
Consumption and the GLBTQ in Sydney

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Gay and lesbian consumers are a recent invention born out of the search for new market niches in western capitalist countries in the late 1980s and the 1990s (Gluckman and Reed 1997, Lukenbill 1999, Chasin 2000, Badgett 2001). In language that makes one wonder what is *really* being compared, marketing organisations made claims about the *bigger* than average salaries of gay men and their *massive* disposable incomes. Many of the statistics were pure fantasy and very misleading, but the myth of the gay economy was established.

Opinions about the role played by consumption in the gay and lesbian community are often sharply divided. Grant Lukenbill, an American business consultant and author of *Untold millions: Secret truths about marketing to gays and lesbians* (1999), is of the opinion that the public emergence of gay and lesbian consumers signals the coming of age and increasing acceptance of a sexual minority. He also argues that in their role as consumers gays and lesbians are able to flex their politico-economic muscles and force through equal rights in the world of work and other spheres. He writes that “profits are no longer immune from the issues surrounding gay and lesbian freedoms – both in the courtroom and in the marketplace”. For Lukenbill, and many other eager promoters of gay consumption, profit and progressive politics go hand-in-hand.

In recent decades, there has been a clear shift in political and social debates towards neo-liberal discourses that emphasise the right to choose and express one’s identity in the so-called market, that is through consumer choices. In the case of gays and lesbians (with some important gender differences), their right to express their sexual identity has often, though not exclusively, been performed within commercial settings. Within bars, clubs, saunas, bath houses – and through the consumption of an increasing output of goods such as novels, poetry, theatre, cinema, and music that provide some reference to and also validation of same-sex eroticism. Indeed, the development of modern western sexual identities is inseparable from capitalist development and there have been strong links between the formation of homosexual and gay and lesbian identities and commercial infrastructures in most western societies, Australia is no

exception (see Wotherspoon 1991, Willett 2000, Moore 2001). It is, then, perhaps not surprising that some commentators display such faith in the social and political inclusion of gay and lesbian citizens via their participation in consumer culture.

Critics of neo-liberal market doctrines have no difficulty pointing out that the neo-liberal ideas paint a patently false and partial view of citizenship. Not least discrimination has a negative impact on access to resources and thus on the opportunity to consume. Minorities may find themselves unable to satisfy their own consumer wishes if the majority does not cater for them, or find themselves subject to interference and sanctions, such as harassment of commercial venues in the form of police raids. Moreover, it is manifestly the case that gays and lesbians do *not* enjoy legal or substantive equality in any country regardless of how successful they may be as consumers. Critics of the recent attention given to the gay consumer argue that the consumption of goods has replaced real politics and activism with hedonism and political apathy. In the most extreme criticisms, capitalism and capitalist consumer culture are depicted as inimical to the 'real' interests of gays and lesbians and contain also accusations that gay men, and to a lesser extent lesbians, have often been duped by consumer capitalism. In particular, there is the complaint that they have neglected class struggle (e.g. Hennessy 1994-5, 2000, Kirsch 2000).

Studies of gay men and lesbians have paid little detailed attention to consumption. Much of the literature examines the historical development of homosexual communities, their spatial location, political mobilisation, and organisations. Rarely, however, has the focus been on the consumption practices that go on within these communities beyond noting the importance of commercial establishments, such as bars, as places to meet and socialise. They do not contain very much information on what was actually consumed, the kinds of beer, spirits, cigarettes, clothing labels, and so forth. A partial exception is Kates (1998), but his theoretical point of departure is 'deviance theory', which automatically isolates queer consumption from the heterosexual society and more 'mainstream' theories. Nor has much attention been paid to gay and lesbian businesses except in works providing advice on how to start and run them (e.g. Levin 1999).

In the case of both advocates and critics of social inclusion through consumption choices (broadly defined) there is a shared tendency to make pronouncements in the absence of detailed information about the actual consumption practices of gays and lesbians. As a consequence of this neglect, there is also a tendency to draw conclusions on the basis of textual and discourse analysis rather than on the examination of actual consumer behaviour. The title of Alexandra Chasin's (2000) book, *Selling out: The gay and lesbian movement*

goes to market, leaves the reader in no doubt about her views on the subject. But her conclusions, as she happily admits, are not based on the ethnography of consumer behaviour and opinion, but on discourse analysis of media messages. When details of consumption are presented, they tend to focus on the individual, in the sense of the personal preferences of individual gay men and lesbians (e.g. Kates 1998), rather than on the more collective manifestations of consumption. Yet collective forms of consumption, and, not least, the places in which they occur, are, I shall argue, important for an understanding of how people conceive of their own consumption practices. It is these collective forms and contexts – including loosely defined communities – that underlie and sometimes contribute directly to social, cultural, and political mobilisation and visibility. Approaches to gay consumption that ignore them provide a rather one-sided account. Much of the focus here will therefore be on the context and collective forms of gay consumption, rather than on details of individual consumers.

The Golden Mile

The Surry Hills and Darlinghurst areas of Sydney, New South Wales, in Australia are crossed by Oxford Street, the main hub of the city's gay and lesbian scene. The proliferation there of rainbow flags, and the obvious sexuality of many of the shoppers, customers and restaurant patrons signals the presence of a significant gay and lesbian population close to the centre of the city.

The origins of this gay enclave go back to the 1960s (Wotherspoon 1991; Faro 2000) and are inseparable from organised crime, especially the history of the gay bathhouses. No legitimate businessman or woman would become involved in this kind of gay commercial venture – homosexual relations between men were illegal in New South Wales until 1984 – and so the criminals seized the opportunity. (For a fascinating insight into some of the people involved, see Harvey 2000.) Even today, there are sensitive areas where homosexuality, business, consumption, and criminality are bedfellows. For instance, the collapse in November 2000 of the Satellite Group, a media and property company that owned several gay bars and clubs as well as gay and lesbian publications throughout Australia, was followed by an investigation into fraud by the owners, including the misuse of company funds, among other things to buy one of the directors a yacht. The legal proceedings continue.

Less serious, but still legally ambiguous, have been the past tactics of some gay restaurant owners on Oxford Street. Competition between them for the gay dollar is fierce. I was told of how restaurant and café owners in the past had sneaked around at night in the back lanes behind the restaurants, opened garbage containers and strewn the contents around, or planted illegal waste and dead rats in the containers of rivals. They then informed the authorities

that the restaurant in question was in violation of health regulations.

Most recently, the financial collapse of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, the organisation responsible for the annual Mardi Gras celebrations, highlighted tensions within Sydney's gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer community (hereafter, *glbtq*). Conflicts are useful objects of study as they often highlight processes that are otherwise difficult to access. As a field of study, queer consumption, at least in Sydney, is implicated in many areas of life including gender relations, class, race and ethnicity, generational differences, and identity where conflicts and tensions are not far below the surface. It does not provide a privileged perspective on these issues, but it certainly helps to foreground them.

Oxford Street is the epicentre of Sydney's gay and lesbian commercial scene. It is sometimes referred to as "the strip" or "Golden Mile", although many are of the opinion that its reputation has become tarnished of late for reasons which will become clear in the course of this article. The street provides commercial venues and businesses of many kinds, including pubs, bars, restaurants and cafés, discotheques, night-clubs, saunas, sex-on-premises venues, two cinemas, clothing shops, florists, opticians, a gay bookstore, newsagents, travel agents, a photographer, marketing and advertising, design, and more.

The Golden Mile serves both gay men and lesbians but there are some differences in the kinds of venues available. For example, Sydney lacks a permanent and exclusively lesbian bar whereas there are several gay male bars. Venues such as Middle Bar at Kinselas, Eden, and Gilligans at the Oxford Hotel (all on Oxford Street) are popular with lesbians. So, too, are Caesar's night-club on Parramatta Road, several kilometres from Oxford Street, and the Bank Hotel in Newtown, although neither is exclusively lesbian. Newtown is an area popular with lesbians, but less so among gay men. However, these differences ought not to be exaggerated. Oxford Street, even with the dominance to some extent of gay men, is still very much the centre of gravity of the *glbtq*.

The presence on Oxford Street of businesses and services also provides Sydney's *glbtq* with a level of visibility that is not found in other parts of the city. (For discussion of the *glbtq* in Sydney, see Johnson and van Reyk 2001.) The Golden Mile is 'evidence' of Sydney's status as a significant gay city and of its hard-won services and venues for its *glbtq*. More than this, the street is felt to provide a degree of security. Gay men and lesbians feel more at ease when showing affection there, such as kissing or holding hands in public, than elsewhere in Sydney. The strip should ideally be a safe place. The words "Safe Place" can be seen on signs containing a pink triangle in the windows of several businesses on Oxford Street. They give notice that any member of the *glbtq* who feels threatened can seek refuge within. For despite the ideal of being a haven in a

potentially hostile environment, violence against gbtq does sometimes occur on the Golden Mile.

Getting Sniffed

In February 2001, the status of Oxford Street as a relatively secure space was challenged by the police. I was having a beer with my flatmate that evening at the Midnight Shift, a bar on Oxford Street, when Pete, an acquaintance, came flying through the door, rushed past the main bar where we were standing and disappeared into the toilets at the back of the rear bar. He emerged about ten minutes later looking flustered. Pete likes to cultivate an air of mystery and to get people's attention. He does this by singing unexpectedly, and wearing clothes such as ripped jeans that leave nothing to the imagination, garish neon T-shirts, and by dying his hair every colour imaginable. That evening it was yellow. But attention was the last thing Pete wanted that Friday as he had four ecstasy tablets in his back pocket. Normally, this would not have been any cause for concern (although the Shift, I ought to point out, does *not* allow drugs on the premises), but that evening the police were patrolling Oxford Street searching for drugs. Officers from the City East Target Action Group (TAG) accompanied by drug detection, or 'sniffer', dogs were stopping people on the streets and entering commercial venues. Pete had taken refuge in the bar and flushed the tablets down the toilet. Twenty-seven people were arrested that Friday evening and twenty more the following evening. Protests were immediately made by the New South Wales Council for Civil Liberties against the drug sweep. The people arrested possessed only very small quantities of drugs obviously for their own use. The timing of the police action, just a week before the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade when there are more people than usual on Oxford Street, including inter-state and foreign tourists, could not have been more provocative. The negative impact on Sydney's image as a gay tourist Mecca of police dogs sniffing people's pockets and searches on the street was not lost on the businesses along the strip. The TAG justified the action by claiming that it was to protect tourists from drug dealers. However, given that no major drug dealers were caught their justification was dismissed. The consensus seems to have been that the sweep was nothing but a cheap publicity stunt to satisfy sections of public opinion and give the impression that the police were tackling the drug problem. Targeting Oxford Street, which automatically meant stopping gays and lesbians, would not raise too many objections.

Bad Carpeting

The Oxford Hotel is located on Oxford Street at Taylor Square. It has been a gay bar since 1982 and gone through many facelifts during its twenty-year

history. But in the winter of 2000 changes were made that led to howls of protest from regular customers and community groups alike. The Oxford changed ownership and was bought by Richard Wynne and his company Wynsix. The company owned several hotel bars in Sydney but had no experience of gay venues and many were apprehensive that this would mean the end of the Oxford as a gay bar. The new company embarked on major renovations, which were greeted with horrified reactions. A chocolate-coloured carpet was lain in the main bar prompting one of my friends to quip that “It was obviously bought at K-Mart by somebody on bad drugs!” The most controversial change was the introduction of poker machines, or “pokies”. Pokies, which are found in the majority of Australian pubs, have been the target of much abuse. Critics point to the huge amounts of money people lose gambling on them. Others complain about their ugliness, garish designs, flashing lights and the endless beeping and buzzing sounds they emit. Pokies destroy atmosphere, and the Oxford has long been a cruisy, mainly gay male, bar and one without poker machines to spoil the ambience and drown out the music videos. The new owners argued that the pokies would bring in the extra revenue needed to pay for the renovations. Angry letters to the *Sydney Star Observer* (SSO), Sydney’s main glbtq newspaper, dismissed this explanation. “Richard Wynne, the new owner of the Oxford, insults the intelligence of every gay man and lesbian. To suggest that the improvements and added quality can only be made to the hotel from gambling revenue is sickening in the extreme” (SSO August 3, 2000). Others complained that the new Oxford looked and felt like a Returned Services League club (RSL). The RSL is regarded as a bastion of homophobia by many glbtq and with good cause. “In return for the loyal support of the regulars we have been landed with the Oxford RSL. Yes, kids, it’s pokies delight on Taylor Square. No more DJs, no more seating, no more atmosphere, no more Oxford” (SSO July 27 2000). Another letter on the same theme had the following to say: “The Oxford, refurbishing out ambience, atmosphere and fun, and wheeling in a look that any sherry-drinking old woman from Walgett should appreciate (when pissed). Loser.” (SSO August 10, 2000).

Apart from the objections to gambling and carpeting, there was the worry that the Oxford would become straight. In quick succession, several of the oldest gay bars in Sydney had been sold as a direct consequence of the collapse of the Satellite Group mentioned earlier. The Flinders and Beresford Hotels were to become part of apartment complexes. The Beauchamp Hotel changed hands and was immediately converted into an Irish pub. The gay regulars abandoned it over night. Opposite the Beauchamp, on the other side of Oxford Street, the legendary Albury Hotel, the cradle of Sydney’s drag culture, was also sold. The new owners announced that the regular evening drag shows would

move upstairs. The end of an era was predicted. In short, it seemed as if most of the gay bars in Sydney were vanishing before the eyes of the glbtq. The Oxford was the latest example of what one SSO reader called the “de-homosexualisation of Oxford Street”.

It was in this context that the new owners of the Oxford took out a full-page advertisement in Sydney's gay press. Addressed to “Dear Community members” it assured readers that “It has definitely not been our intention to create an environment that would discourage our current gay and lesbian clientele from attending. The same friendly security that has always ensured a safe and enjoyable night at the Oxford will remain”. The new owners promised to remove the offending carpet and to lay new floorboards. The pokies were to be hidden behind a new wall in a ‘room’ of their own. The pub-like friendly atmosphere of the ground floor would be restored. The owners also explained that they had just employed a manager for the Oxford who had “extensive connections and experiences working in the gay and lesbian community”. Richard Wynne would not be involved in the day-to-day running of the business. This final reassurance was clearly to placate opinion and allay fears that a heterosexual would be unable to keep the Oxford gay. What was interesting was the assumption among most people I talked with that the previous owners of the Oxford Hotel were homosexual. They were not.

Behind the protests and the criticisms several assumptions could be detected. Firstly, to be reliable a ‘real’ gay and lesbian business must be gay-owned. Heterosexual ownership and loyalty to the glbtq community were incompatible or at least problematic. Secondly, a genuine gay business is not simply swayed by the profit motive. Naked economic gain and a gay bar that is part of the community were mutually exclusive. Thirdly, sexuality was clearly afforded priority as the primary identity that ought to override differences based on property and business ownership. Opposition to the presence of the pokies in particular seems to have been ignited by the sudden intrusion of the gaming machines at the same moment as the bar changed ownership. The problem was pokies and the profits derived from them in the hands of the wrong owners, rather than the pokies as such. The Beauchamp Hotel also had pokies, but they were downstairs out of sight of the main bar. I never heard anyone complain about them.

In among all the protests there were also those who voiced awareness of some of the dilemmas that a decision to boycott the Oxford Hotel might cause. As most bars already had pokies, avoiding them would be difficult for any gay man looking for an alternative venue. Boycotting the Oxford would also “hand it over to heterosexuals on a silver platter” as the owners would have no alternative but to look for a straight clientele if the business was to be a success. In the

event, patrons returned to the Oxford in large numbers and it continues to be one of Sydney's busiest gay bars.

Suspicions that the glbtq was being exploited were by no means confined to the case of the Oxford Hotel; they were often voiced in conversation. The most blatant example is the refusal of the New South Wales government to give financial support to the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, even though the politicians know that the tourist revenues it brings into Sydney run into millions of dollars. This refusal does not, however, stop many local, state and national politicians, including the Premier of New South Wales and the Australian Prime Minister, from having their photographs in the official Mardi Gras programme together with messages of good luck. There was also resentment against some of the shop owners on Oxford Street who made money on gay and lesbian customers but did not take part in events like Shop Yourself Stupid day when businesses donate ten percent of their day's revenue to AIDS charities. But the most frequent complaint was about the poor service, poor food and inflated prices of Oxford Street cafés. "There is the assumption that just because I'm a gay man I'll put up with inferior service and lousy food served by a stuck-up fag", was how a member of Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Business Association bluntly put it. At the same time, many people did admit that they would be prepared to pay a little extra if it meant supporting a gay business as long as they did not feel that they were being exploited.

There Are No 'Gay Businesses'

A basic problem identified by gay business owners themselves was that some people started a business and advertised it as a gay business under the assumption that the loyalty of the glbtq could simply be taken for granted. There were even examples of businesses that were owned and run by heterosexuals doing this. "No one should start a business thinking that they are starting a *gay* business. You start with the ambition to set up a *good* business. Otherwise you are finished before you even start", I was told by Sherry, the lesbian owner and director of a marketing company. To begin with few businesses in Sydney would survive if they were to draw clients only from the glbtq. Exceptions to this include the bars for gay men and some travel agents, and sex-on-premises venues. Most café owners on Oxford Street must be able to attract customers beyond the glbtq. One must run a *good* café not only a *gay* café. But there is also a realisation or fear among business owners that being labelled a gay business will somehow suggest that the business is inferior. One that, as the complaints above suggest, only survives because of the loyalty of customers and not because it is particularly good. Rather like complaints from 'ethnic' and 'women' authors that they are first and foremost authors, a 'gay business' is first and foremost a

business. Another way of looking at this was suggested to me by the owner of a travel agency that specialises in gay male tourists. Ed was of the opinion that the dislike of the gay label was a matter of internalised homophobia and a reluctance to accept or use the label outside the relatively safe and accepting environment offered by the 'community'. While there may be some truth in this, it remains true that a business which is labelled gay or lesbian must deal with the same kinds of prejudices as gays and lesbians themselves.

Sponsors

As the figure of the gay consumer has emerged, corporate businesses have shown an increasing willingness to act as high-profile sponsors. Their contributions are needed in Sydney. As I mentioned earlier, the New South Wales government does not provide any financial support for Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras even though it is Australia's largest outdoor event. Around 500 000 people take part and it draws in millions of dollars to the state every year. This reluctance to subsidise the event is puzzling in the light of the state government's reaction to a report from the USA by Richard Florida entitled *Competing in the age of talent*. According to Florida, in a world of global competition 'cool' cities are the ones that thrive, and a visible gay population is a strong indicator of a cool city. Bob Carr, the New South Wales Premier, asked staff to look at the report as Sydney has a very visible gay population. One of the reasons for its high profile is, of course, the Mardi Gras which the Carr government refuses to support financially.

The lack of financial support from state government leaves gay and lesbian events with little choice but to look for business sponsors. Some of the main sponsors in Sydney include the national airline Qantas, the mortgage company Aussie Home Loans, the national telecommunications provider Telstra, Ford, Absolut vodka, and South Sydney Council. The latter has a healthy appreciation of the size of the glbtq vote in the part of the city for which it is responsible.

Within the large corporate sponsors there are usually one or two executives, often themselves gay or lesbian, who take the initiative and manage contacts with gay and lesbian organisations. What they have told me has provided insights into the kind of misunderstandings, complete ignorance, and prejudices that inform corporate discussion of marketing and advertising directly to the gay and lesbian niche, and the sponsorship of events. These include the vetting of advertisements, horrified rejection of plans to advertise in gay media, and the unintentional use of offensive promotional material that relies on stereotypes. Sponsorship may also come with strings attached. One example was the demand that foreign tourists who visited Sydney to take part in the Mardi Gras celebrations had to have flown to Australia with the sponsoring airline if they

wanted to purchase tickets to the final Mardi Gras party. Such demands are not feasible in practice, but that they were made at all indicates how companies want to control the event. It is, then, not surprising that many people were suspicious, not to mention sarcastic, about corporate sponsorship of glbtq celebrations.

The people responsible for sponsoring events sometimes act on their own initiative without head office being fully informed. One example of this was the involvement of Gulf Air in the Boys' Bake Off, a competition that takes place every year in Sydney. Anyone can compete with a cake they have baked. The point is not to bake something that is delicious, most of the entries are inedible, but to impress with design skills and imagination. For instance, a pink, reclining pig was a recent winner. Prizes are awarded for the best entries and after the prize-giving the cakes are sold at auction and the money donated to charity. A number of organisations and companies have sponsored the event during the years. Gulf Air was one of them until its office in Dubai found out that the competition was organised by homosexuals, that most of the competitors were homosexuals, and that the money raised was given to AIDS organisations. The airline stopped sponsoring the event, but the Bake Off has survived with the help of other sponsors.

The fall and rise of the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras

Yet, even with sponsorship, gay and lesbian events in Australia, as in many other countries, often find it difficult to break even. The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras went into voluntary administration in the middle of 2002. It had huge debts and could no longer manage its own financial affairs. This immediately raised the question of which companies and organisations were to take over the running of the Mardi Gras, and the usual fears were expressed that the event would be taken out of the hands of the 'community'. A round of meetings got under way with commercial interests seeking to buy the Mardi Gras while community representatives demanded that it remain gay and lesbian. Eventually a coalition of organisations, all with strong links to the glbtq, took over responsibility in September 2002. It seemed that the Mardi Gras was safely in the hands of the community. Relief was short lived. In December 2002, one of New Mardi Gras' first actions was to remove the words "gay and lesbian" from the name of the parade that marks the final climax of the celebrations. There were instant protests from all sections of the glbtq, and in January 2003 the parade was given its old name back: the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade. For many observers, this was yet another instance of how out of touch the Mardi Gras organisation was with the 'community'. Some of the board members had felt that after 25 years it was

common knowledge that the Mardi Gras, the parade, and associated events, such as the Fair Day, the Arts Festival, and the Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, were organised by and for gays and lesbians and that the words were therefore superfluous. Those opposed to removing the prefix 'gay and lesbian' argued that it lessened the visibility of the glbtq which the Mardi Gras had done so much to increase, not least through national television coverage of the event. Highlights from the parade are broadcast the following evening across the country. What message will it send, people asked, if it is no longer a "Gay and Lesbian" Mardi Gras?

Other tensions within glbtq, apart from widespread dissatisfaction with representatives, also surfaced. One of the Mardi Gras organisers has blamed "gender equality" for the financial difficulties of the event. He was quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* :

For many years, the Mardi Gras organisation has been run by people who are not of the same constituency as the members... The membership is overwhelmingly gay men and they like the parade and the parties. The decision in the early 1990s to ensure gender equity in the organization was well meant... but it did move Mardi Gras away from its constituency. Lesbians wanted more of their own events but the people who attend them and pay for everything are gay men.

Lesbians dismissed the claims as rubbish.

The Games go bust

But financial problems have not been confined to Mardi Gras. In November 2002, Sydney was host to the Gay Games. The Games are held in a different country every four years and are open to amateur and professional sportsmen and sportswomen from around the world. They attract around 14 000 athletes, 20 000 visitors and people from the host city. The impact of the Games on Sydney's glbtq was considerable. Trading was brisk in the shops and businesses on Oxford Street, especially in the gyms, which were packed with competitors putting in last minute training. Nonetheless, the bill for the event was a loss of between Aus \$1 500 000 to Aus \$2 500 000. A final figure is still not available. An administrator was called in to take over managing the Gay Games finances.

There was widespread disappointment at the financial loss, especially as the Games themselves had gone very well. There was the inevitable post-mortem. Why had it not been a financial success? Some board members pointed to the low ticket sales for the opening ceremonies and farewell party. Yet the risk of relying too heavily on party ticket sales to bring in revenue was spelled out before the Games began. Many gay and lesbian organisations in Sydney and the rest of Australia have reported difficulties with falling dance-party attendance.

Members of these organisations had expressed their concerns to Gay Games. There had also been warnings from former International Federation of Gay Games co-president Bill Wassner. “If you win a game, that means your event’s in the next round. You’re not going to go to an all-night party – you’re going to have dinner and go to bed and get ready for you game the next day.” His comments pointed to the risk of seeing the glbtq through a rather narrow economic lens focused on party animals, rather than sportsmen and women who had flown half way around the world at considerable cost to compete in the Games, not to dance to disco music. Wassner again: “These people that are getting on these planes are goddamn serious. Are the people of Sydney getting this or are they not getting this?”

Some of the explanations for the financial loss were also interpreted as arrogant excuses, such as the complaints from the Gay Games co-chair, Bev Lange, about negative publicity, the failure of sponsors, and the failure of the community to buy enough party tickets. An angry letter to the SSO website summed up what a lot of people felt about the excuses.

What the hell is going on? First Satellite, then Mardi Gras, and now the Gay Games have gone under. Obviously something is seriously wrong in our community. Did we support our own so much during the darkest hours of the still on-going HIV/AIDS crisis that some organisations take our support for granted? I feel as if Gay Inc has taken us all for a horrible ride and then restarted the roller coaster after we all threw up and shouted ”Stop!” Too bad we were all still on board at the time.

The obvious danger with the very public collapses of large glbtq organisations, and the acrimonious debates that often follow in their wake, is that they can discourage sponsors from giving money to organisations which they perceive as unable to manage it responsibly. This is precisely what is now happening in Sydney.

There are other problems. The recently elected co-chair of New Mardi Gras, Michael Woodhouse, commented on the difficulties the collapse of SGLMG had created:

In our efforts to recruit people with good business expertise, we’re finding that the people we most want are all the people for whom it is most dangerous to be involved with an organisation which for whatever reason looks damaged.

Queer consumers?

The sponsorship of gay and lesbian events is informed by an assumption and belief that there does indeed exist a relatively well defined and identifiable gay and lesbian population and that it has money to spend. Marketing consultants have encouraged this, but companies with names such as “10% Productions”,

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and the titles of books such as *20 million new consumers* play on the (in)famous statistic from the Kinsey reports of the 1940s that 10 per cent of the population of the USA is/was homosexual. These essentialising and minoritising views are by now favourite targets of queer critique (and were, in fact, attacked by early gay liberation critiques of the 1970s. See, for example, Altman 1993 [1971]).

Rather than accept the existence of the two major sexual categories 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual', their historical and contingent nature has been emphasised in gay and lesbian scholarship and queer studies. Heterosexuality, the privileged category, can only appear as normal in relation to the sexual minorities. But the contours of the gay and lesbian minority are also stabilised in relation to the putative heterosexual majority. A simple but important point emphasised by queer critics is that the boundaries between them are permeable to such an extent that the categories must be called into question. A detailed examination of consumption behaviour soon reveals that these dominant categories are blunt instruments with which to describe sexuality.

What my own ethnography seems to be showing is that consumption is decidedly more 'queer', and hence difficult to summarise in a sales pitch, than most marketers realise, or perhaps want to acknowledge. It does not easily lend itself to any neat sexual typology of heterosexual-homosexual, or to categories like 'straight', 'lesbian', 'gay' or 'bisexual'. One brief example can illustrate my point.

Roger is a middle-aged man living in Surry Hills close to Oxford Street. His background is solidly working class. His childhood and early adult years were spent in small towns two or three hours drive from Sydney. His work history includes retailing, management training, public transport, and teaching. He is a Roman Catholic with many years of voluntary service to the church behind him although he no longer practises his faith actively and feels alienated from the church hierarchy. Roger also has many years of experience in the reserve armed forces and rose to quite a high rank. He still has his uniforms and other army memorabilia at home, including ceremonial swords hanging on the walls. He has been active in the Rotary Club and a number of other community organisations. He has diplomas and certificates testifying to his military service and membership of organisations, framed on the walls. If one were to do nothing other than look at what hangs on his living rooms walls, one would get the impression that Roger is a solid and respectable member of society, with strong ties to some of its most homophobic and heteronormative institutions. Roger's consumption preferences in furnishings and clothing, when seen against typical tastes for someone of his age and class background, are unremarkable. Among the pictures he owns are abstract paintings he bought from a friend at a time when he earned much more money than he does now – he isn't all that fond of

the pictures – and several prints of idyllic rural scenes. He owns many tapes of classical music, but he never plays them. His real passion is Hollywood and Broadway musicals, the first hint of anything stereotypically gay. He has a sizeable video collection of some of the best known musicals, including several featuring Judy Garland (also a stereotypical gay male icon). He can burst into song at a moment's notice and often does so regardless of where he happens to be at the time. His knowledge of the melodies and words to the best known songs is impressive. Roger also owns a large collection of gay porn videos, out of sight in the bottom drawer of a cupboard in his bedroom, and some sex toys. A large silver crucifix stands on a small bureau next to his bed close to his bottles of poppers¹, and his condoms and sexual lubricants. Above his bed hangs a framed poster of a beautiful young man lying naked under silk sheets. Roger often attends the Mardi Gras parade and parties. He is a regular at several of the gay bars on Oxford Street. He did not become an active member of the Sydney gay scene until he turned forty, but he made up for lost time with a vengeance with drinks, drugs, partying, and as many sexual partners as possible during the last ten years. The combination of military and church service, Roger's deep religious faith, promiscuous party lifestyle, and mixture of tastes make it difficult to classify him. The labels 'gay', 'straight', 'heterosexual', and 'homosexual' do him little justice. If anything he is a touch 'queer'. I could write pages about Roger and his consumption and tastes that would make it even more difficult to pigeonhole him as a particular type of consumer. He is not alone.

One reason why marketers have been able to sell the idea of the 'gay consumer' and gay market niche has been the *absence* of ethnography on the subject of glbtq consumption that shows its complexity and variety. Marketing employs statistics, and questionnaires that purport to provide an accurate picture of gay and lesbian consumption preferences (see Wardlow 1996). The results are often rather simplistic, and frequently entirely lacking in information about the reasons *why* people buy what they do and the interpretations that consumers place on the goods they buy. Marketing consultants who sell the image of the affluent, often gay male, consumer obviously regarded my research as a potential tool with which they could further their own business objectives. The promise of ethnography that is considerably more detailed than anything they had ever seen on the subject of gay and lesbian consumption made many mouths water.

However, ethnography of the queer dimensions of consumption, such as in Roger's case, threatens the kind of categorisation that forms the basis for a marketing strategy directed at gay consumers. It is perhaps not surprising that I encountered opposition to a queer perspective among gay marketing consultants who confidently affirmed the existence of the 'gay consumer'. If a queer critique were to take hold among corporate sponsors, which is not

impossible given the fact that a business world variety of 'gay and lesbian studies' seems to have caught on in the pursuit of a profitable market niche, it might give them pause for thought. Not least about who they are actually sponsoring.

Throughout this article, I have used the convenient shorthand 'glbtq' to stand in for a community. In reality, the different constituencies that comprise this 'community' do not stand as close to each other as the 5-letter abbreviation might seem to imply. Some of the gender divisions brought to the surface by the collapse of the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras have already been mentioned. There are often protests from lesbians against the presence of so many drag queens in and around the parade. Some of the latter do not shy away from misogynist jokes in their shows. There are and always have been racial divisions between white Australians and Aboriginals within the gay scene, and also between whites and Asians. There are generational differences that express themselves in a dislike among younger gays and lesbians of what they see as excessive commercialisation. They sometimes use the term 'queer' to mark themselves off from what they see as the self-satisfied and comfortable lifestyle of an older generation. Indeed, generational divisions within the glbtq coincide with differences of opinion surrounding everything from vegetarianism to globalisation as well as changing understanding of sexuality. Add to this differences of class and all the people like Roger who are so difficult to categorise, and the gay consumer starts to appear as what it always has been male, white, fairly young, well educated, and with a good salary, that is, a minority within the glbtq.

Resistant consumers?

Problems with the figure of the gay consumer ought not to lead us to brand all glbtq consumption as an inherently apolitical pursuit, but it ought to caution against any exaggerated claims about the political significance of glbtq consumption. It is here that the importance of context for an understanding of the links between consumption and politics, or what is sometimes called 'resistance', emerges.

In his study of urban social movements, Manuel Castells (1983) outlined three structural issues around which resistances take place: collective consumption; the defence and expression of cultural identities; and relations to the state and/or local government. The first two issues are of particular relevance for Sydney's glbtq. Categorical statements about gay and lesbian consumption, whether in praise of its political potential or critical of its depoliticising effects, often rest on insufficient evidence that takes little account of how consumption is carried out and, not least, in what contexts it occurs; place is important.

Oxford Street and the surrounding areas of Surry Hills and Darlinghurst

have never been entirely secure lesbian and gay spaces, and the glbtq are well aware that their simply being there, most obviously as consumers, is still resented by some. If we are to ascribe political significance or resistance to the consumption that takes place there, and in its sometimes overly romantic usage virtually anything can qualify as 'resistance' (Abu-Lughod 1990), then we need to attend to both intentional acts of resistance and to the importance of practices, the mundane, quotidian practices of everyday life and the part they play. Among other things, we need to remember that 'resistors' are embodied subjects with an affective investment in what they do, and that what they do is often collective (although not necessarily in the form of a collective actor), and carried out in specific meaningful contexts. As I have explained, Sydney's glbtq is concentrated to a specific part of the city that provides a milieu which is organised around commerce and consumption and a host of other activities and organisations that are tightly associated with marginalised and vulnerable sexualities. It is because of this that consumption has a strong, if not always obvious, affective component. Thus disruptions of consumption routines and possibilities that are embodied, locally anchored, reflexive, and supportive of one's sexuality and hence identity, are not trivial matters. They reverberate throughout the glbtq at many levels, including the body, sexuality, identity, social relations, sense of place, imagined community, sense of security, and sense of justice.

To this can be added the fact that in Sydney the links between glbtq consumption and other spheres – local politics, the police, business ownership, property development, tourism, sexuality, and so on - are fairly easy to identify. It is, in part, these visible and well known links that open up consumption to so many social, cultural and political issues. There are, as we have seen, many sensitive and controversial sides to glbtq consumption in Sydney including fraud, business failures, ineffective leadership, the need for secure public spaces, exploitation, demands for community control of businesses and organisations, homophobia, racism, gender tensions, generational divisions, equal rights, and the essentialisation of sexual identities. There is a great deal of ambivalence about the economic infrastructure and the commercial scene which is created by the above issues. Something as apparently trivial as the presence of a chocolate-coloured carpet in a gay men's bar can help to fuel a debate about straight exploitation of the glbtq. The seemingly endless discussions and criticisms of Mardi Gras – what it is, what it represents, what it ought to become – often touch on the economics of the event, including sponsorship, tourism, and the image of Sydney the Mardi Gras conveys to visitors. It is also including the price of tickets, the quality of the Arts Festival and Film Festival and whether or not they provide value for money. Whether or not 'commercialisation' is blunting the political edge of the celebrations is the perennial question. One marketing

consultant goes so far as to advise companies *not* to sponsor the Mardi Gras, because Sydney's glbtq have become so suspicious of corporate involvement in it. Worries about depoliticisation ought also to be seen against the fact that the first Mardi Gras in 1978 ended in an ugly confrontation with the police who attacked and arrested the marchers. It marked a watershed in the political awareness and visibility of Sydney's lesbians and gays. Any subsequent Mardi Gras was bound to seem tame by comparison (see Carbery 1995).

Worries about the perceived depoliticisation of Sydney's glbtq usually blame it on commercialisation. But to the present author these concerns seem exaggerated. The appointment of a homophobic and conservative Catholic Bishop to Sydney in 2001 led to demonstrations outside St Mary's Cathedral. Federal Government attempts to prevent single women having access to fertilisation services were vigorously opposed by lesbians. Efforts are being made to ensure that gay and lesbian couples have the same pension rights as heterosexuals. And an anti-violence campaign directed against homophobia has called on and received the support of prominent Australian sportsmen. The list of causes goes on. Politics is alive and kicking in Sydney's glbtq.

When members of the glbtq consume, they do so in conditions not always of their own making. Often, the very consumer choices that affirm their sexuality, such as patronising a bar, club, or restaurant, are the same choices that line the pockets of people, who, if tested, might prove to be less gay-friendly or loyal to the 'community' than they would like people to believe. Members of Sydney's glbtq often realise this, comment ironically on it, and continue to patronise a venue, understandably so in the absence of any alternatives to, for example, a bar with pokies. But in other circumstances the affective dimension in glbtq consumption can be activated very quickly and fuel more obviously 'political' actions and opinions, exploitation by straight bar owners, police violence and intervention, the hypocrisy of politicians. It can fuel feelings of a community under siege from property developers (some of whom may themselves be gay), distancing oneself from the older gay and lesbian generation, and not recognising oneself in the advertising imagery directed at the glbtq.

Consumption is not a panacea that will solve the problems that exist among Sydney's glbtq, but neither can it be said to have caused all of them. Consumption can include an element of resistance, but it is complex, often contradictory, contextual, but also sometimes enjoyable. The enjoyment glbtq consumption in its many different forms provides has been fought for in Sydney as in other western cities. The serious side of this consumption on the Golden Mile often only shows its face when that very consumption is threatened.

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Note

¹ Poppers is the common term used for amyl nitrate, a muscle relaxant that when sniffed produces a brief feeling of euphoria. It is often used as a muscle relaxant during anal intercourse.

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