

Jay Clarkson

Contesting Masculinity's Makeover: *Queer Eye*, Consumer Masculinity, and "Straight-Acting" Gays

This article analyzes conflicting and competing discourses about gay masculinities in and about Bravo's Queer Eye for the Straight Guy. The author analyzes Queer Eye's normalization of consumer masculinity, which rejects aspects of traditional masculinity and depends on vanity consumption. The author argues that consumer masculinity is at odds with the masculinities that the gay men on StraightActing.com are attempting to uphold. Their interpretations of Queer Eye differ significantly from academic media critic Kylo-Patrick Hart's interpretation that Queer Eye is the most positive representation of gay men ever. It is in the struggle over mediated masculinity that the men of StraightActing.com find themselves paradoxically aligned with radical conservatives in fearing the impact of Queer Eye on heterosexual audiences but for completely contradictory reasons.

Keywords: *gay men and television; hegemonic masculinity; consumerism; internet community*

Queer Eye for the Straight Guy (hereafter *Queer Eye*) is the latest and perhaps most flamboyant entrant into the struggle over dominant masculinity. The men of *Queer Eye* convert relatively open-minded heterosexual men into sleek, stylish, and sensitive metrosexuals in a mediated presentation of the contemporary contestation over masculine ideals. The makeovers they conduct mold straight men into hyperconsumers and model them on advertising industry's effigy of a gay male market that is assumed to have an inherent access to greater degrees of refinement and taste than straight men. Who would have thought that a reality television makeover show would depict a full frontal capitalist assault on traditional heteromale gender performance? In this battle, some gay men and straight men are willingly surrendering to the construction of the "new and improved" consumption masculinity. However, many

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other men, including the gay men of StraightActing.com, are engaged in a last ditch effort to save traditional masculinity from what they perceive as the influences of gayness and femininity. It is in the conflicted discourses of *Queer Eye* and StraightActing.com that the ways in which gayness, femininity, and consumption are conjoined concepts in contemporary culture are readily observed.

This article analyzes conflicting and competing discourses about masculinity in *Queer Eye* in the media and on the discussion boards of StraightActing.com. First, I outline the representations of masculinity that are contested in *Queer Eye*; next, I detail the ways in which media have responded to these representations; and finally, I discuss the ways in which the gay men of StraightActing.com use their online forum to actively resist capitalism's influence by denigrating gayness as an identity and reinterpreting the meanings of masculinity. The discourse on StraightActing.com represents a site of ideological contestation where its members challenge the notion that gay men similarly respond to gay representations from a monolithic gay subject position and where gay men can be seen defending traditional masculinity by reinscribing its antifeminine and homophobic characteristics through their discussions of *Queer Eye*. The purpose of this study is not to catalog the multiplicity of potential gay male readings, but to illustrate the ways in which *Queer Eye*'s consumer masculinity and traditional masculinity represent highly conflicted discourses among some straight-acting gay men who resist any change in the contemporary gender order.

Before moving to an analysis of *Queer Eye*'s representation of masculinity and the ways in which the straight-acting gay men interpret it, a brief overview of the two forums—*Queer Eye* and StraightActing.com—in which I analyze masculinity is necessary.

Queer Eye for the Straight Guy

Queer Eye is the most high profile and perhaps flamboyant mainstreaming of gay men on television to date. The series is predicated on the basic assumption that straight men are unrefined, ungroomed, and simply need a gay man's help to attain a higher fluency of culture, charm, and sophistication. In each episode, the "fab five"—Carson (fashion), Kyan (grooming), Jai (culture), Thom (interior design), and Ted (food and wine)—inflict their areas of expertise on a hapless straight man, who, more often than not, is depicted as a clueless slob with a good heart and a woman who loves him the way he is but would like to see him improved.

Invariably, *Queer Eye* forces its "straight guys" to confront issues of physical beauty and taste to make themselves more attractive to women. Even John, the first season's straight guy and who could generally be considered attrac-

tive, at the beginning of the episode (Carson calls him a “hottie”), is forced to deal with a variety of physical improvements ranging from hair styling to eyebrow plucking. The growing pressure on men to attain virtually unattainable standards of physical perfection has been blamed for the recent dramatic increase in male drug use, cosmetic surgery, and eating disorders. Although this pressure is nothing new to women or gay men, it is a relatively new phenomenon among heterosexual men for whom hegemonic masculinity has demanded that they avoid any possibility of being perceived as feminine.

StraightActing.com

StraightActing.com is a privately funded Web site featuring quizzes, personal ads, home pages, a monthly cover model contest, and a discussion board. The site provides an online space for straight-acting gay men¹ to socialize, meet, and discuss a wide variety of issues and includes the Butch Boards, a discussion forum. This forum is for members only (although membership is free) and includes discussions ranging from common interests, such as entertainment, politics, religion, and sports, to topics dealing specifically with the meaning of straight acting and masculinity.

Although my analysis here is limited primarily to the members' reactions to *Queer Eye*, it is important to consider the general tone of this group. The site founders acknowledge that one should not discriminate against anyone for expressing their preference for straight-acting men, but the heteronormative and homophobic sentiments voiced by many of the members of this community remain alarming reminders that group and individual identity formation often reflect struggles for power among and within similarly situated groups. Stephen, a long-time member of the Web site, summarizes the potentially problematic nature of this community, saying, “To be honest flammers [*sic*]² frighten me as I'm not quite sure how they tick.”

I focus on this Web site because I believe that the mediated presence of this gender affinity group is appealing to these men to avoid less straight-acting gay men and also insulates them from being forced to confront the real implications of their femiphobia and their own internalized homophobia. Indeed, I focus on this particular site because, after conducting an overview of several gay-themed sites—Outsports, Just Us Boys, and StraightActing.com—this site focuses most clearly on gender issues, although simultaneously demonstrating a lack of feminist consciousness and an obvious commitment to distinguishing among gay masculinities. Functionally, the existence of this community allows for these men to come together to reinforce their own beliefs about men and masculinity and facilitates their condemnation of those men who do not conform.

Although gay men are presumably at the core of *Queer Eye*'s target audience, the members of StraightActing.com gather, albeit virtually, to validate straight-acting queer identities that seemingly are at odds with stereotypical versions of gay masculinity and the metrosexuality represented in *Queer Eye*. Before I begin to analyze their reactions to *Queer Eye*'s masculinity, I discuss the concept of hegemonic masculinity and outline the consumer masculinity constructed in the series.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative masculinity (Cloud, 1998) are two key components of hegemony that often have been used to study the oppression of women in the mass media. Recently, the emerging masculinity studies have begun to focus on the process through which men come to be gendered. The study of hegemonic masculinity is the exploration of the "culturally idealized form of masculine character" (Connell, 1987, p. 83), which can most often be seen in "fantasy figures or models remote from the lives of the unheroic majority" (Donaldson, 1993, p. 646).

Kimmel (2003) argues that masculinity "is the product of historical shifts in the grounds, on which men rooted their sense of themselves as men" (p. 120). In his overview of historical masculinities, he illustrates the transition from two 18th- and early 19th-century models—the genteel patriarch and heroic artisan—to the marketplace man of the latter 19th century. Each of these masculine archetypes reflects the dominant economic system of their day. The genteel patriarch "derived his identity from landownership . . . he was refined, elegant and given to causal sensuousness. He was a doting and devoted father," whereas the heroic artisan "embodied the physical strength and republican virtue . . . in the yeoman farmer, independent urban craftsman or shopkeeper" (Kimmel, 2003, pp. 120-121). Kimmel argues that these masculinities, although different, coexisted because they shared common gender ideals and because they rarely interacted. However, with the rise of modern capitalism, these archetypes were replaced by the marketplace man, who

derived his identity entirely from his success in the capitalist marketplace, as he accumulated wealth, power, status. He was the urban entrepreneur, the businessman. Restless, agitated and anxious. Marketplace Man was an absentee landlord at home and an absent father with his children, devoting himself to his work in an increasingly homosocial environment—a male-only world in which he pits himself against other men . . . Marketplace Manhood was a manhood that required proof, and that required the acquisition of tangible goods as evidence of success. (Kimmel, 2003, p. 121)

Susan Alexander (2003) argues that because the of 1950s, the marketplace man has given way to a new form of masculinity that is a consumer product that “rests on one’s outward appearance rather than on the traditional male role of production” (p. 551). Mackinnon (1997) argues that this change in masculinity can be attributed to contemporary capitalism’s incompatibility with the patriarchal division of traditional gendered behaviors:

When it no longer, as it were, suits capitalism that there be two antithetical, mutually exclusive genders, the patriarchal demand for belief in them is undermined. If contemporary capitalism needs, in addition to security of production, a technology of consumption together with the legitimation of desire, it is fair comment that the differentiation of bodies by sex is increasingly irrelevant. (p. 26)

According to Alexander (2003), “masculinity is no longer defined by what a man produces, as in Kimmel’s discussion of Marketplace Manhood, but instead by what he consumes” (p. 551). Ehrenreich (1983) argued more than 20 years ago that men began to use consumption as a form of rebellion against an increasingly bureaucratic workforce that viewed them solely as “mere earning mechanisms” (p. 6) for families. Holt and Thompson (2003) argue that men who consume are never “above suspicion that [they] are on a quest to compensate” (p. 425) for their masculine insecurities. Here, however, is the key concept: the cultural adage that “he who wins with the most toys” is no longer seen as compensating for a lack of masculinity; it is part and parcel of being masculine in contemporary society.

The shift from masculinity as a producing and providing role to a consumer role is nowhere more apparent than in *Queer Eye*. The research on masculinity has generally argued that traditional hegemonic masculinity has been marked in five ways: “(1) physical force and control, (2) occupational achievement, (3) familial patriarchy, (4) frontiersmanship, and (5) heterosexuality” (Trujillo, 1991, p. 291), but in *Queer Eye* each of these attributes of traditional masculinity gets a capitalism-sponsored makeover.

The archetype of the masculinity emerging in *Queer Eye* differs from these categories in several ways. In this series, manhood is equated with vanity consumption and labor and a fluency in a wide variety of class-inflected taste categories. Ultimately, this idealized manhood is centered on the consumption of beauty and hygiene products and services, extravagant foods, high-end couture, expensive furniture, and involvement in high culture.

For the emerging metrosexual, the quest for physical perfection replaces the need for brute force. Sheer physicality and the need to physically dominate women or other men is never mentioned as a desirable trait by the fab five, instead they focus on contouring the body through spray-on tanning and teaching these men to sculpt their physiques in the gym for cosmetic purposes, not

strength. The body that ceases to be built as a form of armor, as Bordo (1999) suggests, functions to challenge the cultural gaze. The male body in *Queer Eye* is built to be looked at by women and gay men. The straight man's comfort with being looked at by gay men and women as desirable reflects his new found confidence and strength. In *Queer Eye*, it gives his agency a boost instead of objectifying him.

Occupational achievement is not eliminated but is signified through the conspicuous performance of a high level of taste literacy. Admittedly, a large amount of money would be required to maintain these performances, but the men must have sufficient leisure time to engage in home decorating, cooking gourmet meals, enjoying fine wines and liquors, and shopping for the right tea for every occasion. It alters the breadwinner model's focus on working hard to feed one's family to working hard to make enough money to afford more expensive leisure. In this formulation, occupational achievement is no longer limited to the workplace; it is also dependent on a working knowledge of gourmet cooking, design principles, bartending, a wide variety of dance styles, and chemical engineering. It is a tacit acknowledgement that the line between leisure and labor is increasingly blurred, if indeed, it has ever been separate.

The work of being masculine in the home has traditionally been limited to ruling the roost and performing manual tasks. However, with consumer masculinity, familial patriarchy no longer consists of exerting control over women and children and serving as the sole breadwinner. *Queer Eye*'s metrosexual is expected to be an attentive and understanding partner who recognizes women as equals. Additionally, he must also contribute to the maintenance of the household and the rearing of children. Indeed, at the beginning of every *Queer Eye*, it is the men who are blamed for the disastrous living conditions that the fab five invariably arrive to find, regardless of the presence of a romantic partner or grown children.

The frontiersman is replaced with a dapper, dashing man about town who sings to his wife, knows how to handle himself at high-class urban events, and takes time to enjoy a day at the spa. Out with the Marlboro Man of the 1960s, and in with the sensitive, less misogynist everyday James Bond. The challenge to societal order that the rebellious male symbolized has been discarded as a threat to the sophisticated, affluent lifestyle that consumer masculinity requires. Indeed, nonmetropolitan locations are antithetical to the metrosexual. He is confined to urban locations where his aesthetician, tanning salon, and wine steward are only a taxi ride away. The only time he braves the elements is to treat his romantic interest to a picnic in the park.

Heterosexuality, however, is not replaced as the core of hegemonic masculinity. Even with John, a sensitive, good-looking man who was in touch with his feminine side, we are positioned to understand that he is getting fixed up to propose to his girlfriend. Thus, marriage, the ultimate signifier of hetero-

sexuality (for now), assures us that he may be in the process of being queered, but deep down he is 100% heterosexual. However, heterosexuality in *Queer Eye* is changed in one highly significant way: it cannot be homophobic. Instead, although we are constantly reminded of the fab five's sexual identities, the straight guy must remain comfortable with homosexuality without questioning his own heterosexuality except in a humorous way. Kimmel (2003) argued that traditional masculinity has, as its "central organizing principle," a reliance on homophobia (p. 127). For Kimmel,

Homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men. We are afraid to let other men see that fear . . . we are ashamed to be afraid . . . The fear of being a sissy dominates the cultural definitions of manhood. (pp. 127-128)

Remarkably, as the idealized, straight, White masculinity is finally being revealed as marked, socially constructed, and difficult to attain, he is expected to relinquish the fear of being perceived as weak. The adoption of metrosexuality by self-identified heterosexual men erases the imagined line between gay and straight male gender performances and results in straight men not only not fearing being perceived as gay, but enjoying their ambiguous position:

While some metrosexuals may simply be indulging in pursuits they had avoided for fear of being suspected as gaylike getting a pedicure or wearing brighter colors—others consciously appropriate tropes of gay culture the way white suburban teenagers have long cribbed from hip-hop culture, as a way of distinguishing themselves from the pack. Having others question their sexuality is all part of the game.

"Wanting them to wonder and having them wonder is a wonderful thing," said Daniel Peres, the editor in chief of *Details*, a kind of metrosexual bible. "It gives you an air of mystery: could he be? It makes you stand out." (St. John, 2003, pp. 16-17)

To observe the ideological reaction of this blurring, one merely has to turn to reality television series such as *Boy Meets Boy* and *Playing it Straight*. Both of these shows revolve around a lone contestant's (James and Jackie, respectively) attempt to choose a potential mate from a pool of mixed heterosexual and homosexual men without knowing who is playing for which sexual side. These tests of "gaydar," which the official *Playing it Straight* Web site defines as "the intuitive sense that enables someone to identify whether another person is gay," reveal the growing discomfort with blurring lines of homo and hetero performances of masculinity. For gay people, the possibility of gaydar constitutes a sort of double-edged sword, in which locating community or potential

mates may be easier, but gay people become identified by a set of characteristics that constrain the multiplicity of gay identities.

This blurring of gay and straight provides an opportunity to study contemporary gender dynamics. Connell (1992) argues that we must “explore how gender operates for those men most vehemently defined as unmasculine: how masculinity is constructed for them, how homosexual and heterosexual masculinities interact, and how homosexual men experience and respond to change in the gender order” (p. 737).

Donaldson (1993) argues that gay men always challenge the norms of hegemonic masculinity while failing to achieve it because masculinity is based on homophobia and the exclusion of femininity. However, research into how gay men who distinguish themselves as straight-acting actually construct masculine identities has remained relatively limited. The seminal study of gay masculinities is Connell’s (1992) “A Very Straight Gay.” Connell argues that gay men encounter hegemonic masculinity in their normal life development, but as they come to recognize a sexual desire for men, they are forced to develop masculine identities that compensate for the distance from hegemonic masculinity that their homosexuality produces.

What is interesting about the *Queer Eye* depiction of masculinity is the ways in which its straight men are expected to adjust their masculinity to the queer model of the fab five and thus distance themselves from traditional masculinity by replicating a form of imposed gayness. Previous formulations of masculine identity formation have assumed that heterosexual masculinity may inform gay masculinities, but the lived product of the incorporation of heteromasculine ideals resulted in a completely different product through its deconstruction and recombination. According to Fejes (2000),

Gay males draw upon the various texts of heterosexual masculinity as the basis for the construction of their own identities, yet the end product is not simply a distorted mirror image of heterosexual masculinity. Rather the product is a deconstruction and recombination of its elements, reconfigured in such a way as to produce a multiplicity of identities—from the hyper-macho leather daddy to the effeminate, yet powerfully dominant drag queen—whose meanings are very different from that of heterosexual masculinity and which cannot be simply “read-off” or “read-against” the heterosexual masculine text. (p. 114)

This deconstruction and reidealization of the straight masculinity, in the form of clone, muscleman, and frat boy, have resulted in these performances in the gay community being depicted as a form of gay parody. Here, the performance of a heteromascularity, without excess or camp, parodies and challenges the heteromasculine associations of these traits. This process of parody goes one step further in *Queer Eye*. Instead of gay men drawing on heterosexual masculinity, heterosexual men are imitating the idealized masculinity

created by the advertising agency. But in the imitation of the queer guys, it is a metrosexual consumption masculinity, which openly rejects an overt, aggressive masculinity, but still relies on notions of urbane refinement, class, and taste.

Instead of the heterosexual man being the assumed audience for all products not specifically aimed at women or a marginalized group, he is now being targeted based on a set of expected characteristics. Thus, *Queer Eye* helps to create a need for men to adapt their gender performances to the consumer model created just for them. Consequently, the struggle over the definition of hegemonic masculinity is one that is waged between the conditions of capitalism that seek to transform it into a consumer model and those who seek to preserve the traditional masculine model. However, the labeling of this new masculine aesthetic as gay or queer obscures the role of contemporary capitalism in its construction and obscures the ways in which the perceived feminization of American men has been scapegoated as spurring a crisis of masculinity that has led to a variety of societal ills ranging from an increased emotional instability in men to the horrific events in Columbine.

In actuality, the increased emphasis on male consumption is spurred by marketers who salivate at the prospect of using the market-driven gay aesthetic to capitalize on an emerging type of heterosexual man. Just as advertisers have learned to tailor their advertisements to appeal to attitudes traditionally associated with homosexuality to exploit the buying power of homosexuals, they can be seen here attempting to create a consumer masculinity, or metrosexual, just as they helped to construct a hegemonic depiction of gay identity.

Analysis of *Queer Eye*'s brand of consumer masculinity is only one path to understanding the ways in which it is being contested in contemporary culture. It would be naïve to assume that everyone would unquestioningly buy the masculinity that *Queer Eye* is selling. The next section discusses gay and straight media and the StraightActing.com member's responses to *Queer Eye*.

Responses to *Queer Eye*

The obviousness of *Queer Eye*'s textual reconstruction of heteromascularity makes it an easy place to look for backlash against the consumer masculinity. Seemingly subversive *South Park* recently featured *Queer Eye*'s fab five as villains:

In the episode, Stan, Kyle, Kenny and Carman turn metrosexual—trading their hooded jackets for tight T-shirts and gelled hair. At first their mothers and the women in general take a liking to this change in appearance and attitude. However, as things progress, they come to notice the dark underside of this fad. The men of *South Park* have become so concerned with making it to the next shoe sale and keeping up their fabulous look that they stop paying attention and lose

sight of their own masculinity. The metrosexualization of the show's male population provides an opening for a group of effeminate alien creatures called Crab People, who then proceed to try and take over the planet. (Finn, 2004, ¶ 3)

In this episode, the fab five are actually "Crab People" in disguise who deliberately feminize men so that they will be unable to defend the world from invasion. In this instance, the fear of changing male roles is decidedly conspicuous. Finn (2004) goes on to note that

there is something decidedly unnatural about this new trend . . . it alters standard male behavior and propels male narcissism to new heights. . . . As a result, guys stop gazing in admiration of female beauty and become fixated on themselves. (¶ 4)

This, he argues, is a "dead-end on the road to rediscovering a healthy masculinity" (¶ 4), which he claims is necessary to deter a potential invasion from Crab People. Although this last sentence may be tongue in cheek, it reveals the ways in which some men (and some women) view the necessity of a particularized form of male masculinity, despite the fact that it is dependent on the objectification of women and relies on antiquated notions of a natural and prediscursive masculinity that is somehow magically attached to the male body.

Karl du Fresne (2004), of the *Nelson Mail*, argues that to find out why this generation of men has "lost confidence in their masculinity" (p. 15), one should look no further than *Queer Eye*. Indeed, he blames television for a "sustained assault" on "traditional 'maleness'" that is epitomized in the "celebration of homosexual culture," which results in men who are "confused about their sexual identities" (¶ 21-22). Thus, du Fresne equates the changing masculinity with destroying a perceived natural boundary between heterosexuality and homosexuality and, in turn, conflating sexuality and gender and reinscribing a traditional male gender performance.

Some critics claim that the blurring of gay and straight by the evolving metrosexual consumer masculinity is a symptom of the current crisis of American masculinity. This conservative scare tactic has been widely used to demonize the women's movements and lesbian and gay rights movements and attempt to reaffirm traditional heterosexual masculinity and privilege. Although these critics tend to work for non-gay-oriented media, the contestation of this new masculinity can also be observed in gay media where *Queer Eye* has elicited widely divergent responses.

Al Rantel, a conservative but openly gay radio personality, argues that the public is "turned off by the 'really queenie [*sic*] quality that these guys have'" and believes that "a lot of people are secretly offended by it" (Lowry, 2003, p. C6). Rantel contends, "gay people dress just as badly as anybody else"

(Lowry, 2003, p. C6). Conversely, gay-rights activist John Aravosis argues that these stereotypes are no longer harmful because “we’re being presented as the person you wish you could have as your neighbor” (Lowry, 2003, p. C6). Aravosis may be right; these men do embrace many stereotypes about gay men that seem to construct gay male identity as affluent, witty, funny, and attractive. Accordingly, gay academic media critic Kylo-Patrick Hart (2004) argues that *Queer Eye* “consistently offers the most positive representation of gay men” (p. 242) to date because the fab five are gay men who are represented as being superior to straight men. Hart concludes that although some may suggest that *Queer Eye* feminizes gay men,

this is certainly not the case. The widespread perception that it does so, however, contributes to the show’s radically subversive potential: it appears to offer only image of gay men that are non-threatening to heterosexual viewers while at the same time it is bombarding those same viewers with representations implicitly suggesting that gay men are actually superior—rather than inferior—to homosexuals. (p. 246)

However, Rantel is correct to fear the reduction of gay men to one essential type, which Hart (2000) has previously argued that television producers must take care to avoid. Thus, critics must continuously analyze mediated images of homosexuality to assess the diversity of genders and sexualities being depicted because some people may form their opinions about gay people based on televisual representations. Conservative ideologue Pat Buchanan (2003), in arguing that one of the goals of gay-themed shows is “social subversion, the breaking down of taboos” (p. 26), recognizes the influence of increased representation of gays and lesbians on reality television.

Here, Buchanan’s (2003) statement reveals an ideologically conservative response to an ambiguous message. It is not necessarily the content of the series that Buchanan fears, but it is the potential effect that these representations will have on society. Buchanan’s fear is that these representations will lead to a societal shift in attitudes toward homosexuality. Yet his assumption here is that those who consume these images are actually those for whom homosexuality is still a social taboo. Buchanan seems to share Hart’s (2004) assumption that this text is potentially a subversive influence on an imagined audience who can be influenced toward greater acceptance of homosexuality. Although Buchanan (2003) and Hart (2004) seem to represent ideologically divergent positions, they ultimately fail to consider the target audience of the series. It is difficult to assume that a show about five gay men making over a straight man would have ever been targeted at a homophobic demographic, no matter how stripped of sexuality the characters may be. Indeed, it is possible that the marketing of *Queer Eye* to a primarily heterosexual audience on NBC, in addition to Bravo’s gay-friendly and gay audience, merely offers them new

and more acceptable homosexual representations to obscure their own dominance and assuage any concerns about their own homophobia.

The contemporary political climate illustrates a viewing public who are still uneasy with homosexuality, especially when it comes to marriage and other civil rights, but who have little trouble accepting particular forms of male homosexuality when confined to stereotypically traditional representations. It is possible that *Queer Eye* functions to reassure those heterosexual viewers who identify as socially progressive about homosexuality that the popularity of *Queer Eye* relieves them of any guilt about their own homophobia. Hart (2004) suggests that *Queer Eye* positions gay men as superior to straight men. The straight viewer's acceptance of their superiority, although limited to specific areas of expertise, may prove to themselves and the general public that they are not homophobic. In essence, the gay men of *Queer Eye* may function as the proverbial Black friend that racists claim to prove they are not in fact racist. Furthermore, the relative absence of homophobia in the show assures viewers that the struggle for civil rights for gay men and lesbians are merely symbolic and do not reflect a fear of material consequences.

Hart's (2004) analysis of *Queer Eye* is uncharacteristically optimistic about its potentially subversive power. In his rush to label the show subversive, he forgets that not all readers will negotiate the same meanings that he has in his textual analysis, and he completely ignores the gendered context of the show. This show is about making better heterosexual men. Indeed, Hart's reading of the text seems to stretch the imagination of other readers. For instance, he argues that when Carson humorously quips that people believe he looks like Ellen Degeneres, it reveals "how ludicrous it is for individuals to suggest that gay men look like women" (Hart, 2004, p. 247). Although I agree with much of Hart's analysis—the show is highly enjoyable and may position gay men as superior to straight men in certain respects—I do not agree with many of the ways that he reads the text as subversive. Carson's actual resemblance to Ellen Degeneres does not undermine any assumption about gay men looking like women; it is funny because Carson does actually look a bit like Degeneres. Carson is funny because he is often the victim of his own scathing wit. Indeed, it is the ability to laugh at these men that many may find appealing. Regardless, Hart's analysis represents only one set of readings, albeit an optimistic and celebratory one. In the remainder of this analysis, I discuss the ways in which Hart's overwhelmingly positive response is not shared by some other gay men.

StraightActing.com and *Queer Eye*

The struggle over this emerging masculinity has not been limited to heterosexual men. Analysis of the bulletin board posts of a group of straight-acting gay men reveals an array of conservative and conflicted perspectives on *Queer*

Eye's masculine representations. The discussion topic about *Queer Eye* contains many comments about how the fab five are highly stereotypical characters who not only do not represent the members of the forum but also represent the continuing symbolic annihilation (although not their language) of straight-acting gay men through the repetition of iconic gay stereotypes. Stevestr, a highly opinionated participant in this particular discussion group, argued "it appears Bravo found the most stereotypical fags in each of the fields represented. If that is not blatant patronizing then what is?" Indeed, a careful analysis of the series itself, coupled with at least a passing knowledge of male hairdressers on virtually any makeover show, would support the idea that Kyan (grooming) is not the "most stereotypical fag" in the hairdressing profession, as Stevestr would suggest. Indeed, even in this posting, not all agree, and another poster, Olympicut, argued that Carson (fashion) is the only one "over the top."

Although this is but one example, the following discussion of these men's readings of *Queer Eye* suggests that they do not see the series as the subversive text that Hart (2004) argued it could be. Instead, these men read these performances as abnormal, suggesting that even though diversity may exist, only certain performances are acceptable to the members of this group. Specifically, these discussions revealed the belief of its members that the straight-acting gay man is not being adequately represented in *Queer Eye* and that the fab five are themselves bad representations of gay men.

TomMichigan argued the following:

It indeed *did* perpetuate the stereotype that all gay guys are flaming fags, that part of the show I most definitely DID NOT like. Most of the "gays" represented in the mainstream media are the flamers, not regular guys. . . . SO in readjusting my opinion a bit, I'd say it was fun and entertaining, to a point, but disgusting because it was about the kind of gay guys I can't stand.

Again, a broader analysis of existing televisual depictions of gay men reveals a range of gay characters that does include some that this group would most likely accept as straight acting, including David and Keith on *Six Feet Under*, Ben and Dave on *Queer as Folk*, Carter on *Spin City*, and the subtly named Butch on *Normal, Ohio*. Ironically, Will from *Will & Grace* was criticized in the first three seasons by many gay activists for not being gay enough. My point, here, however, is not to prove the men of StraightActing.com wrong, but to illustrate the defensive nature with which they treat gay representations. They seem to equate better representations for gay men with representation of gay men as straight acting (i.e., less feminine or flamboyant) and with increased representations of gay men as "normal" guys. They ignore the ways in which the normal guys they see as straight acting are being redefined by the

consumer masculinity of *Queer Eye* and focus solely on the performances of the gay men.

As TomMichigan noted above, only “flamers,” whom he cannot stand, are represented, not “regular guys.”

JS noted,

Those guys are annoying as hell! Where did they find them on a Greenwich [*sic*] Village Ricki Lake episode? I watched (actually suffered though) a half hour of it and had to turn it off. Still waiting for something to portray less nelly guys. . . . Maybe they’re too boring to bring in cash for the networks?

adem_NYC agreed saying,

Another femmy image of gay men. I didn’t care for it at all. It generalizes all gay men, just like a lot of TV programs. . . . No offense to those of who enjoyed it, but I was put off and offended by the show, because that is the way everyone thinks gay men are supposed to act. If this show exemplifies how far we’ve gotten then “we” haven’t gotten very far. The gay men involved with putting this garbage on TV shouldn’t be praised, they’re only keeping the stereotypes alive and well.

These statements, although positioning specific gender performance as desirable, also reveal an ongoing theme in these discussions best illustrated by Stevestr,

Someone who still remembers this site is called straightacting.com. Its [*sic*] impressive so many of you like a show so full of stereotypes it can send us back about 30 or 40 years. One episode of the painfully clear “Yes we’re Bravo and yes we are painfully obviously catering to the 5 gay viewers we have” show was enough for me. I can imagine a straight couple now: Oh look hunny [*sic*] those silly fags are on TV again. See fags are weird. All they do is lisp, dress badly, go shopping, cook overpriced food, and furnish rooms so gaudy their own mothers wouldn’t live in them. . . . For those who thought the 5 gay guys were not bad?!? Well, I better not say.

To which megatron266 disagreed,

I totally disagree. Entertainment is just that. Entertainment. A way for people to relax and enjoy something other than sex or reading a book. Now watching a show that shows a few queens does not make us any less straight acting. That is like to say if a straight guy watched a chick flick and people started saying he was turning into a girl just because he saw a chick flick. Frankly I see nothing wrong with having this show on. I don’t see it as a step backwards. I see it as a step forwards. We are entering the houses of the ones who hate us just by using satellite signals. How freakin smart is that. I would be like “these people are smart. These deadbolts don’t work anymore.” “Maybe we should listen to what they got to say.” If it weren’t for those “Silly Fags” then we wouldn’t be where we are now.

Those "Silly Fags" got us noticed and they wouldn't back down for anybody. IF anything, I think they deserve a pat on the back for doing what they did in the past and what they still are doing. If every gay man in the world were straight acting then we would not have the little rights we have now. Because nobody would have known where to find us since we blend in with the straight guys.

Blackmet also argues,

I remember one of the guys saying in *Time* something along the lines of "if culture wants to stereotype me as someone who's stylish and can make a great some-kind-of-fancy-food, who am I to complain?" When you look at it that way, it's not as awful as it could be, I suppose.

Yet Stevestr argues,

no one wants to watch a show about fags that shows them as normal. Hell they could go next door and watch the straight dude watching a football game and drinking a beer. The drama of flamboyant queens is what brings in ratings and Bravo knows it. What is sad is when gay men themselves continue to support these so called good gay TV shows.

He continued later, in response to megatron266:

It's very damaging when the wrong signals are being sent across the satellite. If the gay community is so inclusive they need to start including some more of their straighter brethren instead of always playing to the media stereotype of a flaming queen . . . thanks for taking the time to at least state your views Willy. I'm not attacking you personally, I just want you to try and explore a bit beyond what the "gay community" has fed to you over the years and encouraged you to believe. You should never live life as a clone.

In one broad sweep, Stevestr acknowledges the potential role of these mediated images in constructing a hegemonic gay identity. Yet in his dismissal of the clone, he ignores the ways in which his own masculinity has been constructed. He urges this man to abandon the gay community's teaching and turn to the heteronormative community from which most men learn their own masculinity. Indeed, the real clone in this situation could be Stevestr, who has adhered to the conventional standards of masculinity and not challenged the dominant regime of gender and sexuality. Yet ironically, the masculinity being "fed" to straight men in *Queer Eye* has been modeled on the advertiser's model of gay men. Eventually, the straight men of *Queer Eye* may epitomize the same straight-acting masculinity that the men of this forum idolize.

Steverstr concluded, "I'm being exploited as a straight appearing gay man and I refuse to give endorsement to the view that all fags are lispy queens." This comment from Stevestr (as well as other members, some gay activists and

some critical media scholars) seems to call for more “positive” portrayals of gay men and lesbians. Such demands for the different representations signal a new and insidious type of internalized homophobia and illustrate the pervasive ideological dominance of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity. As Brookey’s (1996) analysis has suggested, many of these positive portrayals of homosexuality are positive only because homosexuality has been discarded. Here, it is straight-acting gay men who color their own identities as the only legitimate shade of gay identity and enact a type of discursive violence on those who do not conform to their assumptions of gay masculinity. In turn, these assumptions are tinted by the normative assumptions of the heterosexual society about what behaviors constitute men. Although Stevestr’s concerns about a media representation of gay male identities as a unified, monolithic identity, it is his pejorative labeling of the particular mediated identity as “flaming” and “lippy queens” that is particularly problematic. Additionally, Stevestr attempts to blame the gay community for promoting a feminized gay identity without acknowledging the relative lack of power that gay people have in deciding which identities are represented. Finally, Stevestr’s comments reflect a lack of critical awareness of the straight masculinity that is being produced in *Queer Eye*. The show clearly blurs the line between gay and straight male gender performance, but not by making the gay men seem to be like straight men, but by making the straight men more like gay men and ultimately less like the straight-acting gay men. Ultimately, it may be more difficult for these straight-acting gay men to actually identify as straight as the economy increasingly models straight masculinity on a gay market model.

The hierarchical nature of hegemonic masculinity encourages gay men and lesbians to turn against each other in a battle for position. Nardi (2000) has argued that this focus on hypermasculinity in the gay community has resulted in a divide among gay men seeking the power and acceptance that (hegemonic) masculinity offers those who embody it, those gay men who have embraced femininity or who cannot attain the masculine ideal, and those gay men who reject the quest for masculinity.

These discussions of supposedly straight-acting men about the power of representation obscure the fundamental assumption link between men passing as straight and access to male privilege. JS argued,

Just a thought, maybe if they really need nelly drama queens to bring in viewers and ratings, can’t they at least have one (or a few) non-stereotypical gay guys? I think that would help a lot with our “image” as the general public would see it and say “He’s gay? I thought gay guys were all girly acting . . . I guess I was wrong! There really are gay guys out there who act like guys!”

Indeed, the notion that men have a specific set of behaviors that marks them as guys is especially problematic, for in their calls for inclusion these men

focus on inclusion for those men who adhere to the traditional and perhaps conventional expectations of male behavior. In this discussion group, these particular men want to see a change in the ways gay men are represented. They are angered by the seeming focus on feminine gay characters and want to shift the focus to gay men who act just like normal heterosexual men, thus returning feminine gay men to a closet of symbolic annihilation. Indeed, they want to return to the privileged position of seeming to be just like heterosexual men so that they can assume some of the power that this position entails.

Butler (1993) suggests that the idea of homosexuality as a copy or inauthentic derivative of heterosexuality is problematic. To Butler, without homosexuality, heterosexuality would be without something to define itself against; thus, without the existence of homosexuality, it would be impossible to delineate what types of gender performances were considered heterosexual. Indeed, as homosexuality needs heterosexuality to define itself, it appears that straightness needs the oppositional concept of gayness to exist. Here, the very binaries that Butler critiques are recreated. According to Butler,

Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself. In other words, the naturalistic effects of heterosexualized genders are produced through imitative strategies; what they imitate is an effect. In this sense, the “reality” of heterosexual identities is performatively constituted through an imitation that sets itself up as the origin and ground of all imitations. In other words, heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself—and failing. (p. 313)

Thus, the straight-acting gay men and *Queer Eye* straight guys are not copies, but constitute “inverted imitations, ones which invert the order of imitated and imitation, and which, in the process, expose the fundamental dependency of ‘the origin’ on which it claims to produce as its secondary effect” (Butler, 1993, pp. 313-314). Here, then, the question of whether gay men who identify as or fetishize straight-acting men are attempting to be heterosexual is moot, for heterosexuality has no claim to the emerging consumer masculinity because it is neither origin nor copy. It is not a gay masculinity that is modeled by straight men, nor is it a straight masculinity that has been appropriated by gay men. It is an example of the ways in which the capitalist system produces gendered bodies to fulfill its need for consumption.

Although the men of StraightActing.com certainly have the right to defend their own traditionally masculine identities, a defense that comes at the expense of other masculine performances reveals the ways in which even gay men actively compete for position in the masculine hierarchy and obscures the role of economic forces in shaping these identities. Furthermore, this dis-

course legitimates a cultural understanding of gayness that is conservative and only slightly more inclusive than the dogmatic beliefs of the conservative right. Although these men do challenge the traditional understanding of masculinity as antithetical to homosexuality, they still reinscribe their attempts at traditional masculinity as the only acceptable option.

If we return to Pat Buchanan's (2003) statement that the role of gay characters in reality television is to facilitate the "breaking down of taboos" (p. 26) we find a conservative leader bemoaning the potential power that these images may have over audiences. Here, we can assume that he is discussing the breakdown of taboos among a heterosexual audience, who may still view homosexuality as deviant. These straight-acting gay men, such as Steve Strasser, fear the ways in which these same heterosexual viewers will come to understand all gay men as "silly fags" who overconsume. Although it is unlikely that people who still consider homosexuality taboo will watch *Queer Eye*, it is quite likely that Buchanan is right about one thing. The purpose of these shows is about media power, but the power he should be concerned about is the power of the capitalist system to reshape gender norms, for better or worse. Pat Buchanan, the popular media, academic critics, and the members of StraightActing.com all fail to consider the ways this show is working to change the definition of hegemonic masculinity. This could be especially problematic for the StraightActing.com members who seem to idealize a heterosexual masculinity that is being changed by capitalism and who will be left fighting for an obsolete masculinity that continues to define their own identities as subordinate.

Conclusion

In *Queer Eye*, it appears that heteronormative masculinity is indeed being challenged, but in a way that reidealizes American manhood as one that is predicated on effete style and taste and mandates a visually upper-class identity as a key component of hegemonic masculinity. This reidealized masculinity potentially serves to reposition White, urban, heterosexual masculinity as normative and dominant. It is a masculinity that attempts to replace the idealized gay male image in the media with one that is improved, if only for its heterosexuality and sexual desirability to women. Hart (2004) argues that *Queer Eye* is the most positive representation of gay men on television to date; however, his haste to declare the show positive obscures the ways in which *Queer Eye* represents a particular place for homosexuality and its assumed access to style. The men of *Queer Eye* are likable, knowledgeable, humorous, and accurately represent a fraction of gay male gender identity. They also represent a

potentially dangerous capitulation to a market-driven masculinity that depends on high levels of consumption.

It appears that the gay men who hated the show and even those who enjoyed the show, but were opposed to these characterizations of gay men, supported traditional masculinity. These men regarded straight masculinity as unproblematic, and instead of considering the role of the market in manufacturing a particular masculinity, they homophobically lashed out at the feminization of all gay men in the media. These men did not read *Queer Eye* as positive representation because the fab five's apparent failure to embody traditional masculinity, and these men extrapolated their concerns about these gender performances to concerns about all gay identities. The discourses of StraightActing.com remind us of the ongoing assimilationist and liberationist tensions in gay communities. Although some radical gay activists claim that assimilationists seek the acceptance of some homosexuals by making them seem normal, or "regular," as TomMichigan said, this normality is simply the emulation of heteromale behavior. Although the existence of straight-acting gay men certainly challenges the heterosexual male assumption of masculinity, these gay men, ironically, valorized traditional heteromale masculinity as a necessary component of all male identities. However, in this instance, their rejection of *Queer Eye*'s consumer masculinity is an active rejection of the market forces that conspire to change the look and feel of contemporary hegemonic masculinity. The men of StraightActing.com simultaneously reject the evolving consumer masculinity and support a conservative gender ideology that denies gay men the male privilege that their online community attempts to reclaim.

This analysis demonstrates how these straight-acting men read *Queer Eye* far less positively than Hart (2004) did and questions the notion that any unified gay audience can be assumed for any programming, even the most seemingly gay friendly. Furthermore, as these gay men resist both the construction of straight masculinity as consumer masculinity because, ironically, it was too gay, they simultaneously reject what they see as limited representation of gay men for the lack of traditionally masculine performances for the potential influence that they fear will warp heterosexual audiences. Thus, these men seem to be situated squarely between an emerging masculinity that is based in feminine consumption and a traditional masculinity that is based in homophobia and misogyny. The challenge, then, is to develop a sound critique of these competing forms of masculinity and create space for alternative masculinities while challenging capitalism's need to create gendered identities that are based in consumption.

Notes

1. From this point, I will use straight-acting gay men without quotations in deference to the labels that many of these men have chosen for themselves. I understand that not all members of this community label themselves straight acting, but recognize that the concept of straight acting is the unifying factor for this particular community, whether it is desire to be or desire for these performances.

2. I have attempted to present these postings in their original form, including emphasis, spelling and grammatical errors, and slang.

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Jay Clarkson is a doctoral candidate in communication studies at the University of Iowa.