

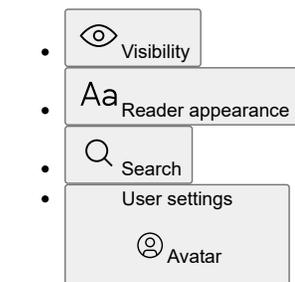
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Options

Reading Representations of (Un)desirable GBTI Men on QueerLife's 4Men Website Section

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Abstract

Using discourse analysis and semiotic analysis, this article examines how the language and images of the "4men" section of the South African site QueerLife construct masculinity and femininity as (un)desirable aspects in gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (GBTI) men's relationships. The use of "(un)desirable" in this article suggests that there are contesting definitions of what constitutes desirable and undesirable traits in GBTI relationships. Although QueerLife states that it caters to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTIQ) people, this article only focuses on GBTI men's content in the 4men section. The article argues that despite claiming to cater to all within the LGBTIQ spectrum, representations on QueerLife 4men seem to treat masculinity as the most desirable trait. This encompasses traits such as penis size, athleticism, class, emotionlessness, and muscular, firmly built bodies. Overall, the analysis of these texts will show that among what such representations seek to achieve in post-apartheid South Africa is an appeal to white, urban, middle-class gay communities.

Keywords

Desirability, Masculinity, Femininity, Patriarchy, South Africa

Introduction

Since 1990, South Africa has experienced radical political changes. Section 16 of the Bill of Rights states that everyone has the right to freedom of expression, including freedom of the press, and freedom to receive and disseminate information and ideas (Fourie 2002). South Africa, also known as the "Rainbow Nation," was the first country in the world to include a sexual orientation clause in its Bill of Rights in 1996 (Graziano 2004; Oswin 2007; Van Zyl 2009).¹ Between 1993 and 2006 there were dramatic legal moves from restriction of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) rights to constitutional protection based on one's orientation; accordingly the social visibility of LGBTIQ people increased in sports, academics, law, media, and the streets (Graziano 2004; Reddy 2004, 2006).

In this article, I make use of the term *GBTI* to refer to gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people, particularly men. *Gay* refers to men sexually attracted to men; *bisexual* refers to men who are sexually attracted to either men or women; *transgender* which broadly refers to people who were assigned the wrong gender at birth, in this article transgender is a gender identity of men who were assigned female at birth; and *intersex* refers to men who were born with ambiguous variations in sex characteristics. Based on the fact that magazines in general are texts that are classed, racialized, and heteronormative (Gill 2009), this article seeks to understand the hidden ways through which masculinity, race, and class are (re)enforced in QueerLife's understanding of desirable or undesirable traits among GBTI men. While acknowledging the visibility of GBTI people in online magazines, this article seeks to critique the dominance of language and images that normalize GBTI masculinity among men as the most desirable.

Although a great deal of literature has focused on GBTI representations in the Global North, it is important to contextualize this study in relation to the particularities of South African GBTI experiences and representations. Numerous studies have explored African sexualities (Amadiume 1987; Gevisser 1995; Gaudio 2001; Arnfred 2004; Morgan and Wieringa 2005; Epprecht 2013; Green-Simms 2016; Hendricks 2018), but these studies have focused mostly on homosexual males (Sonnekus and Van Eeden 2009) in offline spaces. The internet is a space for GBTI writers and allies to tell stories about their fears, desires, loves, and struggles (Green-Simms 2016), yet there has been little research attention given to the issues related to them (Subramony 2018). Following Foucault (1978, 11), this article acknowledges that there are discursive effects (and affects) of power that are generated by what is said about GBTI fears, desires, loves, and struggles through language and images. The concept of desire is therefore important in determining which attributes qualify one as legitimately GBTI. My definition of *desire* follows Thomas Hendriks (2018) in his research on desire among urban Congo men who have sex with men

(MSM), which is a "conceptualisation of *desire-as-connection*" (Hendriks 2018, 860, emphasis in original). This notion of desire centers ideal intimacy as only possible through the presence of physically attractive characteristics and codes. This encompasses traits such as penis size, athleticism, class, emotionlessness, and physically muscular and firmly built bodies.

This article therefore attempts to show how these gendered representations of (un)desirable GBTI are not detached from the broader power relations in South Africa. Gevisser (1994) dates the imbrications of race, class, and masculinity to the earliest form of organization, the Gay Association of South Africa (GASA) formed in 1982. GASA, the first South African formal LGBTIQ organization, was formed along with a queer publication *Link/Skakel* (Gevisser 1995). Theo Sonnekus and Jeanne van Eeden (2009) posit that both GASA and *Link/Skakel* adhered to white norms and paid little attention to gender-based inequality in South Africa. This led to what Zvenyika Mugari (2015, 76) terms the perfection and completion of "racial segregation on ... pages" in the colony. The mainstream South African LGBTIQ press became John Parker's (1972) "Little White Island," whose main focus was white male homosexuality.

Decades later, Reygan stated that South African "discourses in Gay media outputs from Cape Town's Gay village continue to (re)construct a space that is often exclusionary in terms of gender, race and class as well as the nexus of all three" (Reygan 2016, 87). South African social identities are still rooted in the historical discourse of race and apartheid (Moolman 2013), which are intimately tied to masculinity. As such, most of the content analyzed in this article focuses on the QueerLife 4men section to fully unpack the hidden gendered, racialized, and classed power relations that still exist in representations of GBTI (un)desirability.

Rationale and Research Questions

The QueerLife online magazine (www.queerlife.co.za) claims to be "South Africa's leading LGBTIQ destination." Hence it is an ideal space to purposively select texts with which to study representations of GBTI identities. QueerLife's 4mens section is an interesting site of analysis because no research of this nature has been carried out on the website. Because this site's dominant pictorial representation is white bodies, I considered it the most suitable website on which to conduct an intersectional analysis of how (un)desirability is framed for South African GBTI men, and whether this framing institutes racial and classed power relations.

This research focusses on this online site because, unlike print magazines, the online space has been thought of as emancipatory. My study, therefore, sets out to demystify the paradigm that sees the internet as less politicized. QueerLife was selected for this analysis because, unlike other South African LGBTIQ online magazines such as Gay Pages SA, Exit, OUT, and Mamba Online, it explicitly compartmentalizes experiences into 4men and 4women. This compartmentalization along with its highly racialized nature sparked my curiosity and motivated me to explore three themes. First I questioned the representations of masculinity and femininity and their relationship to (un)desirability among GBTI men in QueerLife's 4men section. Second, I wondered whether there are any forms of intragroup subcategorization(s) of GBTI men that take place as a result of the signification attached to masculinity and femininity, and if so, how they intersected with other identity markers such as race, class, sex, and body. Finally, I wanted to understand how the intersection of masculinity, femininity, race, class, sex, and body in representations of GBTI men's (un)desirability is linked to broader power relations in South Africa. After I have provided additional background on QueerLife, I will outline the methodological issues and limitations of my study then analyze my findings.

QueerLife Website

To begin, it is important to briefly explain what QueerLife looks like and how it works for users. QueerLife's opening page features nine tabs that divide the website into different sections: Home, News, Finance, Entertainment News, 4men, 4women, Cars, Competitions, and Join Our Newsletter. Each page also usually features advertisements for QLDating and Pride TV. (Pride TV's hyperlink leads to www.pridetv.co.za, a multimedia website whose content is outside the focus of this article.) The QueerLife site distinguishes the experiences of men and women through the 4men and 4women tabs (the 4women section being outside the scope of this discussion). Naming one of these two different spaces "4men" places GBTI men in a distinct space of gender specificity and performativity. My discussion will focus on the further subcategorizations of GBTI men that may take place within this space.

Also, there exists an odd contradiction in the name of the magazine, QueerLife, because its stated focus on LGBTIQ leaves out queer people. Particular forms of GBTI (e.g., masculine gays) then become standardized as more desirable, resulting in the "formation of a minority within a minority (or the 'other' other)" (Sonnekus and van Eeden 2009, 81) through gender-based "binarism" (see Boelstorff 2003). This binarism involves emphasizing the masculine or feminine as a difference that makes a difference (Steyn 2010) in GBTI (un)desirability.

To submit a post for publication on QueerLife, one must go through the "Contact us at QueerLife" submission tab. Another way through which QueerLife gathers articles and opinions is through submissions from their "award-winning" authors. Their reference to the authors as award-winning makes them appear as authorities or experts in GBTI stories and opinions. These authors' names are anonymized in posts.

Methodological Issues

My study employs a qualitative research approach, focusing solely on content on the 4men's domain, which has the following subpages: Man Fun, Man Health, Man Opinions, Man Relationships, and Man Style. A total of forty posts published between January 1, 2016, and April 30, 2018, on QueerLife's 4men section were purposively sampled for analysis. These forty posts were selected from a total of at least 200 articles published between January 1, 2016, and April 30, 2018. The purposive sampling of articles was based on their relevance to the research questions, including whether they had clear or hidden articulations of male GBTI (un)desirability. I was able to determine these "articulations of (un)desirability" through a close reading of the articles and a two-stage thematic coding.

For the data analysis, I used discourse analysis and semiotic analysis, specifically the approach of Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter (1988) to discourse analysis. Because Wetherell and Potter's approach considers individual accounts to be the primary object of research rather than transparent representations of individual attitudes and beliefs or the true nature of events (McKenzie 2005), this method is appropriate for the research presented here. To substantiate, Wetherell and Potter (1988) assert that discourse should be considered a social practice, not a neutral transmitter, having features and consequences. These consequences include the creation of cultural perceptions that only a particular type of body is desirable within the GBTI male community. I consider such discourse a product of the historical domination of men over women, men over men, white men over black men, and rich men over poorer men. By reading the patriarchal "social practice(s)" and power relations that are at stake in representations of GBTI desirable or undesirable bodies, the discourse analysis shows why normalized accounts of these relationships are implicit in the enforcement of a certain kind of gay homonormativity.

Additionally, a semiotic analysis was used to interpret meanings in encoded visual images. Semiotics is the doctrine of signs (Hershberger 2014). Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (2006) described semiotics as a sign system constituting the signifier and the signified. A sign is anything that substitutes for something else (Stam 2005). Language or images are signifiers in a sign system, and their meanings make up the signified (Barthes 1964): "Signification can

be conceived as a process; it is the act which binds the signifier and the signified, an act whose product is the sign" (48). For example, if one says "dog," what is conveyed mentally is not the dog itself but a concept of "dogness." Similarly, what writers say about "GBTI people" conveys a mental concept of "GBTI-ness." Hence, Roland Barthes (1988) opined that elements are understood as signifiers by their correlative position rather than by their content. Thus, dominant representations of GBTI cultural codes are signifiers of desirable forms of GBTI men. The "psychological imprint" (De Saussure 2006) that the representation of a physical thing leaves on people is important in semiotics: "Saussure's signified is a *concept* in the mind—not a thing but the notion of a thing" (Chandler 2017, 15, emphasis in original).

I define *masculinity* as an identifiable set of practices occurring across space and time, embodied and practiced collectively by groups, communities, and societies (Schippers 2007). By virtue of their enactment over time and space, masculine practices affect the distribution of resources, authority, the social arena of desire and sexuality, and the production of meaning and values (Connell 2000; Schippers 2007). Masculinity guarantees a person's domination over femininities and other masculinities (Connell 2000). These "other masculinities" are "marginalized masculinities" that are of subordinated classes or racial/ethnic groups (Schippers 2007). In this marginalization of other masculinities, "hegemonic masculinity is conflated with whiteness and middle-class status, and it is conferred authority in a way marginalized masculinities are not" (Schippers 2007, 88).

Femininity, on the other hand, refers to a "position within language and in a psycho-sexual formation that the term Woman signifies" (Pollock 2015, 17). Femininity can therefore be embodied by a male-identifying individual. Schippers (2007, 96) observes that once a man exhibits hegemonic, feminine characteristics such as wishing to be the object of masculine desire, being physically weak, or being compliant he is stigmatized or sanctioned. This explains why masculine-presenting GBTI men enjoy more privileges in patriarchal societies than their feminine-presenting counterparts.

Analysis of Findings

In my analysis of the language and images that accompany the articles I have chosen, I found that QueerLife posts tended to provide highly masculine accounts of (un)desirable GBTI men. They also further subgendered men through a conceptualization of desirability as connected to penis size, athleticism, class, emotionlessness, and muscular bodies. Through authors' reference to rugby and athleticism as desirable, the articles also constructed raced and classed gay masculinities, which I argue are aligned with the hegemonic idea of the family and nation in South Africa. I also show how accounts of sex among GBTI men create hierarchies of being.

Masculine Accounts of (Un)desirable GBTI

The language and images of the (un)desirable GBTI man on QueerLife favor masculine-presenting men. (Un)desirability is a set of personal attributes that deter or enhance "connection"—or what one QueerLife post terms "Chemistry between Men." This "chemistry" is also a connection, which stimulates desire. The "Chemistry between Men" post addresses the need for a man to allow his "desires to come out again, to become both active and attached to other people." That connection or attachment is also captured in a 4men relationships post titled "Bi-Curious Experimentation," where the author starts off by stating,

It doesn't take a scientist to know that men are extremely different from women. Our prowl and need for sex cannot compare with each other. We're visual creatures who depend a lot on our physical attraction to the world. We gain our self-esteem by how we sexually attract others to us—it's imperfect, but it's a basic human instinct.

The term "bi-curious" holds the same meaning as the term "heteroflexible," which denotes straight-identified men who at times engage in sex with other men (Carillo and Hoffman 2018). In the context of a queer website, bi-curious is also more likely to connote gay-identified men who are curious about sex with women. "Bi-curious identity could also be read as a 'distancing' identity, embraced by those who are closeted, or by heterosexuals who want to explore same-sex activity without attracting the stigma attached to lesbian, gay or bisexual identities" (Albury 2015, 658). Yet by emphasizing the difference between male and female bi-curious desire, the post's author insists that there exists an essential gendered difference between bi-curious men and women. This standardizes male desire as dependent on "physical attraction" and the ability to be assertive by acting on that attraction.

The overall message in the text is that for bi-curious men assertiveness, a trait associated with masculinity, is the norm rather than the exception. Because bi-curious men sometimes have sex with women, this discourse forwards ideas that lead to the subordination and objectification of women who have sex with these men. This is so because of how the text endorses the "male gaze" through which bi-curious men are constructed as inherently "visual creatures who depend a lot on ... physical attraction to the world."

A post in the Man Relationships subsection, "Gay Sex Fact Sheet," supposes through its titling that the contents of the post are fact. Factuality is problematic when discussing GBTI issues because facts establish fixed, normative regimes of "truth." The author writes that "Gay sex ain't for sissies." In the context of South Africa, *sissies* can be a derogatory reference to the absence of masculinity in a man. McFarland (2001, 174) mentions how heterosexual boys who do not fit into the traditional male gender role of aggression, control, and contained emotions are called by derogatory names such as "faggots," "fairies," "sissies," or the equivalent *Sisi* in South Africa.² The picture that was in the header of the "Gay Sex Fact Sheet" post had two muscular, white, young men (figure 1), who in my view would fit into the "non-sissy" category because they are muscular and firmly built.



Gay Sex Fact Sheet

Figure 1. "Gay Sex Fact Sheet" photo illustration showing two muscular, young white men kissing. (Source: <https://queerlife.co.za/gay/man-man-hugging-explained/>)

After stating that "we all enjoy a bit of machismo"—a statement highlighting a desire for hypermasculinity among men—the article goes on to ridicule femininity. The post's author encourages gay men to "try not to trip in public, stumble on the staircase, scream with excitement when you see your friend on aisle 4, or jam out a little too much on your iPod when you see a potential cruiser. Best to keep the cool factor going as much as possible." The former are traits associated with femininity. By advising that the man who is likely to attract potential cruisers—men who are looking for a sex partner—is one who sticks to hegemonic masculinity's codes, this article shows how desire as a connection (Hendriks 2018) is dependent on the existence of hegemonic masculinity aesthetics.

As such, texts such as "Gay Sex Fact Sheet" and "Bi-Curious Experimentation" iterate gender binaries that obscure and repress human variation, thus sedimenting social understandings (of men as ideally masculine) into a self-fulfilling "common sense" (Steyn 2010). The posts construct a "normal gay" (Santos 2013) category that is "expected to be gender conventional, link sex to love and a marriage-like relationship" (Seidman 2013, 133).

Genital Size and (Un)desirable Masculinity

Genital size is another aesthetic of hegemonic masculinity that is embraced in the 4men content. Just like in the heteropatriarchal world, the desirability of a GBTI man is described as masculine and linked to genital size. Contemporary research has conceptualized the relationship between the male penis and power, particularly patriarchal power (Ostberg 2010). The male penis symbolizes the masculine domination of women or of lesser-endowed men (De La Torre 1999).

In a Man Relationships post titled "Size DOES Matter," the author suggests ways through which a man can convince his partner who is "less endowed" that he is "110% man and huge!" Featuring two muscular men in an interlocking scissors position (figure 2), the article suggests that a man whose partner possesses a smaller penis can find alternative ways to please. The interlocking position that the two bodies assume suggests a deep connection. The chiseled nature of their bodies also embraces well-toned, masculine male bodies as hegemonic and preferable.

Home > 4men > Man Relationships > Size DOES Matter



Size DOES Matter

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Dec 2017

Here's the situation... You love your man dearly and you will never leave him, but he is a little bit "small" for your taste and he knows it. (bear in mind here that the average erect penis size is five to six inches)

Figure 2. "Size DOES Matter" photo illustration showing two muscular men in an interlocking scissors position. (Source: <https://queerlife.co.za/gay/size-does-matter/>)

The writer states, "Convince him [your partner] there's way more to being a man than the size of his penis. When you're out with him, make it 100% clear he satisfies you—and there's no harm in pandering to those old, masculine needs to protect, support, provide and be generally 'manly.'" "Protect" is linked to muscle and strength, and "support and provide" are linked to emotional and financial security. I argue that these interlocking and multiple social, political, cultural, and economic dynamics of power (May 2015) assert masculinity. All these physical and financial abilities come together as the best alternatives to masculinity, even in the lack of endowment.

According to Susan Bordo (1999), men's penis size is linked stereotypically with Western cultural notions of masculinity, which suppose that a large penis size is a sign of one being "more" of a man. The "genitals symbolize virility, procreative potency, and power" (Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia 2000, 165). What is conflicting about this article is that inasmuch as the article's headline emphasizes through the use of uppercase that "Size DOES Matter," its content offers alternative solutions to help preserve the masculinity of the "less endowed" man. The implication is that despite the physical absence of a large penis one can still perform masculinity. Masculinity is thus an idea, a matter of *cojones* (Spanish for testicles). In De La Torre's writing on Cuban machismo, it is the *cojones*, not the penis, that are the cultural "signifier of signifiers" within male domination'. Similarly, in contemporary South Africa, "weak" men are referred to as "lacking the balls" (testicles) to measure up to ideal manhood. One can be male and have a penis but still lack the *cojones* to use it (De La Torre 1999, 215). That is why "the 'fag,' the 'pussy,' and the 'wimp' ... [are the] kinds of men who enact hegemonic femininity" (Schippers 2007, 96). Hence, for this author, although "Size DOES Matter," one can acquire other desirable features (*cojones*) to make up for the lack of endowment.

In "How to Be a Power Bottom," the author also indicates that "size does make a difference boys, and especially thickness—though often length makes up for girth. If you find *yourself fortunate enough* to be with a 'date' that's rather sizably endowed, look at it as a challenge" (emphasis added). For this author, having a "date" with a sizably endowed man is good fortune. This represents male GBTI identities as fixated on penis size because a larger penis is more likely to penetrate, or in Hendriks's (2018) terms, to establish a better "connection." This speaks to how men in Western masculinity are expected to occupy space or "penetrate" space (Pronger 1999). These are all "dictums which both lend credence to the need for a large, penetrating penis" (Drummond and Filiault 2007, 122), which signifies male power. "This gendered logic of penetration thereby reproduces a male/female binary that somehow 'heterosexualises' same-sex desire" (Hendriks 2018, 858). This, along with the assertion by the author that a lesser endowed man can as an alternative "provide," suggests intersections of masculinity and class (material provision) in (un)desirability. Indeed, the ideology in use here does not "disrupt the consuming patterns of white masculine metropolitan privilege" (Elder 2005, 51). If anything, it echoes Jasbir Puar's (2002) observation of how North American and European gay spaces disrupt heterosexual norms while keeping racial, gender, and class disparities in place.

Athleticism, Rugby, Masculinity, and the Nation

Desirable masculinity in QueerLife is also associated with athleticism. In the header of the "Rugby Fetish and Gay Men" post, the image has eight men and one woman playing rugby at the seaside (figure 3). The men in the picture are portrayed as the ideal gay men. Though the men in the picture scarcely look like hegemonic athletic bodies, the article's author indicates that the sport they are playing intersects with class. In this Man Relationships post, the writer asks readers which random stranger they would rather go down on: "the lusty lad in the Springbok shirt, with all his spunk and vim, or your trainee bank manager?" Through the vocabulary in this text, "the lad in the Springbok shirt" is constituted as lusty, with spunk (courage and determination) and vim (energy) in contrast to the bank manager who is addressed merely by his work title of, simply, "trainee bank manager."



Figure 3. "Rugby Fetish and Gay Men" photo illustration of nude men (and one nude woman) playing rugby on a beach near clothed spectators. (Source: <https://queerlife.co.za/gay/rugby-fetish-gay-men/>)

In this post the vocabulary choices construct particular ideological representations of events (Willems 2004). The terms "spunk" and "vim" are aligned with the "virility" and "force" associated with normative masculinity. The frame of "trainee" places the gay man as an inferior in a social hierarchy. Economic and institutional power is being used here to construct desirability and undesirability. Also, the more athletic a man is, the more masculine appeal he has and the more desirable he is for sex without any other reasons. As a result, the athletic rugby player who is represented as the epitome of desirable sexuality is likely to lead another gay man into "going down on him." Finally, after making this position clear, the writer states that all this "is partly to do with the desire for masculinity." This demonstrates the valorization of masculinity within these representations, as there are no feminine-presenting gay men.

One can also locate this post within the context of the historical relationship between rugby, Afrikaner nationalism, and masculinity in South Africa. For example, John Nauright and Timothy Chandler (1996) state that rugby played a historical role in the formation of national identities in countries such as Wales, New Zealand, and South Africa, where it was a central element in the shaping of middle-class, male-dominated hegemony. According to Nauright and Chandler (1996) South African rugby success through its national team, the Springboks, has been one of the most potent sites for the demonstration of white power and cultural identity. By focusing on rugby, the author of the QueerLife post celebrates not only hypermasculine athleticism but a type of athleticism associated with whiteness and a particular vision of the nation. For example, Christian Bolsmann and Andrew Parker (2007) have argued that when football was introduced into South Africa in the early 1860s by missionaries, sailors, soldiers, and traders it was initially a white sport. However, as football became popular among black people, rugby replaced it as the most popular sport for whites. Peter Alegi (2004, 16) posits that "black South Africans" acceptance of British football fostered a perception of soccer as plebeian and black; by contrast rugby was "patrician and white." Hence, rugby was exclusive in terms of gender, class, and race (Bolsmann and Parker 2007). It, therefore, becomes important to locate the intersectional discursive field of such utterances because their meaning is not a straightforward matter of external reference but relies on local and broader discursive systems in which the utterance is embedded (Wetherell and Potter 1988).

This broader discursive system is that of historically heteropatriarchal apartheid South Africa, where rugby and the hierarchy of masculinity are also racialized and classed. According to Deborah Posel (2001) race is among the many paradoxes of South Africa's transition from apartheid. Race is a useful concept for the analysis and description of social relations because races are relationships, practices, and systems of meaning that structure society (Acker 2011). Hence, race can also be a system through which online content is organized or structured. The intersections of athleticism, masculinity, race, and class as desirable by contrast with femininity (or simply the lack of masculinity) and wealth links to Rudolf Gaudio's (2001) study of sex talk among Nigerian Hausa men who identify as homosexual or womanlike. This article explores how, in talking about sex, Nigerian Hausa men who self-identify as homosexual or womanlike reify racially distinct sexualities against a backdrop of perceived sexual similarity. He explains that these men use the grammatically feminine noun *Haja* to refer to lower status, younger, poorer feminized partners in a typically homosexual relationship (Gaudio 2001). In contrast to the *Haja* exists the older, wealthier, "masculine" man (Gaudio 2001). Hence, in both these instances, masculinity is associated with domination, power, and desirability.

In both cases, masculinity and femininity are two binaries that are entrenched by both race and class to enforce gender roles and limit possibilities for transgressing normative cisgender codes without losing one's "male" privilege. "In a world transformed by Euro-Western colonialism, talk about sex is talk about race. Both kinds of talk are inevitably about power; that is, they reflect and reproduce material and symbolic power relations" (Gaudio 2001, 38). Here it becomes possible to view representations on online GBTI spaces as extensions of offline GBTI organizing spaces. Because the earliest forms of LGBTI organizations in South Africa were primarily fronted by white, middle-class gay men, the impediments created for black or non-male LGBTI people are still present in the way in which the local LGBTI press represents a "particularised" (white) version of gay masculinity (Reddy 1998, 67-68; Sonnekus and van

Eeden 2009). That along with the historical inequities of apartheid guarantees gay white men equipped with financial resources the ability to render themselves widely visible in the media and impactful on urban geographies (Hoad 1999). This validates the claim that often LGBTI rights become aligned with aspirations of joining the territory of historically white, male privilege (Santos 2010).

Masculinity in (Un)desirable Sex among GBTI Men

This section seeks to locate how masculinity and power are implicated in representations of GBTI sex on QueerLife. Posts in the 4men's section present different opinions on the idea of the "top" and the "bottom." In a Man Relationships post titled "Top vs Bottom" the top is presented as the one who does all the work. The author advises, "No top likes to screw a loose ass" and that one should "Be an aggressive bottom—don't just lay there—if your partner doesn't seem to take the initiative—then take it yourself. Make him use different positions. Tell him why you want him to screw you, fast or slow. Tell him you want him to stroke your 'member' etc. etc." This representation of the bottom's ability to take charge as desirable or leading to a "connection" contradicts ideas which seamlessly attribute power to the top who penetrates. According to Susan Kippax and Gary Smith (2001),

What comes "naturally" and with greatest linguistic and conceptual ease is to attribute activity to the erect penis. It comes less *naturally* to think of the anus or vagina as "engulfing," "enclosing" or "swallowing" up the penis. (427, emphasis in original)

Hence, I concur with Hendriks's (2018) findings in his research on MSM in Congo, that the *fioto* desire can sometimes be represented as exploitative.³ Although the context of Hendriks's research was of "straight" men who penetrate GBTI men for gifts, I wish to use the same reading in this text, which is that the *fioto* possess the power to control how the sexual encounter goes. In the case of the Congo, Hendriks (2018) posits that unlike in heterosexual "transactional" sex it is the *fioto* men who have to "convince" their objects of desire and command the sex. This reading subverts the common linguistic norm of only attributing "activity to the erect penis" (Kippax and Smith 2001, 427). This is contrary to the "Tops vs Bottoms" post's position:

The use of the terms "bottom" and "top" can suggest an unbridgeable gulf between those who prefer the respective roles. It can seem rather as if, within gay sexuality, there is a further division of sexualities, where the all-male equivalent of the battle of the sexes persists, often not entirely on cold war levels.

The author's association of men with war (Ortner 1972) and sex with war is an attribute of masculinity. Further into the article, the author associates particular sexual positions with masculine domination by stating that the bottom has to accept passivity and this may entail letting go of "any residual notions of what it means to be 'properly' masculine." For this writer, the bottom becomes feminine. The post also posits that "There is a degree of (contained) violence and power-play entailed in penetration." According to Kippax and Smith (2001) during anal intercourse, some chances of power relate to the corporeality of one body connecting with another. In this connection, the receptive person is more physically vulnerable than the insertive person. The idea of "reception" vis-à-vis "penetration" is also deeply mingled with race. According to Nguyen (2014, x) there exists a "widespread assumption in gay Western male subculture that Asian men possess a propensity for the bottom position in gay anal sex. Such an attitude derives from the view of Asian men as feminized and less masculine than men of other races."

However, the same QueerLife post concludes with dynamism, explaining how even the top can involve a feeling of femininity and how this is not such a bad thing. Such femininity perhaps speaks to Hendriks's (2018, 865) conclusion that "unveils how feminine 'passive' pleasures are more 'active' than supposedly 'active' male drives." I link this to the "Top vs Bottom" post which concludes by stating, "After all, you [the bottom] are the one that's really in control here—you decide when the fun starts and when it ends. Use your imagination, and have him do you the way you want to be done." This also comes out in a 4men relationship article titled "Give and Take" in which the author states that "giving and receiving is not about who's about the 'top' or the 'bottom,' who's active or passive in the *traditional* sense" (emphasis added). This seems to suggest that QueerLife offers a conservative and hegemonic, very likely transphobic, take on gender presentation because transgender and intersex men can have partners of every gender and a variety of body types. This can also be read as intersexphobic because intersex men can have ambiguous sexual organs. Overall, these sentiments seem to ignore the fact that not all GBTI sexual positions and relations are "conventional" or, as the author states, "traditional."

The "Give and Take" article seems a bit at odds with the other sections I have addressed because its engagement with sexuality allows for a more open set of possibilities. However, it still seems to inform a broader racialized and classed GBTI take on desirability. First, the title "Give and Take" suggests some form of transaction or exchange between partners. It is also a sexual anecdote of the "receiver" and the "giver," the "bottom" and the "top."

Home > 4men > Man Relationships > Give And Take



Give And Take

Figure 4. "Give and Take" photo illustration showing a muscular young black man. (Source: <https://queerlife.co.za/gay/give-and-take/>)

The muscular black man in the "Give and Take" article's header (figure 4) stares directly into the camera, half of his bottom out, appearing to seduce the reader. The representation of this man is laden with seduction and desirability. According to Patricia Hill Collins (1986) domination always involves the objectification of the dominated, and all forms of domination imply the devaluation of the subjectivity of the oppressed. This type of representation commodifies the black body as a desirable figure for the satisfaction of readers. As this black man is portrayed as the object of desire, the author speaks about how, by giving and receiving, the reader can get maximum satisfaction from his partner: "Work together so you can experience pure giving and receiving. Then you can surrender totally—and enjoy true freedom and fulfilment in your sex life."

Because the meaning of bodies in spaces is not detached from their histories (Steyn 2010), I argue that this semiotic conflation of black people with sexual satisfaction is embedded in colonialism. Chong-suk Han (2007) fleshes out such a representation at length.

It's almost as if no Gay men of color exist outside of fantasy cruises to Jamaica, Puerto Rico, or the "Orient." And even then, they exist only to fulfil the sexual fantasies of Gay white men. "Exotic" vacations to far-away places are marketed to rich white men and poor colored bodies are only another consumable product easily purchased with western dollars. As such, Gay men of color, whether found within western borders or conveniently waiting for white arrival in the far off corners of the globe, are nothing more than commodities for consumption. (53)

The man's depiction lying on grass also says something about the construction of black men as closer to nature, and in a state of "waiting" for the white male gaze. Also, when black men are portrayed as desirable in such a visually submissive position, a representation that supports male homomascuine domination at the expense of the feminized black man is mobilized. This is because the colonization of black people in South Africa is connected to their infantilization and feminization. "The limited definition of desirable masculinity within the gay community leads to white males as being 'men' while men of color are placed lower on the hierarchy much in the same way that the mainstream creates a hierarchy of men and women" (Han 2007, 61).

Conclusion

This article set out to address three questions. The first is the question of the representation of masculinity and femininity and its relationship to (un)desirability among GBTI men in QueerLife's 4men section. The second question sought to find out about forms of intragroup subcategorization of GBTI men that take place as a result of the signification attached to masculinity and femininity, and how these intersect with other identity markers such as race, class, sex, and body. Lastly I ventured into the question of how the intersection of masculinity, femininity, race, class, sex, and body in representations of GBTI men's (un)desirability is linked to broader power relations in South Africa.

Overall, the findings suggest that masculinity as defined in this research is considered a currency in representations of GBTI (un)desirability. Aesthetics such as emotional strength, penis size, a muscular body, and athleticism are seen as desirable or essential in the establishment of a "connection" among men who identify as GBTI. This relegates femininity to being an undesirable trait among men. However, masculinity and femininity are not represented as static but as dynamically related to other spheres of power and meaning. For example, male GBTI sex is represented as a complex field in which there is a struggle over the meaning of sexual positions and their implications for masculinity, race, class, and power. This can be seen through images of racialized black male bodies in which they are portrayed as feminine and consumable. Such representations seem to play into the preservation of white gay men's superiority in society.

Also, the selected accounts of the (un)desirability in GBTI men's relationships on QueerLife are imbricated in broader power relations present in South Africa. These include masculinity, race, class, sex, and body and how they influence hierarchies of being in the world. In the case of articles such as "Bi-Curious Experimentation," for example, the author articulates how men are different from women because straight men who have sex with men formulate their attraction based on the male gaze. Foucault's (1988) assertion that there is no knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations is important here because such discourses can potentially be used to maintain the subjugation of women and other "lesser" men in society.

While QueerLife claims to be "South Africa's leading LGBTI destination," it is loaded with transphobic and intersexphobic narratives. The erasure of transgender and intersex men's narratives have implications as power at work to exclude alternative gender and sexual articulations that may disrupt the hegemonic "binarism" of gayness. According to Steyn (2010) power does not name itself as such. Instead, hegemonic language muddies the ways through which social control is exercised and curtails alternative ways of thinking. Therefore, the representation of such desire is political.

Lastly, because there are instances where innocuous GBTI sex is still portrayed as gendered through linguistic and visual representations, I would argue that the power politics of GBTI desire might not be wholly embodied in these relationships themselves but in the language that writers use to explain these relationships. This is why queer theorists advocate for the reshaping of language and theoretical concepts of current knowledge production (Green 2002).

While my overall assumption was that representations of GBTI men on QueerLife would encompass all identity experiences in the acronym, I found that they seem to prioritize homomale gay narratives. This trend confirms previous studies' observation that print publications are dominated by male gay content. Through its classification of GBTI experiences into a distinct 4men section, QueerLife reinforces dense intragroup categories of masculine, raced, and classed GBTI-identifying men in which gay men seem to take precedence.

Although significant research on this topic has been carried out in the West, all these observations speak to the need for future research in online GBTI media spaces in South Africa to examine how they reinforce existing social relationships of domination embodied in capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and classism. The intersection of these systems with transphobia, biphobia, and intersexphobia also demonstrates the need for future research projects that expose the prioritization of gay males in online media content. This prioritization often entails the relegation of other GBTI identities. What such representations seek to achieve in the case of post-apartheid South Africa is a capitalist-centered appeal to white, urban, middle-class gay communities.

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1. See Section 8, Part II of the 1996 South African Bill of Rights. [↵](#)
2. *Sisi* is isiZulu for “sister,” but it is sometimes used for feminine-presenting gay men. [↵](#)
3. *Fioto* is Congolese for “bottom” in MSM relationships. [↵](#)



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