* was also hailed a revolution in television culture, but for different reasons (Meyer, 2014: 425). The series chronicles the relationships of and between four New York women: newspaper columnist Carrie Bradshaw, publicist Samantha Jones, lawyer Miranda Hobbes, and art gallery curator Charlotte York, the first group of female characters to talk openly, honestly and often shockingly about sex on the small screen (Gerhard, 2005: 37). Carrie and friends are all attractive, accomplished women who are able to consume men just as they consume everything Manhattan has to offer (Oria, 2014: 387): fabulous parties, trendy restaurants, and – for Carrie especially – fashion. The series inverted the usual trope in television whereby men commodify and objectify women as sexual playthings (Brunner, 2010: 88–89). In *Sex and the City*, the men are reduced to nicknames ('Mr. Big', 'Catholic Guy', 'the Russian'), likened to designer labels (the 'always in style' George Clooney, for instance, is compared to a classic Chanel suit), and often discarded or considered disposable goods (Cramer, 2007: 420–421).

In its glamorised depiction of contemporary New York, *Sex and the City* constructs a post-feminist playground for the women, replete with freedoms and indulgences of all kinds, channelling the gains of their second-wave forbears towards their atomised, individualised, consumerist selves (Adriaens and Van Bauwel, 2014: 178–179). Though less central than in *Will & Grace*, the gay best friends in *Sex and the City* are also, like Will and Jack, filtered and fashioned through a consumerist ethos. Carrie's friendship with the openly gay Stanford Blatch, a seemingly wealthy (though not particularly successful) talent agent, is her only ongoing male friendship. Most male acquaintances are past, present or potential sexual partners (Lorié, 2011: 44). Similarly, for Charlotte, gay friend Anthony Marantino is not just her stylist and wedding planner (they met in a Vera Wang boutique), but also a friend and confidante who shares her own emotional and histrionic disposition. As with Will and Jack, Stanford and Anthony are connoisseurs of fashion; indeed, Stanford was one of the few characters that could top Carrie's eccentric outfits, with his perfectly matched and often brightly hued suits and cravats.

In both *Will & Grace* and *Sex and the City*, the friendships forged between sassy and attractive straight female characters and openly gay male characters adhere to popularly recognisable conventions. In this New York, gay best friends are perfect partners for gossip and shopping (Doudaki, 2012: 10), in a specific type of symbolic containment, whereby fashion and friendships form part of a glamorous, consumerist lifestyle (Fackler and Salvato, 2012: 79). Consumption is naturalised as the necessary route to personal fulfilment, and neither the gay characters nor their straight friends venture into the trickier terrain of politics or equity. The gay characters rarely remind audiences of the constrictive realities of a heteronormative world, where inclusion does not automatically confer equality. Stylish, fashionable and vain, they serve the conservative commercial imperatives of the cultural, political and economic status quo, where perpetual shopping is tied to the postmodern imagining of identity – fluid, playful, and self-centred.

As such, the straight female characters discussed here – Grace, Karen, Carrie and Charlotte – show how gay best friends can be conveniently lassoed into their own 'straight' worlds, as companions in consumption. In this way, these shows encouraged audiences to consider the term 'fag hag' anew (Thompson, 2004: 41). A vestige of a misogynist gay sub-culture of the pre-Stonewell 1970s, the term no longer carries the stigma and contempt once bestowed on straight women that habitually befriended gay men – that is, considered too hopeless or unattractive to enjoy 'real' relationships with straight men. In these programmes the 'fag hag' is an altogether different proposition: a stylish and sophisticated woman that sees in gay men an affinity born of common and pleasurable pursuits, not the least of which is fashion (King, 2013: 4).

Within the focus on fashion and style, these gay characters appear blithely unencumbered by political concerns. When questioned by journalists about the show's apolitical stance, actors and writers of *Will & Grace* made it clear that this was a deliberate move, lest the show suffer the same fate as *Ellen*, the ABC sitcom (1994–1998) in which the lead character (played by Ellen DeGeneres) comes out only to see the series axed soon after. In contrast, *Will & Grace* is, as Mitchell observes, 'consciously and conscientiously framed as an apolitical comedy about friends rather than a site of a counterhegemonic politics of sexuality' (2005: 1053).

The Help: *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *How to Look Good Naked*

The consistently reinforced link between gay men and an aptitude for consumer fashions is central to the two make-over reality shows considered here: *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *How to Look Good Naked*. In these, gay men tutor straight men and women in correct forms of consumerism in order to become better

looking, more confident, and to navigate the everyday with a more nuanced appreciation for detail and design. Gay men are positioned as ambassadors for, and arbiters of, quality consumption. During its run *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* was one of the most successful and popular programmes on the United States' Bravo network. It featured the 'Fab 5': an elite team of lifestyle experts on fashion (Carson Kressley), décor (Thom Filicia), grooming (Kyan Douglas), cuisine (Ted Allen) and culture (Jai Rodriguez). The team schooled straight men in these areas in order to improve their attractiveness to their partners, families, and workmates. The appeal here is twofold: the straight man's often humorous but ultimately rewarding journey from a hapless (though sometimes reluctant) subject to a more polished 'metrosexual'; and the easy rapport between the Fab 5 themselves, whose in-jokes and innuendo were often subversive and ironic but never cruel or alienating.

By predicating a relationship between straight men and gay men on the latter's perceived consumer expertise, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* works within (not against) a culturally entrenched stereotype: straight men lack the innate 'eye' for style that gay men have, and this difference implicitly places gay men in a discursive space that is otherwise associated with straight women, such as shopping malls, hair salons, and even the kitchen – areas where apparently many straight men fear to go, or at least do not know what to do when they get there. The Fab 5 expertly navigate these spaces, and share their skills for the sake of the straight man's improvement. Crucially, this improvement comes not through quiet introspection or an emotional stock-take, but through better practices of consumption. To this end, the show was a triumph of product placement, as furniture, clothing and hair-care ranges featured and endorsed seemed extra special for having met the Fab 5's exacting 'queer eye' standards.

First airing on Britain's Channel 4 in 2006, *How to Look Good Naked* is another makeover reality show that features a gay man's consumer nous. Presented by Gok Wan, the show teaches women (and occasionally men) how to better present themselves without surgery, shame or apology, through a process that culminates in an artfully composed nude photo shoot. Gok's philosophy is simple: it is not bodies that need changing, but body image – achieved through a discourse of self-love, personal pride and, more often than not, the right 'shape wear' (or body-contouring undergarments). As with *Queer Eye*, Gok's mission is to link image and self-regard to more mindful consumption, insofar as the right dress can, as Mae West once quipped, cover a multitude of sins. Gok draws on his own metamorphosis from a doubly marginalised teenager (overweight and gay) to a confident and attractive professional stylist. He embodies and enacts the show's feel-good message: better shopping is cathartic, uplifting and transformative. Despite his insistence that a nude photo shoot will capture and celebrate his subjects' 'inner beauty', it is hard not to see the commercial imperative that informs Gok's advice. That his fashion advice requires women

to contrive an hourglass body shape through a carefully curated (and new) wardrobe suggests that, for all the 'self-love' talk, a better body image can be conveyed with better shopping choices.

Amidst the plethora of makeover reality shows that populate the contemporary television landscape, *How to Look Good Naked* stands out for two reasons in particular. First, Gok establishes an intimacy with his subjects that appears genuine and warm, calling them 'girlfriend' and 'sister' and touching their bodies (even their private parts) with affection. Second, and more obvious, are his body-image mantras, where women are coaxed into not just accepting their bodies (cellulite, 'saddlebags', wobbly bits and all), but loving them (Kadir and Tidy, 2013: 179). The doublespeak at work here is never confronted directly, in that it is these same bodies that are only rendered more appealing through strategically chosen clothing, underwear and (especially for the nude photo shoot) lighting and camera angles.

It would be disingenuous to expect a message too contrary to the one Gok articulates: commercial television is driven by and for advertising, so it makes sense to promote consumption as integral to personal contentment in an explicitly capitalist context. All the shows discussed thus far fit seamlessly within the political economy of commercial television. Of critical concern here is how and why, in the promotion of a consumerist mindset and consumerist practices, gay men *in particular* have been so routinely associated with certain roles, skills and attributes. On the one hand, the aesthetic value of this association is apposite: the depiction of gay men as urban, upscale and stylish is visually attractive and thus helps to sell a lifestyle within which consumption is both enjoyable and necessary. Whilst refusing the diversity of gay male experience, this recurring motif reinforces hackneyed ideas of 'real' (read: straight) men. As Avila-Saavedra (2009: 17) notes, straight men in *Queer Eye* are almost caricatures of masculinity, 'always the most inept at cooking, grooming, decorating, entertaining, etc.' This no doubt reinforces popular tendencies to align gay men's strengths and skills with traditionally feminine fields – fashion, shopping and so on (Gorman-Murray, 2006: 230).

Through commercially driven promotion, the 'queer eye' provides a privileged kind of labour. Moreover, this assumes growing significance and urgency within a post-industrial context, where identity is understood as made rather than ascribed, and personal improvement is the responsibility of the informed, enterprising, malleable self (Sender, 2006: 140–141). In this way, and as Tania Lewis (2007: 286) argues, the gay man's pedagogical role is driven by neoliberal conceptions of a 'new' citizen, whereby lifestyle becomes the site of perpetual reinvention. In the makeover shows especially, the gay men's job is to induct aberrant consumers 'into the joys of stylish living'. For this reason, such shows are not wholly devoid of politics, since capitalism entails a suite of political priorities and agendas. Rather, this suggests that *only* in matters of

consumption inclusiveness and encouragement is paramount; everybody has the 'right' to shop, even overweight women (hence Gok's 'body love' message) and recalcitrant men (hence Carson's unsubtle didacticism).

In constructing and foregrounding gay men's superiority in matters of taste and style, these shows obscure (if not deny) the latent prejudices of a heteronormative society, as they actively desexualise the gay men. That is, they are rarely seen as erotic, desiring subjects. Instead, and as Shugart (2003) points out, they mostly appear as catalysts for the growth and entertainment of heterosexual characters and subjects, which in turn supports the socio-cultural hegemony. Their presence and purpose can be easily grafted onto the heteropatriarchal status quo with minimal disruption. This visibility of gay men on mainstream television thus comes at a price, since they must be made palatable to mainstream audiences with heterosexist sensibilities, which involves divesting gay men of potent sexual agency (Shugart, 2003: 69–70). This protects the commercial value of gay men, as cultural attachés of consumer capitalism, without upsetting dominant institutions, values and mores.

In *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, for instance, once the Fab 5 has worked its magic on the heterosexual subject, they literally retreat to the margins, as the 'big reveal' is for family and friends, with the Fab 5 watching it all from afar on CCTV, toasting their work amongst themselves. Their presence in the straight guy's life is ephemeral, and the transformation merely aesthetic (Papacharissi and Fernback, 2008: 362–363). By each episode's end, the Fab 5 is once again at the periphery, but the straight guy enjoys a fuller, more fashionable life. Whilst the commercial gay/queer figure 'sells an equally parodic image of the straight guy back to himself' (Lambert, 2006: 75), the straight man nonetheless reaps the rewards of a 'queer eye' without suffering the stigma of *being* gay in a heterosexist society (Ramsey and Santiago, 2004: 354). *Queer Eye* plays less to the threatening and subversive aspects of queerness, and more to commercial possibilities of an effeminate, pan-homosexual type. Michael ldato (in Lambert, 2006: 74) finds some 'parallels with the way America's black community has struggled to get more black faces on TV', but remarks that the programme is neither 'groundbreaking' nor even 'gay' but 'camp'. Less friends than subordinates 'to heterosexual narratives of advancement … the ultimately sexless figures of *Queer Eye* can be relieved of the need to perform hypermasculinity by similarly reinforcing its idealization and its attachments to social structures that ultimately exclude them' (Lambert, 2006: 74–75).

We see a similar pattern in *Sex and the City*, as Carrie complains at length to Stanford about the heterosexual dating minefield that is contemporary New York, but rarely considers his love life with too much interest. For Carrie then this is a 'safe' relationship, untroubled by his sexual or dating conundrums, except on the rare occasion he is allowed to discuss them. In *Will & Grace*, the reimagining of the domestic was reassuring for a heterosexist audience, as

the lead characters' playful intimacy only ever communicates 'safe eroticism', a common trope in the 'gay best friend' genre: 'We are given intimations of romance, all along recognising that it is unlikely to be realised or consummated' (Dreisinger, 2000: 6). In *How to Look Good Naked*, Gok's 'sisterly' persona is similarly construed: he can caress and extol his heterosexual subjects with abandon since his sexual desires pose no threat or competition. He sustains a space of 'suspended sexuality' that 'serves as an absent presence, simultaneously indicated and neutralized' (Frith et al., 2010: 479–480). Such programmes exploit the perceived benefits and utility of gay men for the service of commercial culture, but do not invoke their sexuality *per se*.

From Expert Consumerism to Extreme Consumption

In *Will & Grace* and *Sex and the City*, the gay male best friend is the consumer *par excellence*, and simultaneously the signifier of 'gayness' itself as a desired commodity, divested of explicitly sexual acts and sustainable, 'quality' romantic attachments. The gay best friend as a subject position is mediated by relationships to larger stories of white femininity and 'conspicuous' capitalistic immersion that is rarely based in economic 'realities'. With *How to Look Good Naked* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* the need to explore or consider non-normative romance or sexuality is now fully extracted from the consumer context, as the friend becomes the expert whose identity is wholly appropriated within, and focused on, normative capitalist conventions and outcomes.

Through *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and the comedy/drama *Queer as Folk* it is then possible to chart the expansion and splitting of the televisual consumerist gay best friend advanced in *Will & Grace* and *Sex in the City* (and resurrected in programmes such as *Ugly Betty* (2006–2010) and musical 'dramedy' *Glee* (2009–2015)) along two specific lines: the expert consumer, as in *How to Look Good Naked*, who directs purchase, taste and capital (as instrumental to heteronormative narratives of advancement, as we've seen) and the excessive consumer who imbibes and amasses both objects and people (reattaching the gay best friend to explicit sex, male friendships, and economic/material contexts in the process). As the final section of this chapter suggests, this split in the function of the gay figure in turn leads to the recouping of the threatening aspects of gayness and consumption within the contradictory discourses of normalisation in programmes such as *Modern Family* and *The New Normal*. The splitting, and amplification of gayness within the rise of queer politics changes considerably within the more recent contexts of sexual citizenship and marriage equality.

For programmes like *Queer as Folk* – that developed between the 'fag hag/shopping bag' tales of *Will and Grace* and *Sex and the City* and the 'normal/

modern' revisions and assimilations of *Modern Family* and similarly themed texts – the excessive gay male troubles the easy reconciliation of 'queer' with modes of capitalism and consumerism, even as aspects of queerness work within, rather than against, the 'gay/masculine' dichotomy. As a 'dramatic smorgasbord of situations that tell the story of "queer" life in the city' (Poole, 2014: 282), *Queer as Folk* layers the construction of gay male best friends with the capacity to not only choose and direct taste and style, but to explicitly and passionately consume and use objects and bodies in equal measure. Consuming is connected to power, though not necessarily stability or happiness.

The US series starts with teenage Justin who is exploring the throbbing gay district of Pittsburgh for the first time. He is picked up by Brian, an attractive, predatory, self-employed advertising executive – a master of consumption and commodities, of selling objects and fantasies, who *takes* without fear:

> Brian represents the emotionally troubled dominant male who has his way physically and emotionally with anyone he wants; his sexual desires being portrayed as same-sex, yet we see that women and men alike are attracted to his rather dark independence and, acting in a very traditionally masculine manner, he dominates his partners with no concern other than fulfilling his own sexual needs … his partners are willing to become subordinate in order to be in relationship with him. His embodiment of white masculinity, queered as it may be given his same-sex practices, remains rooted in hierarchical power structures that privilege the dominance ascribed to males despite the costs to those with presumably less power (Poole, 2014: 282).

Combining commercial savvy, with attractiveness *and* masculinity, Brian's power and his success are reflected in a succession of perfectly formed lovers, his shining four wheel drive, expensive suits, and loft-style apartment on the right side of town. By extension, Justin's initiation into the gay scene is a freefall into excessive consumerism and consumption, from clothes to sex, from drugs and music to pornography, promiscuity and even politics. Like those around him, the teenager idolises Brian, and quickly learns how to objectify and commodify the bodies of other men (warding off emotional advances from a one-night stand, he repeats Brian's signature line: "I've already *had* you").

The male *Queer as Folk* characters consume in all areas of their lives. As they move between gymnasium and backroom, bedroom, boardroom, schoolroom, showroom, nightclubs, and the diner, their friendships withstand numerous trials, whilst a sense of emptiness prevails with respect to relationships, which generally don't last. Excessive consumption shapes non-normative queer consumerism, but there are limits to potential satisfaction that can come from buying and using without the usual (re)productive outcomes of heteronormative capitalism. Earlier in the series, the less confident character, Ted, falls into a coma

after overloading on a bad batch of party drugs, and later in the series Justin is visibly shattered when Brian presents him with a muscular male prostitute lying on a bed with a bright ribbon tied around him for his birthday.

The sexualised macho ideal is emblematic of the consumerism that unites them and others under this version of 'queer', and their relationship is a joint subscription to the commodification of the male body. The other central character of the series, Michael, has passionate, athletic sex with a youthful, muscular man he has met on the Internet, moments after his own relationship ends. Michael marvels at the perfection of the man's looks and body. At the end of the session the man tells Michael that he too could become perfect if he would have some work done, just like he did: pectoral implants, cheek implants, dental work, and, of course, a penis extension. Michael later says the guy spoiled the encounter by opening his mouth. The commodification of the sexualised, masculine gay body when foregrounded as such, serves to offer a hollow experience of the act of consuming, the loss of passion and integrity comes as the result of taking too much, whenever one wants; as the result of excess.

The graphic gay sex is transgressive and provocative, whilst again reproducing 'male gayness as a form of self-modification, renovation, and maintenance' (Lambert 2006: 73). Ideal forms of gay masculinity, bodies and style are simultaneously explored/reinforced and undermined. As these TV gay/queer figures challenge 'normal' performances of buying, using, consuming and acting, the negative associations also encourage the commodification of gayness disinvested from attachments to gay male sex, preferable to the seemingly hollow outcomes of a 'queer' consumerism, one that unwitting reinstalls gay figures as the 'repositories of shame' (Cavalcante, 2014: 2) seen in historical representations.

Becoming Modern and Normal: From Consumption to (Re)Production

Gay best friends on television after *Will & Grace* and *Sex and the City* developed largely within either of two extremes: the expert 'fairy godmother' who makes the 'straight' world look and feel better, or the excessive figure who consumes through the aggressive assertion of individualism/self-interest. Yet within the more recent contexts of global marriage equality, representations of same-sex male couples encroach on the figurative terrain of the traditional family through domestic settings, arrangements and parenting practices. Images of gay men on popular television are becoming more reflective of a relationship between sexual citizenship and discourses of consumption, and the management of associated cultural anxieties through changing representations.

In so far as consumerism is always and already shaped by available definitions of sexual citizenship, it can be stated that social rights and entitlements are made

and managed in ways that live out Foucauldian (1991; 1998) understandings of 'biopower' and 'social death'; the disciplining of bodies, identities and pleasures is so deeply entrenched in government and law that any non-normative claims to rights require negotiation within the dominant contexts of popular televisual representations. As Bell and Binnie (2000: 2–3) argue, 'many of the current nodes of the political articulation of sexual citizenship are marked by compromise; this is inherent in the very notion itself'.

As *Will & Grace* and *Sex in the City* both demonstrate, the politics of the queer offsider's status as consumer is tempered by (de)politicised negotiations of the larger framework of the diegetic worlds – both in a narrative and physical sense. If what Berlant (1997: 2) has termed the 'intimacy of citizenship' is reserved for the ostensible subscription to heteronormative family structures, approaches to gay best friends and male same-sex couples in recent US television can be filtered through critical thinking about the mutually productive relationship between capitalism and the traditional family. Whilst consumer culture constitutes shared social spaces and practices between and within dominant and marginal groups, the terms of participation have been different and reliant on a relationship to larger social structures through the subscription to the norms (or normativity). In *Will & Grace* and *Queer as Folk* for example, consumption within and outside of the 'gay ghetto' is reflective of hierarchies, cultural capital, inclusions and exclusions. Outside of the ghetto, and beyond fashion and celebrity, 'consumer identity construction, usually a tacit concern with consumers most of the time, becomes a salient and political affair, particularly for a politicized and stigmatized community of gay men' (Kates, 2002: 398).

Gay male friends and partnerships are constructed and commodifed as 'already normal' as 'a particular image of homosexuality and same-sex relationships is becoming increasingly common in popular media' (Richard-Self, 2012, online). The marginal status of the gay best friend and his romantic/sexual partners (reinforced by the distribution of, as well as access to, socio-legal entitlements), has been countered through the normalisation of gay couples, relationships and same-sex parents/families, in a range of programmes including *Desperate Housewives* (2004–2012), *Brothers and Sisters* (2006–2011), *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005), and even in long running NBC soap opera *Days of our Lives* (1965–present), which has since 2012 included a gay male couple living together, sharing responsibility for a child (fathered by one of the men with a straight female character), getting married in 2014, and since facing a custody battle and homophobic attacks from the resident evil villain.

Such couples are 'unique' within the soap/drama genre, for being masculine and devoid of self-loathing (Helligar, 2014: online), but also because, as Hoffman (2011: online) suggests 'the gay best friend is ideally suited for situation comedy' as in the commercial phenomenon *Modern Family* and the short-lived series *The New Normal*:

> American sitcom *Modern Family* features a gay couple who share a house, have an adopted daughter, and maintain a fairly traditional lifestyle where one works full time as a lawyer, while the other remains at home and is the primary care-giver for their daughter. Their relationship is also monogamous and long-term. The couple is white, and they appear to have a middle-class status. Another American sitcom, *The New Normal*, features a white gay couple (one is Jewish) who also share a home, are in a long-term monogamous relationship, and who both have careers. This sitcom centres on this couple's decision to have a child and the life of the woman who decides to act as their surrogate. This couple are also financially well off (Richardson-Self, 2012: online).

As friends and relatives, the couples' relationships in these sitcoms support the larger story of the traditional family which is seen to have evolved in order to accommodate multiple romantic and parental/familial arrangements that nonetheless remain 'traditionally marriage-like in structure' (Richardson-Self, 2012: online).

To this end the sitcom genre requires recognisable types as it reflects popular tastes with respect to 'consumable' characters and scenarios. In *Modern Family*, gay son Mitchell and his partner Cam, having adopted their daughter Lily from Vietnam, eventually marry in a 'wedding of the year' double episode, once the dust has settled on the United States Supreme Court's reversal of 'Proposition 8' (the nullification of same-sex marriage in California) and repealing of the Defense of Marriage Act (which did not recognise same-sex unions federally). Mitchell and Cameron are older and less stereotypically attractive than previous gay best friends, but recognisably flighty, camp and neurotic – conforming not only to qualitative expectations of gayness, but to the dynamics of traditional structures that see Mitchell work as a lawyer and Cameron parenting at home for most of the show's earlier seasons. For *The New Normal*, dichotomies and stereotypes are even more clearly drawn as the coupling of Bryan and David comprises an 'effeminate man-boy' and 'a football-watching handsome dude' in a world where the gay friends 'are wealthy, materialistic effetes with crazy disposable income. Gay men randomly wake up and decide that they want a child as the latest must-have accessory. Intended parents look through a catalogue of egg donors like they are recruiting for the HJ' (Bua, 2012: online). In creating the 'modern' and the 'normal', popular rhetoric merges with representational and commercial imperatives. Cavalcante (2014: 4–5) notes 'three generative engines' that drive these reconstructions in popular sitcoms: the 'political force' (of popular gay rights discourse); the 'textual force' (of the 'transformational' qualities of popular media); and, the 'industrial force' (of television producers and 'showrunners'). Although the reinstalment of traditional domestic models and politically problematic types suggests the limited capacity of the more recent gay best friend to change larger social contexts, they have at least unsettled

'the narrative rationality of the argument that gay people harm children and produced a more positive narrative in its place' (Niedwiecki, 2013: 172).

The 'normalisation' of these gay figures, serving as it does to 'attenuate "risk"' and assert 'sameness to an idealised, white, middle-class, heterosexual norm' (Cavalcante, 2014: 2), is again connected to consumer behaviours and consumer culture. Buying and consumption are, in both *Modern Family* and *The New Normal,* aligned with the more effeminate and domestic partner in each scenario. In early episodes of *Modern Family*, Mitchell happily confesses he has no idea where Cameron buys nappies for Lily, whilst Cameron is content to dress the child up as various divas and pop icons for a photo shoot, speaking to the earlier suggestion of the 'child as accessory' in gay representations. Similarly, *The New Normal* sees Bryan consistently speak of 'dressing up' the baby (preferably in Marc Jacobs) before details of the pregnancy are even confirmed. He immediately breaks the shared rule of not buying baby clothes for the first 12 weeks, and returns them. Indeed Bryan seems more excited about images and objects than fatherhood, and both he and David have to overcome the idea that a child might damage their expensive furniture in the pilot episode. The focus on material objects extends unsurprisingly to the gay wedding in *Modern Family*, as the couple plot to procure an expensive turquoise bowl as a wedding gift, and Cameron forces the now school age Lily through the express chute of a closed dry cleaners to procure his wedding suit. The normalisation of gay 'reproduction' and associated consumer practices also invariably reproduces aspects of commodified gayness that continue to reaffirm gayness itself as humorous, familiar and non-threatening.

At the same time, taking the focus away from gay sex and sexuality in effect foregrounds the non-normal aspects of other, usually 'normal' characters in contemporary sitcoms. The appropriation and disavowal of the subversive aspects of gay/queer consumption and (re)production in *Modern Family* and *The New Normal* constitutes that which Cavalcante (2014: 2) terms 'anxious displacement':

> … the overloading of negatively codified social differences and symbolic excess onto figures and relationships that surround LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) characters. This symbolic intervention manages the cultural anxiety generated by LGBT issues and themes by normalising gay characters and channelling cultural anxiety away from them.

Whilst gay friends and family members are reassuringly funny in these contexts, the tensions and social ills normally associated with them (and still associated with singly gay men in many programmes), are frequently placed on characters whose sexuality is not the key fascination. In *Modern Family* blended families, noticeable differences in age and ethnicity, foolish misunderstandings and

lapses in ethics are routinely associated with relationships between heterosexual characters. In *The New Normal* divorce, casual sex, and physical outbursts (in addition to the qualities of racism, homophobia and intolerance) foreground the *abnormal* in the non-gay figures, and vice versa. As equality is frequently seen as 'representing a replication of so-called straightness' (Poole, 2014: 283), the 'ideologically cautious space' of popular network television 'typically raises contemporary debates like gay parenting only to reconcile them with prevailing liberal frameworks' (Calvacante, 2014: 4).

In such programmes, gay male figures are the humorous agents of consumerism and of normative (re)production, in a state of confusion borne of the recent televisual 'politics of equality' and acceptance. Popular television is reliant on persistence as much as it is on change, and the former even more so – producers must decide how best to buffer and bolster the same coalitions (ones that continue to privilege consumer driven narratives, whiteness, class sensibility, as well as heteronormative familial and symbolic practices), whilst also deciding how to practice (re)presentation, popular politics, and social responsibility in a different way. How might television speak of and to difference and identity politics whist still promoting equal access to social systems and meanings which are, as stated earlier, created and negotiated by markets? As Bell and Binnie (2000: 141) have rightly observed 'that's what the hard choices facing the sexual citizen are: the push towards rights claims that make dissident sexualities fit into heterosexual culture, by demanding equality and recognition, versus the demand to reject settling for heteronormativity'.

Conclusion

As friends, assistants, partners and family members, gay men are pervasive figures in contemporary television and popular culture. Contemporary discourses of acceptance and anti-discrimination towards gay men in television texts are invariably arranged around the gay best friend's capacity to consume and to be consumed, within images and narratives of excessive femininity, sexuality, physicality, material and experiential consumption (as both consumer and/or expert), and more recently in the reproduction of the 'traditional' heteropatriarchal family that capitalism desires and supports. Whilst such discourses can produce positive representational, diegetic and social outcomes, at the same time they necessarily reanimate power dynamics and keep the consuming/consumed gay male friends of contemporary commercial US and global TV within the histories and practices of oppression the texts themselves appear to challenge.

The purposeful inspection of contemporary representations brings us closer to understanding how normalising practices produce the gay male best friend in popular American and global television; homosexual males whose consumerism

and agency are made possible through the enactment of a vocabulary that frequently reduces, exaggerates or recoups both the visibility and value of their difference (usually from white, heterosexual characters). From the effeminate sidekick to the arbiter of fashion and lifestyle, and from queer excesses to the construction/reproduction of 'normal' families, we see how the performance of gay male best friends in contemporary televisual representations has an explicit relationship to consumerism and capitalism. Tracing relations between various constructions of the gay male friend foregrounds the textual value and commercial viability of gayness and queerness as filtered through larger social and cultural discourses that are both complex and contradictory.

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