

Just Kill Me When I'm 50: Impact of Gay American Culture on Young Gay Men's Perceptions of Aging

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The older you get is like a death sentence. [Carlos, 28]

After 30, that's like gay middle age, right? [Corey, 25]

Just kill me when I'm 50. [Roger, 21]

Introduction

Young gay men's negative perceptions of growing older have been indicated in prior research [Bergling, 2004; Jones & Pugh, 2005; Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000]. A recent resurgence of HIV infection rates among young gay men [Mitsch et al, 2008] calls into question whether these negative perceptions contribute to a lack of future-oriented health investments; i.e., a "live for now" outlook. Strength of future orientation has repeatedly predicted risk aversion [McCabe & Barnett, 2000], hence, it is of great social and public health value to ask: what does aging mean to today's youngest generation of gay men? How do cultural norms in the gay community inform how today's young gay men imagine growing older? This research explores these questions.

Background

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that, for American gay men, one's sense of growing older may differ from their heterosexual counterparts. Despite advances in the gay and lesbian civil rights movement, the anticipation of homophobia continues to limit career options and mobility [Barrett, Pollack, & Tilden, 2002]. Gay "baby boomers" report being more worried about their financial outlook than their heterosexual counterparts [MetLife Mature Market Institute, 2006]. Gay men face an economic disadvantage in the U.S., contrary to popular myths of affluence [Badgett, 2001]. The institution of marriage, unavailable to most same sex-American couples, renders it a less definitive life-marker of imagined future identity than it is for heterosexuals. Finally, research among gay "baby boomers" has revealed anticipation of discrimination and/or unhappiness in old age; more than half [n=1000] were not confident that they would be treated "with dignity and respect" by health care professionals [MetLife Mature Market Institute, 2006]. At best, these factors create a sense of an ambiguous future; at worst, a dismal one.

Unfortunately, aspects of gay male culture add to these insecurities. The gay "mainstream" culture represented in gay men's print, televised and online media, does little to resolve fears about aging. Images of younger men are disproportionately featured, as with its counterpart in popular American media. The images perpetuate the notion that youthfulness, athleticism, muscular physique, and sexual power are a community standard. These standards of beauty are often reinforced in communities and spaces where gay men congregate, such as retail corridors in gay neighborhoods and entertainment venues.

Meanwhile, American popular media representations do little to create a positive sense of gay male future, as most gay characters on television lack long-term development as individuals, existing more visibly on the situation-comedy front, to provide little beyond comic relief [Raley & Lucas 2006; Fouts & Inch 2005]. The following analysis of the relationship between young gay men's beliefs about aging and gay male culture is divided into four themes: young gay men's experience of time, body, community, and personal resilience.

Methods

Individual interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of young gay-identified males living in the metropolitan Seattle, WA area, ages 18-28. Recruitment of men occurred through the use of posted fliers, Seattle's Craigslist.com, and by recruiting from the "Seattle Citywide 1" room on Gay.com. Fliers were posted at every major university, and throughout the main gay-oriented retail neighborhood.

Features

Following informed consent¹, hour-long semi-structured interviews were conducted in public venues [i.e., coffeehouses] with 42 gay-identified men. The interviews explored experiences and perceptions of time, and of the gay community. These men were paid \$25 for the interview.² Many of these interviews lasted well over an hour, by choice of the participants. All interviews were audiotaped, and conducted by this author. The participants were made aware of the author's identity as a gay man, in hope of establishing rapport and increasing the men's comfort level in discussing issues and experiences specific to gay men. Given that the subject matter concerned aging, it is worth noting that the author was in his mid-thirties at the time, older than these men, a factor which may have influenced responses.

The men who participated in the one-on-one interviews closely represented Seattle's ethnic diversity [Census Bureau, 2006]. Asian-Americans were overrepresented [24% of study participants, compared to 13% of Seattle's population], and included members with Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese, Samoan, Thai, and Cambodian ancestry. The latter six were second-generation [parents were born abroad]. The sample also had 12% mixed ancestry, 8% African-American, 7% Native American, and 7% Latino-identified. Just over two-thirds identified as Caucasian. With respect to age, respondents skewed a bit older. 43% of men were between ages 26-28, while 28% were 23-25, 24% were 21-22, and 22% were 18-20. Approximately one-third were Seattle-area natives, typically from its suburbs or adjacent counties. One-fourth were from Western states, particularly California, Oregon, and Montana. The remainder were from points further east. Approximately 40% had had substantial exposure to gay culture in other large cities, either through living there or frequent visits.

In the area of academics, 40% had no higher-education aspirations or experience; the remaining 60% did. Of the latter, 60% were [or planned to be] liberal arts majors. The remainder were divided roughly evenly between the sciences and mathematics. Two-thirds of participants were employed at least part-time. 15% of the men identified themselves as artists. The remainder were primarily in school. Three were in substance abuse recovery, two from crystal meth, and one from alcohol abuse. Two identified themselves as HIV-positive.

Audiotaped data was transcribed and coded for themes within the categories of "experiences/perceptions of time" and "experiences/perceptions of community", using inductive, open-coding. Two separate categories arose from this coding process: experiences of body and experiences of resilience. Themes within these two new categories were also coded using this method.

Young gay men's experience of time

The developmental context in which gay men's identities emerge creates a perception of time unique to their heterosexual counterparts. Due to widespread stigmatization of homosexuality in adolescence, many young gay men, for social and physical survival, must conceal their true identity. Opportunities to date other men came later for the men interviewed here- typically once relocating to an urban or college environment. Those who had done so expressed an intense need to "make up for lost time":

As a teenager, I had no vision of the future as a gay man. I didn't know what to do with myself. I wanted a life partner. I didn't know where to look. I hid from peers in high school, because I knew I'd be stigmatized. Finally, when I got to the city, I just wanted to explore the sensory aspect. Like a kid in a candy store. [Frank]

Often, "making up for lost time" came at the expense of planning for the future:

When I first came here, I was partying a lot [with gay friends], doing a lot of cocaine, smoking more, not really caring about what happened to me, just kind of having fun and living for the day...I didn't want to worry about what was going to happen down the line. I didn't want to be old or worry about tomorrow. [Corey]

Three of the men even turned down college scholarships, two of them full scholarships, prioritizing the need to concentrate on their newfound freedoms. Two of them explain:

Law school sounded so ordinary, so lame. My parents are furious of course [about declining the scholarship]; they've cut me off financially. I can understand. But I've worked really hard to do well in [high] school, hit all the right marks, save money, be responsible. I was trapped out in the suburbs for so long...I don't want to be weighed down like that anymore. It's my turn to have fun. [Andrew]

1 Boston University IRB approval #1633E.

2 Funding provided by the Boston University Department of Anthropology.

I turned down full ride minority scholarship to [rural in-state university]...but I got so caught up in making money, being out [as a gay man] and on my own terms, I lost track of that. I couldn't get into the idea of being out there in the middle of nowhere. [Curtis]

From the comments of these men, the need to experience and explore this aspect of themselves heavily informed decision-making. The isolation of young gay men in their adolescence prevents opportunities for learning from experiences of flirting, dating, or interacting with same-sex romantic partners. The delay has been called a "developmental disruption" [Kertzner 2001, p.80]. Youth-focused standards of beauty boost the importance of this exploration period as critical for seizing dating opportunities. In the young gay male perspective of time, the period of one's late teens and early twenties comprise a highly compressed period between post-isolation and pre-"oldness"; a limited window to avail oneself of the opportunities afforded by youth and freedom. At the cultural level, this creates both a dynamic yet high-pressure environment for partner selection and dating. Some, like those who forewent college scholarships, discounted the future in order to concentrate on meeting these developmental needs. Some men felt pressured to attract long-term relationships in their twenties while it is still felt to be possible:

Once you get out of your 20s I think people start considering you to be too old. Like you're not going to be wanted, won't be able to get a boyfriend. [David]

The type of guy I'm looking for is out there somewhere. But sometimes I'm like, if it's not going to happen now, when is it going to happen? [Corey]

The need to "make up for lost time" in one's twenties stands in contrast to the heterosexual experience, in which goals of marriage, child-rearing, and career mobility are pursued during this same time period. By contrast, heterosexual life is often viewed as normative and stable "in relationships and markers of aging...social status and a sense of place in life", accounting for why some middle-aged gay men have described feeling "off sequence" relative to their heterosexual peers [Kertzner, 2001, p. 85]. Similar sentiments have been expressed by gay men in their 30's [Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000]. For some, the lack of clear expectations or longitudinal structure in gay male identity was discomfiting. A common fear was that they would remain feeling unhitched to anything, i.e., careers or romantic partners, or that they would never figure out "what it is [I'm] supposed to be doing". As one man lamented: "there's no handbook of gay life. You figure it out as you go."

It has long been theorized that gay men undergo an accelerated sense of middle and old age compared to heterosexual men due to a sense of "role loss" [Francher and Henkin, 1973], which leads gay men to go from a kind of "youth" to "not-youth" with little gradation in between. This resonates today: recent research has found "old" in gay subculture to mean age 40, and sometimes as early as the mid-30's [Bergling, 2004]. The sharp transition between what it means to be "young" vs. "old" was echoed in some of the men's comments:

...the point where you turn 30. That's when you're considered old. [Frank]

I've felt like I've had to hang out in [older men's gay bar], since I've been losing my hair, I look older. [Michael]

Temporal perceptions like these front-load one's post-adolescent years with a sense of urgency to meet intimacy and relationship goals before one is "old". This leaves the period after age 30 to be regarded as frighteningly ambiguous territory, as young gay men find themselves facing the prospect of diminished self-worth and quality of life in the future. As will be discussed in the next section, young gay men's experience of community adds to the ambiguity to one's sense of self in the future.

Young gay men's experience of community

All of the men interviewed for this study had migrated to large cities or college towns to live, from contexts of relative isolation from other gay men. This move was often eagerly anticipated:

When I was a teenager it felt like gay culture was just a matter of getting there...it seemed like another nation was waiting, Pride flags and all. [Michael]

Features

The “Pride flag” Michael references is a multi-colored “rainbow flag” well known to most gay Americans, meant to convey a gay cultural attribute of embracing cultural, ethnic, and sexual orientation-based diversity. However, this attribute was felt to be more aspirational than actual, particularly to men of color:

The idea that we [as a community] actually stand up for everyone that’s just like us is false. [Tyson, African-American]

This week’s Pride parade...diversity [refers only to] sexual orientation in ‘gay pride’ terms. We don’t really accept everyone. We’re in fact fueled by race, by age...the irony of the alphabet soup [of LGBTQ³], the pink elephant, is that we *don’t* embrace diversity. We’re not all ‘one.’ [Mark, Asian-American]

While most men felt it important to be a part of a gay community, nearly all reported feeling “outside” of both gay male culture and community. This was best summarized by Adam:

I feel more like I’m part of a [gay male] culture than a community. I see a lot of [the same] people, but I don’t *know* a lot of people. When I think of ‘community’ I think of first name basis, support...I don’t really feel that ...we don’t hit it off because of our sexuality necessarily...this is an illusion.

In fact, alienation was a strong theme among men’s discussion of gay men’s culture and community. The men’s emotional connections with the gay community followed a common pattern: initial fear/dread of being publicly known as gay men, typically before migrating away from family-of-origin; pre-migration excitement and anticipation of connection to an idealized gay community; subsequent “let down” when expectations are not met upon arrival; and acceptance/integration of expectations with reality. The men represented all parts of this continuum, with most in the “let down” phase. Some had hoped to have already established a long-term relationship, but had not, or had experienced heartbreak along the way. Others had envisioned a stronger sense of interpersonal connection. Others had hoped for more stimulating night life. Gay men’s bars bore the brunt of the blame for these “let downs” and feelings of alienation, and were widely resented as what was felt to be a “default” social outlet:

The power of the bar is enormous in gay life. When it’s good you’re all ‘this is the best time *ever!*’, but when it’s bad, it’s devastating. [Stephan]

Unless you’re out in the bars, you feel like you’re invisible....[Carlos]

Another observed the irony of bars as a default social setting:

...we hunker down and go to bars by default, but then complain because we feel like we are around ‘bar people’. [Matthew]

Unmet utopian expectations may resonate at the cultural level as collective disillusionment, sometimes to the point of disdain, for gay men and gay culture. Some of the older men had moved beyond the “let down” period and began to accept the realities of gay culture, both positive and negative. Many, however, remained in a state of disappointment, still positioning gay cultural realities against their previous utopian ideals. The unmet expectation of belonging within a culture or community, and the resulting disillusionment, has negative implications for young gay men’s visualization of the future. The prospect of isolation leaves the quality of one’s future in question, again, rendering aging as something to be feared.

Finding older gay male role models sometimes proves difficult. Few of the men interviewed acknowledged knowing any older gay men. There is a documented lack of communication between generations of gay men [Bergling 2004, Peacock et al., 2001] confirmed by this research. This is at least partly attributable to the very different social climates in which each generation of gay men came of age: the sexual revolution and prior repression; the devastation of the AIDS epidemic; advances in human rights; the rise of the gay consumer market [Bergling, 2004; Bohan, Russell, & Montgomery, 2002; Kertzner, 2001]. It has even been suggested that a “generation” in gay life “is a matter of a few years rather than a matter of decades” [Bohan et al 2002, p. 21]. There was a lack of desire to connect with older gay men. Reasons for this included perceived bitterness and pessimism, especially about monogamy:

3 Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer community. This acronym is commonly used describe these parts of the community.

Guys in their 30s and 40s seem bitter and harsh. If you're only in an open relationship because you think you can't have monogamy, that's not good. [Michael]

Some [older gay men] are bitter that some young guys have more powers such as coming out in early age, have more rights than they did when they were our age. [Jeff]

The perception of older generations as less monogamous fed into a more general stereotyping of older gay men as promiscuous and predatory of younger gay men.

It's a rarity of connection, across generations. Some of them just go, oh, so you're a young stud...imagine the possibilities. [Tyler]

There was also a perception of older gay men as socially exclusive. Some men felt it was difficult to connect with older men when attempting to participate in social activities beyond the bar scene, many of which were felt to be more for older men:

[Gay resource center] has coffee talks, but who wants to sit around. I just prefer more active social things. There is [running group] and gay hiking, but these are a lot older guys...certainly not anyone college age. I don't like that bar or online feels like the only way to meet single guys...it's tough to interact in those settings. I wish there were other social things that weren't way out of my age range. [Michael]

When you're in those groups, it's hard to break through [to a personal level] to make strong friendships/relationships...easy to join, hard to connect. It feels like exhausting work. [Clark]

Guys who are older have their own little circle. There's not much interaction in between generations, not a lot of opportunities. [Matthew]

In general, perceptions of gay male life past 30 are based on stereotypes. The impact on imagined futures of younger gay men are easily apparent: absence of role modeling, and difficulty visualizing positive older versions of oneself. The sum of these perceptions, suspicions, and experiences, limit opportunities for young gay men to glimpse positive futures through their older peers.

Young gay men's experience of body

The prospect of deviation from a youthful, muscled standard, amplifies a fear of aging, which becomes associated with "loss":

I'm afraid of losing my looks. You lose your worth in gay society. 40% of your angle is your looks. People don't really want to lend you a hand, but step up to the plate if you're cute. [Jake]

I feel like after you kind of reach a point it's all downhill...you get older, you get gross. [Roger]

When I get older, I guess I'll ...dye my hair, change my diet, work out, get plastic surgery. [Derek]

Gay male culture mirrors its Western host in its high value of a youthful, fit physique. Gay media equates male desirability with youth, sexual skillfulness, athleticism, confidence, aggressiveness, and strength [Wierzalis, Barret, Pope, & Rankins, 2006]. Muscled pectorals and torsos are a key convention in gay media advertising as well as gay male pornography. Several of the men expressed concerns over meeting and/or maintaining this standard of beauty:

If you don't have an A & F⁴ body, it's like you don't exist. [Nick]

Acceptable gay standards are very limited and very small. Abercrombie, 6ft 180, white, muscles, athletic,

4 Abercrombie & Fitch, a clothing retailer catering to young men. Their advertisements frequently feature shirtless young men, typically Caucasian, with muscular bodies.

straight looking. I feel bad about this sometimes, but I see a fat gay guy and I think, oh, that's unfortunate...he doesn't get laid very often. My friends and I will even joke around about it. [Corey]

I was a very chubby child. I've lost a lot of weight. I got addicted to working out. But I noticed that you get treated really differently. I'm really caught up in that, it's bad. But it's good too...it's such a release for me. [Curtis]

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Todd describes his experience of stigmatization for being "too skinny":

I was at Revival [local club], I never go there, but decided to check it out on a Sunday. It was a total meat market, muscle market. A meat factory- I couldn't help but feel like the grade B meat mixed in by accident...

Some men recognized the irony of being both owner and object of the male gaze: as "objects", resentment was high over the felt need to conform to high standards; as "owners", desire for people and products perpetuating these standards persists.

While many noted that Seattle felt less pressured than other places in terms of conforming to body image, all felt the effect of these expectations from mainstream media, and gay media sources, which heavily promote this body type. While weight control and building muscle reap positive health rewards, intimacy rewards, and psychological benefits, perception of the quality of one's future is bound tightly to one's perception of their conformity to this ideal. The prospect of deviating from this ideal threatens one's anticipated quality of life. Again, the implications are a perceived loss of community, perceived loss of citizenship in gay culture, and loss of personal self-worth.

Young gay men's resilience as predictive of the future

All of the worrisome aspects of gay male culture, taken in total, create a fairly dismal picture. Each of the men I spoke with had been deeply affected by one or more of the future-inhibiting factors listed in this paper. In addition, the men survived violence, family disownment, workplace discrimination, clinical depression, accidental drug overdoses, addiction, HIV infection, and/or suicide attempts. Only 14% of these men had *not* been affected by at least two of these factors.

Yet, resilience prevails. Most gay men do reach their 30's without contracting HIV, without succumbing to drug or alcohol addiction; careers advance, relationships flourish; positive sense of self as an older individual strengthens. Literature provides strong evidence that things get better for gay men. Nearly all studies of older gay men indicated satisfaction with age [Bergling, 2004, p. 56]; a meta-analysis of studies found a trend of positive adjustment, rich lives, strong social networks, and long-term relationships [Wierzalis et al., 2006]; a 1982 study found that there was no difference in levels of depression compared to the general U.S. population [Berger, 1996]; this is especially compelling since those men came of age, in far more repressive times. This finding also proved true for the gay elderly [Dorfman et al., 1995]. Adding to the chorus, Cruz [2004] found gay men over 55 to be vibrant, well-connected, not lonely, reporting high quality of life [n=125]. In addition, gay men may parallel the trend noted for the general population of middle-aged adults, who "increasingly perceive themselves and their relationship to the social world with greater cognitive complexity and a heightened appreciation for paradox, ambivalence, and uncertainty in life" [Kertzner, 2001, p. 78]. Younger age sets, by contrast, may feel uncertainty to be more of a threat.

Confidence in one's capacity for resilience is critical for a positive long-term future outlook. The men regard gay culture itself as a dynamic and resilient force in recent history, given the de-criminalization of homosexuality, response to the AIDS crisis, and the movement for equal treatment and rights. Before these men migrated to the city, gay culture was a beacon for a better life: more acceptance, less isolation. Several men interacted with others online on gay-themed social networking sites. Gay-specific online venues such as gay.com helped several of the men navigate the "coming out" process, through informal supportive friendships with men around the country. These contacts, through chat rooms and social networking sites, helped facilitate the [typically] mid-to-late adolescence moment where their validity as a human being was realized, and where negative or homophobic messages received by family, religion, or media were rejected. Many drew, and continue to draw, strength from this powerful moment.

When I first came out, I felt betrayed by God. How could all that I believe be suddenly so suspect? But [homosexuality] didn't *feel* like a disorder, so I questioned religious messages. I became more aware of gay culture, found out what I was taught didn't connect to reality. It was a definite turning point. If I can make it through that, I can make it through anything.

Features

Will power. Just keep going, going. Don't stop, don't let anything discourage you. I have done a good job at not letting things hamper what I think I can achieve. This comes from my family always telling me that I won't be anything. It drives me. [Evan]

The men drew strength from having seen the gay community directly confront discrimination at national and local levels, and followed suit in their own environments:

Freshman year someone wrote fag on the white board on my door...so I asked my RA to call a floor meeting. I lectured all these straight college men about, 'you need to accept me for me...I'm not here to get with you. I'm here for me. To have to put up with that shit ...I basically let them know that you can spray paint my door, you can harass me, I'm still gonna be here...deal with it'. [Todd]

For some, a history of being the lone gay person in many past and current settings prepared them leadership roles:

It was really weird [as the only openly gay man on campus] because when I came out, people were like 'you have to be an activist on campus' ...so I became one. I even got quoted in the newspaper. [Clark]

I became a cheerleader in a high school in a very small town. If you're going to be looked at as different, you might as well just go for it and try out. [Philip]

Another form of resilience was the use of humor to negotiate hetero-normative or homophobic space. Witty banter and exchange of one-liners and insults, celebrated in gay male culture, serve the dual purpose of reducing the tension in relationships with other gay men and the heterosexual world alike. Scott explains:

When you deal in a homophobic environment all the time, you're always...distrustful. Is this person going to make fun of me? That's why I think gay men are so catty. We're catty to stave off those who would do us harm, either emotionally or physically. Strike back before you get struck.

Gay men's selection of careers in the expressive and liberal arts were spoken of as a means of distancing from, critiquing, and meaningfully participating in the world:

What brought me out of feeling bad about being gay? In my senior year of high school I was encouraged to write. I was told I was good at it....writers, artists in general that I like are commenting on society from the margins. I like that art gives pop culture the [middle] finger. The arts are good for gay men because they can be 'in it' but not 'of it'. I like the fact that some gays don't completely assimilate. [Dylan]

Dancing for me is a real expression of empowerment...it's the time when I feel most attractive. No one can stop me when I'm out there on the floor. I feel like I'm exuding happiness, warmth, that I'm in the reality when I dance. I'm both more desired and desirable. [Todd]

Making music is what keeps me from blowing up things. [Antoine]

Some men entered helping professions, particularly education and social work, as a form of personal resilience:

[I went into youth social work because...]I have a sense of devotion to people. I really believe the only reason for my being is to give back...to help people stand up when they fall down is really just what I want to do. I've seen the suffering and understand it. [Joe]

I wanted to teach because I want there to be a positive place for kids to come to school and not be afraid to go to school because they're different. To have a great place where they won't be pointed at and laughed at. [Seth, 21, sign language interpreter]

Features

The physical body also acted as a conduit for symbolizing and conveying strength and resilience, to oneself and others. This may be a positive aspect of the pursuit of fitness and muscularity. Alteration of the gay male body has been described as a landscape for asserting power which directly fuels self-validation [Jones & Pugh, 2005]. Resilience is also performed through sense of personal style and dress. Vincent, Tyson, Tyler, Andrew, Nick, Clark, and Manuel all described their style choices in terms of self-empowerment and resistance against constrictive mainstream male and gay male style norms. These styles include tattoos, large earring plugs, black gothic clothing and make-up, gender-blurring style, and thrift store wear.

I've run out of skin space [for tattoos]...but all of it is about being more clear on who I am, clarity, more realization. [Clark]

For me doing drag [at night] is a form of empowerment... a way of celebrating my femininity. Doing drag was a way of accessing pride I guess. Before that I grew up feeling accepted, but not proud....[later] I got into activism as [my drag persona]. I decided 'if you're gonna look at me, you're gonna hear from me'. [Manuel]

I really appreciate people who take clothing seriously. Style is power...like my friend Rachel, she has her own distinct look and works at it. It's a decision you make. Clothes are a language of their own, a way of communicating, being in the world. [Vincent]

Several men were highly skilled at social networking. In earlier development, it is possible that the use of personal qualities to distract from, or unravel, homophobia, such as sense of humor, academic wisdom, or ability to hold court among a group of people, translates later into professional skills in the fine and liberal arts, politics, business, or the ability to simply reinvent oneself in a new place. The ability to manage other people's perceptions translates into all of these skills as well. The idea of personal resilience, and of belonging to a culture made up of others who are resilient, was also a structuring force in guiding a new philosophy of living, including delineation of personal boundaries regarding what is/is not acceptable treatment, placing life's challenges in perspective, and bolstering altruism.

Conclusion

Young gay men face a particularly difficult mix of barriers against constructing a positive view of aging. To review: this includes the general stigma against aging in mainstream society; lack of clear institutional markers of age progression; limited and/or perceived limited career trajectories; the anticipation of discrimination and/or unhappiness in old age; the association of aging with loss of control and lack of physical appeal, bolstered by gay male cultural valuation of the muscled, youthful physique; lack of media representations of future-oriented gay men; effects of previous isolation creating a bias toward present-oriented, sensory reward when dating finally becomes viable; and lack of intergenerational trust and connection within the gay community. Clearly, this is a lot to navigate.

Thankfully, for those that survive these disillusionments and pressures, resilience prevails. For these men, this transpired through forming alliances with others experiencing similar challenges; through manipulation and management of public perception; through focusing efforts on moving to and surviving in a more urban environment; through physical alterations; through self-selection into helping professions, education, liberal/fine arts, and careers that would minimize their experience of homophobia and afford them a critical distance from society; through serious revision or complete abandonment of homophobic religious beliefs. These experiences foster a high degree of personal re-invention, creativity, innovation, analytic skill, and adventurousness. Gay men's contributions to several industries, including fine arts, fashion, entertainment, non-profit development, politics, higher education, and entrepreneurship are byproducts of this resilience, and institutions both within and outside the gay community reflect this.

To the extent that these experiences are shared and communicated, a dynamic community can emerge which interrogates and transcends that which holds it back. Young gay men survive both in spite of and because of gay culture. The rapid change of social and legal status adds a mix of ambiguity and hope, as young gay men imagine growing old.

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