ALMOST EQUAL, BUT NOT QUITE YET:
THE CONSUMPTION OF HISTORICALLY STIGMATISED SOCIAL GROUPS UNDER CONDITIONS OF FRAGMENTED STIGMA

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Just as this article is based on the author's dissertation work, the author acknowledges that feedback and insights emerging during the co-authoring and peer-review process of said article also informed the final positioning and conceptualisations as they are brought forward in this monograph.

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ABSTRACT

How do the consumption strategies of historically stigmatised social groups change when they have achieved greater recognition, status, and respectability in society? I answer this timely and relevant question based on a seven-year interpretive study of gay men's consumption in contemporary Germany.

Prior consumer culture research has theorised how members of historically stigmatised social groups use consumption strategically to *avoid*, *cope with*, or *resist* their widespread, pervasive, and persistent stigmatisation across life contexts — a condition which I call *dominant stigma*. Different from these studies, gay consumers in Germany neither face such a *dominant* stigmatisation any longer due to the social progress achieved over the past three decades. Nor, however, have gay consumers simply become uniformly destigmatised and respected all across German society. This begs the question how their *post-dominant* stigmatisation bears on contemporary gay men's consumption and identities?

I draw on Social Representations Theory from Social Psychology as an analytical lens to uncover that gay men's once dominant stigma has *fragmented* into co-existing *oppressive*, *enabling*, and *normalised societal representations* that gay men encounter to different degrees in their everyday lives. Faced with these societal changes, gay men no longer exclusively consume and identify as a *subculture*, as earlier consumer research has found. Instead, the social group of gay men has fanned out into five ideal-typical subgroups, which I refer to as *underground*, *discrete*, *hybrid*, *anti-stigma*, and *post-stigma social groups*. Each subgroup uses consumption for distinct strategic purposes, including *hiding and denial*, *collective resistance*, *reformation*, *deconstruction of differences*, and *expression of individuality*.

I synthesise these findings into a conceptual model of *consumption under fragmented stigma* that extends prior research on consumption under *dominant* and *hegemonic stigma configurations*, contributes to the literature on consumption and morality, and suggests ways in which consumption may ameliorate but also reinforce stigma. I show how these theory insights are relevant for future research on historically stigmatised social groups such as immigrants, racial, religious, or ethnic minorities, or consumers stigmatised for their appearance or (in-)abilities. In doing so, I also shed light on the complex lived experiences of gay men as a still-vulnerable social group that has become almost equal, but not quite yet.

Keywords: stigma, stigmatised consumers, gay men, LGBTQ, sexuality, subculture, consumer culture, sociology of consumption

The hope for change lends strength to those,
who suffer from stigma and exclusion.
But once change has arrived,
few things remain the same.

1 - INTRODUCTION

History tells that societal change towards greater equality and social justice is all but an easy endeavour. But even as people act up, defy the current status quo, and eventually make progress, new challenges may arise for those seeking liberation from stigma and discrimination.

The present study offers answers to the question of how the identities and consumption strategies of historically stigmatised social groups change when they have achieved greater recognition, status, and respect within a society. Answering this timely and relevant theory question not only provides new insights into the consumer behaviour of likely millions of consumers who are stigmatised, for example, due to their race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or (bodily) (in-) abilities, once these groups have successfully taken first steps towards respectability within a society. Answering this question also allows for a better understanding of the needs, the daily struggles, and the lived experiences of these social groups, and may ultimately enable progressive social change toward a shared understanding of our common humanity and human dignity.

I have carried out this research project, and authored the present manuscript, from a scholarly perspective grounded in a socio-cultural tradition within consumer research that is best known under the umbrella terms of Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, 2007, 2015), and sociology of consumption (Warde,

2015). I base my theorisation on the interpretive analysis of qualitative data collected over a seven-year inquiry into the empirical context of gay men's consumption in contemporary Germany.

With this study and its findings, I aspire to primarily contribute to an existing body of research on stigma management and collective consumption among historically stigmatised social groups such as sexual minorities (Bettany, 2016; Coffin, Eichert, & Noelke, 2019; Kates, 2002; Kates & Belk, 2001; Peñaloza, 1996; Rinallo, 2007; Visconti, 2008), immigrants (Luedicke, 2011, 2015; Oswald, 1999; Peñaloza, 1994), racial and religious minorities (Bonsu, 2009; Crockett, 2017; Jafari & Goulding, 2008; McAlexander, DuFault, Martin, & Schouten, 2014), or consumer collectivities stigmatised for their bodily features (Bettany & Kerrane, 2016; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) or (in-)abilities (Adkins & Ozanne, 2005), for example. I do, however, hope that this study and its findings will also prove useful to a broader community of scholars and practitioners from across the social sciences.

The remainder of this first chapter is structured as follows: In the next section, I will introduce the reader to the phenomenon of interest, and the theoretical positioning of this work within research on historically stigmatised social groups and their consumer behaviour. I will summarise key approaches and findings of prior research, uncover the gap within the current state of knowledge as it relates to answering my research question, and establish the relevance of the phenomenon under study. In the following section, I will then outline the key tenets of my analytical and methodological approach adopted to deliver answers to this research question, before offering a summary of my findings and key contributions. I conclude the introductory chapter providing the reader with a structured outline to guide them through the remainder of this manuscript.

1.1 - Research Phenomenon, Theoretical Background, and Relevance

The everyday lived experiences and consumer behaviour of historically stigmatised social groups grounded in markers such as race (Bonsu, 2009; Crockett, 2017; Pittman, 2020), ethnicity (Cui, 2001; Luedicke, 2015; Üstüner & Holt, 2007; Visconti et al., 2014), sexual orientation (Bettany, 2016; Coffin et al., 2019; Kates, 2002; Kates & Belk, 2001; Peñaloza, 1996; Rinallo, 2007; Visconti, 2008), class (Hamilton et al., 2014; Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013; Visconti, 2016), religion (Jafari & Goulding, 2008; McAlexander et al., 2014; Sandıkcı & Ger, 2010), or bodily features and (dis-)abilities (Adkins & Ozanne, 2005; Rosenthal, Cardoso, & Abdalla, 2020), for example, has attracted significant attention within socio-cultural consumer research over the past three decades. An aligned stream of research has engaged in the study of stigmatised consumption practices (Belk & Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2001; Sandıkcı & Ger, 2010; Seregina & Weijo, 2017), consumers' attempts to escape stigmatisation (Crockett, 2017; Kozinets, 2001; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), the deliberate consumption of stigma (Martin, Schouten, & McAlexander, 2006; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), and consumers' destigmatisation strategies and tactics (Crockett, 2017; Sandıkcı & Ger, 2010).

Consumers who belong to a *historically stigmatised social group* account for a significant share of consumer markets across geographies and cultures, and differ from their non-stigmatised counterparts in at least one most crucial aspect: Non-stigmatised consumers may use consumption for their individual construction, expression, and maintenance of identities and life-styles (Bardhi, Eckhardt, & Arnould, 2012; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Holt, 1997; Holt & Thompson, 2004; Scott, Cayla, & Cova, 2017); to link with others in communal and collective consumption experiences (Chalmers Thomas, Price, & Schau, 2012; Cova, Kozinets, & Shankar, 2007; Goulding, Shankar,

& Elliot, 2002; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau & Muñiz, 2007; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007); to live through extraordinary, transformative, or even spiritual episodes (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019; McAlexander et al., 2014; Rinallo, Scott, & Maclaren, 2013; Schouten, 1991; Scott et al., 2017); to express their moral values and political views (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2010; Thompson, 2004; Yaprak & Prince, 2019); or to negotiate and resolve social conflicts (Giesler, 2008; Husemann, Ladstaetter, & Luedicke, 2015; Luedicke et al., 2010; Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Asrsel, 2006), among others. Unlike such non-stigmatised consumers, however, members of historically stigmatised social groups always consume strategically —at least to some degree— to *avoid*, *cope with*, or *resist* their stigmatisation as a dominant, and "very persistent predicament" (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 379) in these consumers' everyday lives (Adkins & Ozanne, 2005; Crockett, 2017; Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1994; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Visconti, 2016).

For example, gay consumers in Toronto in the 1990s strategically *avoided* significant oppression "in the straight world" (Kates, 2002, p. 389), by retreating to the "physical place[s] and social space[s]" (p. 386) of the city's gay neighbourhood where they could freely express their sexual orientation, subcultural identities, and unique consumption tastes and styles without fear of stigma or discrimination. Likewise, British Muslim women in the aftermath of 9/11 *avoided* the stigma of being associated with radical Islamic terrorism by strategically refraining from wearing their traditional veils in public (Jafari & Goulding, 2008). Moreover, low-literacy American consumers, for example, "avoid encounters where they were forced to perform any type of public writing tasks (e.g., filling out forms)", and so *avoid* the stigma of being stereotyped and possibly discriminated against by Others (Adkins & Ozanne, 2005, p. 100).

Contemporary black American middle-class consumers, in turn, *cope with* their stigmatisation by seeking out "'positive' (non-stigmatized) representations of

blackness" through their consumption (Crockett, 2017, p. 568), for instance through their appreciation of black war heroes and black action figures like the "original black G.I. Joe" (ibid.). Likewise, Mexican immigrants to the United States rely on "coping social structures" such as "social networks of family and friends" for collective consumption, who support their acculturation into American consumer culture (Peñaloza, 1994, p. 40). Finally, also gay subcultural consumers of the 1990s collectively *coped* with their stigmatisation and minority stress, for example, through subcultural infrastructure such as the gay "community center", or through collective consumption at "popular [gay] bars" or nightclubs (Kates, 2002, p. 387).

Beyond *avoiding* and *coping* with stigma, plus-sized fashion enthusiasts, for instance, *resist* their stigmatisation outwardly through online activism, or by "allying with powerful institutional actors" in order to challenge mainstream beauty-ideals, and to destigmatise plus-sized bodies within the fashion industry (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013, p. 1250). Likewise, black middle-class Americans *resist* their stigmatisation, for instance through the collection of blackness-themed art in an attempt to "destigmatize blackness" (Crockett, 2017, p. 537).

What unites these and other stigmatised social groups studied in earlier consumer culture inquiries, is that all of these consumer groups found or continue to find themselves confronted with "pervasive" (Kates, 2002, p. 383), "systemic" (Crockett, 2017, p. 555), and "widespread stigmatization" (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013, p. 1238), that impairs and diminishes their life prospects (and consumption prospects) in almost every social domain (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001).

Contrary to the above-described consumers, however, some historically stigmatised social groups have made remarkable progress in their fight for civil rights and equality. Over the past thirty years, gay consumers, for example, have achieved significantly higher levels of legal and symbolic recognition, tolerance, and even respect

in many Western societies than those stigmatised consumer collectivities described in prior studies cited above (Die Zeit, 2016; Ghaziani, 2011; Pew Research, 2020). As a consequence, it appears that these consumers no longer face the same all-encompassing, *dominant* stigma they used to face several decades ago. For gay consumers, for example, comprehensive anti-discrimination policies, the adoption of same-sex marriage legislation, and broader trends towards a normalisation of non-heterosexual identities in liberal Western democracies —on average— provides evidence that these consumers are no longer as oppressed and disadvantaged in their consumption as they once used to be (Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996). I therefore ask the timely and relevant question that is: *How do the consumption strategies of historically stigmatised social groups change when they have achieved greater recognition, status, and respectability in society?*

Within consumer research, members of sexual minorities have traditionally been studied as consumption subcultures (Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), either explicitly or implicitly (Coffin et al., 2019; Ginder & Byun, 2015). Research informed by this *subcultural* approach has theorised non-heterosexual consumers as a "highly stigmatized and policitized" collectivity (Holt, 1997, p. 341), whose consumption is primarily driven by their desire to *avoid*, *cope with*, and *resist* their dominant stigma within society, and who find comfort in the celebratory expression of their unique subcultural tastes, styles, and identities, grounded in their opposition against a heterosexual mainstream (Coffin et al., 2019; Haslop, Hill, & Schmidt, 1998; Kates, 2002; Kates & Belk, 2001; Keating & McLoughlin, 2005; Peñaloza, 1996). However, as subcultural approaches assume an outright dominant stigmatisation against a subculture from outside society (Hall & Jefferson, 1973; Kates, 2002; Thornton, 1997), and oppositional identity work alongside the construction and maintenance of clear-cut symbolic boundaries on the inside (Kates, 2002; Kozinets,

2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), the analytic lens of *subculture* falls short to deliver convincing answers to my research question of how historically stigmatised social groups consume *once they have achieved greater recognition, status, and respectability* in society.

As I will show below, the case of contemporary gay men's consumption in Germany constitutes an ideal empirical context to investigate this important theory question, and to develop a theorisation of—what I call— *consumption under fragmented stigma.* Kurt Lewin (Lewin, 1952, p. 169) once famously noted: "There's nothing more practical than a good theory." In this spirit, I am confident that my theorisation will prove useful also when transferred to other empirical contexts of historically stigmatised social groups, such as the ones above, once their dominant and widespread stigma within a society has begun to fragment.

Having established my focal research phenomenon, its theoretical background, and its relevance for other stigmatised consumer collectivities across geographies and markets, I will now turn to outlining the analytical and methodological considerations underlying my research approach.

1.2 - Analytical and Methodological Research Approach

I address the question how members of historically stigmatised social groups consume once their stigma is no longer dominant and all-encompassing through a seven-year interpretive study of gay consumers in Germany. I collected a wide range of qualitative data from interviews and focus group sessions with gay consumers, interviews with expert informants and marketplace actors, contemporary and historic archival records, and seven years of multi-sited participant observation within gay consumption-scapes (for an overview see Table 1, page 116). My historical data spans

almost 80 years, from times of systematic persecution and criminalisation of gay men during and after World War II up until today, and therefore covers periods of gay men's gradual progress from state-sponsored killings in the Nazi's concentration camps, through decriminalisation, to full marriage equality and contemporary LGBTQ-mainstreaming.

In order to best analyse this data, I draw on Social Representations Theory as my analytic lens (Moscovici, 1961/2007; Rateau, Moliner, & Abric, 2012; Wagner & Hayes, 2005), and I conduct an interpretive thematic analysis on the analytic levels of broader German society (macro), gay men as a social group (meso), and individual gay consumers and their consumption practices (micro) (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2009). Social Representations Theory is an analytic framework which has been widely used in social psychology and sociology for more than 60 years (Doise, Clemence, & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993; Farr, 1990; Howarth, 2007; Howarth et al., 2013; Jodelet, 1991; Jovchelovitch & Gervais, 1999; Lopes & Gaskell, 2015; Moscovici, 1981, 1984, 1988, 2001), including in studies concerned with the representational dynamics of stigma and discrimination (Howarth, 2002; Jodelet, 1991; Joffe, 1999; Jovchelovitch & Priego-Hermández, 2013).

Adopting a social representations approach not only allows me to capture the multiple, intersecting, and often contradictory meanings, images, and manifestations through which members of a broader German society "establish facts" about gay men (Howarth, 2006, p. 67; Jodelet, 1991). Social Representations Theory also enables me to systematically explore how stigmatised gay consumers see themselves "through the eyes of others" (Howarth, 2002, p. 151), and how this outside view shapes their collective identities and consumption strategies (Howarth, Wagner, Magnusson, & Sammut, 2014; Jovchelovitch & Priego-Hermández, 2013).

Informed by Social Representations Theory as my analytic lens, I was able to

break down my main research question into three sub-questions, each one open to empirical inquiry based on my data corpus and chosen methodology. As such, my original research question, "How do the consumption strategies of historically stigmatised social groups change when they have achieved greater recognition, status, and respectability in society?", fanned out into the following:

Firstly, I had to ask: *How are gay men being represented within contemporary German society?* Asking and answering this question is important, because, unlike in prior studies (Kates, 2002), I could no longer assume the pervasive and widespread stigmatisation of gay consumers across social domains, due to the social change that had taken place in the meantime. The question how gay men are being seen by a broader public in contemporary Germany, and how this relates to their stigmatisation, therefore became an open empirical one.

Secondly, given my first question, I had to ask further: *How do gay men represent themselves as members of a historically stigmatised social group, given how they are being represented within broader society*? Again, this question is most crucial to answer, as I could no longer assume gay men's *subcultural* positionality, with its well-theorised identity propositions and consumption practices (Kates, 2002, 2004; Rinallo, 2007). This is because the subcultural approach presupposes an identity grounded in opposition against mainstream culture (Fox, 1987; Hebdige, 1979; Muggleton, 2000; Thornton, 1995), and finds a dominant societal stigma against the subculture and its members to be a constitutive marker of the subculture concept (Hall & Jefferson, 1973; Thornton, 1997). Hence, the question of how gay men *see themselves* as members of a social group structured around their sexual minority status, and given *how they are being seen by Others,* became again an open empirical one.

Thirdly, and following from my second question, I had to ask: *How do contemporary gay men in Germany use consumption strategically, that is, to "reach*

several different life goals" (Swidler, 1986, p. 277)*, given the complex interplay of being represented ("they about us") and self-representing ("we about us"), and across various social contexts?* It has been firmly established by extant consumer culture research how gay subcultural consumers, but also other historically stigmatised social groups, use consumption strategically to *avoid*, *cope with*, and *resist* their dominant and widespread stigmatisation, and how consumption plays a vital role in the construction and maintenance of their social identities (Adkins & Ozanne, 2005; Kates, 2002; Mirabito et al., 2016; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). As now, I could neither any longer assume their pervasive and widespread stigmatisation, nor their consumption and identity response as a sub-ordinated *subculture*, "lower down the social ladder" (Thornton, 1997, p. 4), also the question of gay men's strategic consumption in my research context became an open empirical one.

Enabled by Social Representations Theory, and equipped with a rich corpus of qualitative data, I therefore began unravelling the complex triadic entanglement of *being represented by Others*, *representing oneself*, and *consuming strategically to reach different life goals* across social domains and representational configurations, in order to answer my main research question. In the following section I will briefly summarise the key findings and contributions from my analysis.

1.3 - Key Findings and Contributions

In sum, the findings from this study make contributions to existing consumer research on historically stigmatised social groups in three theoretical key areas. First, I introduce the notion of *stigma configurations* that allows for the empirical analysis and theoretic delineation of different, ideal-typical constellations of stigmatising processes and outcomes. Second, on a societal level, I discover, theorise, and operationalise three

major *societal representations* of historically stigmatised social groups under fragmented stigma gay men within broader contemporary German society, which encompass the shared beliefs, values, and attitudes heterosexual Others hold about gay men, and which therefore more or less stigmatise gay consumers as a social group. Third, on the level of the social group, I uncover five theoretically distinct *self-representations* of contemporary gay men in Germany which form the building blocks of their social identities, that is, how gay men relate to themselves as members of the social group constituted by their sexual orientation. I furthermore show how each of these five self-representations comes with its own distinct *consumption strategy* that serves gay men to various utilitarian, symbolic, or political ends. I will now briefly elaborate on each of these key findings and how they contribute to consumer research.

First, my turn away from prior subcultural approaches (Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996), and contexts in which widespread and pervasive stigmatisation of a consumer group could be rightfully assumed (Crockett, 2017; Peñaloza, 1994; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), opened up the opportunity to re-conceptualise stigmatising processes and outcomes (Link & Phelan, 2001). As such, I define a *stigma configuration* as an *ideal-typical combination of social representations that shape the collective identities, consumption strategies, and life prospects of stigmatised social groups in characteristic ways*. My re-reading of prior consumer research on stigmatised collectivities through the lens of social representations theory, aided by my concept of *stigma configurations*, allows me to identify three distinct stigma configurations which I call a *hegemonic stigma configuration,* a *dominant stigma configuration*, and a *post-dominant stigma configuration*. I define, theorise, and characterise each of these three stigma configurations, and illustrate consumption under *hegemonic* and *dominant* stigma by referring to consumer culture studies conducted under such conditions respectively.

To date, prior consumer research has not yet explored consumption under the

configuration of *post-dominant* stigma, and the present study constitutes the first empirical research project focused on consumption under post-dominant stigma conditions. I find the stigma configuration in my own research context of gay men's consumption in Germany to be a specific sub-type of a *post-dominant stigma configuration*, which I further identify as *fragmented stigma*.

This first key area of theory findings contributes to consumer research on stigmatised consumer groups by highlighting the relevance of the societal *context of context* in which stigmatising processes, outcomes, and consumption occur (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011; Link & Phelan, 2001). More specifically, the concept of *stigma configurations,* paired with a theory of social representations, allows social scientists to map and measure the scope, magnitude, and qualities of those more or less stigmatising "normative conversations*"* (Visconti, 2016, p. 372) about a social group at a particular point in time, and therefore paves the way towards more nuanced understandings of the relationship between stigma and consumption across empirical and social contexts, and configurations of stigma. The theoretical essence of *post-dominant* stigma in general, and *fragmented stigma* in my specific research context, leads the way to my second area of key findings:

Second, the concept of stigma configurations, and my analysis of eight decades worth of historical data on gay men in Germany, combined with first-person accounts of gay informants that were up to 82 years of age, allowed me to discover the previously unstudied stigma configuration of *post-dominant stigma*, and, further, *fragmented stigma* as the specific instantiation of post-dominant stigma in my research context. My historic analysis reveals the co-existence of three *societal representations* held among members of broader German society *about* gay men, which I name *oppressive*, *enabling*, and *normalised societal representations.* I define and trace the historical origins of each of these three societal representations in my context and offer empirical

illustrations from my data. *Oppressive* societal representations, for example, characterise gay men as outright unacceptable, disgraceful, fundamentally unequal, and as lesser or even non-human beings. *Enabling* societal representations, in turn, recognise gay men as legally and symbolically legitimate citizens, but do so with a sceptical undertone of *tolerance* toward the unfamiliar Other, rather than by showing honest and unconditional *respect* for difference. Finally, *normalised* societal representations still recognise a marker of difference such as sexual orientation, but do not instrumentalise it to construct social hierarchies. Instead, normalised representations relate to gay men through principles such as common human dignity, equality in difference, and liberal democratic pluralism.

This second key area of theory findings contributes to consumer research on stigmatised consumer groups by introducing the notion of *societal representations* that allows the mapping of stigmatising, destigmatising, normalising, or possibly also re-stigmatising discourses within a specific research context of interest. While emerging from the analysis of data from my own research context, I suggest that ideal-typical *oppressive*, *enabling*, and *normalising* societal representations may also exist for other historically stigmatised social groups once their stigmatisation in a society is no longer dominant. Moreover, future contextual research on different historically stigmatised social groups might arrive at other *post-dominant* configurations such as, for example, configurations of *ameliorated*, or even *eradicated* stigma. In my research context, the fragmentation of gay men's stigma through the simultaneous co-existence of mutually contradictory *oppressive*, *enabling*, and *normalising societal representations* gives way for me to present my third key area of theory findings and contributions to consumer research:

Third, my analysis reveals how gay men's fragmented stigma under oppressive, enabling, and normalised societal representations in contemporary German society leads

to the emergence of five theoretically distinct *self-representations*, that is, the ways how gay men represent themselves as members of an "imagined" (Anderson, 2006) social group of gay men. Each of these five *self-representations*, I find, comes alongside its own characteristic *consumption strategy* that serves gay men to specific utilitarian, symbolic, or political ends. I name, define, and theorise these self-representations and consumption strategies, and offer empirical illustrations based on my data analysis.

For example, in social encounters in which oppressive societal representations prevail, gay consumers tend to *self-represent* as members of an *underground social group,* and use *consumption* strategically to *hide* and possibly *deny* their homosexuality altogether. In contexts in which oppressive and enabling societal representations coexist, gay consumers, in turn, tend to *self-represent* as members of a *discrete social group*, and strategically use *consumption as collective resistance* against their oppression and discrimination. Moreover, where only enabling societal representations characterise a social encounter, gay men tend to *self-represent* as members of a *hybrid social group*, and use consumption strategically to seek representational *reform,* that is, to establish new acceptabilities within broader society through creative acts of reflexive bricolage. In contrast, under conditions of co-existing enabling and normalising societal representations, gay men tend to *self-represent* as members of an *anti-gay social group*, or an *anti-stigma social group* in its de-contextualised abstraction. Anti-gay consumers use consumption strategically to *deconstruct differences* between gay and mainstream identities, and seek respectability through assimilation into, and subordination under (hetero-)normative representational frameworks. Finally, where normalised societal representations prevail, gay men tend to *self-represent* as members of a *post-gay social group*, or a *post-stigma social group* in the category's de-contextualised abstraction. *Post-gay* consumers use *consumption* as an *expression of individuality*, and engage in omnivorous and individualistic consumption in the perceived absence of stigmatisation

by heterosexual Others.

This third key area of theory findings contributes to consumer culture research on historically stigmatised consumer groups in four most important ways: First, these findings situate and extend prior research under *dominant stigma configurations* and its conceptualisation of consumption as *avoidance, coping*, and *resistance* (Crockett, 2017; Kates, 2002; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), by establishing five new consumption strategies under conditions of *fragmented stigma*. Second, my findings also extend prior research under *dominant stigma* from a subcultural perspective (Coffin et al., 2019; Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996; Visconti, 2008), by answering the question what happens to subcultures once their stigma fragments. I do so by identifying five self-representations that are constitutive of distinct subgroups within a historically stigmatised social group, and which I contrast and compare to prior subcultural theorisations. Third, my findings contribute to literatures on consumption-mediated morality plays (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Husemann et al., 2015; Luedicke et al., 2010), for example by offering answers to the question why some historically stigmatised consumers under stigma fragmentation may turn against their own kinds, or why some gay men, for instance, feel attracted by right-wing populism and anti-immigrant rhetorics. Fourth, my findings contribute to relevant and timely debates on the role of consumption for the destigmatisation, and possibly also the re-stigmatisation, of historically stigmatised consumer groups under post-dominant stigma configurations.

For a visualisation of these findings, please see my conceptual model of consumption under fragmented stigma (Figure 1, on page 136).

In this section, I have outlined my study's main findings structured across three key theoretical and substantive domains. I have furthermore summarised the major contributions this study seeks to make to the literature on historically stigmatised social groups within the tradition of cultural and sociological consumption studies. In the next,

and final subchapter of my introduction, I will provide the reader with a structured and commented outline to orient them within the remainder of this thesis.

1.4 - Structure of this Thesis

In the above sections of this introductory chapter, I have sought to familiarise the reader with this study's general rationale, and I have introduced my research phenomenon of interest, its theoretical background in consumer culture studies on historically stigmatised social groups, and highlighted the relevance of this study. I then continued with an outline of my analytical and methodological research approach, introducing Social Representations Theory as my key analytic lens. Subsequently, I have summarised key findings and contributions of the present study structured around three key substantive and theoretical domains. In the following, I will now offer the reader a guiding overview about the remaining structure of this work.

The next chapter offers a review of existing literature as it is relevant to answering my research question. I will start out from my empirical context and offer a brief overview of consumer research on non-heterosexual consumers, followed by a review of the —so far— dominant analytic approach to studying sexual minorities: the subcultural approach. As my review reveals, the subcultural approach falls short of offering satisfactory answers to my research question, and so I will turn my attention to a broader review of literature on stigma and consumer research. After reviewing key theoretical foundations of stigma research and its origins within sociology, I will introduce the notion of *stigma configurations* to guide my review and categorisation of extant research on consumption under *hegemonic*, *dominant*, and *post-dominant* configurations of stigma. As theory derived from existing research again turns out to be insufficient to answer my research question, I turn for help to Social Representations

Theory. After a brief introduction to the theory and its history, I will outline five main characteristics of social representations, and introduce two of the theory's main analytic concepts, *anchoring* and *objectification*. Next, I will highlight relevant links between Social Representations Theory and theories of identity, before summarising the key benefits and possible applications of the theory for consumer researchers.

After having concluded my literature review chapter, I will familiarise the reader with the methodological approach underlying this study. In particular, I will disclose the epistemological positioning adopted in this study, introduce my research context of gay men's consumption in Germany, and I will elaborate on my adopted methods of data collection through consumer interviews, consumer focus groups, expert interviews, historical and contemporary archival research, and participant observation. Following my data collection, I present the procedures underlying my data analysis, and I am going to comment on the robustness of my analysis and its quality criteria. Finally, I will offer reflections on my researcher positionality, matters of research ethics, and methodological limitations of this study.

I will then present my findings, structured as two main sub-chapters on *societal representations*, and on *self-representations and their consumption strategies*. In the first sub-chapter I will elaborate on the results from my historical and society-level analysis, and reveal *oppressive*, *enabling*, and *normalised* societal representations of gay men as co-existing in contemporary German society, giving rise to a condition which I call *stigma fragmentation*. The second sub-chapter reveals the five ideal-typical *self-representations* contemporary gay men in Germany (and likely other consumers faced with fragmented stigma) perpetuate as members of an *underground, discrete, hybrid, anti-stigma,* and *post-stigma social group,* alongside their characteristic consumption strategies of *consumption as hiding and denial, collective resistance, reformation, deconstruction of difference,* and *expression of individuality*. I summarise

these findings, before leading over to the following chapter, in which I discuss my findings before the backdrop of prior research.

I start my discussion by briefly recapitulating my research question, approach, and key findings, before discussing contributions of my social representations-informed analysis of stigma configurations for inquiries into the consumer behaviour of historically stigmatised social groups. Next, I will discuss what happens to *subcultures* as *dominant* societal stigma *fragments*. In the following sections I consider in detail each of the five consumption strategies discovered through my analysis, and how they relate to existing knowledge on consumption under *dominant* stigma configurations. Finally, I discuss contributions of my findings to the literature on consumption-mediated morality plays, and offer insights into *if* and *how* consumption under fragmented stigma can contribute to a destigmatisation of historically stigmatised social groups. Throughout the discussion chapter I highlight limitations and offer suggestions for future research.

In a penultimate chapter I will offer reflections and provocations on possible managerial implications of this study's findings for marketing practitioners looking to cater to an LGBTQ audience, and possibly also to other historically stigmatised consumer groups, before concluding.

2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

In the following chapter I will seek to lay the theoretical groundwork for my analysis of the consumer behaviour of contemporary gay men in Germany under conditions of, what I will call below, *fragmented stigma*. In order to approach this task, I will start my exploration of relevant literature by focussing on my contextualised phenomenon of interest and first offer a broader overview about prior research on

lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans* and queer (LGBTQ) consumers in marketing and consumer research.

As this general review will reveal, the dominant analytic framework over the past 25 years, on which socio-cultural studies on non-heterosexual consumers were based, is the *subcultural* approach (Peñaloza, 1996; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), and, in particular, the conceptualisation of LGBTQ consumers as subcultural consumers (Coffin et al., 2019; Haslop et al., 1998; Keating & McLoughlin, 2005; Peñaloza, 1996; Visconti, 2008). Following my general review on LGBTQ consumer research, I will therefore trace the subcultural approach to its sociological origins, outline its assumptions, strengths, and limitations, and I will review relevant applications of the subcultural approach in marketing and consumer research. As I will show, subculture theories and concepts proved to be useful and adequate in the mid-1990s when Lisa Peñaloza (1996) first suggested their application for the study of LGBTQ populations, and when Steven Kates (2002, p. 385) collected the ethnographic data for his pathbreaking study on gay men's subcultural consumption in Toronto's "gay ghetto", which he published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* several years later. I will show, however, that subculture frameworks fall short to capture the diversity and variety of strategic consumption practices of contemporary gay men in societies which have —on average— moved towards tolerance, destigmatisation and even respect towards their LGBTQ populations.

As subculture approaches appear inadequate to answer my research question at hand, I will then turn to research that has made *stigma*, stigma theorisations, and stigma management strategies the centrepiece of attention. Again, I will first trace the origins of stigma theoretics from its foundational conceptualisation by sociologist Erving Goffman (1963) to contemporary understandings of stigma and stigmatising processes. Then, I will review relevant consumer research on historically stigmatised social groups

under conditions of what I call *hegemonic stigma* and *dominant stigma*. As I will show, prior research on historically stigmatised consumer groups has theorised four main consumption strategies used by stigmatised consumers, which I call *invisible consumption*, *consumption as avoidance*, *consumption as coping*, and *consumption as resistance*. While these studies combined have revealed ground-breaking insights into the consumer behaviour of historically stigmatised social groups when being faced with dominant, persistent, and mostly uniform stigmatisation across social domains and contexts, their existing theorisations cannot sufficiently explain the consumption behaviour and identity dynamics of contemporary gay men, who find themselves confronted with much more diverse and fragmented configurations of stigma across different life contexts.

In order to empirically capture and analyse the multiplicity of coexisting, contested, and conflicting stigmatising, destigmatising, and normalising processes relating to gay men in contemporary German society, rather than taking their dominant stigmatisation for granted, I will then introduce *Social Representations Theory* as an analytic framework that is ideally suited to deliver meaningful insights to my still unanswered research question which remains: *How do the consumption strategies of historically stigmatised social groups change when they have achieved greater recognition, status, and respectability in society?* After having introduced Social Representations Theory and its origins in French social psychology, I will elaborate on five main characteristics of social representations, and the theory's key processes of *anchoring* and *objectification*. In the following subchapters, I will then outline links between Social Representations Theory and theories of identity, before elaborating on the potential of the theory of social representations for researchers in the field of marketing and consumer research.

In a final section, I will briefly synthesise the consolidated insights from my

review of relevant literature before transitioning to the following chapter which outlines the methodological approach underlying this study.

2.1 - Consumer Research on Non-Heterosexual Consumers

The social scientist who wants to make meaningful contributions not only to abstract high-level theory, but also to the contextualised understanding of a particular substantive empirical domain, will have no choice but to engage with the specificities and idiosyncrasies of their research context, alongside the analytic and ideally contextually transferable frameworks, concepts, processes, and relations that may ultimately form the cornerstones of their theorisation of the phenomena of interest (Flyvberg, 2001). Setting out to study the consumer behaviour of historically stigmatised social groups under conditions of post-dominant stigma, and in the context of gay consumers in Germany, therefore first requires a review of relevant research on gay and other non-heterosexual consumers in the field of marketing and consumer research.

In marketing and consumer research, Ginder and Byun (2015) and Coffin, Eichert, and Noelke (2019) have recently published comprehensive, structured, and critical reviews of the exiting research on sexual minorities, and have outlined suggested pathways for future research. In the following, I will therefore, in the interest of completeness, summarise the existing research on non-heterosexual consumers in my field, while, in the interest of avoiding unnecessary redundancies with the work of aforementioned authors, remain mindful about the relevance of these reviewed studies for answering the research question at hands. I encourage the interested reader, however, to consult the works of Ginder and Byun (2015) and Coffin and colleagues (2019) for a broader overview of research on non-heterosexual consumers in marketing

and consumer research.

Compared with other disciplines within the social sciences, consumer researchers have developed an interest in non-heterosexual consumers only in the mid 1990s, and therefore rather late when compared to, for example, disciplines such as sociology (Adam, 1992; Cass, 1979; D'Emilio, 1998; Katz, 1995; Plummer, 1981; Weeks, 1977, 1985, 2007). Ginder and Byun (2015, p. 823) categorise the research that has emerged since then into four main research streams that are concerned with: (1) "the viability of the gay and lesbian market"; (2) "the nature of gay/lesbian-targeted media and advertising"; (3) "consumer responses to gay/lesbian-targeted advertising"; and (4) "consumer behaviour and attitudes among gays and lesbians". Of these four research steams, the fourth one is most directly related to the present study. Therefore, I will keep discussion of the prior three streams to a reasonable amount.

Studies concerned with the "viability" of the "gay and lesbian market" (Ginder & Byun, 2015, p. 823) have sought to establish whether sexual minorities do in fact constitute a distinct market segment that is worth considering for brands and marketers in terms of segmentation and targeting (Peñaloza, 1996), and have further sought to understand the emergence of these "market[s] based on identity" (Keating & McLoughlin, 2005, p. 131), and in particular as an identity that is grounded in its difference from heterosexuals (Coffin et al., 2019). It was, in fact, Lisa Peñaloza (1996, p. 10) who, back then in the *Journal of Homosexuality*, first critically discussed the idea of the gay and lesbian market as a "dream market" for marketers, due to its (perceived) abundance of mostly urban, middle-class, above-average educated *double-income-no-kids* consumers (DINKS). These ideal consumers would be able and willing to spend their above-average disposable income on lifestyle goods and other consumer products (Coffin et al., 2019; Kates, 1999; Lukenbill, 1995), which lead to a multiplicity of emerging gay-targeted media and advertising images (Branchik, 2007; Chasin, 2000).

However, such early studies already displayed criticism towards the dream-market metaphor, and the presumable hunt for the "pink dollar" (Kates, 2000, p. 494) as overly simplistic and mostly focused on white, urban, educated, cis-gendered, and able-bodied gay men (Coffin et al., 2019; Gudelunas, 2011; Kates, 1999; Peñaloza, 1996).

The second stream of research on non-heterosexual consumers, as identified by Ginder and Byun (2015), explores how representations of lesbian, gay, and other non-heterosexual consumers in advertising and media has evolved over the years, and how these changing portrayals have impacted the lesbian and gay market. In particular, this research delineates explicit out-of-closet advertising, from gay-vague advertising (Tsai, 2004), the latter of which often deliberately works with ambiguous images that are usually not easily deciphered by a heterosexual audience (Borgerson, Schroeder, Blomberg, & Thorssén, 2006; Oakenfull, McCarthy, & Greenlee, 2008). This strategy seeks to cater to a non-heterosexual minority, while not alienating the heterosexual majority (DeLozier & Rodrigue, 1996), and has been described by media-semioticians as a strategy of *purposeful polysemy* (Puntoni, Schroeder, & Ritson, 2010; Puntoni, Vanhamme, & Visscher, 2012). In contrast, out-of-closet advertising draws on explicit LGBTQ images, symbols, language, or codes (Tsai, 2012). Moreover, most research in this stream finds a high degree of adherence to heteronormative, binary gender norms, and the almost entirely absent portrayal of trans* persons and identities until rather recently (Branchik, 2007; Tsai, 2004; Kates, 1999; Marshall, 2011).

The third category of research on non-heterosexual consumers, according to Ginder and Byun's (2015, p. 825) typology, is concerned with how non-heterosexual consumers "interpret and respond to gay/lesbian-oriented advertising". Such studies have drawn on the concept of non-heterosexual consumers as an interpretative community (Fish, 1980; Hall, 1980), where these consumers negotiate their dual identities as simultaneously belonging to a social group structured around their sexual

minority status, as well as belonging to mainstream heteronormative society (Hooten, Noeva, & Hammonds, 2009; Oakenfull et al., 2008; Visconti, 2008). Studies in this stream of research have drawn on theories such a reader-response theory (Ritson & Elliott, 1999; Scott, 1994) to explore concepts like gay-friendliness in advertisements (Kates, 2000; Oakenfull, 2013; Tuten, 2006), brand loyalty among non-heterosexual consumers (Hooten et al., 2009; Tuten, 2006), or heterosexual consumers' reactions to different forms of explicit or vague advertising targeted at non-heterosexual consumers (Borgerson et al., 2006; Oakenfull & Greenlee, 2004).

Finally, the fourth stream of research includes studies investigating lesbian, gay, and other non-heterosexual consumers' consumer behaviour and attitudes (Ginder & Byun, 2015). In her pioneering article, Peñaloza (1996, p. 23) first conceptualised lesbian and gay consumers as a „consumer subculture, that encompasses the distinct dimensions of identity, social practices, and community formation," and argued that subcultures based on sexual orientation and identity engage in symbolic consumption practices that construct distinct, collective subcultural identities through shared codes, tastes, and consumption meanings. Across several studies of the time (Haslop et al., 1998; Kates, 2002; Kates & Belk, 2001; Peñaloza, 1996), gay and lesbian collectivities were theorised as „highly stigmatized and politicized" social groups that were likely to „enact consumption practices centered around a single coherent framework of tastes, expressive of a social identity" (Holt, 1997, p. 341).

Following Holt's (1997) observation, consumer research studies on sexual minorities echoed the societal sentiments of their time, framing non-heterosexual consumers as uniformly marginalised, stigmatised, and politicised, and therefore under constant threat from a hostile, non-accepting, *heteronormative* mainstream society (D'Emilio, 1998; DiPlacido, 1998; Halperin, 2002). I use the term heteronormativity, analogous to Berlant and Warner (1998, p. 548), to refer to „the institutions, structures

of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality not only coherent - that is, organized as a sexuality - but also privileged. (…) Unmarked, as the basic idiom of the personal and the social; or marked as a natural state; or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment.“ Therefore, heteronormativity refers to the discursive construction of heterosexuality as exclusively natural, healthy, and morally right - a normative, prescriptive representation which Judith Butler (1993, p. 18) once described as „compulsory heterosexuality“; a moral imperative within the „heterosexual matrix” of “heterosexual hegemony“ (Butler, 1993, p. 19; Rubin, 1984).

Accordingly, a dominated social positionality thus became a constitutive marker for a significant number of studies on sexuality-based subcultural consumption (Branchik, 2002; Haslop et al., 1998; Hsieh & Wu, 2011; Kates, 2002, 2003; Keating & McLoughlin, 2005; Oakenfull, 2012; Rinallo, 2007), and these studies continued to draw on the concept of *subculture* either implicitly or explicitly (Coffin et al., 2019). Probably best known among consumer culture theorists for his work on gay consumers from a subcultural perspective is Steven Kates (2002, p. 383), who refined and extended Douglas Holt’s notion of gay consumers as highly stigmatised and politicised, by foregrounding the internal diversity and “protean” quality of the gay subculture, that allows gay consumers to “express their individuality, while upholding the symbolic boundaries that demarcate gay subculture from outside mainstream culture, thereby creating a safe subcultural space, free from stigma and discrimination” (Coffin et al., 2019, p. 280).

Several years later, and within the cultural context of Catholic Italy, Rinallo (2007) and Visconti (2008) revisited gay subcultural consumption, and found that certain gay consumption practices had meanwhile become appropriated by heterosexual (mainstream) consumers. In his study on male fashion styles, Rinallo (2007, p. 89) further speculates that gay men “seem[ed] to enjoy the diffusion of the ‘gay vagueness’

trend in society and appreciate it […] as a mechanism through which they can gain standing in society", thereby confirming Kates' (2002) findings that stigma, discrimination, and marginalisation of gay men was still commonplace in Rinallo's (2007) research context at the time. Likewise, Visconti (2008, p. 132) hints at a movement towards increasing fragmentation and de-homogenisation of (subcultural) gay consumption practices and meanings, but he leaves it to future research to theorise the implications of a "fluid nature and the (de)construction of gay/straight symbolic boundaries" on gay consumers identity construction and consumption practices. However, both, Rinallo (2007) and Visconti (2008) remain with their analysis within the theoretic framework afforded by the subcultural approach to non-heterosexual consumers and, as such, adopt its underlying assumptions. Until today, this subcultural approach, that assumes "an outright stigmatized and marginalized social positionality of non-heterosexual consumers" remains the dominant theoretic framework adopted in socio-cultural studies of non-heterosexual consumers (Coffin et al., 2019, p. 283).

In sum, although consumer researchers have developed an interest in non-heterosexual consumers rather late when compared to other disciplines, a considerable amount of research has developed within the last 25 years. Such research investigated the emergence, existence, and viability of a discrete LGBTQ market segment; the particularities of lesbian- and gay-targeted advertising; consumers' responses to advertising targeted at non-heterosexual consumers; and the consumer behaviour and attitudes of LGBTQ consumers (Coffin et al., 2019; Ginder & Byun, 2015). The review of this literature, as it is relevant to answering my research question, reveals that since Lisa Peñaloza's (1996) pathbreaking article, the subcultural approach to studying non-heterosexual consumers remains the analytical quasi-standard, either implicitly or explicitly. In order to better understand the assumptions, merits, and limitations of a subcultural approach to consumer research on historically stigmatised social groups, and

non-heterosexual consumers in particular, I will dedicate the following section to an in-depth discussion of research on consumption subcultures, and other applications of subculture frameworks to phenomena of collective consumption within a consumer culture theory tradition.

2.2 - The Subcultural Approach and its Limitations

In the preceding section, I have presented an overview on research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, and queer consumers in marketing and consumer research, structured around four exiting research streams as categorised by Ginder and Byun (2015), and critically assessed by Coffin, Eichert, and Noelke (2019). In conclusion, I have shown that existing research in a socio-cultural tradition of marketing and consumer research has predominantly adopted the sociological concept of subculture to study the consumer behaviour of sexual minorities, but also, as I will show below, the consumption of consumer groups that face social stigma due to their consumption choices (Kozinets, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Seregina & Weijo, 2017). In order to evaluate the analytic strengths and weaknesses of the subcultural approach and its underpinning assumptions, this section will be dedicated to a review of relevant literature on the emergence of the subculture concept, and its use in consumer culture studies of sexual minorities and other phenomena of collective consumption.

Historically, scholarship on consumption subcultures builds on extensive research on punks, youth movements, and club cultures within sociology and cultural studies from the 1970s onward, particularly on work carried out at the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Gelder, 2005; Hall & Jefferson, 1973; Hebdige, 1979; Thornton, 1995). Of particular relevance among these studies ranks the volume "Resistance through Rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war

Britain", edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (1973). The volume features seminal early contributions by subculture theorists such as Hall and Jefferson themselves, but also Dick Hebdige and John Clarke, among others, who theorise how, at the time, collectivities of mostly working-class youth in post-war Britain displayed and enacted their discontent with the current state of social affairs, and vocalised their alternative political and social demands through ritualised deviance in music, fashion, language, conduct, and the like.

Attempts to arrive at a single, widely accepted definition of the term subculture have been manifold, contested, and are still unfruitful to date (Fox, 1987; Gelder, 2005; Hebdige, 1979; Jenks, 2005; Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003; Thornton, 1997). However, despite not being a unified theory, and despite voices proclaiming a *death* of subculture, the emergence of a *post*-subculture-era, or even an era of *post-post*-subcultures, the subculture approach to studying social phenomena of resistance, deviance, and stigma remains curiously resilient and of remaining relevance (Bennett, 2011; Blackman, 2014; Clark, 2003; Greener & Hollands, 2006; Huq, 2006; Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003; Williams, 2019).

On a basic level, Fine and Kleinman (1979, p. 18) define a subculture as constituted by „a set of understandings, behaviours, and artefacts used by particular groups," which is „diffused through interlocking group networks." Members of a subculture identify with each other, as well as with the subculture as a collectivity based on their shared commonalities, and develop a sense of identity and belonging through shared values, practices, taste regimes, and perspectives on the world (Fine & Kleinman, 1979; Hebdige, 1979; Jenks, 2005). Such shared beliefs, values, attitudes, and practices —which I will further below call their *social representations*—, however, are not ex-ante conditions, but are continuously negotiated and re-negotiated through symbolic interaction and discursive processes between members of a subculture

(Blumer, 1969; Fine & Kleinman, 1979; Mead, 1934). Building on Bourdieu's (1984) notions of fields, capitals, practices, and habitus, subcultural novices acquire "subcultural capital" (Thornton, 1995, p. 26) by interacting with experienced members, and therefore socialise into a subculture's structures, roles, symbols, practices, values, rituals, and systems of knowledge (Fine & Kleinman, 1979; Hebdige, 1979; Thornton, 1995).

It is a common theme in this literature that subcultures are understood as dominated sub-groups of society, which are subversive, rebellious, deviant, and agentic, promoting symbolic resistance, and opposition against a hegemonic and unwelcoming mainstream culture (Hall & Jefferson, 1973; Hebdige, 1979; Thornton, 1997). As such, subcultures in sociology have been conceptualised as "subordinate, subaltern, or subterranean", "deviant or debased", and as "lower down the social ladder due to social differences of class, race, ethnicity and age", among other features (Thornton, 1997, p. 4). In line with this conceptualisation, dominant stigma, marginalisation, and asymmetrical power relations between insiders and outsiders of a subculture have also become common themes in either explicitly or implicitly subculture-informed consumer culture studies of collectives of outlaw bikers (Martin et al., 2006; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), Star Trek enthusiasts (Kozinets, 2001), role-players and cosplayers (Belk & Costa, 1998; Seregina & Weijo, 2017), plus-sized consumers (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), religious, ethnic, and racial groups (Crockett, 2017; Sandıkcı & Ger, 2010; Üstüner & Holt, 2007), or sexual minorities (Kates, 2002; Keating & McLoughlin, 2005; Rinallo, 2007; Visconti, 2008), among others.

Being the first to introduce the concept of subculture to consumer research, Schouten and McAlexander (1995, p. 43) in their study on Harley Davidson bikers define a "subculture of consumption" as "a distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or

consumption activity". Further characteristics of such a subculture of consumption, the authors explain, include "an identifiable, hierarchical social structure; a unique ethos, or set of shared beliefs and values; and unique jargons, rituals, and modes of symbolic expression" (ibid). Similar to punks (Fox, 1987), Harley consumers engage in "stereotypical" consumption behaviours in ways that render them "virtually indistinguishable" to outsiders (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995, p. 48), despite notable internal differentiation (Martin et al., 2006). Within the subculture, new members build up their subcultural capital, and as such gain legitimacy towards others through experimentation, identification, and internalisation of subcultural codes, norms, and behaviours (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). While this subcultural capital allows for the emergence of formal or informal status hierarchies based on taste or expertise within the subculture, it also allows to distinguish members of a particular subculture from outsiders: Insiders become distinguishable from outsiders based on their different beliefs, values, tastes, and (consumption) practices (ibid.).

Such differences lead to the emergence and maintenance of symbolic boundaries, „the lines that include and define some people, groups and things, while excluding others" (Epstein, 1992, p. 232). Boundary work is essential for the construction of social identities (Reicher, 2004; Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), the process through which collectivities define who they are in contrast to a generalised other (Mead, 1934). Put differently, symbolic boundaries delineate insiders from outsiders; they establish the distinction between *us* and *them* (Hunt & Benford, 2004; Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Lamont et al., 2016; Taylor & Whittier, 1992).

Contrary to social groups which share an "interdependence of fate" (Lewin, 1948, p. 165) and form around inevitable religious, racial, sexual, or other more enduring social markers, however, Harley bikers tend to actively search for, and

consume, the social stigma attached to the "outlaw stereotype" (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995, p. 53). These stereotypes serve Harley bikers as an essential resource for constructing their rebellious, oppositional, or —in fact—countercultural identities that, in turn, provide them a "liberation from confinement" (p. 52) as perceived in their daily lives as privileged, middle-class, North-American consumers. These consumers do therefore not seek to *avoid*, *cope with*, or *resist* a particular stigma derived from their consumption choices. To the contrary, it is precisely because of the unruly identity propositions these widespread negative social sentiments against bikers allow for, that these consumers engage in such subcultural consumer behaviour, as it affords them to defy and liberate themselves from the normative frameworks of mainstream society.

Like Harley bikers, also Star Trek enthusiasts face social stigma in the form of "Trekkie stereotypes [that] associate Star Trek consumption with fanaticism, immaturity, passivity, escapism, addiction, obsessive consumption, and the inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality" (Kozinets, 2001, p. 73). Moreover, however, Star Trek's idealistic vision of a future in which humanity has overcome poverty, racism, nationalism, ethnic tensions, or gender inequalities, among others, seems to particularly "attract [...] those [already] in stigmatized social categories" (p. 72), and enables such consumers to consume a "utopian refuge for the alienated and disenfranchised" (p. 71). While both, Harley bikers and Star Trek fans, "self-select on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular [...] consumption activity" (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995, p. 43), Star Trek's subculture of consumption offers a social sanctuary space for collective coping and "feelings of *communitas*" (Kozinets, 2001, p. 73, emphasis in original) to those already marginalised for reasons other than their Star Trek fandom. In this regard, Star Trek's subculture of consumption and the consumption subculture within Toronto's "gay ghetto" (Kates, 2002, p. 385) may

equally provide its members a "safe social space" to "walk, talk, behave, and consume in as open a way as they wished" (p. 386) while avoiding a dominant stigma against them from broader outside society.

Different from Star Trek consumers who remain within the protective boundaries of their utopian subcultural space (Kozinets, 2001), or Kates' (2002, p. 385) gay consumers who spent most of their lives "in or near the geographic confines of the gay ghetto", Scaraboto and Fischer's (2013, p. 1234) plus-sized fashion enthusiasts, who call themselves *"fatshionistas"*, actively engage in a fight for legitimacy and inclusion into mainstream fashion markets. They do so, for instance, by appealing to institutional logics of art and commerce, and by forging alliances with more powerful institutional actors such as Vogue Italia (p. 1246) or celebrity singer Beth Ditto (p. 1244). While collective consumption is arguably constitutive of the political fatshionista identity (e.g., through fashion consumption, -blogging, -design), the social stigma Scaraboto and Fischer's informants experience is not exclusive to the Fatshionista subjectivity *per se*. Rather, the emergence of the political *fatshionista* as an identity category is a collective response to a "widespread stigmatization of fat bodies" (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013, p. 1238) in a society, which regards them as "pitiful, pathological, unfortunate, childlike, self-deluding, ugly, disgusting, and/or ignorant" (p. 1246).

Although Star Trek fans, or role- and cosplayers alike, might seek to escape their stigmatisation in a different social domain by trading it against a stigma derived from their consumption choices (Belk & Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2001; Seregina & Weijo, 2017), and although Harley bikers actively indulge in, and consume the deviance and stigma derived from the biker subjectivity (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), it is their shared consumption practices and consumption meanings, in what Kozinets calls (2001, p. 68) "American leisure activities", that constitute such consumer collectivities as

deviant, and stereotyped subcultures of consumption.

In contrast, consumers facing stigma and marginalisation due to enduring and often inescapable markers such as, for instance, race, ethnicity, age, religion, disability, gender identity, or sexual orientation, share an "organic life [as] a minority group" (Lewin, 1948, p. 165) beyond the realm of consumption, which is grounded in their "interdependence of fate" (p. 184) as a social group. For fatshionistas (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), then, the situation is more complicated: On one side, the subject position of the fatshionista is constituted by consumption activities such as fashion consumption, fashion blogging, or activism, and these activities may attract social stigma by themselves already. On the other side, however, the socially selected marker of difference that is instrumental to the stigmatisation of fatshionistas, but likely also for hundreds of millions of other consumers around the world, is body-size and body-shape, and only partly due to the fatshionista's choices as a consumer (if at all). Therefore, while not necessarily as inescapable as race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, for example, I would advocate to consider body-size and bodily features as one of the more enduring, and more difficult to change features in the human beings we sometimes too easily tend to call consumers.

For sexual minorities, the historically stigmatised social group of present interest, the situation seems even more problematic: As I have shown above, a considerable number of scholars after Peñaloza (1996) have adopted an analytic approach to the consumer behaviour of sexual minorities that was implicitly or explicitly informed by subcultural theorisations (Coffin et al., 2019; Kates, 2002; Rinallo, 2007; Visconti, 2008). Rightfully at the time, these authors assumed a dominant and pervasive stigma, discrimination, and marginalisation against sexual minorities within broader society. The subcultural approach has therefore enabled these authors to theorise subcultural processes among non-heterosexual consumers including

phenomena such as a shared ethos and identity among its members (Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996); symbolic boundary construction, maintenance, and deconstruction through consumption (Kates, 2002; Keating & McLoughlin, 2005; Rinallo, 2007; Visconti, 2008); subcultural capital and taste hierarchies within a (gay) subculture (Kates, 2002, 2004; Peñaloza, 1996; Rinallo, 2007; Visconti, 2008); commitment to similar consumption practices including fashion styles, bodily aesthetics, cultural products, and modes of symbolic expression (Halperin, 2012; Kates, 2002; Kates & Belk, 2001; Peñaloza, 1996); and collective coping with and resistance against minority stress and a dominated social positionality derived from dominant stigma (Hatzenbuehler, 2014; Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, Keyes, & Hasin, 2010; Hatzenbuehler, Phelan, & Link, 2013; Kates, 2002; Kates & Belk, 2001; Visconti, 2008).

There are, however, three major issues with the subcultural approach to studying non-heterosexual consumers as consumption subcultures: First, for the non-heterosexual consumers featured in these studies, their social stigma may partly be derived from their consumption preferences, that is, for example, their preferences regarding styles, tastes, appearances: the way they walk, talk, dress, and the like. However, and similar to plus-sized consumers which do or do not identify as fatshionistas, it appears most plausible that the stigma attracted by their consumption preferences is secondary in nature, or, put differently, acts as a proxy for the stigma that is derived from their inescapable marker of difference: who they *are*, whom they *love*, how they have *sex*. This poses the question whether a subcultural framing *is* or *ever was* an appropriate theoretic framework to study the consumer behaviour of sexual minorities beyond a narrowly confined geographic (or virtual) setting (Kates, 2002)?

Second, if consumption choice is not the most promising variable to explain the stigmatisation of non-heterosexual consumers, it appears furthermore crucial to note

that sexual minorities cannot opt-in or opt-out of their claimed and ascribed social group. To stay with the example of gay men for the sake of simplicity: most of today's (Western, middle-class) gay men have a choice as of where to live, how to dress, what music and cultural products to consume, and what bodily aesthetics to appreciate. Arguably, however, they have much less agency over changing their sexual orientation. Sexual minorities share this feature alongside other historically stigmatised social groups, which face social stigma grounded in an enduring marker of difference, such as immigrants (Jafari & Goulding, 2008; Luedicke, 2015; Peñaloza, 1994), ethnic and religious groups (Cui, 2001; Üstüner & Holt, 2007; Visconti et al., 2014), plus-sized consumers (Bettany & Kerrane, 2016; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), or racial groups (Bonsu, 2009; Crockett, 2017; Pittman, 2020), for example. The *stickiness* of the marker of difference that constitutes their social group therefore sets these consumers apart from, for example, Star Trek fans and Harley Bikers (Kozinets, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), but also from clubbers (Goulding et al., 2002; Thornton, 1995), Punks (Clark, 2003; Fox, 1987), or members of youth subcultures (Hall & Jefferson, 1973) who may "self-select on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity" (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995, p. 43).

As self-selection and the ability of opting-in and opting-out remains a foundational assumption for both, subcultures of consumption, and Birmingham-style subcultures, historically stigmatised social groups, such as sexual minorities, do not fit the subcultural definition. However, also other established frameworks to analyse collective consumption phenomena do not seem appropriate (Canniford, 2011; Chalmers Thomas, Schau, & Price, 2011): neither are non-heterosexual consumers members of unstigmatised consumption- or brand communities (Chalmers Thomas et al., 2011; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001), nor are they members of transient and individualistic neo-tribes (Cova et al., 2007; Goulding et al., 2002; Maffesoli, 1996).

The search for an appropriate analytic framework to analyse the collective consumer behaviour of historically stigmatised social groups therefore remains an open one.

Third, in line with consumer researchers, sociologists see the widespread stigmatisation from broader society as a constitutive feature of subcultures as deviant, and rebellious, but also as sub-ordinated, sub-versive, sub-terranean, and generally of lower social status (Thornton, 1997). Notwithstanding my above critique about the general suitability of the subcultural concept for the study of sexual minorities, consumer researchers adopting a subcultural perspective have assumed a dominant, ubiquitous social stigma against members of sexual minorities as „highly stigmatized and politicized“ (Holt, 1997, p. 341); “substantially more stigmatized in [their] history of oppression and marginalization by various institutions in society” (Kates, 2002, p. 383) than, for example, subcultures of Harley Davidson bikers, or Star Trek fans. Also research on historically stigmatised consumer groups such as black middle-class consumers in the United States, who certainly do not fit the subcultural definition, have noted the dominant, widespread, and “systemic” (Crockett, 2017, p. 555) quality of the stigma faced by such consumers.

What we can conclude from these observations is that, *while all subcultures are stigmatised, not all stigmatised social groups are subcultures*. Moreover, if, for the above reasons, non-heterosexual consumers are then defined by the dominant and pervasive stigma towards their social group as a sexual minority, how does a popularisation or destigmatisation of their characteristic modes of being and consuming affect these consumers and their consumption (Campana, Duffy, & Micheli, 2020; Canavan, 2021; Rinallo, 2007; Visconti, 2008)? How would social progress towards stigma amelioration, legal equality, and symbolic inclusion of non-heterosexual identities into popular culture affect those identities defined by their stigma, exclusion, and otherness (Kates, 2002; Wiegman & Wilson, 2015)? How can and do regimes of

social stigma change, and how might this affect those stigmatised? I will seek to address these questions in the chapters further below.

In sum, from the review of relevant literature on the sociological origins of subculture research, and after reviewing inquiries into consumption subcultures, it becomes clear that the subcultural approach no longer appears appropriate to study the lived consumer experiences of contemporary gay consumers in Germany. Neither is it primarily their consumption choices for which non-heterosexual consumers are faced with social stigma, nor are non-heterosexual consumers able to opt-in or opt-out of their stigmatising marker, as subcultural consumers and members of historically studied (sociological) subcultures would be. Even the assumption of a dominant and uniform stigma against sexual minorities across social contexts and societal domains appears more and more unlikely, given the social progress being made in many Western societies over the past three decades. A promising path, however, towards overcoming the analytic constraints of a subcultural perspective on sexual minorities seems to be a direct focus on their *stigma*. The concept of stigma itself, and processes of stigmatisation and stigma management therefore deserve to be unpacked more carefully, so that we may eventually arrive at a richer, and more nuanced understanding of historically stigmatised social groups' consumption beyond contexts of universal and dominant stigma. In the next section I will aspire to do just this.

2.3 - Stigma and Consumer Research

In the sections above, I have first reviewed the available research on sexual minorities in marketing and consumer research. This review revealed that, to date, the dominant theoretic approach informing research into the consumer behaviour of non-heterosexual consumers has been the subcultural approach. I have therefore

subsequently reviewed relevant literature on the origins, assumptions, application, and limitations of the subcultural approach, and evaluated its suitability to answer my research question at hands. While my review revealed several major issues regarding the theoretic fit between subculture theorisations and the consumer behaviour of gay consumers in contemporary Germany, a review of the literature also revealed the apparent centrality of the concept of *stigma* for the success of my research endeavour. The following section is therefore dedicated to a review of stigma theorisations and their application and refinement within marketing and consumer research. As above, I will first elaborate on the core concept of stigma and its theorisations form its historical origins, and then discuss their adoption in, and relevance for academics in marketing and consumer research.

2.3.1 - Stigma as Concept, Process, and Outcome

Without much doubt, Erving Goffman (1963) remains the foundational stigma theoretician across social scientific disciplines. Although Goffman's seminal writings on the management of a spoiled identity are as relevant and influential as ever, social scientists have made significant progress with regard to developing refined understandings of the concept of stigma itself, processes of stigmatisation, and the strategies adopted by stigmatised social groups and individuals to manage their lives with a social burden (Link & Phelan, 2001; Major & O'Brien, 2005; Pescosolido & Martin, 2015).

In their impactful review of sociological stigma studies since Goffman in the Annual Review of Sociology, Link and Phelan (2001, p. 277) define stigma as the outcome of co-occurring processes of "labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination", that come together "in a power situation that allows them". As per the authors' definition, labelling requires the creation and naming of a social category,

for example the category of gay men, bound together by an identifiable and socially selected marker of difference (e.g., their sexual orientation) (Link & Phelan, 2001). Stereotyping, in turn, describes the construction, maintenance, and enactment of (mostly derogatory, devaluing) narrations and ascriptions about the labelled social group or individual (e.g., stereotyping gay men as sinners, morally flawed, perverts, weak, unmanly, abnormal, among others) (ibid.).

The negative beliefs, values, and attitudes underlying these stereotypes then serve to (socially and/or physically) separate the labelled and stereotyped group as *Others*, and as distinctively different from mainstream society (e.g., into separate neighbourhoods or parallel commercial infrastructure, considering same-sex love and relationships as fundamentally different from heterosexual ones, etc.) (ibid.). Stigmatised individuals or social groups are, however, not merely seen as different, but as of lower value, that is, further down the social hierarchy (e.g., gay men are not only different, but also socially less) (ibid.). Finally, the labelling, stereotyping, separation, and devaluation of these Others serves to legitimise discrimination, either implicitly (e.g., being treated less friendly than a heterosexual customer within a marketplace service encounter), or explicitly (e.g., being treated unequally in front of the law, for example not allowing gay men to marry; structural homophobia) (ibid.). Important to the authors' definition of stigma is that these powerful dominant groups (or societies at large) not only label and stereotype other groups as different based on socially selected markers such as class, gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, or bodily features, for instance, but as explicitly *socially less*.

For Link and Phelan (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 367), the ability to stigmatise therefore requires those who stigmatise to have "access to social, economic, and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labelled persons into distinct categories, and the full

execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination". Put differently, their categorisation, stereotyping, and what follows from them, must have consequences for the life of a less powerful social group. Being stigmatised therefore often significantly reduces the stigmatised's consumption prospects (Luedicke, 2015; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), career opportunities (Stuart, 2004), mental and physical health (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013; Parcesepe & Cabassa, 2013), and even life expectancies (Hatzenbuehler, 2014).

Two elements of Link and Phelan's (2001) conceptualisation of stigma are of particular relevance to my analysis of the consumption practices and life-worlds of contemporary gay men in Germany. These are, the "*dependence of stigma on power*" (p. 375) and "*stigma as a matter of degree*" (p. 377). The dependence of stigma on power allows me to distinguish stigmatised social groups from social groups that merely face negative stereotypes. Many social groups may be faced with negative stereotypes from time to time by parts, or even a majority of society: Investment bankers, for example, may be stereotyped as greedy, marketers as manipulative, and social scientists as nerdy and hopelessly out of touch with the actual social worlds around them.

Link and Phelan (2001) argue, however, that groups who stigmatise others must not only be powerful enough to shape the discourse on the stigmatised group in a way that the label they ascribe to Others "is broadly identified" within society, and that society "recognizes and deeply accepts the stereotypes they connect to the labelled differences" (p. 376). The dominant group must also be powerful enough to effectively "separate 'us' from 'them'" by controlling "access to major life domains like educational institutions, jobs, housing, and health care" (p. 376). In the above example it becomes therefore obvious that neither investment bankers, marketers, or social scientists count as a stigmatised social group as per Link and Phelan's (2001) definition, as these social groups are usually not displaced into a power-deprived social position by

powerful others.

In my research context, the dependence of stigma on power helps to delineate historically stigmatised consumer groups from belittled or disparaged subcultures and fan communities. As shown above, rich, (sub-)urban Harley Davidson riders in the United States, for example, do find themselves confronted with the subculture's notorious "outlaw stereotype" (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995, p. 53). However, they proactively seek out and consume these stereotypical ascriptions, styles, and practices from a privileged middle-class position, and willingly surround themselves with an *air of rebellion* for a limited amount of time while engaging in their self-selected consumption hobby (ibid). Star Trek fans, in turn, face derogatory stereotypes associated with "fanaticism, immaturity, [...] obsessive consumption, and the inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality" (Kozinets, 2001, p. 73). However, these "Trekkies" (ibid.) also embrace these stereotypes as either a by-product, or even as constitutive of their utopian subculture that —as per definition of being *utopian*— must be in conflict with contemporary social arrangements deemed as imperfect by those utopian escapists. Neither Harley bikers, nor Star Trek fans are therefore forced into an inescapable, subordinate social position by powerful Others, unlike, for example, sexual minorities (Kates, 2002), plus-sized consumers (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), or black middle-class consumers (Crockett, 2017).

Link and Phelan (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 377) further conceptualise stigma as "*a matter of degree"*. This aspect of their theorisation not only captures the empirical insight that "some groups are more stigmatized than others" (ibid.). It also highlights that some individuals within a stigmatised social group may suffer more or less than others depending on their "personal, social, and economic resources" (p. 380); an insight that lies at the core of intersectional approaches to stigma and social inequality (Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). Link and Phelan (2001, p. 381)

further acknowledge the possibility that "deeply held attitudes and beliefs" about a stigmatised social group may eventually change over time. However, they still conclude from their review that overall, stigma is a "very persistent predicament" (p. 363) in the lives of the people who are affected by it. The authors consider this general continuity, or stability of stigma, as grounded in the more enduring nature of societal *power-relations* that typically enable dominant groups to remain in control over "a flexible package of mutually reinforcing mechanisms" (p. 381), which allow them to stigmatise social groups to a significant degree in ever-changing ways (Crockett, 2017).

For instance, researchers conducting studies on the issue of racism within Western societies have more recently argued that anti-black stigma is now being reinterpreted by some members of society as an "individual-level animosity" (Bonilla-Silva & Ray, 2015, p. 59), rather than as a "structural and institutional" problem (Mondon & Winter, 2020, p. 1). This *reframing* allows members of broader society to "conveniently" ignore remaining and newly emerging forms of racism (ibid.), and to instead engage in a communicative strategy that seeks to blame the victim (Kram, 2018). This leads to the social outcome that anti-black stigma has not diminished overall, but rather simply changed its *form* and *quality*. It is this changing of properties, or, as I will call this further below, *configurations* of stigma, that remains un-theorised, but is of uttermost relevance also to my own research context:

Within my research context of non-heterosexual consumers, more recent sociological studies of gay men in North America suggest ongoing social change regarding the stigmatisation of their focal group of interest. These authors argue that homosexuality has been "significantly stripped of its stigma" in recent decades (Ghaziani, 2011, p. 107), allowing contemporary gay men to integrate into American mainstream society in previously unexpected and unprecedented ways (Ghaziani, 2011, 2014; Ng, 2013; Pew Research, 2020; Russell, Clarke, & Clary, 2009; Savin-Williams,

2005, 2016). Such findings suggest that, at least for some social groups, stigma is less persistent and more multifaceted than previously assumed (Kram, 2018).

While prior research on stigmatised social groups has indeed revealed how said social groups react and respond to being faced with stigmas that may vary in quantity and quality, these studies still find stigma to be the *dominant* social force in the lives of these consumers (Crockett, 2017; Kates, 2002; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). However, this research cannot explain how identities and consumption practices of historically stigmatised social groups change when historical power inequalities have flattened to some extent, and some, but not all of the derogatory stereotypes, and the discrimination that followed from them, have either been overcome, or at least in part become ameliorated. In order to investigate systematically how historically stigmatised social groups adapt the ways they consume in response to different conditions, or *configurations* of stigma and stigmatising processes, I will now introduce the concept of *stigma configurations*.

2.3.2 - Stigma Configurations and Corresponding Consumption Strategies

In the previous section, I have elaborated on the concept of stigma as outcome of stigmatising processes of labelling, stereotyping, separation, status-loss, and discrimination following the definition of Link and Phelan (2001) and building on seminal work by Erving Goffman (1963). Link and Phelan's (2001) conceptualisation of stigma being dependent on *power*, and *a matter of degree*, sparked further interest into the possibly changing stigma dynamics for social groups such as blacks in the United States (Bonilla-Silva & Ray, 2015; Mondon & Winter, 2020), or sexual minorities (Ghaziani, 2011; Ng, 2013; Pew Research, 2020; Savin-Williams, 2005). In the following, I will introduce the notion of *stigma configurations* as an analytic concept, that will enable me to distinguish between different ideal-typical conglomerations of

stigmatising processes and their outcomes.

I conceptualise *stigma configurations* as ideal-typical combinations of *social representations* (a notion that I will introduce in the next section) that shape the collective identities, consumption strategies, and life prospects of stigmatised social groups in characteristic ways. Stigma configurations differ with regard to how dominant groups within a society, or a society as a whole, represent a social group in domains such as legislation, markets, media, religion, professions, arts and cultural products, or education, for instance, and what stereotypical beliefs, images, associations, relationships, and moral judgments they perpetuate. I suggest that *stigma configurations* evolve over the long term, as "deeply held attitudes and beliefs of powerful groups" change (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 381), and may in tendency follow a path from *hegemony* (or total oppression), to tolerance, to unconditional recognition and respect. With this suggestion I do neither want to imply, however, that social progress towards the destigmatisation of a social group is uniform or linear, nor do I assume that this process might benefit all members of a social group equally fast or equally strong (Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). Instead, as I will show, the identification of ideal-typical *configurations* of stigmatising processes and outcomes helps to classify existing research on stigmatised consumers, and to better theorise new social phenomena that pose challenges to existing theoretical understandings of stigma and categorisations of stigma management techniques.

Without explicitly naming them as such, research in a consumer culture theory tradition to date has engaged with *two* predominant stigma configurations, and *four* corresponding consumption strategies, through which stigmatised social groups respond to, and manage their life with a social burden through consumption. In the following, I will elaborate on these two stigma configurations, and four consumption strategies discovered by prior studies.

2.3.2.1 - Hegemonic Stigma and Invisible Consumption

The first stigma configuration I find implied by previous research is best described as *hegemonic stigma*. Under a hegemonic stigma configuration, a society not only marginalises or discriminates against a social group, but denies that social group the mere right to exist and to participate in social life in any meaningful way. In naming this stigma configuration, I borrow from Gramsci's notion of *cultural hegemony* as absolute oppression or domination of a social group through control of economic, social, legal, and cultural means. This involves that those in power ideologically influence the beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviours, expectations, and worldviews of most members of a society (Bates, 1975; Cox, 1983; Mouffe, 2014).

Consequently, under hegemonic stigma, members of the stigmatised social group are called by derogatory labels, and are stereotyped as degenerated, perverted, immoral, illegitimate, or even as non-human. These stereotypes legitimate the separation and discrimination of members of the social group as dangerous to a society's moral integrity and structural order. The stigmatised are systematically ostracised, and often persecuted not only to a point of "symbolic domination" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 50), but to even physical punishment, incarceration, or total annihilation. Under hegemonic stigma, no overtly visible forms of collective sociality or solidarity can emerge between members of the social group.

Hegemonic stigma is commonly featured in studies on slavery, state-sponsored homophobia, or even genocide, for example (Bauman, 2001; Berlin, 1998; ILGA, 2019). Consumer research has mostly not directly addressed the role of *consumption* under hegemonic stigma. Notable exceptions are the studies by Hirschman and Hill (1996; 2000) on inmates of the Nazi's *Buchenwald Concentration Camp*. In these two studies, the authors discuss the "forced absence of meaningful consumer behaviour

choices" (Hirschman & Hill, 2000, p. 477) under conditions of "human commoditization" (p. 469), and outline "consumer survival strategies" (Hill & Hirschman, 1996, p. 859) such as "diversions" (p. 863) that were "developed and operated by the inmates themselves", for example in the form of "concerts and variety shows" performed within the camp (ibid.). Hirschman and Hill arguably describe extreme contexts of hegemonic stigma, in which members of stigmatised (and persecuted) social groups were being forced into a state of "existing as a commodity" (Hirschman & Hill, 2000, p. 473), so all inmates could hope for was some "diversion" to "cope with their lives" (Hill & Hirschman, 1996, p. 863).

Other studies on hegemonic stigma that did not explicitly foreground consumption can nonetheless offers insightful clues about how this configuration may have shaped the consumption strategies of the stigmatised: For example, research into the systematic criminalisation and persecution of gay men in Germany during the Third Reich suggests that, in order to avoid a similar fate as the inmates studied by Hirschman and Hill (1996; 2000), any form of gay consumption under these conditions was strictly inconspicuous, utilitarian, and focused on survival, rather than on community building or identity expression (Pretzel & Weiß, 2010; von Wahl, 2011; Zinn, 2017). While, after the end of World War II, gay consumers were no longer killed in concentration camps, they reminded outright criminalised in West Germany up and until the late 1960s, with many of those discovered serving prison sentences (Pretzel & Weiß, 2010, 2012; von Wahl, 2011).

Consumer research points to similar *invisible* consumption strategies in its historical reviews. In the United States, for instance, hegemonic stigma shaped the lifeworlds of black consumers during slavery and Civil War, but also well until the mid-20th century, relegating "blacks to the bottom of the evolutionary and social scale" (Crockett, 2017, p. 557), and depriving them of access to "full social and cultural

citizenship" (p. 558). Moreover, Luedicke (2015) shows how indigenous consumers in Austria used to stigmatise Turkish migrant workers during the 1960s and 1970s in ways that resemble those of stigma hegemony: By treating them like slaves who were "supposed to work and be well-behaved" and did not even "exist as consumers" (p. 116), the powerful indigenous group de-facto took away the *common humanity* of these immigrants, and stigmatised them in an absolute, hegemonic way.

In sum, while luckily the times of hegemonic stigma configurations have long been overcome for historically stigmatised social groups across Western societies, *hegemonic stigma*, and *invisible consumption* remain important theoretic concepts, not only when considering those non-heterosexual consumers who live in one of the 69 countries that still criminalise homosexuality today (ILGA, 2019). The following section looks at the stigma configuration most widely studied within consumer research on historically stigmatised social groups. I call this stigma configuration *dominant stigma*.

2.3.2.2 - Dominant Stigma and Consumption as Avoidance, Coping, and Resistance

The second configuration of stigma is the one most readily captured and theorised by prior research on historically stigmatised social groups, and I refer to this stigma configuration by the term of *dominant stigma*. Under dominant stigma configurations, a society (and its powerful sub-groups) recognise a historically stigmatised social group as bearers of some (but not all) legal and symbolic rights. As such, society grants members of the social group limited access to markets and other institutions such as education or media representation. At the same time, however, society continues to negatively label and stereotype members of the group across social spheres, exercising its power to separate, discriminate, and deny them equal status and participation rights (Link & Phelan, 2001). As a result, a dominated social group can

legally exist as a distinct social entity, openly express its subcultural identity and tastes (Kates, 2002), and aspire to "challenge domination" (Crockett, 2017, p. 562), but is still merely *tolerated*, and certainly not *respected* within the broader society.

Stereotypes about a dominated social group may sometimes entail *benevolent* prejudices (Massey, 2010), as is the case in so-called *benevolent sexism* (Glick & Fiske, 1996). These stereotypes, however, nonetheless serve the purpose of turning the stigmatised individual into a "discounted one" (Goffman, 1963, p. 3), and hence, of keeping the stigmatised *in their place.* Gay men, for example, are sometimes deemed to "have a better reputation for creativity and innovation" (Visconti, 2008, p. 132), or might even be seen as "leading" in domains such as "fashion, design, arts or social behaviors" (p. 122). The flip-side of these stereotypes, however, regularly describes gay men as not equally well suited to be professional football players, kindergarten teachers, or top-managers, for example. As such, even *benevolent* stereotypes perpetuate those pervasive negative stereotypes that define the stigmatised individual in all-encompassing terms (Goffman, 1963). Therefore, when living under dominant stigma, members of a historically stigmatised social group will always have to "expect to be stigmatized" (Crockett, 2017, p. 566).

Among consumer research studies on historically stigmatised social groups, dominant stigma is the most commonly featured stigma configuration. Studies have shown with great consistency how also those historically stigmatised consumer groups that are legally recognised as (almost) equal are still ascribed pejorative labels (Adkins & Ozanne, 2005), stereotyped as inferior (Bonsu, 2009; Peñaloza, 1994), forced into segregation (Crockett, 2017; Kates, 2002), and excluded from access to consumption opportunities markers of social status (Jafari & Goulding, 2008; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Under conditions of dominant stigma, the stigmatised use consumption strategically to *avoid*, *cope with*, and *resist* a dominant stigma (Luedicke, 2015;

Sandıkcı & Ger, 2010; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Üstüner & Holt, 2007).

Consumption as *avoidance* and *coping* appears to occur mostly in contexts where the threat of emotional or even physical harm is high for stigmatised consumers, and where power imbalances are formalised and substantial. For instance, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon, Muslim women in the United Kingdom sought to strategically *avoid* discrimination by not wearing their traditional Islamic veils in public (Jafari & Goulding, 2008). Contemporary black middle-class consumers in the United States, in turn, similarly seek to *avoid* discrimination by strategically distancing themselves from stigmatised black (consumer) "identities, objects, tactics and alike" (Crockett, 2017, p. 561).

Much like Crockett's (2017) black middle-class Americans who seclude to black neighbourhoods, either voluntarily or by economic pressures, also Kates' (Kates, 2002, p. 389) Canadian gay consumers in the 1990s *coped with* their dominant stigma collectively by escaping from "the straight world" into the "gay ghetto" (p. 386) where they could find other "like-minded gay men" (p. 390). Within this segregated geographical and social space, gay consumers "felt safe and secure to walk, talk, behave, and consume in as open a way as they wished" (p. 386), were confident to express and negotiate gay, subcultural tastes and identities (see above), and collectively carried the burden of belonging to a "politicised and stigmatised community" (p. 398). It was in these places, and before the advent of the Internet, that many felt for the first time they had found a *family of choice* where they truly belonged (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001). This collective response to dominant stigma facilitated the emergence of "queer solidarity" (Ng, 2013, p. 278) and fostered an internal cohesion within an otherwise diverse collective of LGBTQ+ consumers (Coffin et al., 2019; Peñaloza, 1996).

Finally, consumption as *resistance* tends to occur in contexts where substantial

power imbalances persist, but still allow some space for collective solidarity and political agency by a dominated social group (Peñaloza, 1994; Sandıkcı & Ger, 2010; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Non-heterosexual consumers, for example, collectively *resist* their marginalisation and domination at political consumption spectacles such as LGBTQ+ pride parades and street festivals (Kates & Belk, 2001). Through their celebratory public consumption, these consumers at least temporarily manage to reverse their minority status within society, and publicly claim "space and power beyond the confines of the gay ghetto" (p. 420). Also plus-sized fashion enthusiasts openly *resist* "the widespread stigmatisation of fat bodies" (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013, p. 1238), although possibly in a less spectacular way. These fatshionistas engage in online transnational community-building to mobilise like-minded others—colloquially referred to as the "Fatosphere" (p. 1239)—to leverage their public visibility, form strategic partnerships powerful market actors and institutional players, and so seek to jointly fight against the industry's market exclusion and dominant stigmatisation of plus-sized bodies (Saren, Parsons, & Goulding, 2019).

Unfortunately, however, it seems that even the arguably well-coordinated political attempts of collective resistance by said fatshionistas have so far not been successful in replacing the configurations of dominant and pervasive stigma against plus-sized bodies in many Western societies. What happens to the collective identities and consumption strategies of historically stigmatised social groups, when their unambiguous and dominant stigmatisation can no longer be taken for granted remains therefore my open research question. In the following, I will seek to find answers to this question beyond the stigma configurations of *hegemonic* and *dominant* stigma.

2.3.2.3 - Beyond Dominant Stigma.

Once societies have begun to embrace the idea of human diversity and equality,

historically stigmatised consumers, such as gay men in Germany, do no longer necessarily or uniformly experience their stigma as persistent, all-encompassing, or dominant. Instead, in such *post-dominant* social contexts, some consumers may still find themselves to be severely disadvantaged and struggling for "the same life chances" (Gregor, 66, expert interview), whereas others may already represent themselves as "totally normal" (Adam, 32, consumer interview). Research on non-heterosexual populations outside the field of marketing and consumer research has similarly argued that non-heterosexual identities have, on average, undergone processes of vast destigmatisation and normalisation over the past three decades across Western societies (Ghaziani, 2011; Monaghan, 2021; Pew Research, 2020). On the other hand, however, anti-gay hate crimes in my research country Germany remain on the rise (Queer.de, 2020a), and new right-wing organisations seeking to undo legal and social progress towards sexual minorities have gained societal traction across Europe (Datta, 2018; Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2016a). *Post-dominant* configurations of stigma do therefore not imply the uniform *amelioration*, or even *eradication* of stigma for historically stigmatised social groups across socio-cultural consumption contexts.

Being able to capture the multiple, and likely contradictory and conflicting identities and consumption strategies of consumers under post-dominant stigma empirically requires three shifts in analytical perspective from previous research: First, prior research within a subcultural or stigma-focused tradition has been taking the existence of a dominant stigma as an external given (Crockett, 2017; Kates, 2002; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Different from these studies, I must incorporate the multiple competing stereotypes, associations, and normative conversations about gay men in German society into my empirical analysis (i.e., what *they* think about *us*). Second, rather than taking a subcultural positionality and identity of gay men in Germany for granted, my empirical analysis must be able to capture the multiple ways

in which gay men represent themselves as members of a historically stigmatised social group when some of the external pressures they used to face have subsided (i.e., *we* about *us*) (Duggan, 2002; Gamson, 1995; Wiegman & Wilson, 2015). Finally, my analysis has to remain open to a wide range of consumption strategies and micro-political purposes, well beyond the established strategies of consumption as *avoidance*, *coping*, and *resistance*. To facilitate these necessary shifts in my empirical perspective, I turned to Social Representations Theory as an analytic lens that is ideally suited to tackle the issues at hand. In the next chapter I will introduce the reader to this theoretical framework and its key analytic tenants.

2.4 - Social Representations Theory

As human beings all we have is mediated access to what we call our material and social realities: How we represent the worlds around us is shaped by the merits and limitations of our sensory apparatus; our systems of knowledge and meaning are necessarily cultural products. To paraphrase Gregory Bateson: we not only discover, but actively *make* those *differences that make a difference* (Bateson, 1972). Language itself, and the concepts and categories we use to make sense of the world are relational, dynamic, historically contingent, intersubjective, and shaped by biological as well as cultural co-evolutionary forces (Fiske & Taylor, 2008; Franks, 2011; Keil, 1989; Tomasello, 1999; Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). We *re-present* the world, establish concepts and categories, and collectively give meaning to these in social interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Blumer, 1969; Gergen, 1973; Goodman, 1978; Mead, 1934; Miller, 1984; Smith & Medin, 1981; Sperber & Hirschfeld, 2004).

The above insights may seem trivial for the social scientist familiar with a social constructionist epistemology. I would argue, however, that, especially for career-

researchers in the late-modern neoliberal academic enterprise (Fleming, 2021; Haidt & Lukianoff, 2019), pausing, stepping back from our own pet theories and favourite analytic frameworks, and reflecting on the philosophical foundations on which we seek to discover, understand, and create knowledge has increasingly become a luxury. In the following, I want to invite the reader to take with me this step back, as I introduce Social Representations Theory, a meta-theoretical framework at the intersection of sociology, social psychology, anthropology, and epistemology.

In the next section, I will therefore first offer a brief summary of Social Representations Theory and its historical roots in the works of sociologist Emile Durkheim, anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and psychologists such as Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget. I will then discuss five main characteristics of social representations as being *organised*; *shared across minds*; *collectively produced and reproduced*; *political*; and *useful*, before discussing the mechanisms of *anchoring* and *objectification* in further detail. In the subsequent section I will discuss links between Social Representations Theory and theories of identity. The final subchapter will consolidate the main tenets of Social Representations Theory, discuss its potential for consumer researchers, and show why Social Representations Theory is ideally suited to study and uncover the consumption strategies of historically stigmatised social groups under conditions of post-dominant stigma.

2.4.1 - A Brief Introduction to Social Representations Theory

Social Representations Theory (SRT) is a meta-theoretical framework, derived from research in social psychology, sociology, and anthropology, that seeks to explain how people collectively create meaning through social interaction, and how systems of meaning operate and change within communities and whole societies (e.g., Jovchelovitch, 2007; Moscovici, 1961/2007, 1984; Wagner & Hayes, 2005). The theory

assumes that social reality is constituted by continuous, repeated, and collective communicative processes of "re-presenting" (Howarth, 2006, p. 79) the world and its others in symbols, language, objects, categories, and practices, and the meanings and normative evaluations ascribed to them (Rateau et al., 2012).

Social Representations Theory was originally conceived by French social psychologist Serge Moscovici sixty years ago, as he was interested in understanding how new scientific insights, that is, ideas only held by a small group of experts, diffuse into the general public and become part of common sense and everyday discourse also among lay people. In his seminal study "Psychoanalysis: Its Image and Its Public", Moscovici (1961/2007) sought to discover how urban-liberal, Catholic-conservative, and communist milieus in Paris of the 1950s made sense of, and developed distinctively different understandings of a new and formerly unknown scientific phenomenon: Freud's theories on Psychoanalysis.

Moscovici believed that social phenomena should *neither* be studied exclusively on the individual, cognitive level (as in classic psychology), *nor* on the level of social categories, structures, and institutions (as in classic sociology), but that social phenomena needed to be understood as dynamic socio-cognitive processes embedded in their historical, cultural and macrosocial contexts (Wagner et al., 1999). Informed by Durkheim's (1898) structuralist perspective on *collective representations* as *social facts* for a given society, Lévy-Bruhl's (1923) accounts of multiplicity and diversity of representations among indigenous cultures, and Piaget's (1952) and Vygotsky's (1965; 1978; 1993) early constructivist writings on the role of mediation, assimilation and accommodation in developmental psychology and childhood learning, Moscovici studied how these three social milieus developed different strategies to make sense of *psychoanalysis* as a new, strange, and unfamiliar knowledge object. They did so, Moscovici found, by *relating* and *fitting in* the new and unfamiliar epistemic object with

their social group's existing and established sets of beliefs, values, and attitudes. Moreover, they created *figurative placeholders,* such as the *slip* or the therapist's *couch,* that helped to diffuse and popularise psychoanalytic concepts, as they made these complex theories accessible to laypersons, and thus enabled them to engage in meaningful everyday discourse, thereby creating popularised versions of Freud's theorisations (Moscovici, 1961/2007).

Based on his findings, Moscovici (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii) defines *social representations* as relational „systems of values, ideas and practices", shared across a social group or community, that enable them „to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it", and that equip them with codes for social exchange, the marking and evaluation of categories, and the development of shared identities based on their common group history. Put differently, social representations entail the common values, practices, beliefs, and knowledges, that enable social groups — a family, a football club, a religious community, a nation state — (i) to collectively make sense of the world, themselves and others, (ii) to act in the world, re-enact and navigate it, and (iii) to act on the world, and exert agency (Howarth, 2006). As such, Social Representations Theory allows to differentiate between, and study representations held on the level of the individual (micro level), representations held among a community or members of a social group (meso level), and representations on an institutional or societal level (macro level).

In sum, Social Representations are defined as commonly held beliefs, values, and practices which are shared among a group of individuals or whole societies, and which enable people to give meaning to their life worlds and enter into communicative exchange (Moscovici, 1973). Social Representations Theory is therefore a meta-theoretical framework concerned with how systems of knowledge, beliefs, values, and practices form, operate, and evolve on the levels of the socially embedded individual,

social groups, and whole societies (Moscovici, 1961/2007, 1984). In the following section I will now elaborate on five main characteristics of social representations.

2.4.2 - Five Main Characteristics of Social Representations

In extension of work by Rateau and colleagues (2012), I outline five main characteristics of social representations: First, social representations are organised. They have structure as well as content, and interact with each other. Social representations are relational, multiple, consensual, or contradictory (Duveen, 2001; Jovchelovitch, 2007; Wagner, Duveen, Verma, & Themel, 2000). For instance, social representations of *poverty*, and understandings of its underlying origins and potential paths for remedy may substantially differ between conservatives, market-libertarians, and left-liberal voters. Likewise, social representations of a "black middle class" in the United States (Crockett, 2017, p. 554), for example, and understandings of their historical origins and normative connotations, may not only differ substantially between black middle class consumers, white left-liberals, and white supremacists, but the different social representations of "black middle class" held by these groups may even be contradictory and incommensurable, making exchange between social groups about the same knowledge object potentially difficult and prone to eliciting conflict.

Second, social representations are shared *across* minds rather than being individual cognitive phenomena. As shared values, beliefs and practices they encompass the interpersonal, intergroup, and societal levels of analysis (Doise, 1986; Doise et al., 1993; Lopes & Gaskell, 2015; Wagner & Hayes, 2005). Social representations theory, however, does not assume that representations are congruent between individual members of a social group or community. Instead, the theory suggests that members of the same community are more likely to share *similar* representations that give meaning to their life worlds, than when being compared to representations held by outsiders

(Moscovici, 1961/2007, 1984).

For instance, the shared ethos, modes of symbolic expression, and consumption practices that Schouten and McAlexander (1995) find among Harley Davidson bikers can be explained by the differences in social representations collectively held by their biker informants vis-a-vis outside members of society. Likewise, social representations of "blackness" and pervasive "anti-black stigma" (Crockett, 2017, p. 556), that may be shared among black Americans but not necessarily among all Americans, are foundational for black consumers to perpetuate a sense of stigmatised collective identity, and to manage stigma through consumption.

Social representations establish social distinctions: they demarcate subgroups within society and render such distinctions meaningful for insiders and outsiders. As such, they are the building blocks of collective identities (Breakwell, 1993, 2014; Lloyd & Duveen, 1992) (see below), as well as symbolic boundaries (see above).

Within a social representations tradition of scholarship, Breakwell (1993), for instance, expands on the point that social representations have their manifestations on the level of the individual mind, the social group, and on a societal level. The representations of ‚basic human rights', for example, are likely to show various degrees of variation across individual minds within the same social group, in-between social groups, or among or across societies and cultures. Without at least some degree of overlap in the content and structure of such representations *across* individual minds, however, no meaningful exchange about the knowledge object could emerge (Moscovici & Marková, 2000). Put differently, within a social representations framework, the individual mind cannot be thought as anything other but relational and therefore social: The concept of the mind as being *individual*, adopting a social representations framework, therefore only makes sense in so-far, as that the individual mind's dependence on shared representations remains honoured.

Third, social representations are collectively produced and reproduced through communication and discourse. They are both, process *and* outcome of communicative action in a public sphere, in which a diversity of ideas, opinions, beliefs, and perspectives on an epistemic object are expressed and exchanged in (inter-)personal or (mass-)mediated communication. Re-presentation, as a collective effort within "thinking societies" (Moscovici, 2001, p. 12), however, does not only occur in an Habermasian ideal public discourse that is organised, participatory, egalitarian, and grounded in a free exchange of rational arguments (Habermas, 1989, 1991). It also occurs in semi-public and private spaces, such as in cafés, corporations, political parties, churches, therapy groups, at family dinner tables, or on social media, among others. Grassroots "collective action and respectability politics" during the black civil rights movement, for example, facilitated the emergence of "the new black middle class" as an influential, new social representation within American culture (Crockett, 2017, p. 560; Landry, 1987), which continues to be *enacted*, *rejected* and *reformed* (see below) through consumption (Crockett, 2017).

However, not only do individual minds depend on shared social representations, also shared social representations depend on individual minds (Franks, 2011), as they are dynamically brought into being through discursive, communicative action, and allow for agency and the critical potential of the individual actor (Giddens, 1984; Howarth, 2006). Social representations are thus both, the process and the result of *re-presenting* the world in concepts, categories, artefacts, or practices through communication and discourse (Moscovici, 1988). As such, social representations are a link between cognition and culture, between the individual and their embeddedness in micro-social relations, and macrosocial structures. Social Representations Theory therefore offers consumer researchers a new theoretical lens to investigate the relationship between structure and agency (Giddens, 1979, 1984), as well as between

consumption contexts, and their macrosocial embedding (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011).

Fourth, the process of *re-presentation* is "deeply political" (Howarth, 2011, p. 160). Social representations shared across a social group define what they consider as *normal*, and delineate it from the *abnormal*. Social representations thus define who belongs and who is excluded (Hall, 1997). As a consequence, knowledge is never purely descriptive, but also always entails a normative dimension (Jodelet, 1991; Visconti, 2016). Not all social groups are equally resourceful and successful in making their voices heard (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001), and their relative success and failure to do so creates and reifies hierarchies of knowledge that render certain representations as "superior form[s] of knowing that can displace all others" (Howarth, 2011; Jovchelovitch, 1996; 2007, p. 125).

"Hegemonic representations" (Moscovici, 1988, p. 221), for example, which are rooted in systems of power, can establish, uphold, legitimise, and institutionalise regimes of domination, exclusion, and marginalisation (e.g. Hall, 1997; Howarth, 2009, 2011; Jovchelovitch, 2007), while "oppositional representations" (Howarth, 2006, p. 79) offer dominated social groups the opportunity for agency, resistance, and social change (Elcheroth, Doise, & Reicher, 2011; Howarth, 2006, 2011; Howarth et al., 2013; Howarth et al., 2014; Joffe, 1998; Reicher, 2004). Understanding the dynamics and politics of social representations, and answering questions such as: '*who* represents *whom*, *how*, and *why?*' is therefore of paramount importance when studying historically stigmatised social groups and their consumption practices under changing configurations of stigma (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). Hegemonic *societal representations* (see below) of blacks in the United States, for example, manifest for black consumers in "systemic racism" (Crockett, 2017, p. 57), while oppositional *self-representations* (see below) enable them to resist stigmatisation and engage in practices aimed at a destigmatisation of black culture through consumption (Crockett, 2017).

Inherent power-asymmetries between hegemonic and oppositional representations also likely shape the consumption strategies of other stigmatised consumer groups, including sexual minorities (Kates, 2002), plus-sized consumers (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), or immigrants (Luedicke, 2015), for example.

Moscovici (1961/2007) describes three (more or less political) communicative styles how social representations spread across a community (or within society at large): through *diffusion* (as *opinions*), through *propagation* (as *attitudes*), and through *propaganda* (as *stereotypes*). *Diffusion* relates to the (non-intentional and non-agentic) process through which representations spread through everyday communicative encounters, and their inherent exchange of perspectives and opinions, without social agents seeking to promote certain representations in their own interest or to convince the other of their own viewpoint (Moscovici, 1961/2007). As an example, consider how social representations of the technology called the *Internet* have diffused across the globe over the past three decades. My point here is not that there were no stakeholders who had an early-on interest in propagating or promoting such representations and its underlying technology (think, for example, CompuServe, America Online [AOL], Netscape, or others at the time). Rather, consider how social representations that, at the minimum, entailed a very basic understanding of *what the Internet is*, have diffused across communities, cultures, languages, and geographies to reach even some of the most remote and the least tech-savvy individuals and communities. While there are arguably people in the world who have not yet, and possibly never will adopt online technology (Moore, 2014; Rogers, 2003), *knowledge*, or, even more basic, *awareness* of the phenomenon that is the *Internet* has widely diffused across humanity, and enables individuals, communities, organisations, and institutions to engage in meaningful discourse about the epistemic object.

Propagation, in turn, describes the agentic and intentional process of actively

promoting or spreading some representations in relation to a knowledge object, rather than others (Moscovici, 1961/2007). This can be either, because the propagating agent holds strong attitudes, beliefs, or values towards an epistemic object, or because the proliferation of a particular representation (and its dominance over alternative representations of the same object) serves the interests of the agent propagating such representations. Empirical examples of this strategy are manifold: Individuals, political parties, NGOs, institutions, organisations, and media outlets invested in particular representations of a knowledge object over others regularly seek to propagate their own worldview and therefore establish it as a superior way of knowing (Jovchelovitch, 1996, 2007). Marketing, advertising, and promotional industries are built around ideas of propagation, and social influence.

Finally, *propaganda* refers to not only the agentic and intentional process of actively promoting certain social representations in relation to a knowledge object, but to intentionally *misconstruing* said knowledge object in *stereotypical* ways, so that the promoted representations serve the agents' ideological, political, economic, or social goals (Moscovici, 1961/2007). Propaganda, and the spreading of stereotypes, is a communication strategy many historically stigmatised consumer groups encounter as they seek to avoid, cope with, and resist, for example, structural racism (Crockett, 2017), body-shaming (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), islamophobic stereotypes (Jafari & Goulding, 2008), populism against immigrants (Luedicke, 2015), or homophobic symbolic or physical violence (Kates, 2002). As such, analysing social representations enables social scientists in general, and consumer researchers in particular, to empirically investigate '*who* represents *whom*, and *how*, and *why?',* and how these representations are objectified in symbolic consumption practices that aim at labeling, stereotyping, demarcating, devaluing, and discriminating a social group of consumers (Link & Phelan, 2001).

Fifth, social representations are useful — they serve a purpose. They make the social and material world understandable and manageable by fitting new and unfamiliar phenomena into existing representational knowledge structures. Joffe (1998, 1999, 2003), for instance, shows how early public understandings of HIV/AIDS, represented as the *gay plague*, served the purpose to construct a stigmatised and deviant minority of those affected by and living with HIV/AIDS. These early social representation of HIV/AIDS allowed members of the general public to downplay the societal risks of HIV/AIDS by representing the disease as a matter only concerning ostracised and *othered* social groups.

Likewise, in her study of mental illness in a French village, Jodelet (1991) describes how the villagers created a social representation of *the mad* that served the purpose of protecting their own villager identity through excluding and pathologising those who do not fit in as *Others*. Jodelet (1991) further notes how social representations are not merely linguistic or symbolic constructs, but also encompass embodied practices. She gives the example of villagers engaging in elaborate washing and sanitising practices to avoid *contagion* from *the mad*, although the same informants articulated in interviews that they did not believe that mental illness was in fact contagious. Also American social representations of "blackness" and "respectability" (Crockett, 2017, p. 557), for example, are useful for black consumers as they enable them to navigate their social worlds, to offer orientation and a sense of belonging, and to develop elaborate strategies to oppose anti-black stigma through consumption.

Social representations, however, are not set in stone, as representational systems can and do change over time through continuous re-iteration and re-negotiation in communicative action (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999, 2008), that is, through „knowledge encounters" with alternative, competing, and incompatible systems of representations (Jovchelovitch, 2007, p. 110).

In sum, social representations are organised; shared across minds; collectively produced and reproduced; political; and useful for those who hold them. They are also useful for social scientists seeking to gain insight into the complex interplay of those who stigmatise, those who are being stigmatised, and the social representations and re-presenting practices underlying processes of labelling, stereotyping, separating, devaluating, and discriminating members of a particular social group (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001).

In the following I will elaborate on two main operative mechanisms within Social Representations Theory: *anchoring* and *objectification*.

2.4.3 - Anchoring and Objectification

Above, I have already introduced key tenets of Social Representations Theory, and described five key characteristics of social representations. To better equip us for the analysis of process and outcome of social representation with regard to historically stigmatised consumers' consumption strategies, I will now focus on two main operational mechanisms within Social Representations Theory: anchoring and objectification (Moscovici, 1961/2007).

Anchoring refers to the communicative process of rendering new and unknown phenomena familiar by relating them to pre-existing systems of representations (Moscovici, 1984). Anchoring requires first the creation, naming, and (normative) evaluation of new categories, and then categorising new objects, practices, experiences, or phenomena „into pre-existing cognitive frameworks in order to render them familiar" (Breakwell, 2014, p. 120). Anchoring seeks to *fit in* what is new, strange, and unknown, into existing relational systems of concepts, knowledge, and representations. Social representations scholar Birgitta Höjer (2011, pp. 7-8) describes the process of anchoring as a forging of abstract, new phenomena "into recognizable frames of references" in

order to liberate “the unknown from total incomprehensibility”.

Anchoring takes various empirical forms. Research by Marková and Wilkie (1987) and Joffe (1998), for instance, has documented how anchoring operated in conceptualising the previously unknown phenomenon of AIDS in the early 1980s through the othering of a minority group, and how the multiplicity of public understandings of the disease evolved from its early representation as *GRID* (Gay Related Immune Deficiency) (anchored to gay men), the *gay plague* (anchored to gay men; representations of the plague as illness, disease, but also contagion and fear), or *God’s* very own *punishment* for sodomites and other sinners (anchored to certain sexual-normative beliefs and the belief in transcendental spooks; particular ideas about justice and punishment), towards more nuanced understandings of the phenomenon over the years. Another empirical example of anchoring is provided by Höjer (2011, p. 7), who shows how the first anchoring of a knowledge object known as *climate change* involved naming (e.g., as a “threat”, “crisis”), thematic anchoring (e.g., to individualisation, nationalisation, consumerism), emotional anchoring (e.g., to arrogance, entitlement, fear, hope, and guilt), metaphoric anchoring (e.g., to a dying planet), and anchoring it to antinomies (e.g., guilty versus innocent, us versus them, Global North versus Global South).

Anchoring is a deeply political and contested process, especially in relation to stigmatised social groups (Howarth, 2006). Analysing what stigmatised social groups are anchored in, and by whom, can surface the underlying political motivations of competing social groups, and can explain the life struggles and counter-anchoring practices in oppositional representations of those who are being represented (ibid.). For example, in her study on representations of black pupils from South London’s poverty-ridden borough of Brixton, social representations scholar Caroline Howarth (2002, p. 154) shows how anchoring these pupils in notions of poverty, crime and deviance,

emotions of fear, and us-versus-them antinomies, served the dominant group to "maintain" these children as "marginal and subordinate" —"losers" (Howarth, 2006, p. 72) in an unequal "battle" (p. 75) for representational dominance. The social outcome of such anchorings is a self-sustaining vicious cycle of structural racism and discrimination.

In sum, anchoring refers to the process by which an unfamiliar phenomenon is rendered familiar through a relational placement of the unfamiliar within pre-existing systems of representations (Moscovici, 1984). New, strange, or previously unknown phenomena are collectively made sense of by positioning them relative to beliefs, values, and practices that are already considered to be known. Anchoring can involve several dimensions such as naming, thematic anchoring, emotional anchoring, metaphoric anchoring, or anchoring in antinomies, among others. Anchoring is often a deeply political process, and therefore considering the power-asymmetries between those who represent and those who are being represented is highly important.

Objectification refers to the process of translating abstract social representations and their anchorings into manifest images, signs, symbols, names, artefacts, metaphors, institutions, laws, or embodied practices (Moscovici, 1984; Wagner & Hayes, 2005). For Moscovici (Moscovici, 1984, p. 38), to objectify means "to discover the iconic quality of an imprecise idea or being" and to reproduce it in a visual image or object, for instance, that we can "perceive and experience with our senses" (Höijer, 2011, p. 12).

Objectification occurs in multiple ways. In their work on social representations of science, Bauer and Gaskell (1999, p. 172) give the example of *Dolly the Sheep* as an objectified placeholder-metaphor through which a general public made sense of the new and unfamiliar phenomenon of cloning and genetic engineering. Jodelet (1991), in turn, shows how anchoring and objectification operate in the creation of social representations of mental illness in France, and how they give rise to concrete

objectifications such as the *madhouse*, the *straightjacket*, or fears of *contamination* from *the mad*. Likewise, Smith and Joffe (2013) investigate the relationships between representations of global warming in British mass-media, and the general public's understanding of the phenomenon through objectified imagery of *melting ice* and *extreme weather phenomena*.

Extending the arguments of Smith and Joffe (2013) and Höijer (2011), the abstract phenomenon of climate change has been objectified through concrete images (e.g., melting glaciers, burning forests), objects (e.g., coal power stations, airplanes), animals (e.g., cute, clean polar bears, starving wildlife), persons (e.g., Al Gore, Greta Thunberg), organisations (e.g., Fridays For Future, Extinction Rebellion, the World Economic Forum), emotions (e.g., images of starving polar bears evoke pity, rage, fear), events (e.g., extreme weather phenomena, protest marches, climate summits), and embodied practices (e.g., air travel, cycling, recycling). As a final example of objectification, consider the famous rainbow-coloured flag used by LGBTQ activists around the world as an iconicised objectification of abstract representations and their shared beliefs, values, and practices anchored in concepts of diversity, equality, solidarity, and collective memories of the history of the LGBTQ civil rights movement.

Like anchoring, also objectification is a deeply political and contested process. Adding a "figurative nucleus" (Moscovici, 1988, p. 222) to an abstract phenomenon can have a profound impact on an audience, and its thoughts, feelings, and actions. For instance, purposefully objectifying multifaceted immigration dynamics in disturbing images of invading *crowds*, or as *waves* of immigrants *flooding* the homeland, not only inadequately represents a complex phenomenon (Sassen, 1998), it also evokes fears and hostile reactions among a broader public that serve the political agendas of those who intentionally propagate such social representations and their objectifications (Bonsu, 2009; Luedicke, 2015).

In sum, objectification refers to the process by which abstract ideas, beliefs, and values are being translated into concrete instantiations and signifiers, as for instance in language, symbols, artefacts, institutions, metaphors, persons, places, events, or practices (Moscovici, 1984). Asking *who* objectifies *what* or *whom* and *how* and *why* can be of paramount importance to uncover the (sometimes hidden) political agendas of the parties involved. This is not only, but particularly relevant when studying stigmatising processes and outcomes with regard to historically stigmatised groups.

Finally, a historical example: In his aforementioned foundational study on social representations of psychoanalysis in France in the 1950s, Moscovici (1961/2007) first illustrated how *anchoring* and *objectification* operated in the emergence of distinctively different lay-understandings of Freud's theory as an epistemic object among the urban-liberal, Catholic-conservative, and communist milieus at the time. Given the relative homogeneity of worldviews (that is, bundles of relational social representations) within, and heterogeneity of worldviews across these three milieus, Moscovici identified distinct strategies how each milieu appropriated psychoanalytic ideas and concepts relative to their existing representations (*anchoring*), and further elaborated how figurative concepts such as the ‚unconscious', the ‚slip', or ‚sexual repression' became concrete (*objectified*), albeit decontextualised representational signifiers, which informed the *commonsensical* understanding of psychoanalysis among lay people, and enabled them to engage in communicative exchange about the phenomenon.

In the following section I will now relate the theory and analytic toolkit of social representations to theories of identity and empirical studies on identity and social representations.

2.4.4 - Social Representations and Identity

A variety of scholars have discussed the relationship between social

representations and theories of identity (e.g. Breakwell, 1993, 2001, 2010, 2014; Duveen, 2001; Howarth, 2002, 2006; Howarth et al., 2014; Marková, 2007; Wagner & Hayes, 2005), mostly adopting the complementary perspective of social-psychological social identity theory or sociological identity theories alongside (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker, 1987; Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

These studies share the common understanding that social representations and identities are mutually interdependent, and dynamically constitute and define one other. Social representations are the fabric through which the world is collectively rendered into shared knowable categories, and it is though the same fabric that these categories acquire meaning and normative connotations (Howarth, 2002). The dominant opinion expressed in the literature on the relationship of social representations and identity is therefore that social representations, shared among a group of people, allow for the creation of abstract identity categories (as for instance the category of gay men with its various anchorings and objectifications), and that social representations also fill such categories with meaning and normative sentiments by fostering quasi-naturalised collective understandings of how an identity relates to other identities and representations (what it *means* to be a gay man) (Breakwell, 1993, 2001, 2014; Howarth, 2002; Lloyd & Duveen, 1992; Marková, 2007; Moscovici & Marková, 2000).

The historian Robert Beachy (2010, 2014), for example, talks about the emergence of, what I would call the social representation of, *the homosexual* as a distinct identity category, and the birth of the world's first homosexual rights movement, in late 19th century Berlin, among a group of scientists gathering around the influential early sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld. It was their political and social agenda to establish a public understanding of homosexuality based on scientific insight, and to re-anchor the abstract representation of *the homosexual* in the public's eye to naturally occurring, and scientifically affirmed diversity, rather than to dominant at-the-time

anchorings of sodomy, criminality, sinfulness, illness, or moral inferiority. This arguably early case of representational entrepreneurship focused on *re-anchoring, re-forming*, and *re-presenting* the popular understanding of a widely unfamiliar yet stigmatised identity, and showcases how Social Representations Theory can serve as an analytic framework to investigate questions of collective identity and social stigma (Crocker & Major, 1989; Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001).

While existing social representations toward an epistemic object - within a given population and at a given point in time - are the building blocks of identities (Lloyd & Duveen, 1992), the representations that define identity categories and the meanings they carry are continuously *enacted*, *re-enacted*, *rejected*, or *reformed*, and therefore undergo constant negotiation and change (Howarth, 2006; Marková, 2007). Markova (2016) reminds us that all identities - even so-called *individual*, or *self*-identities - do not form in isolation, but are always relational to somebody or something *other*, whose positionalities and meanings are dialogically negotiated through communicative acts within and across systems of complementary or conflicting sets of representations. In the same vein, Stuart Hall (1996, p. 4) notes that our individual and social identities are lived answers to the question of "how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves".

As I have discussed above, social representations may be multiple, compatible, controversial, contested, polysemic, fragmented, and necessarily dynamic and changing across time, space, context, and social group (Howarth, 2006). As such, the rich conceptual and analytic repertoire of Social Representations Theory has given rise to extensive research linking social representations to the creation, maintenance, and modification of individual and social identities. Conceptualising social representations and identities as interlocked phenomena has enabled researchers to study intergroup processes through sets of *self*/*other*, *us*/*them*, *they about us*/*we about them*/*we about us*

representational configurations (Lorenzi-Cioldi & Clémence, 2001), and has shed light on dynamics of identity construction among marginalised, stigmatised, and discriminated social groups in contexts such as race and ethnicity (Howarth, 2007, 2009; Howarth et al., 2014), health and illness (Jodelet, 1991; Joffe, 1998, 1999, 2002; Jovchelovitch & Gervais, 1999), poverty (Chauhan & Foster, 2014; Jovchelovitch & Priego-Hermández, 2013), or religion (Wagner, Sen, Permanadeli, & Howarth, 2012). Foundational to a conceptualisation of social identity as the *self-representations* shared among members of a social group, is the insight that „identities are continually developed and contested though others' representations of our claimed [or ascribed] social groups" (Howarth, 2002, p. 159, my annotation).

In sum, Social Representations Theory has enabled researchers to theorise social identities as constituted by the labels, categories, and the meaning ascribed to them by either those who represent themselves, or are being represented. Therefore, the social identities and consumption strategies of a historically stigmatised social group may emerge at the intersection of three overlapping representational questions:

(I) How have we been and are we being represented by (dominant) Others?

(II) How have we and do we represent ourselves, given these representations Others hold about us?

(III) How does the interplay of these *societal* representations (I) and a social group's *self-representations* (II) *objectify* in the marketplace through strategic consumption?

In the following, final subchapter on Social Representations Theory, I will summarise key concepts and analytic tools of the theory, and particularly focus on their usefulness for consumer researchers interested in studying the consumer behaviour of historically stigmatised social groups under post-dominant configurations of stigma.

2.4.5 - Social Representations Theory for Consumer Research

In the preceding sections I have introduced Social Representations Theory and its history, I have outlined five main characteristics of social representations, discussed the key processes of anchoring and objectification, and illustrated links between Social Representations Theory and theories of identity. In the following I will elaborate on my own personal journey with the theory of social representations, discuss the reception of Social Representations Theory in marketing and consumer research to date, and summarise how and why the theory and its analytic tools is ideally suited to arrive at rich and meaningful insights into the consumption strategies of a historically stigmatised consumer group under conditions of post-dominant stigma.

I first encountered Social Representations Theory and its intellectual heritage during my time as a postgraduate student of social and cultural psychology at the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2012 and 2013. During this time, I had the privilege of learning from leading social representations scholars including Ivana Markóva (a long-term colleague and friend of Moscovici), Saadi Lahlou (former PhD student of Moscovici at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* in Paris), Sandra Jovchelovitch (who served as programme director of my MSc programme) and Caroline Howarth (who was my MSc dissertation supervisor). Early on during my degree, I got fascinated by the potential of Social Representations Theory for the study of social problems, and particularly for understanding the struggles of stigmatised, vulnerable, or marginalised social groups (Elcheroth et al., 2011; Howarth et al., 2013; Reicher, 2004). Inspired by the legalisation of same-sex marriage in the UK during my studies at the LSE, I adopted a social representations approach for my MSc dissertation (2013), in which I studied social representations of same-sex marriage under the supervision of Caroline Howarth.

After I had joined (what was back then called) Cass Business School as a PhD

researcher in 2014, I sought to *bridge disciplines*, and to integrate these new intellectual stimuli with my longstanding interest in socio-cultural consumption studies, which had developed since I had first met Markus Giesler and Marius Luedicke back in 2008, at my first alma mater in Witten, Germany. During the years of my PhD programme at Cass, I continued to pursue regular exchange with social representations scholars at the London School of Economics and the University of Cambridge, and I attended conferences and research seminars on on-going social representations scholarship. I also collected feedback on my own emerging doctoral research at meetings of the LSE's *Social Representations Lab*. The valuable feedback and guidance I received at these encounters strengthened my confidence in the suitability of Social Representations Theory for this present study, which is, to my best knowledge, the first adoption of Social Representations Theory as an analytic framework for an empirical research project in the tradition of socio-cultural consumer research.

Despite its 60-years long history, and the theory's wide application within social psychology, sociology, anthropology, and media studies, among others, the impact of Social Representations Theory on scholarship in the field of marketing and consumer research has been modest so far. The few studies in the field that adopted a social representations approach did so either from a quantitative, word-association task perspective (Bartels & Onwezen, 2014; Penz, 2006), studied social representations of marketing work and marketing professionals (Cluley & Green, 2019), or evaluated brand positioning within the sporting goods market (Lebrun, Souchet, & Bouchet, 2013). Within consumer culture theory, work by Hamilton and colleagues (2014) and Visconti (2016) first suggested the use of Social Representations Theory to study poor and vulnerable consumer groups; but these authors' conceptual contributions are calls to action, rather than empirical studies analysing consumption phenomena through a social representations analytic lens. Visconti (2016), for example, suggests specifically

analysing how a vulnerable consumer group sees itself in relation to how this group is represented by outside others. Hamilton et al. (2014, p. 1835), in turn, suggest that future research should explore the "dominant representations" that "stigmatise those experiencing poverty".

Along with these authors, I consider social representations theory an especially effective theoretical lens for studying historically stigmatised consumer groups, as the theory enables researchers to unpack the multiplicity of co-existing beliefs, values, and practices that shape these groups' collective identities and consumption strategies, rather than taking them for granted; as external givens. Specifically, adopting a social representations approach allows me to capture and analyse the multiplicity of coexisting, competing, and conflicting beliefs, meanings, and "normative conversations" (Visconti, 2016, p. 372) that a society perpetuates about a knowledge object, such as a stigmatised social group, in order to label, stereotype, separate, discriminate, and deprive this group of social status (Link & Phelan, 2001). A social representations analytic perspective further encourages the tracing of representations over time and space, and thus to explore "how new reconfigurations" of stigma processes and consumption practices "come into being" (Kates, 2002, p. 396). The theory's ability to account for such phenomena has been showcased by research on poverty (Chauhan & Foster, 2014; Jovchelovitch & Priego-Hermández, 2013), stigmatised ethnic and racial groups (Howarth, 2002; Howarth et al., 2014), religious minorities (Wagner et al., 2012), the mentally ill (Jodelet, 1991), or people living with HIV/AIDS (Joffe, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2003) outside the field of marketing and consumer research.

As such, social representations theory enables me to incorporate into my analysis the potentially multiple, contradictory, and fragmented *societal* representations of a social group as the *context of context* in which a social group's *self-representations*

are formed, enacted, and expressed through consumption (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). Moving beyond the subcultural paradigm's assumptions of uniform stigma and symbolic threat from outside society (Holt, 1997; Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996), I am well equipped to empirically *explore* how gay consumers are *being represented* within contemporary German society, how this bears on how gay consumers *represent themselves* as members of a historically stigmatised social group, and how such configurations of social representations *objectify* in concrete consumption practices to reach strategic goals with regard to their stigmatisation (Link & Phelan, 2001; Swidler, 1986).

Besides the core notion of *social representations* and their main characteristics, I will use three additional elements of the social representations framework to analyse the consumption of gay men in Germany under conditions of post-dominant stigma: *anchoring*, *objectification*, and "*re-presenting*" (Howarth, 2006, p. 68) as *enacting*, *rejecting*, and *reforming* social representations. While I have elaborated on characteristics of social representations, anchoring, and objectification in dedicated sub-chapters above already, I will now consolidate and build on these insights to explain my key analytic rationale of *re-presenting* as *enacting*, *rejecting*, and *reforming* of social representations.

In contrast to Durkheim's (1912/1995, p. 13) conceptualisation of pre-modern "collective representations" as static beliefs propagated uniformly across a society by powerful actors such as the authoritarian state or organised religion, Moscovici (1988) characterises social representations as highly dynamic entities that capture the epistemological fragmentation of contemporary pluralist societies. As I have shown above, social representations are constantly produced, reproduced, contested, and reworked through inter-subjective, inter-group, and societal communications that may take place around family dinner tables, among fans of competing football clubs, or in

the mass media and social media of "thinking societies" (Moscovici, 2001, p. 12), among other places.

Building on Howarth (2006) and Jovchelovitch (2007), I distinguish between *enacting*, *rejecting*, and *reforming* social representations as key processes of re-presenting the social and material life-worlds: First, social representations are *enacted* when people turn the contents of such representations, and their anchors and objectifications, into scripts for situated cognition, conversation, action, and affect.

For instance, when a police officer stops and searches a young black man in a favela in Rio de Janeiro, the officer *enacts* the social representation of *young black man* —as anchored in crime, poverty, danger, and drug trafficking—in situated objectifications as cognition, language, action, and embodied responses, including a rising heart rate and a sense of alertness on behalf of the officer (Jovchelovitch & Priego-Hermández, 2013). The police officer will likely enact their own, *individual* cognitive representation of *young black man* that is in its particular form unique to the individual and shaped by, among other factors, this officer's own biography and personal history of encounters with *young black men* inside the favela. However, we can reasonably assume that there is a high degree of similarity between these *individual* representations as they are being held *across* the set of individuals that make up the social group of police officers in Rio. This relates back to the fundamental characteristic of *sharedness* of social representations across minds. As a side note, police officers will also likely engage in communicative exchange about, for example, their beliefs, values, and attitudes towards, and their personal encounters with *young black men*. This further illustrates the third main characteristic (above): the production and reproduction of social representations through communicative exchange.

Second, social representations are *rejected* when a stigmatised social group holds "oppositional representations" (Howarth, 2006, p. 75) about themselves that

conflict with dominant representations. For instance, the young black man who is stopped in the favela anticipates the police officer's stigmatising representation of *young black man* by seeing himself through the eyes of the other (Howarth, 2002), but rejects and contests this representation. Instead, the young man enacts an oppositional self-representation shared widely among his peers, that black favela youth is structurally discriminated against, helpless, and constantly harassed by the police. This representation objectifies in rhetorical strategies (e.g., the emic "I didn't do anything wrong"), for example, or embodied responses (e.g., fight-or-flight impulses) (Jovchelovitch & Priego-Hermández, 2013). As Jovchelovitch (2007) notes, oppositional representations often serve the purpose of resistance, but not necessarily dialogue between (holders of) competing systems of representations.

Third, social representations are *reformed* when dialogue between conflicting "knowledge systems" (Jovchelovitch, 2007, p. 111) occurs and, "through the ethical imperative of recognizing the other," representations are either "understood, negotiated, and eventually transformed" (p. 144), or entirely new representations come into being. For example, inclusive youth projects, where young people from inside and outside Rio's favelas meet with social workers and local authorities, create spaces to communicate *with* each other, not just *about* each other. Such dialogue allows participants to encounter the others' perspectives, rethink and rework their anchorings and objectifications of each other, and may ultimately help to break the vicious cycle of stigmatisation and violence (Jovchelovitch & Priego-Hermández, 2013).

In sum, the analysis of social representations has been proven to be useful for unpacking the nuances and "hidden levels" (Höijer, 2011, p. 14) in the social construction of stigmatised social groups, for critically assessing who "the winners and losers in the battleground of social re-presentation" are and why (Howarth, 2006, pp. 71-72), and for identifying the potential trajectories that could allow for representational

reform and social change. However, similar to existing studies in consumer research, social representations scholars have traditionally dedicated their attention predominantly to studying the effects of, and resistance towards, a *dominant* and *ubiquitous* configuration of stigma. Therefore, existing research cannot sufficiently explain how the *societal* representations of a historically stigmatised social group, this group's *self-*representations, and the group's consumption strategies change, when we can no longer assume their stigmatisation to be dominant or hegemonic, but instead their stigma could be fragmented, multifaceted, and contested. In the next chapter, and after offering a summary of the present chapter, I will therefore describe the social representations analytical procedures that enabled me to address this important and yet unanswered theoretical and substantive question.

2.5 - Summary of Literature Review Chapter

In this chapter I have reviewed relevant existing literature on the consumption of sexual minorities, and historically stigmatised social groups in marketing and consumer research. A broader overview of research on non-heterosexual consumers within marketing and consumer research revealed the predominance of *subculture* theories-enabled approaches to the consumer behaviour of LGBTQ consumers. Consequently, I have traced the origins of subcultural approaches, outlined their assumptions, strengths, and limitations, and I have shown how and why subcultural approaches fall short of delivering satisfying answers to my research questions at hand.

Inspired by the centrality of the concept of *stigma* and stigma management strategies through consumption in this literature, I have then dedicated my attention to historical and contemporary understandings and applications of stigma theoretics within sociology and consumer research. Building on Goffman's (1963) foundational work,

and Link and Phelan's (2001) conceptualisation of stigma, I have introduced the notion of *stigma configurations*, and I have categorised relevant studies within consumer research into two of such stigma configurations: *hegemonic stigma*, with its strategy of *invisible consumption*, and *dominant stigma*, with its consumption strategies of *avoiding*, *coping with*, and *resisting* stigmatisation through consumption. Finally, I have assessed that neither hegemonic, nor dominant stigma configurations adequately capture the empirical realities that are the life worlds of contemporary gay men in Germany; consumers living under which I have called a *post-dominant stigma configuration*.

In order to mitigate this apparent lack of research and knowledge on this timely and relevant phenomenon, I have thus introduced *Social Representations Theory* as an analytic framework that allows me to better capture the nuances of on-going stigmatising processes and consumption responses of a historically stigmatised social group which has become *almost equal, but not quite yet*. To best achieve my analytic goals, I have first briefly introduced Social Representations Theory, its history, and its main characteristics; discussed the key analytic processes of *anchoring, objectification,* and *re-presenting*; established the links between research on social representations and theories of identity; and reflected on my own personal history with Social Representations Theory, and why it is ideally suited to answer the research question at hand.

In sum, my review of prior research within the field of marketing and consumer research has revealed an apparent gap of knowledge on consumption under *post-dominant* configurations of stigma. Social Representations Theory offers a rich set of analytic concepts and their relationships to approach the present task at hand through notions of *social representations*, *anchoring* and *objectification*, and *re-presenting* as *enacting*, *rejecting*, and *reforming*. As such, I am well equipped to answer my research question which remains: *How do members of a historically stigmatised social group*

consume strategically across social contexts, when their unambiguous and dominant stigmatisation can no longer be taken for granted?

To best answer this question, I will now reveal my methodological approach and considerations.

3 - METHODOLOGY

In the preceding chapter I have reviewed relevant literature on research on non-heterosexual consumers and the theoretic traditions of subcultural studies, and research on stigma and stigma management through consumption under what I have identified as *hegemonic*, and *dominant stigma configurations*. This review has revealed substantial gaps in the current state of knowledge on the consumption of historically stigmatised social groups which have become almost equal, but not quite yet, that is, when their dominant and uniform stigmatisation can no longer be taken for granted.

Therefore, instead of taking a social group's dominant stigmatisation across all or most social domains as an external given, this study seeks to actively incorporate into its empirical analysis the multiple, and often contested and conflicting social representations *about* a social group (gay men), which simultaneously co-exist *within* broader German society. To best achieve this goal, I have introduced the theory of social representations, and its key analytic features in the preceding chapter.

In order to arrive at meaningful insights capable of answering the research question at hand, a suitable methodological approach must not exclusively focus on the level of individual consumers, their consumption practices, or their individual market-mediated identity work (Belk, 1988; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Holt, 1997), as such approaches would disregard the social and societal environments in which stigmatising processes unfold (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). A suitable methodological

approach must also not stop at the analytic level of unstigmatised consumption communities (Chalmers Thomas et al., 2012; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001), tribes (Cova et al., 2007; Maffesoli, 1996), subcultures (Belk & Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Seregina & Weijo, 2017), or stigmatised collectivities whose dominant stigma can (or rather: must) be reasonably assumed (Crockett, 2017; Jafari & Goulding, 2008; Kates, 2002; Luedicke, 2015; Peñaloza, 1994; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Üstüner & Holt, 2007). This is, because the former collectivities do equally not qualify as stigmatised consumers as per Link and Phelan's (2001) definition (see also above), and in contrast to the latter, the *actual* and *perceived* qualities, quantities, and properties of stigmatising (and possibly destigmatising) processes and outcomes for contemporary gay men in Germany remain unknown at present. A suitable methodological approach must therefore incorporate the historical, social, and cultural *context of context* (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011), in which possible new qualities, quantities, or —as I have called them above— *configurations* of stigma, consumption, and identity work may emerge on the level of the individual and the social group.

As I will show in the following sections, the methodological approach chosen for this study is an adequate, and "complexity-seeking" interpretive research design (Crockett, 2017, p. 561; Howarth et al., 2014; Jodelet, 1991; Joffe, 1999), well suited to deliver answers to my research question: How do members of a historically stigmatised social group consume strategically, when they have achieved greater recognition, status, and respectability in society?

I will seek to answer this question in a rule of three: First by exploring empirically how gay men currently *are being*, and historically *have been* represented within German society and its discourses. Second, I will explore empirically how contemporary gay men in Germany represent themselves, that is, how they relate to their *being-gay* across contexts, as members of a historically stigmatised social group. It

is then through the interplay of *being represented* (*"they about us"*) and *self-representing* as inescapably belonging to a historically stigmatised social group (*"we about us"*), that we can unlock the role consumption plays in the maintenance, (re-)negotiation, and possibly un-doing of gay identities under conditions of non-dominant stigma, which will enable me to make valuable and meaningful contributions to the field of research on non-heterosexual consumers in particular (Bettany, 2016; Coffin et al., 2019; Ginder & Byun, 2015; Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996), and research on the consumption of historically stigmatised social groups more generally (Crockett, 2017; Peñaloza, 1994; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013).

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows: First, I will comment on the epistemological considerations underlying this present qualitative, and interpretivist endeavour into the consumption of gay men, before introducing the reader to my empirical context of gay men's consumption in Germany. In the following section, I will elaborate on the process of data collection, and specifically the five sources of primary data collected from (1) semi-structured interviews and (2) focus group discussions with gay consumers, (3) semi-structured interviews with experts on LGBTQ matters and consumption across time, (4) historical and contemporary archival data on LGBTQ consumption and identities in Germany, and finally (5) ethnographic datapoints from seven years of in-situ fieldwork in LGBTQ consumption-spheres in Germany and select other Western societies. Next, I will present the analytic principles and procedures which guided me in this scholarly endeavour and discuss the robustness of my analysis and its quality criteria. I close this methodology chapter by reflecting on my own researcher positionality given the phenomenon studied. I will also comment on matters of research ethics and methodological limitations, before presenting my findings in the following chapter.

3.1 - Epistemological Considerations

Likely no PhD thesis in the social sciences should be written without a sub-chapter dedicated to the study's epistemological positioning — after all, the degree is called Doctor of *Philosophy* for a reason. Indeed, I would be most tempted, at this point, to lose myself in lengthy discussions on the philosophical accounts that underpin the endeavour of scientific discovery—and their criticisms. Ever since I first attended a module on philosophy of science (or rather: philosoph*ies*) back in 2007, questions of *what 'is'?*, *what can we know and how?*, and *what shall we do about it?* have been constant companions throughout my academic journey. If I remember correctly, my first encounter with *truth tables*, and reasoning by means of deduction and predicate logic at the time did not exactly spark unbridled joy, to put it mildly. Later along this journey, however, I was lucky enough to encounter mentors who would share with me their enthusiasm for thinkers such as Karl Popper (1959/2002) and his ideas on falsification and critical rationalism, Thomas Kuhn's (1962) and Imre Lakatos' (1976) accounts of science as a social enterprise alongside its paradigms and research programs, or Paul Feyerabend's (1975/2010) passionate plea for methodological pluralism (or even epistemological anarchism), among others. In fact, it seems to me, that today's university curricula would benefit substantially from placing more emphasis on *how* to think rather than *what* to think, since the half-life of most what we regard as topical *knowledge* is so much shorter than the half-life of the underlying philosophical principles that enable us to engage in critical inquiry.

I don't want to digress, but I don't think I do either. This is because when it comes to the philosophical principles that inform our thinking, I consider Social Representations Theory, which I have introduced above, to be somewhat of an epistemology in itself: As I have shown, the theory is concerned with how systems of

knowledge, but also beliefs, values, attitudes, and practices form and change, that is, how they are negotiated and re-negotiated in continuous communicative practice on the level of individuals, social groups, and whole societies. This positions Social Representations Theory clearly within the realm of a social constructionist epistemology (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Burr, 2003; Geertz, 1973; Gergen, 1973, 2009; Goodman, 1978). However, given that social representations theoretics are concerned with *what* we know and *how we collectively negotiate* what we accept as an utterance or text that seeks to establish some kind of *truth*, or at least some degree of *explanatory power* over our material and social life-worlds, Social Representations Theory may in itself be considered a *sub-episteme* within social constructionism. It is for these considerations, that I have characterised Social Representations Theory to be a *meta-theoretical framework* in my introduction to the theory above.

Arguably, social stigma is socially constructed (Goffman, 1963), and processes of labelling, stereotyping, separation, status-loss, and discrimination (Link & Phelan, 2001), do not happen outside a society's cultural categories and discourses, but only acquire meaning through *interpretation* (Denzin, 1997). It follows therefore logically, that positivist or realist approaches to answering my research question are not only inadequate, but in fact self-contradictory. Put differently, „meaning is negotiated mutually in the act of interpretation; it is not simply discovered" (Schwandt, 2000, p. 195).

Therefore, as I seek to utilise Social Representations Theory to unpack how meanings —particularly with regard to stigma and consumption— are mutually negotiated, I do accordingly adopt a social constructionist epistemology (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1973, 2009), and a qualitative, interpretivist research design, which I will discuss in more detail below. Before I present my methods of data collection and analysis, however, I will first familiarise the reader with my empirical research context

in the following section.

3.2 - Empirical Context: Gay Men's Consumption in Germany

The following section seeks to familiarise the reader with some key characteristics of my empirical research context of gay men's consumption in Germany, and establishes why this context is ideally suited to answer my theory-focused research question as stated above. I keep this section rather concise, as I will elaborate in greater detail on the socio-historical particularities of my context further below, as I present the findings from my historical analysis of *societal representations* of gay men in Germany since the Second World War.

Over the last 30 years, the transnational movement for LGBTQ civil rights and marriage equality ranks among the most prominent and —importantly— most *successful* examples of social progress in the domain of minority rights across Western societies (Pew Research, 2020). Given the existing research on gay men's consumption within marketing and consumer research (Coffin et al., 2019; Ginder & Byun, 2015), revisiting gay men's consumer behaviour 25 years after Steven Kates (2002) collected the empirical data for his pathbreaking study on gay men's subcultural consumption in the *Journal of Consumer Research* offers an ideal case to contrast and compare shifted configurations of stigma, and possibly discover the newly emerging identities and consumption practices that flow from them. Put differently, the consumer behaviour of gay men offers an ideal empirical context to answer my research question for three reasons:

First, foundational and impactful prior studies on gay men's consumption within my field do exist (Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996), and their subcultural approach remains influential until present day (Coffin et al., 2019). This facilitates a contrasting and

comparing of findings across studies. However, these prior studies are bound to the socio-historical particularities of their time and contexts, that is, Canadian gay men in the mid-1990s (Kates, 2002). Accordingly, such past studies theorise the consumer lives of an earlier generation of gay men embedded in the social representations of the times.

Second, there is ample academic and non-academic evidence, from various disciplines, that societal sentiments towards gay men have changed substantially, and their stigmatisation has —on average— declined across many Western societies in the past three decades, making gay men suitable for the study of post-dominant stigma configurations (Adam, Duyvendak, & Koruwel, 1999; Badgett, 2009, 2011; D'Emilio, 1998; Flynn, 2017; Halperin, 2002, 2012; Holy, 2012; Kram, 2018; Pew Research, 2020; Plummer, 1981; Savin-Williams, 2005; Weeks, 1998, 2010).

Third, gay men are a historically stigmatised social group of consumers, grounded in their sexual orientation; an enduring and inescapable marker similar to race, ethnicity, or bodily features, for example (Crockett, 2017; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Stayman & Deshpande, 1989; Visconti et al., 2014). Findings from the context of gay men's consumption may therefore be as a minimum partly transferable to other historically stigmatised consumer collectivities, should they face similar changes within their societal environment. For the above reasons combined, revisiting gay men's consumption, once their dominant and widespread stigmatisation within a society can no longer be taken for granted, constitutes an ideal empirical context to advance theoretic knowledge about a historically stigmatised social group's consumer behaviour under post-dominant configurations of stigma. Furthermore, Germany is a modern, liberal, Western democracy, comparable to Canada, and offers its citizens a similar standard of living. Theory findings derived from either national context will therefore likely not differ substantially due to vast intercultural or political variation. But why else Germany? I will seek to provide an answer to this question just next.

In Germany, which historian Robert Beachy (2014) named as the *birthplace* of gay subjectivities as a distinct modern identity category back in Weimar Berlin, gay men have come a long and rocky way: They have undergone periods of systematic state-sponsored persecution and killings by the Nazi regime during World War II (von Wahl, 2011; Zinn, 2017), faced legal prosecution and incarceration until the part-decriminalisation of male homosexuality in 1969 (Pretzel & Weiß, 2010), and continued to live in a social environment that kept pathologising and stigmatising homosexuality for much longer (Coffin et al., 2019; Heichel & Rinscheid, 2015; Holy, 2012; Plastargias, 2015; Pretzel & Weiß, 2012, 2013).

While in 1963, 90% of respondents in a representative poll considered homosexuality either an illness or a vice (Wissenschaftliche Dienste des Deutschen Bundestags, 2016), approval rates for same-sex marriage among Germany's general public has spiked from 24% in 2000 to 75% in 2017 (Allensbach Institute, 2015; Die Zeit, 2017). Such changes in social sentiments towards gay men also shine through their codified objectifications in the legal sphere: In 2001, lesbian and gay couples in Germany were given the right to form civil unions, and a series of consecutive rulings by the German federal constitutional court [Bundesverfassungsgericht] kept pushing the federal government towards a gradual abolition of extant discrimination against same-sex couples in front of the law (Bundesverfassungsgericht, 2009, 2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b).

Full marriage equality was ultimately established in Germany only in 2017, that is, while my data collection for this study was still ongoing. This dramatic change in public attitudes towards homosexuality has come alongside more frequent and more nuanced representations of homosexuality in political and public discourse, art, and popular culture in Germany, and across many societies of the Global West (GLAAD, 2016). For the above reasons, I could no longer assume contemporary Germany to be a

national and cultural context in which gay consumers would face persistent, uniform, and *dominant* stigmatisation as prior studies have found (Holt, 1997; Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996).

However, despite such notable progress, Germany, like many other Western societies (Rinallo, 2007; Visconti, 2008), is still a predominantly heteronormative, rather than *post-gay* society (Ghaziani, 2011; Ng, 2013; Russell et al., 2009): For many gay men in Germany, *coming out* still bears substantial social and professional risk (Frohn, 2007; Frohn, Meinhold, & Schmidt, 2017), and the fear of becoming a victim of violent hate crimes continues to be a constant companion: Numbers of recorded hate crimes against LGBTQ citizens in Germany have recently been on the rise (Maneo, 2017; Queer.de, 2020a; Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2016b), and religious fundamentalists alongside neo-right-wing political movements have managed to attract considerable public support for their anti-gay and anti-immigrant rhetorics (Datta, 2018). Not least the horrific attack on an LGBTQ nightclub in June 2016 in Orlando, Florida, which left 49 dead and 53 wounded (Queer.de, 2016a), and the recent homophobically motivated murder of a gay men and the attempted murder of his partner in the German city of Dresden (LSVD e.V., 2021), highlight the fragility of social progress, which cannot naïvely be taken for granted. For the above reasons, then, I could equally not assume that anti-gay stigma had simply *ameliorated*, or even become *eradicated* over the past decades.

In sum, for the reasons listed above, I could neither assume gay men in Germany to still face a *dominant stigma configuration*, nor could I assume a linear, widespread, and qualitatively similar *destigmatisation* of gay men across most or even all parts of contemporary German society and life contexts. This makes gay consumers in Germany an ideal empirical context to answer how members of historically stigmatised social groups use consumption strategically when their dominant stigmatisation can no longer

be taken for granted. Finally, I was born and raised in Germany myself, and faced my coming-out experience as a gay man in Germany during the late 1990s and early 2000s. I therefore experienced societal transitions in Germany since that time first-hand, and I am therefore attuned to the context's cultural and historical particularities (see also the section on researcher positionality below). Furthermore, my personal network in the country facilitated access to gay informants and experts, and my German language proficiency facilitated access to contemporary and historic archival documents that were only available in their original German editions.

3.3 - Data Collection

The following sub-chapters provide an overview about my data collection procedures. To best present my data collection process, I will describe the individual data collection steps in the chronological order in which I carried them out. This is to allow the reader to better follow the analytic rationale behind each data collection step and the type of data collected.

It is not uncommon in qualitative research that, through the iterative nature of data collection and data analysis (see below), the project's analytic focus — and therefore also its research question — develops along the way as the project unfolds. Therefore, while I present my data collection steps in their chronological order, the findings chapter further below is structured so that my presentation of findings makes most sense from an analytical perspective. In other words, I present my data collection in a way that makes it easiest to logically *follow the process* and understand *what* I did, and *how*, and *why*, at a particular point in time. In contrast, I will present my findings afterwards in a way that makes it easiest to *understand the results of my analysis* as they serve to answer my research question.

In the following subchapters, I will now elaborate on my data collection through semi-structured interviews with gay consumers; focus group sessions with gay consumers; semi-structured interviews with expert informants; the collection of historical and contemporary archival data; and through multi-sited participant observation. In the final sub-chapter I present a general overview over my consolidated data corpus.

3.3.1 - Consumer Interviews

I started familiarising myself with contemporary gay consumption in Germany through a first round of data collection in the form of semi-structured, phenomenological interviews with 14 self-identified gay and cis-gendered men between 2013 and 2016 (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Thompson, 1997b). I conducted these interviews to collect data on the micro-level of representations of contemporary gay identities and their objectifications in lived consumer experiences and consumption practices. My informants were between 18 and 39 years of age and stemmed from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds in four major metropolitan areas in Germany (Berlin, Cologne, Stuttgart, Munich), allowing for regional diversity. My informants' occupations included students, employees, civil servants, managers, apprentices, and consultants, among others (for an overview see Appendix A, page 287).

For this first round of data collection, I purposefully selected a younger sample in order to garner insights from informants who faced their coming-of-age and coming-out experiences in a society in which male homosexuality had already been decriminalised (von Wahl, 2011), "significantly stripped of its stigma" (Ghaziani, 2011, p. 107), and which was shaped by the achievements of the gay-rights movement of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s (Ghaziani, 2011; Marshall, 1996; Patton, 2002; Pretzel & Weiß, 2012, 2013; Savin-Williams, 2016; Wengraf, 2001). As such, and beyond cultural

variance vis-a-vis earlier studies from a North American perspective (Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996), I expected to encounter different social representations and objectifications about gay identity and gay consumption from those displayed by the interviewees of Kates (2002): In fact, some of the gay consumers I ended up interviewing were not even born when Kates' (2002, p. 385) fieldwork ended in 1994.

Consequently, as I started engaging with the lived consumer experiences of a younger and contemporary cohort of gay male informants, I expected themes of discrimination, marginalisation and stigmatisation to be less prevalent in the identity narratives of these informants — particularly in comparison with members of the pioneering generation of the modern gay civil rights movement in Germany (Holy, 2012; Pretzel & Weiß, 2010, 2012, 2013), and across other Western contexts (Badgett, 2009; Carter, 2004; D'Emilio, 1998; Edsall, 2003; Plummer, 1981; Weeks, 2007). I later (see below) complemented these interviews with younger gay consumers through expert interviews with informants of up to 82 years of age, to adequately expand on the timespan of first-hand lived experiences of gay men in Germany throughout the decades covered within my data corpus.

I recruited informants via electronic mailing lists, Facebook forums, LGBTQ student union associations, LGBTQ community organisations, and through my own personal network. Interviews took place online via Skype, at informants' homes, coffee shops, on university campuses, and in other third place environments (Oldenburg, 1999).

I drafted and iteratively revised a thematic topic guide for semi-structured interviews by developing my central research questions into theory questions, and further into empirical interview questions (Wengraf, 2001). I started the interviews with a number of "grand tour" questions (McCracken, 1988), and then delved into topics such as consumption preferences, personal accounts of coming out, and informants'

first-hand experiences of labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination across education, work, family, leisure, and intimate life contexts (Link & Phelan, 2001). In these interviews, which typically lasted between 60 and 120 minutes, I further explored how informants relate to their identity as a gay man across spatial and social contexts and if and how they experienced social stigma. Moreover, I explored and probed how progressive social change, objectified in, for example, the legalisation of civil unions and same-sex marriage, reflected on their identity as a gay man, and how my informants construct and express their identities as members of a sexual minority through consumption and via marketplace resources.

All sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed in verbatim, and yielded a total of 658 pages of data (A4, 12pt, double-spaced). Informed consent was obtained prior to participation in the study, and informants were handed a study information sheet either in paper or in electronic format. Interviewees were given ample opportunity to discuss any open questions prior to participating in the study.

This first set of consumer interview data offered me insight into situated and lived experiences of contemporary gay consumers in Germany, and their relation to representations of belonging to a social group which shares a history of oppression, discrimination, and stigma across spatial and socio-cultural contexts. Moreover, these interviews allowed in-depth insights into the ways in which contemporary gay consumers self-represent as members of a historically stigmatised social group, when they felt more or less stigmatised by local peers and broader German society, and how they use consumption and marketplace resources strategically to respond to different degrees and qualities of stigmatisation.

3.3.2 - Consumer Focus Groups

As a second source of data, I led two focus group discussions with 11 additional

gay informants (5 and 6 participants, respectively), which were not part of the original interview sample, but displayed comparable sociodemographic characteristics, and were sampled in a similar fashion. I conducted these focus groups in a mid-sized city near Cologne (western Germany) and in Munich (southern Germany). Occupations of participants included students, teachers, engineers, soldiers, and physicians, for example (for an overview see Appendix A, page 287).

I followed Marková's (2007) methodological recommendations for social representations research through focus groups: As miniature "thinking societies" (Moscovici, 2001, p. 12), focus group discussions are regularly used by scholars in a social representations tradition to garner insight into the degree to which social representations are shared, controversial, or challenged among a group of people (Flick, Foster, & Caillaud, 2015). Focus group discussions therefore allow to unearth the intersubjective, inherently *social* nature of social representations through their anchorings and objectifications (Flick et al., 2015; Howarth et al., 2014; Marková, 2016), and as such added a discursive social element of "knowledge encounters" (Jovchelovitch, 2007, p. 111) to the corpus of data collected.

I led discussions based on a dedicated semi-structured topic guide, exploring experiences of discrimination and stigmatisation, progressive social change towards anti-discrimination policies, civil unions, and marriage equality, and identity construction through consumption as it was important to informants' identity as a member of a historically stigmatised social group. At times I facilitated controversial discussion through provocative interventions, for example by introducing the quote of an anti-gay rights politician positing that the „perverted spectacle of pride parades" should be banned from the country's inner cities to „protect children and normal families". Such interventions are common in social representations scholarship, as they intend to spark controversy and unearth complementing and conflicting representations

towards the same knowledge object (e.g., the relevance of *pride parades* for informants' representations of gay identity and gay rights history) as they are being held across a group of people (Marková, Linell, Grossen, & Orvig, 2007).

Observing my informants that work as soldiers, journalists, or teachers, for example, engaging in heated discussion on the legitimacy of marriage equality, for instance, added not only further insights into how gay men self-represent under societal conditions in which stigma can longer be assumed to be dominant and ubiquitous, but also allowed insight into how their diverse self-representations complement and contradict one another. My focus group discussions therefore added crucial nuance to my individual-level consumer interviews, and enabled me to explore the socially shared nature of knowledge that naturally emerged within the group discussion setting (see also Krueger & Casey, 2009; Morgan, 1997; Myers, 1998).

I audio-recorded and transcribed both focus group sessions, which yielded an additional 178 pages of data (A4, 12pt, double-spaced). Informed consent was obtained prior to participation in the study, and all participants were handed a study information sheet and given room to discuss questions in a confidential setting. After the end of group discussions, I offered space for collective and individual debriefing and reflection, while sharing more of the theory rationale behind this study and its research questions.

3.3.3 - Expert Interviews

To further explore the historical embedding and development of social representations about and among gay men in Germany, I conducted formal, semi-structured interviews with a total of 11 expert informants, who shared with me their aggregated perspectives on gay lifestyles, (sub-)culture(s), and consumption over time, and therefore added to my macro- and meso-level understanding of contemporary

collective gay identities (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This expert data was additionally enriched through informal conversations during the participant observational part of my data collection (see below).

I purposefully sampled experts based on their individual biographical and occupational backgrounds, particularly as it seemed plausible to me that their knowledge and personal experience could leverage meaningful contributions to answering my research question of gay consumption under post-dominant stigma. My sample of experts included two current and former gay members of the German federal parliament (Deutscher Bundestag) involved in anti-discrimination and civil union legislation, two entrepreneurs catering to the LGBTQ community, a journalist of a leading German news magazine who has been writing on LGBTQ matters for many years, a prize-winning author and blogger on LGBTQ matters, a former cleric at the Vatican and now openly gay publicist, a diversity consultant to a major German city, a former social worker and LGBTQ rights activists focussing on LGBTQ senior citizens' interests, a social worker at an LGBTQ community centre in a major German city, and a former federal prosecutor and first-wave postwar gay-activist who—at the age of 82—was able to share with me insights from over 5 decades of campaigning for LGBTQ civil rights (see Appendix B, page 288).

Among the two entrepreneurs, I interviewed Laura Halding-Hoppenheit, the (female) owner of one of the longest running gay dance clubs in Germany (Kings Club Stuttgart, running for over 40 years), who was awarded the Cross of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany [Bundesverdienstkreuz] for her social engagement for the LGBTQ community and people living with HIV and AIDS. Laura furthermore serves on the city council of the city of Stuttgart in south-west Germany, and has kindly consented to be pictured and named by her clear name in this thesis.

Excerpt 1 - Laura wearing her Cross of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany [Bundesverdienstkreuz] with Christian at Kings Club Stuttgart, 29.04.2016

The second entrepreneur interviewed is the owner of a chain of gay saunas and bath houses in several major cities across Germany, and contributed important insights into (changing) patterns of sexual consumption among men who identify as gay or bisexual, but also those who neither identify as such, but still engage in casual sexual practices with other men (Ward, 2015).

Thus, my expert informants encompass self-identified gay men, heterosexual men, and heterosexual women, and were all cis-gendered. Ages ranged from 33 to 82 years, allowing me access to their often decade-long personal experience on changing representations of gay subjectivities and gay consumption practices. Through their longitudinal involvement with gay (sub-)culture(s), identity politics, and marketplace offerings, data from these expert interviews added a valuable layer of meso-level data points to my consumer level- (see above), and historical data (see below).

Tailored to each of my expert's biographically grounded area of expertise, I drafted thematic interview guides prior to each interview. During the interviews, I sought to explore informants' perspectives on gay identities and consumer behaviour across time, and their interdependence with representations of gay subjectivities in macro-political discourses, the legal sphere, mainstream and subcultural media, and in LGBTQ markets and servicescapes (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004; Coffin & Eichert, 2016; Coffin et al., 2019; Ghaziani, 2014; Haslop et al., 1998; Kates, 2002).

Typical interviews lasted between 90 and 120 minutes, were audio-recorded, verbatim transcribed, and yielded a total of 786 pages of data (A4, 12pt, double-spaced). Interviews were conducted over telephone, via Skype, or face-to-face at interviewee's homes, in hotel lobbies, at LGBTQ community centres, or at informants' offices or business venues. I drafted analytic memos for each interview to capture ad-hoc interpretations, insights, and leads for further inquiry, which became part of the data corpus (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). All experts were presented a study information sheet and signed informed consent sheets. With the exception of Laura (see above), all experts will be referred to by pseudonym throughout the remainder of this study.

3.3.4 - Historical and Contemporary Archival Data

Between November 2012 and January 2020, I collected historical and contemporary archival data as evidence that allowed me to trace, contrast, and compare changes of societal representations of gay men in German society, and self-representations of gay men as a social group since the Second World War. This macro- and meso-level data proved much valuable to my overall analysis, for example by allowing historical contextualisation and triangulation of data points from other empirical sources such as expert interviews or consumer interviews. This data also formed the backbone of my historical analysis of societal representations of gay men in

Germany over the decades, which gave rise to my discovery of the stigma configuration of *fragmented stigma*. Moreover, the collected historical and contemporary archival data informed my holistic phenomenological understanding of my research context and its specific socio-historical embedding (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011).

On a macro-level, I collected data on how gay men have been represented within the discourses of broader German society since the Second World War. I studied the objectifications of such societal representations in concrete instantiations such as, for example, legislative action, court rulings, journalistic coverage, or cultural products such as art, music, film, and television.

On a meso-level, I collected data on how gay men have represented themselves as a social group, and in relation to how they have been represented by broader German society at given points in time. I studied the objectifications of such self-representations in homoerotic art, fiction, photographs and film, as well as in subcultural (and often underground) periodicals, books, and political pamphlets published since 1945, among others. I furthermore collected data on historical marketplace infrastructures for non-heterosexuals such as gay bars, clubs and bookstores, community centres, cabarets and drag venues, or infrastructure for clandestine sexual consumption such as bath houses, parks, and public restrooms.

I sourced historical data on legislation and court rulings (regarding, for example, the de-criminalisation of male homosexuality in West Germany since 1969, the sequential adoption of non-discrimination regulations, or political debates surrounding civil union and same-sex marriage legislation) from the online archives of the German federal parliament (Deutscher Bundestag), the German federal constitutional court (Bundesverfassungsgericht), and through formal and informal interviews with gay rights activists, legal experts on the history of the German gay rights movement, and current and former members of the German federal parliament involved with LGBTQ-rights

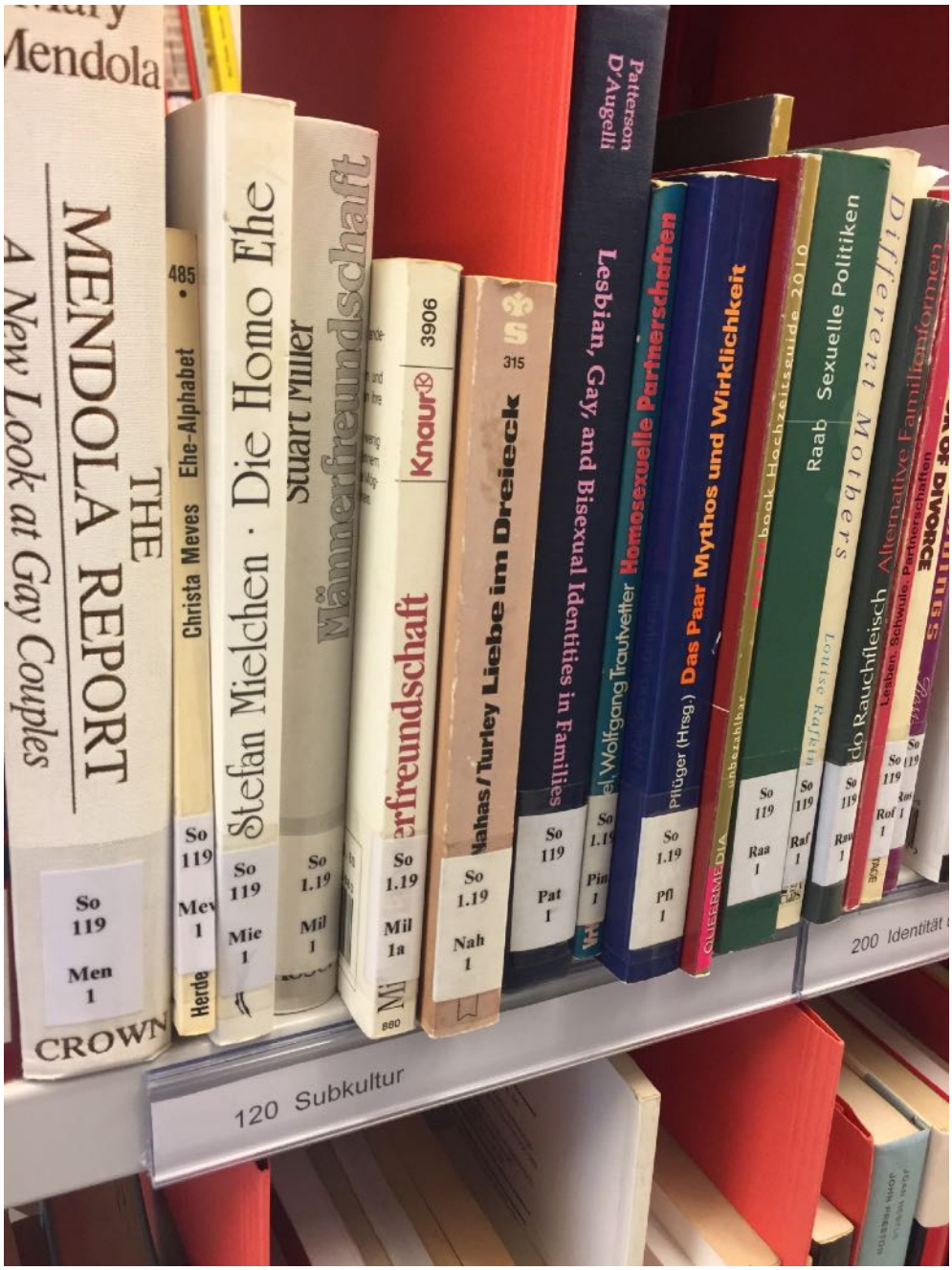
legislation.

I traced journalistic representations of gay men in leading national publications through periods of de-criminalisation and destigmatisation of male homosexuality (from 1969 onward), the HIV/AIDS crisis (from the 1980s), and the societal debates on civil union and marriage equality (from the late 1990s). My data collection incorporated digital and physical documents sourced from the archives of Der Spiegel (weekly, liberal-leaning, news magazine), Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (daily, conservative-leaning, newspaper), and Süddeutsche Zeitung (daily, liberal-leaning newspaper). In their respective online archives I conducted online searches for the German equivalents of the keywords „gay", „gay culture", „gay subculture", „gay stigma", „gay discrimination", „gay rights", „gay pride", „civil union", „same-sex marriage", „marriage equality", and „LGBT rights" which I read and further screened for the relevance of this study.

Where I considered it appropriate, I sourced original hardcopies of publications from archives and antiquarian booksellers, such as an 1973 issue of „Der Spiegel" with its cover story „Homosexuals — Freed but Ostracised" in the aftermath of de-criminalisation, or an original copy of the first major empirical investigation into gay lifeworlds in Germany by sociologists Martin Dannecker and Hartmut Reiche (1974), entitled „Der gewöhnliche Homosexuelle" [The Ordinary Homosexual].

I sourced further historical data on societal and self-representations of gay men throughout German history since the late 19th century through the library, archives, and exhibitions at the Gay Museum in Berlin, and the exhibition „Homosexualität_en" [Homosexualit_ies] at the German Historic Museum [Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin], covering 150 years of non-heterosexual history in Germany. I conducted systematic searches across the 25,183 archival records of the Gay Museum's online catalogue on the (respective German) keywords "subculture," "consumption," "civil

rights movement," "stigma," "discrimination," "gay movement," "scene," "market," and "lifestyle".



Excerpt 2 - Historic writings on gay subculture [Subkultur] and identity [Identität] at the Gay Museum Berlin

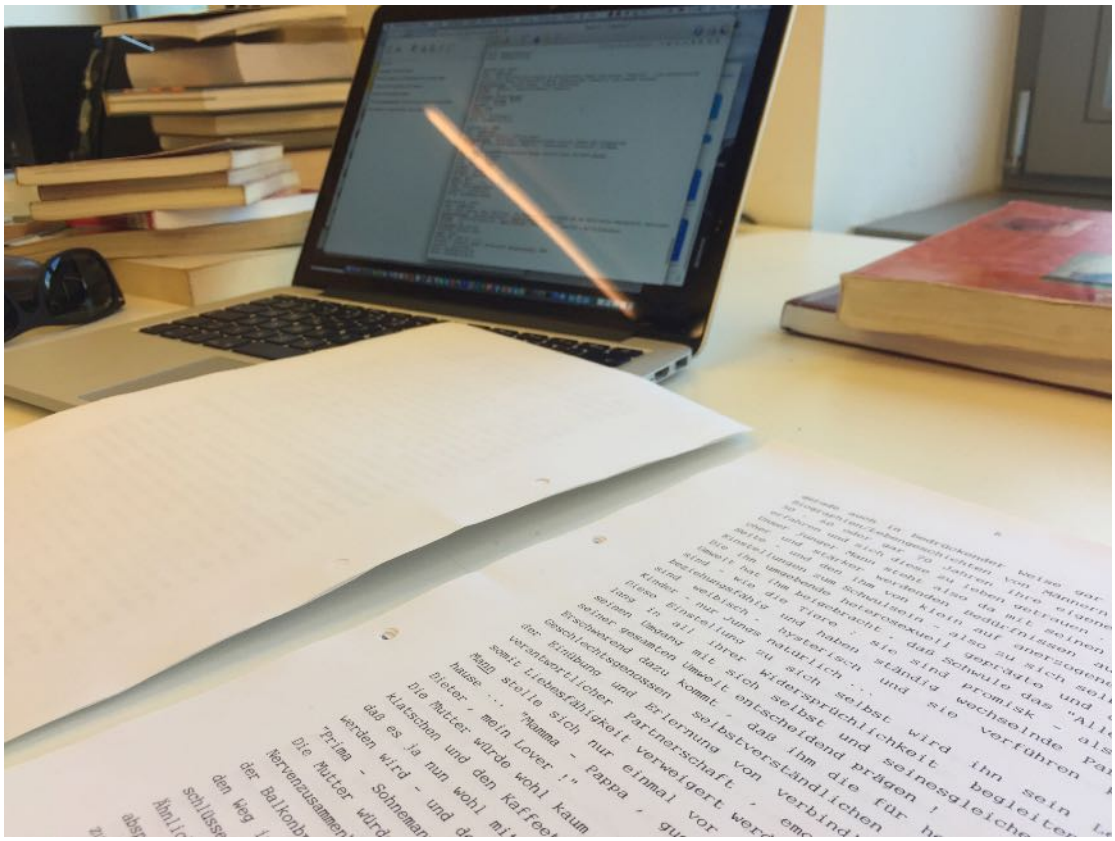
After initial screening, I narrowed down results for thematic fit with my research questions. This yielded a total of 96 records, totalling several thousand pages of published and unpublished books, manuscripts, periodicals, political manifestos,

dissertations, and academic sources since 1945.

Excerpt 3 - Archives of the Gay Museum Berlin

I further examined these records, during six days of archival work in Berlin in May 2017. There, I engaged with numerous additional records and exhibits, which I considered relevant to this research, and with which I came in contact during my research stays with the Gay Museum Berlin. I attended guided tours through exhibitions

and took photographs, photocopies, and analytic notes throughout this episode of data collection.



Excerpt 4 - Archival research at the Gay Museum Berlin

I complemented and triangulated primary data from my own archival research with secondary sources including work on the gay civil right movement in Germany after World War II (e.g. HAW, 1975; Heichel & Rinscheid, 2015; Plastargias, 2015; Preidel, 2015; Pretzel & Weiß, 2010, 2012, 2013), Robert Beachy's (2010, 2014) historical analysis of the emergence of gay identity in Weimar Germany, and early empirical sociological research on gay identities in post-war Germany (Dannecker & Reiche, 1974). I furthermore collected historical data on the self-representations of gay men as a social group in subcultural periodicals, books, films, and political manifestos which I sourced from the library and archives of the Gay Museum Berlin, informants' personal archives and memorabilia, various online resources, and antiquarian book

stores. I collected articles on gay self-representations based on on-going struggles with discrimination, the LGBTQ emancipation movement, and the civil-union and marriage equality debates form the online archives of *Queer.de* - an impactful German online magazine which has been catering to an LGBTQ audience since 2003.

Excerpt 5 - A model of Magnus Hirschfeld's Institut für Sexualwissenschaft [Instititute for Sexual Science] at the Gay Museum Berlin before a background of early homoerotic and gay-vague exhibits from the 1870s until Weimar Berlin

Published research on the gay civil rights movement in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom enabled me to situate the socio-historical particularities and similarities of my research context Germany with supranational themes of the gay (and later LGBTQ) liberation movement across other Western cultures in the second half of the twentieth century (e.g., Carter, 2004; D'Emilio, 1998; Edsall, 2003; Flynn, 2017; Halperin, 2002; McCaskell, 2016; M. Smith, 2008; Weeks, 2000). This international data enabled me also to contrast and compare historical particularities

between my own dataset and published consumer research on non-heterosexual consumers in North America (Kates, 2000, 2002, 2004; Kates & Belk, 2001), the United Kingdom (Keating & McLoughlin, 2005), and other parts of Europe (Rinallo, 2007; Visconti, 2008).

Alongside collecting published resources, I attended exhibitions on the LGBTQ civil rights movement in the United Kingdom at the People's History Museum in Manchester, UK, and the GLBT History Museum in San Francisco, California to garner first-person insights into these national contexts, and to contrast and compare these with my own primary data in Germany.

Excerpt 6 - Fieldwork on the history of the LGBTQ civil rights movement in the United Kingdom at the People's Museum Manchester

In conclusion, this rich contemporary and historical archival data corpus informed my understanding and theorisation of representations *about* and *among*

contemporary gay consumers in Germany, and afforded me insights into their consumption strategies as historically and culturally contingent on a sexual minority's decade-long struggle against criminalisation, stigmatisation, and discrimination.

3.3.5 - Participant Observation

As a fifth source of data, I engaged in multi-sited participant observation (Marcus, 1995), studying the identity dynamics of sexual minorities and their related consumption behaviour. Formal data collection commenced in 2012, ended in January 2020, and included numerous field trips to research-relevant events and consumption-scapes such as LGBTQ bars, clubs, commercial infrastructure, community centres, public and private parties, LGBTQ pride parades and street festivals, queer movie screenings and film festivals, art exhibitions, theatre and music performances, lectures, seminars, and meetings of LGBTQ student unions and professional associations.

Excerpt 7 - Exploring gay resistance and aesthetics at a drag show hosted by members of an LGBTQ

While I carried out the majority of fieldwork in Germany, specifically within the gay/queer scenes of Berlin and Cologne and their respective *gay villages* (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004; Coffin & Eichert, 2016; Ghaziani, 2014; Haslop et al., 1998; Kates, 2002), I also attended similar places and events in North America and the United Kingdom, to contrast and compare observations across cultures and spaces. I carried out most of the abroad field work in the Greater London and Manchester areas in the United Kingdom, and in New York City and the San Francisco Bay Area in the United States. This plurality of local perspectives and consumption performances raised my researcher awareness for nuances in gay identity work and consumption, and thus informed my later analysis and interpretation of collected data. In addition to this abroad fieldwork, I furthermore attended two one-week-long research trips on sexual minority rights to Prague, Czech Republic and Budapest, Hungary, which were organised by the „Queer Initiative" group of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, and which featured cultural events, as well as meetings and discussions with local politicians, NGO representatives and LGBTQ rights activists in these countries.

I attended conferences of the European Sociological Association's research network on „Sociology of Sexuality" in Prague (2015), Athens (2017), and Krakow (2019), to garner feedback and insights on sexuality-related research topics from outside my own field of socio-cultural consumption studies. In 2016, 2017, and 2018, I each attended an annual week of seminars, lectures, movie screenings, performances, and exhibitions on non-heterosexual sexualities and queer culture, organised by the University of Manchester's interdisciplinary „Centre for the Study of Gender, Sexuality and Culture". The annual themes of this series of events included „Love and its Others" (2016), „Why be normal?" (2017), and „Queer Longing" (2018). These conferences

offered me a humanities-led perspective on contemporary (and historical) LGBTQ and queer issues, and therefore complemented and challenged my own social-scientific researcher perspective. As such, they contributed to establish a deeper, interdisciplinary understanding of challenges faced by non-heterosexual and non-heteronormative consumers, and historically stigmatised social groups more broadly.

In sum, this fieldwork outside my own research context of Germany enabled me to further situate and challenge taken-for-granted preconceptions based on my personal coming-out and coming-of-age experience as a white, gay, cis-gendered, able-bodied, middle-class man in Germany, by offering vantage points outside the socio-historical particularities of my own socialisation, and therefore contributed to making the familiar strange again.

Excerpt 8 - Fieldwork on (discrete) gay lifestyles, aesthetics, and consumption in Manchester, United Kingdom

Throughout this multi-sited fieldwork, I conducted informal ethnographic interviews, collected photographic and videographic material, and drafted reflexive and analytic ad-hoc field notes that informed my later analysis and interpretation of data (Emerson et al., 2011; Marcus, 1995). This immersion into the contextualised life worlds of contemporary gay consumers in and beyond Germany allowed me to "actually witness or even experience the social representations operating in particular contexts or encounters" (Howarth, 2006, p. 73), and thus to garner a first-hand, embodied understanding of the multiplicity of configurations of gay stigma and how they shape consumption strategies across various socio-spatial contexts.

3.3.6 - Overview over the Data Corpus

The following table offers a general overview over my collected data and summarises data sources, the rationale for collecting this data, as well as the scope and timeframe of engagement for each data source. Additionally, profiles and demographics of my gay informants and expert informants can be found in Appendix A, page 287, and Appendix B, page 288, respectively.

Table 1 - Data Overview

	Interviews with Gay Consumers	Focus Group Discussions with Gay Consumers	Interviews with Expert Informants	Contemporary and Historical Archival Data	Multi-Sited Participant Observation
Rationale	Attaining a deep understanding of self-representations of gay men, their enactment, and objectifications in consumption strategies over time, space, and social context. Individual-level perspective on stigma configurations. Triangulation.	Attaining a deep understanding of converging and diverging self-representations, stigma management, and consumption strategies through discursive group discussions. Triangulation.	Attaining aggregated expert perspectives on contemporary and historical self-representations of gay men, gay lifestyles, and societal representations of gay men in German society over time. Triangulation.	Gaining insight into cultural turning points, representational transformations of gay self-representations, and representations of gay men in German society. Conceptualising stigma configurations through sociohistorical contextualisation and triangulation.	Attaining embodied and in situ insights into contemporary gay self-representations, consumption practices, anchorings, and objectifications. Increasing reflexivity, contextual sensitivity, inform data interpretation. Triangulation.
Scope	Semi-structured formal interviews with 14 gay male informants (45 to 90 minutes), audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview topic guide included questions about self-identity and collective identity, consumption and lifestyle, experience with stigma and discrimination, but also social change such as gay marriage. Purposefully sampled via mailing lists, Facebook groups, LGBTQ community centres, student unions, snowballing. 658 pages of text (A4, 12-pt, double-spaced).	Two semi-structured group discussions with 11 gay male informants (85 to 115 minutes), audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The discussion topic guide included questions about gay identity, consumption and lifestyle, experience with stigma and discrimination, but also social change such as gay marriage. Provocative interventions to foster discussion. Purposefully sampled via mailing lists, Facebook groups, LGBTQ community centres, student unions, snowballing. 178 pages of text (A4, 12pt, double-spaced).	Semi-structured formal interviews with 11 informants (70 to 120 minutes), audio-recorded and verbatim transcribed, individually tailored, expertise and biography-cantered interview topic guide, additional informal interviews. 781 pages of text (A4, 12-pt, double-spaced).	Historic documents from the archives of the Gay Museum Berlin; photographs, paintings, magazines, pamphlets, movies, audio recordings. Exhibition *Homosexualit_ies* at German Historical Museum Berlin, covering 150 years of non-heterosexual history. Newspaper articles (1950 onwards) from the archives of *Der Spiegel*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Queer.de*, among others. Additional exhibitions and archival research in the U.S. and UK for sociohistorical contextualization of major supranational turning points for gay rights (e.g., Stonewall Riots, Section 28).	Multi-sited participant observation in LGBTQ bars, clubs, commercial infrastructure, community centres, public and private parties, pride parades, street festivals, bathhouses, movie screenings, film festivals, art exhibitions, theatre and music performances, lectures, seminars, meetings of LGBTQ student unions and professional associations, among others. Increase awareness of sociohistorical particularities of German context through field trips to Germany, the UK, the U.S., Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Informal interviews.
Timeframe	2013 to 2016	2013	2016	2012 to 2020	2012 to 2020

In the following sub-chapter I will now elaborate on my analytic procedures.

3.4 - Data Analysis

In line with consumer culture theoreticians' interest in the "cultural meanings, socio-historic influences, and social dynamics that shape consumer experiences and identities in the myriad messy contexts of everyday life" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 875), and the no less "fluid, unfinalizable, and inherently messy" (Howarth et al., 2014, p. 83) qualities of social categories, identities, and the social representations that constitute their building blocks, the qualitative researcher finds themself confronted with the equally challenging and gratifying task to resist the urge to dismiss social life as simply "too messy and incoherent to be grasped by any one cohesive model" (Bauman, 1996, p. 26), but instead to try bringing *some* (analytical) *order* to *all that* (empirical) *mess*.

It is traditionally part of the inherently *messy* process of qualitative research to cycle between rounds of data collection and data analysis; processes of "iteration" (Spiggle, 1994, pp. 493-496), that incorporate the "categorization", "abstraction", and "integration" of data, and —most often— also the "refutation" of preliminary insights as a research project unfolds. In this regard, also interpretivist consumer research, grounded in social constructionist epistemology (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1973), seeks to cultivate credibility and increase transferability of its findings through falsification and revision, rather than through confirmation or verification (Popper, 1959/2002). In the words of philosopher Gerhard Vollmer (1995, p. 4), the scientific enterprise is the one in which "we collectively err upwards" [German original: "Wir irren uns empor"] in search of better, more consistent, coherent, and parsimonious explanations about our social and material life-worlds.

Manuscripts, however, are linear in nature, and—as the reader of this manuscript will likely confirm—they will only tolerate some limited degree of iteration, inconsistency, or, to borrow again from Bauman (1996): *mess*. The task is then to funnel the many iterations of data collection and analysis, of refutation and revision, of allowing complexity and then seeking to reduce it again, to funnel these processes, that have unfolded over the course of 7 years, into a consistent, coherent, parsimonious, and importantly *linear* report of this study's underlying analytic processes. In the following, I would like to take up this challenge.

3.4.1 - Analytic Procedures

Without pre-empting the study's findings chapter, yet also without elaborating at length on each false lead and analytic dead end encountered along the way, I will in the following seek to describe the analytic procedures that lead to the below presented theorisation in a most accessible, transparent, and parsimonious, yet comprehensive way.

From my first round of collecting consumer interviews and focus group discussions back in 2013, through conducting expert interviews, collecting archival data, and engaging in ethnographic fieldwork up until 2020, I analysed the collected data following principles of thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2009). Thematic analysis is an iterative, interpretivist part-to-whole approach common in qualitative consumer (culture) research (Spiggle, 1994; Thompson, 1997a), and in social representations research alike (Flick et al., 2015). While data from interviews, focus groups, archives, or participant observation naturally differ in scope, format and properties, these different data still remain accessible to thematic analysis which seeks to identify, group, and label reoccurring patterns—junks of data that form semantic units—and then abstract analytic insights

from them, organising them into consistent themes on an intratextual and intertextual level (Boyatzis, 1998; Spiggle, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

In their seminal article, which at the time of writing had received more than 100,000 citations on Google Scholar in a mere 15 years since its publication, Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87) famously describe six steps of thematic analysis: (1) familiarising oneself with the data, which includes transcription, a "reading and re-reading" of data, alongside a "noting down of initial ideas"; (2) the generation of initial (descriptive) codes, that is, "coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set" while "collating data relevant to each code" (ibid.); (3) the search for themes, which includes "collating codes to potential themes" and "gathering all relevant data to each potential theme" (ibid.), focussing on the relationship between semantic units (themes) rather than merely summarising, descriptive labels (codes); (4) "reviewing themes", that is, "checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2)" (ibid.) — this step is also sometimes called intertextual and intratextual, or "axial coding" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 13) by some authors; (5) "defining and naming themes", which includes an on-going iterative refinement of "the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87), making sure that themes capture a phenomenon's variety represented in the data, and that themes are mutually exclusive and not overlapping; and (6) producing the final research report, thereby ensuring a "selection of vivid, compelling extract samples" (ibid.) that adequately represent the analytic categories discovered. This final step also requires "relating [the analysis back] to the research question and literature" (ibid.).

As I assembled the final data corpus through several iterative rounds of simultaneous data collection and analysis (see above), I followed Braun and Clarke (2006) and Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) in developing my initial codes by

adopting a hybrid approach of data-driven and theory-driven codebook development. I did so to combine the explorative openness of inductive theory building approaches (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998), while garnering additional insights though coding for already existing concepts and theory frameworks derived from consumer research in the domains of historically stigmatised consumer groups (Crockett, 2017; Luedicke, 2015; Peñaloza, 1994; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Visconti et al., 2014), sexual minorities (Coffin et al., 2019; Ginder & Byun, 2015; Haslop et al., 1998; Kates, 2002, 2004; Kates & Belk, 2001; Keating & McLoughlin, 2005; Rinallo, 2007; Visconti, 2008), subcultural consumption (Belk & Costa, 1998; Kates, 2002; Kozinets, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), and stigma theoretics (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001; Major & O'Brien, 2005; Pescosolido & Martin, 2015).

Drawing on social representations theory's concepts of *anchoring* and *objectification* (Höijer, 2011; Moscovici, 1961/2007, 1984; Rateau et al., 2012; Wagner & Hayes, 2005), I coded, for example, how gay men *anchored* themselves, or were anchored by outside Others, in concepts (e.g., straight-acting, flamboyant, creative, perverted), emotions (e.g., fear, guilt, pride, love, hate), themes (e.g., liberalism, oppression, freedom, politicality), metaphors (e.g., coming out of the closet, living as a rainbow family, living a double-life), and antinomies (e.g., shame vs. pride, feminine vs. masculine, natural vs. perverted, us vs. them). Because anchorings are abstract in their relational nature, interlinking with existing systems of representations, I also coded for their concrete instantiations: *objectifications.*

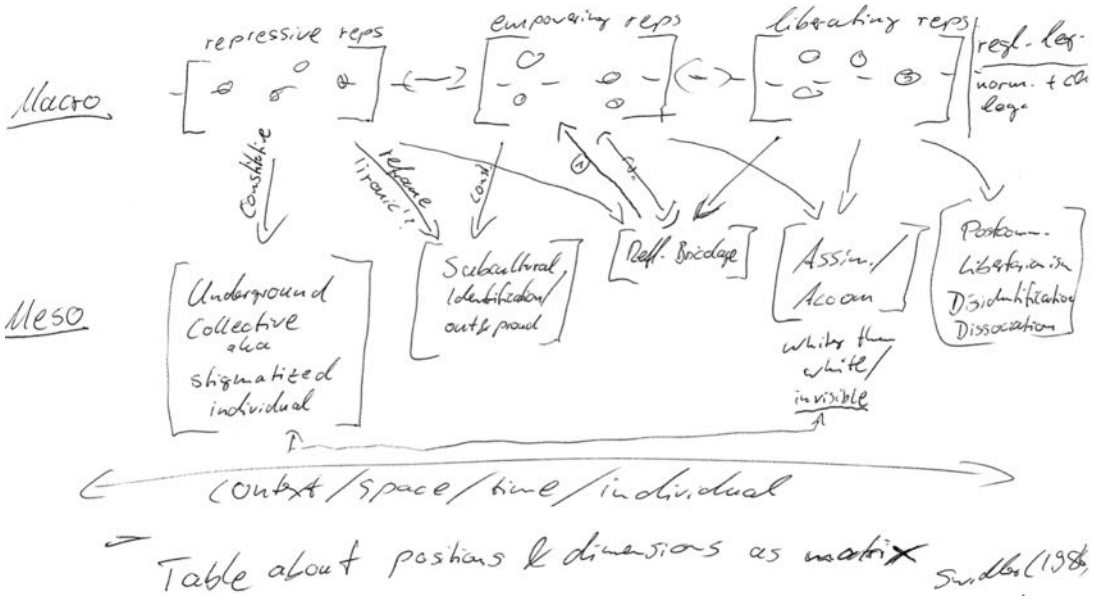
For example, I coded how gay men as a social group objectified themselves or were being objectified in images (e.g., bodybuilders, drag queens, "twinks" [emic: describing an archetypical body type of young, slender appearance with little or no body hair], "bears" [emic: describing an archetypical body type of older, muscular or heavy-set appearance with heavy body hair and beard]), language (e.g., the word *faggot*

[German: “Schwuchtel”], subcultural gay language and modes of expression such as, for example, using female pronouns on male [gay] friends), emotions (e.g., symbolic expressions of fear, pride, love, hate, for example in relation to HIV/AIDS), persons (e.g., Klaus Wowereit [former mayor of Berlin, and first high-ranking publicly ‘out’ German politician], Georg Uecker [gay German actor, famous for the first gay kiss in a mainstream German prime-time TV show], Freddie Mercury, Harvey Milk), social structures (e.g., LGBTQ student associations, coming out support groups, or pride parades), objects and artefacts (e.g., rainbow flags, wedding rings, pink triangles [used by the Nazis to mark gay concentration camp inmates], piercings, media, books, art), places (e.g., the gay village, cruising park, dance club), encounters with stigma and violence (e.g., gay-bashings, hate crimes, negative/positive market and service encounters), and symbolic consumption practices (e.g., fashion, bodily aesthetics, music, film, events, living arrangements).

Following recommendations by Braun and Clarke (2006), my analysis developed from (descriptive) codes to first and second level abstracted analytic themes, to relating these themes to one-another and external concepts, while carefully working towards answering my main research question, and carving out a meaningful contribution to marketing and consumer research. Contrasting and comparing my emerging themes and interpretations from micro- (consumer) and meso-level (social group) data with findings from existing research on sexual minorities and historically stigmatised consumer groups (e.g., Crockett, 2017; Kates, 2002; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) lead me to expand my analytic focus to the macro-level (society) of changing representations of gay men in Germany, which suggested further rounds of data collection moving from individual-level data (interviews, focus groups) to macro-level data (expert interviews, mass-media and archival data; see sections on data collection above).

Throughout the various rounds of data collection, I coded for data-emerging, and theory derived aspects on gay stigma and consumption dynamics which seemed relevant to answering my research questions. I carried out all initial and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), and the development and refinement of themes and the relationship between them (Braun & Clarke, 2006), using QSR's computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) NVivo versions 10-12. NVivo facilitated the organisation of a large data corpus, and allowed for analysis across different data formats (text, image, audio-visual sources) using the same codebook and themes.

At various times throughout the course of this research project I conducted and revised thematic network analyses following the recommendations of Attride-Stirling (2001) who recommends visually grouping themes hierarchically into basic, organising, and global themes, and exploring relationships between these themes to arrive at more insightful and robust interpretations of the data. Visualising themes in thematic networks proved particularly useful in deriving my final conceptual model of consumption under conditions of fragmented stigma (see below). Throughout my analysis, I kept adding additional data until theoretical saturation was reached, that is, when adding additional units of data to the data corpus (e.g., interviews, archival records, ethnographic data points) added redundancy, rather than capturing additional variance of the research phenomenon of interest (Spiggle, 1994).



Excerpt 9 - An early analytic visualisation of themes and conceptual categories displaying preliminary findings, hand drawing, 14.11.2016

After several rounds of data collection, analysis, and refinement, I re-analysed the entire data-corpus for the final version of this manuscript in three steps: First, I analysed macro- (society) and meso- (social group) level data for historical turning points and shifting anchorings and objectifications that would mark epochal transitions in how gay men were being represented in German societal discourse. This analytic focus on stigmatising processes and outcomes of labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination, following Link and Phelan (2001), lead to the emergence of the concept of *stigma configurations*, and three such distinct stigma configurations which I call *hegemonic* stigma, *dominant* stigma, and *post-dominant* stigma (see the findings chapter below). This historic thematic analysis forms the backdrop against which I then theorise gay men's *consumption under fragmented stigma*, a specific sub-type of a *post-dominant stigma configuration*.

Second, I analysed meso- (social group) and micro- (consumer) level data, as well as my own ethnographic data points, for anchorings and objectifications representative of how contemporary gay men in Germany self-represent as members of

a social group, and in context of how they are being represented within contemporary broader German society. This analytic step focussed also on consumption practices, and the strategic identity work and symbolic labour gay men conduct in order to navigate their belonging to a historically stigmatised social group under conditions of post-hegemonic, and post-dominant stigma (see below).

Finally, I reconciled and integrated my analytic insights form my socio-historical and consumer-level analyses, hardening the robustness of my interpretations through triangulation across consumer interview, consumer focus groups, expert interviews, historical and contemporary archival data, and ethnographic data points (see below). Before presenting the final results from this analysis, I will now comment on the robustness of my analysis, quality indicators of qualitative research, research ethics, and reflect on my own researcher positionality given the research question and context.

3.4.2 - Robustness of Analysis and Quality Criteria

In their classic work "Naturalistic Inquiry", Lincoln and Guba (1985) name four dimensions for evaluating the robustness of qualitative research: *credibility*, *dependability*, *transferability*, and *confirmability*. My analysis seeks to be credible with regard to its raw data and the interpretations derived from it. I have combined multiple data sources on the levels of individuals, social groups, and society, over a course of eight decades, and through seven years of in-situ fieldwork. Dependability, in turn, describes the internal coherence of the analysis, and the dependence of the findings presented with the data collected, that is, that findings can, and actually are derived from the underlying data as the researcher claims (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

On several occasions during the course of this research project have I sought feedback and advice from both my PhD advisors, my PhD researcher peers, and other experienced consumer researchers. Also at several points in time, I have collected

feedback on my emerging interpretations from a sub-sample of my expert and consumer informants through de-briefing sessions, in which I disclosed my methodological approach, my interpretation of primary data excerpts, and the preliminary results of my theory building efforts. Informant debriefing sessions helped me to strengthen the plausibility and robustness of my theorisation, in conjunction with the invaluable feedback I received as I presented the on-going research project at international academic conferences, workshops, roundtables, doctoral seminars, and symposia. Feedback from these events allowed me to increase the dependability between findings and underlying data, and the overall credibility of my interpretation and theorisation:

For example, and among others, I garnered feedback on my data and emerging findings at the 2015 "Qualitative Data Analysis Workshop" at the University of Arkansas, USA (mentors: John W. Schouten, James H. McAlexander); the 2015 "Qualitative Methods and Research Design" seminar at SKEMA Business School, University of Lille, France (mentors: Nil Özçağlar-Toulouse, Luca M. Visconti); the 2016 "American Marketing Association Sheth Foundation Doctoral Consortium" at the University of Notre Dame, USA (mentors: Linda L. Price, Russell W. Belk); the 2016 "Consumption Theory: A Canon of Classics" doctoral workshop at the University of Southern Denmark (mentors: Eric J. Arnould, Pauline Maclaren); the 2016 "Association for Consumer Research Doctoral Consortium" in Berlin, Germany (mentors: Cele C. Otnes, Lisa Peñaloza, Michelle F. Weinberger); and the 2017 "Consumption, Markets, and Culture Theorization" workshop at Stockholm Business School, Sweden (mentors: Craig J. Thompson, Steven Miles).

I further presented results from preliminary analyses of this project's data at international academic conferences, including, among others, the 2015 "Consumer Culture Theory Conference" in Arkansas, USA — where my contribution was awarded joint winner of the Conference Best Special Session Award; the 2015 "12th Conference

of the European Sociological Association" in Prague, Czech Republic; the 2016 "Cass Business School PhD Research Days" in London, United Kingdom — where my presentation was awarded the Best Research Presentations Award; and the 2017 "13th Conference of the European Sociological Association" in Athens, Greece. Moreover, I was able to receive valuable feedback on my work as a member of an academic roundtable on research on sexualities in marketing and consumer research at the 2016 "Consumer Culture Theory Conference" in Lille, France (mentor and organiser: Shona M. Bettany); as a delegate at the 2016, 2017, and 2018 "Sexuality Summer School" postgraduate research students' events at the University of Manchester, United Kingdom; and as the organiser and panellist of a roundtable entitled "Happily Ever After!? Exploring the Future of Research on Marginalized, Stigmatized, and Vulnerable Consumer Collectives" held at the 2018 Consumer Culture Theory Conference in Odense, Denmark (panellists among others: Fleura Bardhi, Shona M. Bettany, Lisa Peñaloza, Linda L. Price, Diego Rinallo, John W. Schouten, Luca M. Visconti). Beyond these events, my final theorisation benefitted substantially from the constructive and helpful feedback received at the *Social Representations Lab* research seminar series at the London School of Economics, and the helpful feedback from three anonymous expert reviewers, and one associate editor throughout three rounds of revision of an article on this dissertation's key findings at the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

In sum, the feedback received from my own informants, through the above formal events, and the many more informal conversations with experienced researchers over the past seven years, proved invaluable for the emergence and refinement of the credibility and dependability of the findings still to be presented further below in this manuscript. Indeed, as a researcher, I stand on the proverbial shoulder of giants, and this author humbly acknowledges that *it takes a village* to make meaningful contributions to the state of knowledge in one's academic field (Palmer & Gasman, 2008).

Transferability, then, in the sense of Lincoln and Guba (1985), describes the degree to which analytic insights derived from one empirical context can be transferred and applied in a different context. Although this research project is embedded in the socio-cultural and historical context of gay consumers in Germany, my *conceptual model of consumption under fragmented stigma* (below) seeks to offer transferrable insights into historically stigmatised social groups' consumption under conditions of fragmented stigma. While further research is undoubtedly required, I will show below how insights from my theorisation relate to other contexts such as, for example, immigrant consumers (Peñaloza, 1994), black consumers in the United States (Crockett, 2017), religious minorities (Jafari & Goulding, 2008), or social groups stigmatised due to their appearance (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) or (in-)abilities (Adkins & Ozanne, 2005). My theorisation should therefore as a minimum facilitate insights into other contexts in which historically stigmatised social groups consume strategically when their unambiguous and dominant stigmatisation can no longer be taken for granted.

Finally, for Lincoln and Guba (1985), confirmability relates to other researchers' ability to confirm, or reproduce similar findings to the same research question given the phenomenon and context under scrutiny. Through iterative rounds of data collection and analysis, data source triangulation, and plausibility checks through the above-described feedback measures, I believe that other researchers might be well-equipped to confirm and possibly reproduce the findings underlying my theorisation. I have strived to describe my research process in a transparent, coherent, and rigorous way that should not only establish dependability between my data, analytic procedures, and findings presented, but also allow for confirmability given the research site, research question, and theoretical and methodological frameworks underlying this study.

3.5 - Researcher Positionality, Ethics, and Limitations

In this final section of the methodology chapter, will comment on my own positionality as a researcher in relation to the research question, and the phenomenon under study. I will further elaborate on matters of research ethics and good academic conduct, and on methodological limitations before presenting my findings in the subsequent chapter.

I, the author, identify as a white, able-bodied, cis-gender, gay male in his mid-30s, and of middle-class upbringing, who came of age in the late 1990s and early 2000s in a suburban town of 40,000 inhabitants in Germany's traditionally more conservative South-West. My professional interest in the consumption strategies of historically stigmatised social groups before the backdrop of progressive social change therefore bears links to my own personal biography, and, as such, I do have a personal interest in making such research *matter* (Flyvberg, 2001). Neither did my own coming-out as gay (both to myself, and to friends, family, and relevant Others) cause me severe hardships along my biography, nor did I grow up under "post-gay" (Ghaziani, 2011) conditions under which sexual otherness and non-heterosexual identities went without questioning, or, at times, social policing in defence of perceived normative hierarchies (Rubin, 1984).

While, due to my sexual identity, I have never experienced physical harm, or structural discrimination that negatively impacted my life prospects in a meaningful way (Hatzenbuehler, 2014; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013; Link & Phelan, 2001), I did personally experience my share of stigmatising encounters, lost friendships, social setbacks, and verbal abuse. I will not elaborate on these further, as the concrete nature of such encounters does not make a difference for my argument. Also, I do not intend to evoke sympathy or pity from the reader. Compared to many others, including some of

the men I was lucky enough to interview for this study, I have had much less of a burden to carry, and I am reflexive of the favourable alignment of capitals and circumstances beyond my own control or doing which allowed me to occupy such a position of relative privilege (Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). Instead, I write these lines to remind myself just as much as the reader, that even the most privileged of us, who inescapably belong to a historically stigmatised social group, have their own, sometimes very personal and painful stories to tell about encounters with stigma and discrimination. It is this constantly "not knowing what the others present are 'really' thinking about [us]" (Goffman, 1963, p. 14), that binds us together as a community of "common fate" (Lewin, 1948, p. 166). In order to conduct research such as the present one, being sensitised, and emotionally attuned to such experiences is, I find, mostly an asset, and not a liability.

Along the course of this project, my own subject position and experience allowed me relatively easy access to informants, allowed me to establish rapport, and to create an environment of recognition, trust, and honest interest in the other person's life, stories, and struggles (Jovchelovitch, 2007; Marková, 2016). Being a relatable, *fellow* gay man enabled me to cultivate an atmosphere of openness and candour between my interviewees and me, who were often willing to share also their more personal and at times painful stories in relation to their coming out, and about their first-hand experiences with stigma and discrimination. My *being in the same boat,* no matter my profession, also contributed to counteracting possible perceived power asymmetries between a researcher and their participants within an interview of group discussion setting (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In this regard, my long-term mentor Sandra Jovchelovitch (2007, p. 131) speaks of the "ethical imperative of recognising the other and engaging in a dialogical encounter where perspectives can be understood", particularly when engaging with stigmatised and possibly vulnerable populations; for

the “unavoidable ethical dimension for the plight of others is seen, known, and difficulty to deny” (p. 156).

Moreover, as I was being socialised into a local *gay subculture* as I was growing up (Kates, 2002), I have alongside acquired the *subcultural capital* (Thornton, 1995) necessary not only to decipher and understand, but also to partake and master those “unique jargons, rituals, and modes of symbolic expression” (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995, p. 46) common among gay consumers with relative ease and proficiency. This embodied (emic) understanding of various consumption phenomena related to gay men and their social structures, combined with my analytic (etic) interest in explanatory theories and frameworks as a life-long student of the social sciences, has hopefully left me to be embedded-enough, yet analytically distanced as necessary to arrive at meaningful “thick description[s]” (Geertz, 1973, pp. 5-6) and rich insights into the consumption strategies of gay men and other historically stigmatised social groups under conditions of fragmented stigma. I am particularly grateful to my two PhD advisors, who identify as a heterosexual, cis-male, and a heterosexual cis-female respectively, and who provided me with the much-needed external perspective to reap the fruit of my (sub-)cultural expertise, “being native”, while preventing me from “going native” (Kanuha, 2000, p. 439). Thanks to my PhD advisors, I was able to more than once make the familiar strange again.

Occupying the subject position I do, however, limits my personal perspective to that of a person of a particular upbringing and life history. As such, the qualitative researcher must be reflexively aware of their own subjectivity, what this subjectivity allows them to see and not to see, and how to distinguish between a cognitive-analytic form of *understanding*, and an embodied sense of *knowing* (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Schwandt, 2000). There is a profound difference in quality between, for example, a cis-man’s *abstract* understanding of women’s struggle with

sexism, objectification, and gender-based violence, and the deeper and much more *relatable, empathetic* understanding of a women who either had to encounter such phenomena first-hand herself, or can draw on her biography-derived embodied understanding of what it *means* to be a woman within still widely patriarchic societies. Marková (2016) reminds us of this intersubjective psychology of perspective-taking, and its relevance for qualitative researchers in general, and researchers in a social representations tradition in particular. Notwithstanding such limitations by my own researcher subjectivity, I believe the above described measures to increase credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of my analytic procedures and findings allow for overall robust and trustworthy results in line with standards of good academic conduct.

With regard to research ethics, I followed guidelines issued by City, University of London, and best-practice recommendations by Israel and Hay (2005) to ensure compliance with all applicable regulations. This study underwent consideration by the appropriate ethics committee at City, University of London, where it received ethical clearing. All informants were handed a study information sheet (see Appendix C, page 289), were given an opportunity to ask questions before and after participation in the study, and written informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Where written informed consent could not be obtained (for example when conducting interviews via Skype), I audio-recorded myself reading out the contents of the informed consent sheet (see Appendix D, page 291) to the participant and asked for their oral consent. I collected basic demographic information of all participants (see Appendices A and B, pages 287 and 288), and ensured data was stored safely and was only accessible to authorised persons as outlined in the informed consent sheet. I followed best-practice procedures to anonymise or pseudo-anonymise interview- and focus group data (Israel & Hay, 2005), and I will use pseudonyms to refer to my participants when using

excerpts to illustrate the results of my analysis.

While I sought to sample informants across a broad socio-demographic spectrum, there are certain limitations emerging also from the composition of my pool of participants: First, all my consumer participants were of a white European ethnic background, and of a working-class or middle-class upbringing. All identified as gay, cis-males, and none of my informants identified as gender-non-binary or gender fluid. Although this does not impair the quality of my analysis or robustness of my findings per-se, I must acknowledge that it is for future research to assess the boundary conditions of my findings with regard to other research populations, and the dependence of my theorisation with regards to intersectional configurations across the above-described dimensions (Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020).

3.6 - Summary of Methodology Chapter

In this chapter I have described and justified the methodological approach through which I seek to answer my theory-focused research question through the collection and analysis of qualitative empirical data. I have located this study's positioning within a social constructionist epistemology, and I have introduced the reader to my empirical research context of gay men's consumer behaviour in contemporary Germany. I have then elaborated on rationale, scope, and properties of my collected data from consumer interviews, consumer focus groups, expert interviews, historical and contemporary archival records, and participant observation over the course of seven years.

I followed principles of thematic analysis and iterative interpretivist data analysis common in consumer culture research and research on social representations, discussed the robustness and limitations of my methodological approach, and offered

reflexive insights into my own researcher positionality and matters of research ethics. In the next chapter, I will now present the findings of my analysis of contemporary gay men's consumption under post-dominant stigma as a historically social group that has become almost equal, but not quite yet.

4 - FINDINGS

My analysis of social representations *about* and *among* gay men in contemporary Germany results in a conceptual model of *consumption under fragmented stigma.* Figure 1 (page 136) provides a schematic summary of this model, and Figure 2 (page 223) provides a more detailed summary which includes key anchorings, objectifications, and consumption examples. I conceptualise consumption under fragmented stigma in terms of three key distinctions from consumption under dominant stigma, its predecessor so well-documented by prior consumer research.

First, when a historically stigmatised social group has eventually achieved overall greater recognition and respect, as is the case with gay consumers in Germany, broader society no longer anchors the social group and its member in a single dominant, and unequivocally stigmatising societal representation. Instead, this dominant representation fragments into three *societal* representations, which I call *oppressive*, *enabling*, and *normalised* societal representations (see left side of Figure 1). These three societal representations simultaneously coexist in German society, and, as they represent members of the social group in vastly different ways, compete for representational dominance within societal discourse. Taken together, these three societal representations form the *post-dominant* stigma configuration which I call *fragmented stigma*.

Second, under fragmented stigma, gay men in Germany find themselves no

longer uniformly forced into a subordinate, *sub*-cultural position (Thornton, 1997), as prior research under dominant stigma had rightfully found at the time (Coffin et al., 2019; Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996). Instead, contemporary gay men identify with either one of five distinct subgroups that have gradually evolved as outside social pressures on gay men as a social group in general have eased. Within this more liberal societal environment, gay men gained more freedom to self-represent beyond traditional *subcultural* modes of being, but rather based on their individual differences and preferences (Kates, 2002). I theorise each of these subgroups as ideal-typical bundles of self-representations, and I label them *underground*, *discrete*, *hybrid*, *anti-stigma*, and *post-stigma* social groups (see right side of Figure 1). Among these five subgroups, only *discrete* gay men are still heavily symbolically invested with their identities in the local gay communities, "gay ghettos" (Kates, 2002, p. 385), and the commercial structures they have come to rely on under the dominant stigma of the past. Therefore, it is mostly *discrete* gay men who seek to maintain these formerly subcultural commercial or communitarian structures. The other four subgroups exist predominantly as "imagined communities" (Anderson, 2006) of like-minded gay men, who share certain social representations of *what it means* to be a gay man in contemporary Germany. This is because *underground* gay men are unable to form visible, overground collective structures, whereas *hybrid*, *anti-stigma*, and *post-stigma* men no longer depend on them, although for different reasons.

Which of these five subgroups gay men predominantly identify with depends not only on their individual biographies, social status, political beliefs, and the relevance they ascribe to their homosexuality as an identity marker, but also considerably on the power relations between these gay men and relevant Others in a given social setting or encounter. These relevant Others may include heterosexual families, friends, employers, or market actors, for example.

Third, a transition from a dominant to a fragmented stigma configuration expands the opportunities for stigmatised consumers to use their consumption strategically—that is, in an organised way to "reach several different life goals" (Swidler, 1986, p. 277). Discrete gay men continue to use consumption to avoid, cope with, and resist their (actual or perceived) ongoing oppression. The other four subgroups, however, use their consumption strategically to *hide and deny* their stigma marker (discrete social group), to pursue *representational reform* (hybrid social group), for a *deconstruction of differences* between gay men and heterosexuals (anti-stigma social group), and to *express their individuality* (post-stigma social group) (see middle column in Figure 1).

I will now introduce each element of my conceptual model, starting with the three co-existing societal representations of gay men within German society, and followed by the five self-representations among gay men and their distinct consumption strategies. Throughout the findings chapter, I will use excerpts from my data set, in order to illustrate how societal representations and self-representations encounter each other in situated "mixed contacts" (Goffman, 1963, p. 12) and thus require, enable, or afford gay consumers opportunities to strategically use their consumption to enact, resist, or reform representations of their social group.

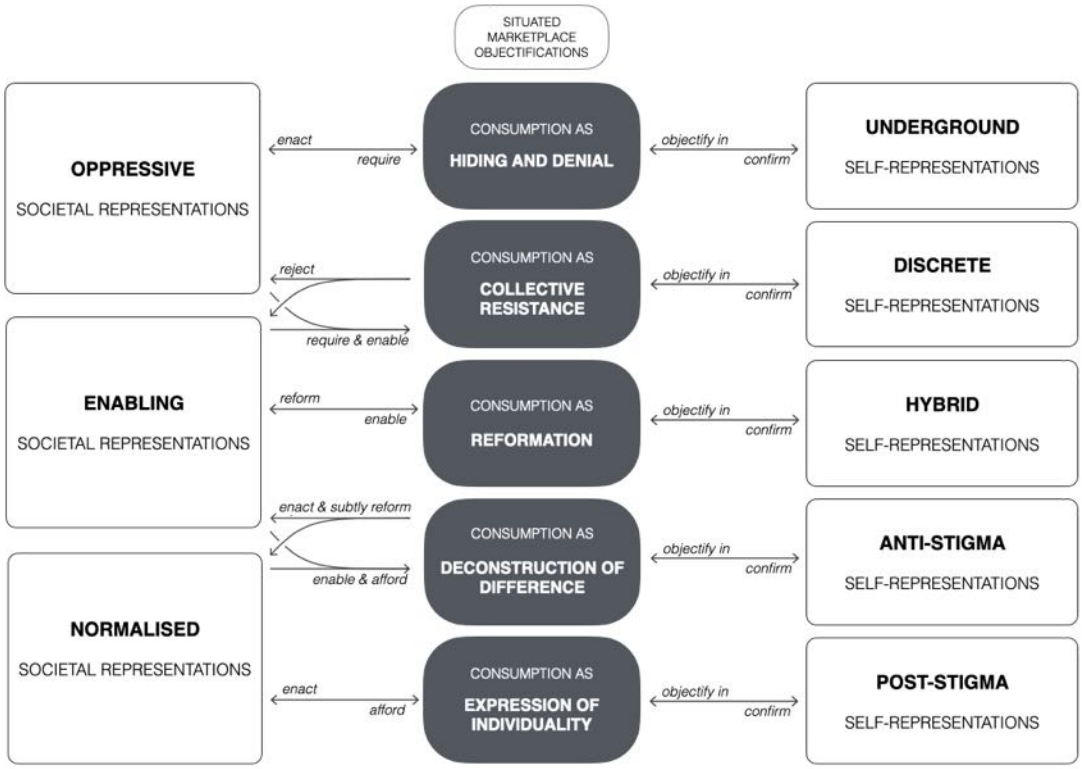


Figure 1 - A Conceptual Model of Consumption under Fragmented Stigma

4.1 - Societal Representations of Gay Men under Fragmented Stigma

Once a society begins to treat a historically stigmatised social group with more respect, or even as equal in some domains, the previously dominant, stigmatising representation of this social group described by earlier consumer research appears to fragment into three competing representations, which I call *oppressive*, *enabling*, and *normalised societal representations*. Each of these societal representations anchors stigmatised consumers in a different, ideal-typical set of images, concepts, emotions, and antinomies, and objectifies these anchoring in ideal-typical ways. Next, I will present these three societal representations and trace their historical origins, facilitated by excerpts from my dataset. I will also show how these societal representations have very tangible implications when they come to bear in situated encounters between gay

men and the "other knowledges" (Jovchelovitch, 2007, p. 154) of heterosexual consumers - especially when accompanied by significant power imbalances.

4.1.1 - Oppressive Societal Representations

Societal representations that I call *oppressive societal representations* portray members of a historically stigmatised social group as outright unacceptable, disgraceful, fundamentally unequal, and as lesser or even non-human beings. Oppressive representations anchor gay men in representations of perversion, criminality, immorality, or pathology, in antinomies such as unnatural versus natural, wrong versus right, or sinful versus righteous, and in feelings of fear, disgust, and hate. As such, the broader society legitimises the oppression and discrimination of gay consumers. As the stigmatised group has, according to oppressive representations, not even the right to exist, some citizens consider not only symbolic but also physical violence against gay consumers as legitimate. Oppressive societal representations are likely to be the only societal representations present in contexts of, what I have called above, a *hegemonic stigma configuration*.

According to my historical analysis, oppressive representations are the longest-standing among German societal representations of gay men, dating back to the systematic persecution of "sodomites" since the 13th century (Jordan, 1997). The modern era of gay oppression dates back to 1872, when Paragraph 175 was introduced into the German Empire's criminal code [Strafgesetzbuch, StGB], subjecting male homosexuality to prosecution. While homosexual acts between men were punishable with up to four years in prison, financial penalty, and loss of civil rights, homosexual acts between women remained unsanctioned.

After the end of World War I in 1918, an illustrious bohemian art scene emerged in the capital city Berlin, despite the persistence of criminalisation, offering protection

and plausible deniability for those with non-normative tastes and desires (Beachy, 2014). After this brief flare-up of liberal social sentiments, however, oppressive representations flourished under the rule of the Nazi regime from 1933, who tightened and extended Paragraph 175 and increased the maximum prison sentence for same-sex sexual acts from four to ten years (von Wahl, 2011; Zinn, 2017). Also in 1933, the Nazis raided Magnus Hirschfeld's *Institute for Sexual Sciences* [Institut für Sexualwissenschaft] and burned most of its records and books from the institute's library. In 1935, Heinrich Himmler created the 'Reich Central Office for Combating Homosexuality and Abortion' as a sub-department of Gestapo (the Nazi's secret state police). Despite, or possibly *because* of the Nazis' own homoerotic fetishisation of the male body, particularly within the Hitler Youth and Himmler's Schutzstaffel (SS) (Zinn, 2017), Hitler's henchmen increased pressure on homosexual men: Between 1935 and 1942 more than 50,000 men were convicted based on the revised Paragraph 175, over 100,000 were *recorded* on so-called *pink lists* and marked as socially aberrant (von Wahl, 2011). About 15,000 homosexual men were sent into concentration camps, where many became victims of medical experiments, castration, and sterilisation. Less than 40% of those sent to concentration camps survived (ibid.).

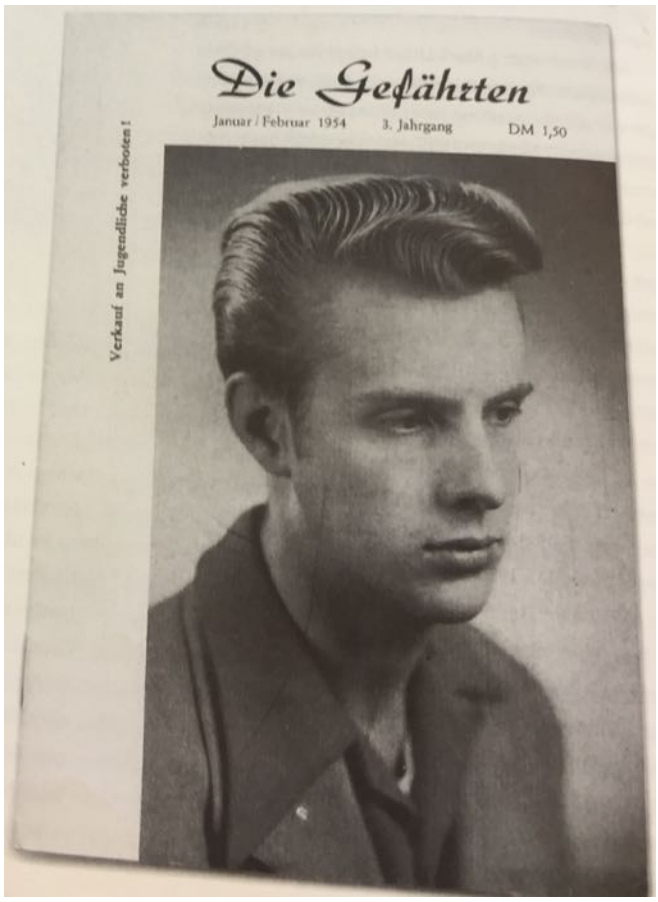
Still after the end of the Second World War, the government of the new Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) retained Paragraph 175 StGB in the unchanged version as coined by the Nazi regime until 1969. During this time, any form of consensual sexual contact between two adult men remained illegal in West Germany, and gay men freed from concentration camps by Allied Forces were sent to prisons to serve their remaining sentences (Pretzel & Weiß, 2010; von Wahl, 2011). Between 1950 and 1969, criminal investigations based on Paragraph 175 StGB were launched against more than 100,000 men, of which about 50,000 were convicted of sodomy [German: "Unzucht"] (von Wahl, 2011). Many of those convicted faced prison sentences and even solitary

confinement in cases of 'recidivism' (Hoffschildt, 2000). Victims of Paragraph 175 StGB kept fighting for legal rehabilitation and the striking-off of their official criminal records until very recently, when, in 2017, the German federal parliament (Deutscher Bundestag) passed a law to vindicate, and compensate at least some of the gay men who suffered from injustice also in post-war Germany (Bundesministerium der Justiz und für Verbraucherschutz, 2017). In the early post-war republic, however, several attempts to challenge and change Paragraph 175, either in the Federal Republic's parliament or via the federal constitutional court remained unsuccessful (Pretzel & Weiß, 2010; von Wahl, 2011). In 1957 the German federal constitutional court ruled that "sexual acts between the same sex unambiguously violate moral law and common decency" (Bundesverfassungsgericht, 1957), hereby practically re-confirming Paragraph 175 StGB in its wording coined by the Nazi regime.

Post-war democracy and freedom in the new Federal Republic of Germany, thus was not meant for gay men, who remained outright criminalised, pathologised and stigmatised by oppressive representations. In 1963, historian Hans-Joachim Schoeps therefore famously posited: ***"****For the Homosexuals the Third Reich has not yet ended"* (von Wahl, 2011, p. 191). Two of my more mature expert informants had to live through these times of criminalisation as young gay men, sharing with me their lived experiences during times of criminalisation, which enriched my analytic insight from archival material by triangulation with their first-hand historical accounts.

During times of outright criminalisation, any form of gay life, and as such also consumption, had to take place strictly underground, hidden from the public eye, and from the state's institutions of law enforcement. In this regard, also historic artefacts of such underground gay consumption can be interpreted as responses to, and therefore objectifications of the *dominant* (or even *hegemonic*) oppressive societal representations within German society at the time. Plausible deniability of such polysemic gay-vague

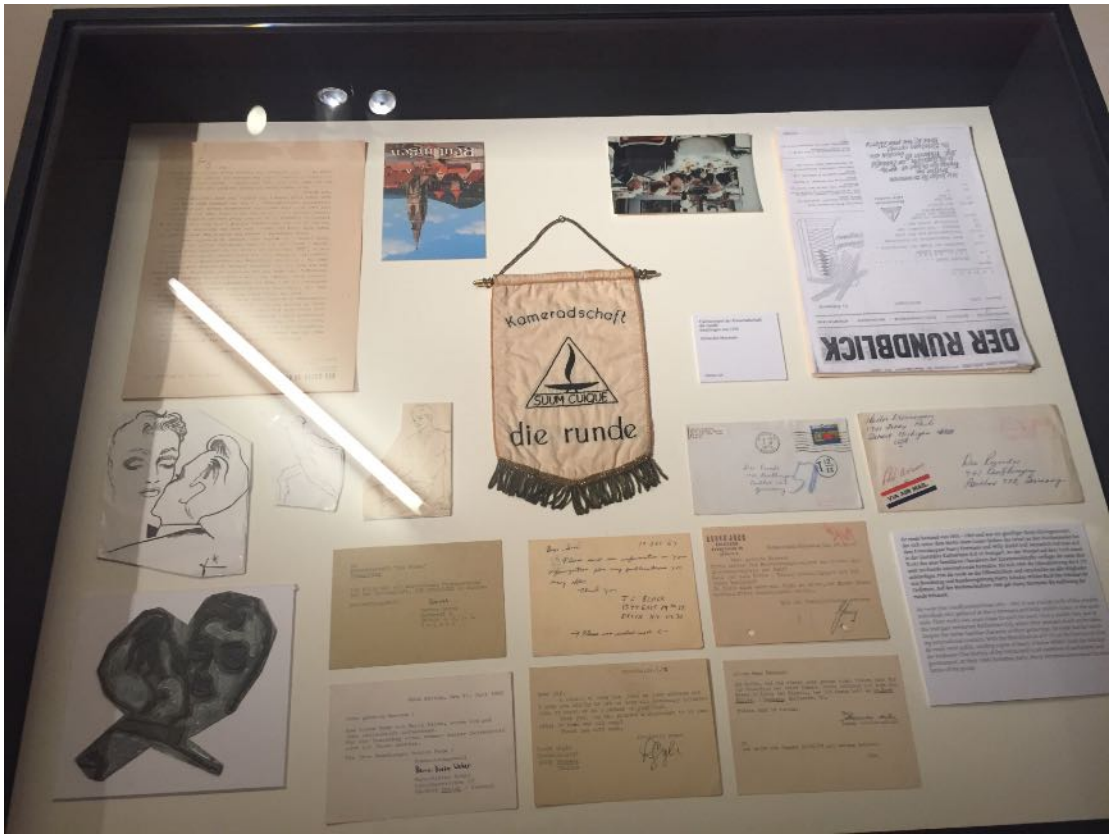
consumption artefacts was therefore a mandatory requirement: Gay-themed magazines and other periodicals, if they existed, officially operated under the protective umbrella-genres of art, photography, or fiction. Anchorings to artistic expression as an homage dedicated to male beauty, or as objectifications of a *special friendship* depicting homosocial bonding between two men, allowed for gay-vague polysemy that could be readily reinterpreted in non-sexual terms (Puntoni et al., 2010; Puntoni et al., 2012). As an example of such underground periodicals, see the below issue of early gay (but officially gay-vague) magazine *Die Gefährten* [The Companions], which I sampled during my fieldwork at the archives of the Gay Museum in Berlin:



Excerpt 10 - Die Gefährten, 1954, a polysemic, gay-vague periodical during times of outright oppression and criminalisation; Fieldwork at Gay Museum Berlin

Where more formalised underground social circles of gay men existed during

outright oppression, these were strategically disguised as *friendship circles* or anchored to notions of *culture clubs* and associations, as I have learned during my on-site archival research. The below photograph, taken at an exhibition at the Gay Museum Berlin, shows artefacts and memorabilia of the secret all-male association *Kameradschaft Die Runde* ["Camaraderie The Circle"] and its members-only periodical *Der Rundblick* ["The Panoramic View"] which was sent out to its members by postal mail. New men seeking membership in such societies had to formally apply by postal mail (see the post cards in the lower half of the photograph), and often had to name a guarantor or one or more personal referees who would vouch for the new member's discretion and trustworthiness.



Excerpt 11 - An exhibit at Gay Museum Berlin showcasing secret gay association Kameradschaft Die Runde; Fieldwork: 13.05.2017

In 1969, Paragraph 175 was reformed within West-Germany's criminal code,

and consensual sexual acts between two men aged 21 and over were decriminalised (see also *enabling representations* below). However, it took 25 more years until Paragraph 175 was struck off the criminal code altogether in 1994.

Despite its decriminalisation, male homosexuality remained and continues to remain widely stigmatised and socially sanctioned in certain parts of contemporary German society (Heichel & Rinscheid, 2015; Pretzel & Weiß, 2012, 2013). Because of the continuing existence of oppressive societal representations about gay men, coming out as gay in certain social contexts such as the workplace, professional sports, or religious communities, still entails substantial risks for gay men of losing their jobs and social standing, as well as facing repudiation by families and friends (Die Zeit, 2014; Frohn, 2007; Frohn et al., 2017).

Oppressive social representations, my analysis reveals, have a tendency not to disappear altogether, but to hibernate outside the limelight of public discourse and re-emerge as soon as the political tides turn. Historically stigmatised social groups can therefore never be certain of their social recognition. Empirical evidence for such a continuous significance of oppressive representations is abundant. The Roman Catholic Church in Germany, for example, still adheres to its legal right to dismiss its employees if they come out as non-heterosexual (Spiegel Online, 2012). Members of the right-wing political party AfD, which managed to secure 12.6% of votes in the 2017 national election, not only lobbied against immigrants, but also called for the re-imprisonment of gay men (Bundeswahlleiter, 2017; Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2016a), while the reactionary "Demo für Alle" movement regularly condemns male homosexuality as pathological, sodomy, and a perverted, non-natural form of sexuality (Datta, 2018; Demo für Alle, 2017).

During my data collection period, a 26-year-old man was convicted of sedition after calling on his public Facebook page for a "gassing" of gay men (Queer.de, 2017a),

and in a representative poll, 16.4% of Germans openly admitted to finding it "disgusting" to see two men kissing in public (Zick, Küpper, & Krause, 2016, p. 46). According to my analysis, these widely publicised examples constitute merely the proverbial tip of the oppressive iceberg and illustrate that a considerable share of Germans openly display such oppressive sentiments toward gay men, as a rising number of anti-gay hate crimes documents (Queer.de, 2020a). In addition to broader societal trends toward political or religious polarisation and radicalisation (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), online echo chambers also appear to fuel the resurgence of oppressive representations without being held accountable by a critical public.

The case of Simon, a 27 year old employee, gives us a first-person example of how oppressive representations may objectify in a mundane everyday context. Reflecting on popular narratives on how *things have gotten better* for gay consumers, Simon assesses:

> *„I would say that society is not yet where some heterosexuals and perhaps also some homosexuals would like to believe. Quite often I hear from heterosexuals: well, it's basically all achieved. And yes, I could explain it to them, but then, there would be no emotional understanding when I tell them: no, it's not all achieved. Some time ago, I was walking with my boyfriend from the train station to his flat [holding hands] and along the way we were getting verbally harassed six times within 15 minutes. If something like this happens, then it's not all achieved." (Simon, 27, consumer interview)*

Although narratives of social progress are popular among his gay and straight friends, the embodied and visceral experience of oppressive representations objectifying in verbal abuse shows the proverbial *thin ice* between verbal and potentially also

physical violence. Simon criticises overly optimistic wishful thinking of straight, but also fellow LGBTQ friends with regard to the amount of social progress already achieved. As somebody who has never experienced this kind of fear themselves, heterosexual friends would lack the "emotional understanding" of the vulnerability brought onto gay men through the continuous existence of oppressive representations. Indeed, during my ethnographic data collection, my informant Paul got beaten up at a bus stop in his neighbourhood after a night out partying at a gay dance club in Cologne. According to his account of events, a group of about five young men in their late teens and early 20s first insulted Paul for his *gay looks*, called him a *faggot* [Schwuchtel], and ultimately started to physically attack him. Paul had to be taken to hospital where was treated for his injuries. Thankfully, Paul had fully recovered after a few weeks, and so, while the psychological trauma remains, this brutal objectification of oppressive representations has at least not left him with permanent physical damage.

In sum, my analysis reveals that, while oppressive societal representations have, on average, been in decline for almost five decades since the first decriminalisation of sex between men, they continue to persist and occasionally violently resurface, not only in the most reactionary pockets of German society. There, gay consumers can still today expect to face stigmatisation, discrimination, or outright hate and violence. However, because today oppressive representations are no longer institutionally and legally legitimised, or uncontested (see below), oppressive representations have lost much of their dominating power over most gay men. Nevertheless, many gay men still encounter oppressive representations among conservative (religious) families, friends, colleagues, or institutions that associate homosexuality with immorality, shame, sin, abnormality, and revulsion.

4.1.2 - Enabling Societal Representations

Social representations that I call *enabling societal representations* recognise members of a historically stigmatised social group as legally and symbolically legitimate citizens, but do so with a sceptical undertone of *tolerance* toward the unfamiliar Other, rather than by showing honest and unconditional *respect* for difference. By recognising a stigmatised group's right to exist and pursue its own ways, society enables the social group to a parallel yet separate existence, to form openly visible social and economic structures, and to wage emancipatory struggles against their stigmatisation and market discrimination (Crockett, 2017; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Oppressive- and enabling societal representations likely simultaneously coexist in contexts of, what I have called above, a *dominant stigma configuration,* but future research will have to confirm this plausible, yet abductive inference from my analytic position.

In West Germany, enabling representations of gay men first emerged in the late 1960s: The 1960s marked an eventful period of social change for many Western societies. In Germany, the resignation of the new republic's first post-war chancellor Konrad Adenauer in 1963 marks the end of the new conservatism of the 1950s, and the beginning of a period of liberal social reforms. The construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the on-going Cold War and the Cuba Missile Crisis 1962, the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, the Vietnam War from 1964, the Arab-Israeli six-day war in 1967, and the Prague Spring in 1968 all contributed to the emergence of a public atmosphere of discontent and protest against the social status quo and undermined trust in established elites and institutions. The new peace movement and the 1968 student protests fostered the emergence of a new left-wing extra-parliamentary opposition, based on the intellectual foundations of contemporary German critical social theorists such as Theodor Adorno and Jürgen Habermas at the time.

The 1960s is also the decade of the *sexual revolution*: The contraceptive pill hits the German market in 1961, the slogan "make love, not war!" unites a whole generation from Woodstock to West Berlin, and even the Roman Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council makes first cautious steps towards an acknowledgement of sexuality as part of the human condition beyond its purely reproductive function. Also during the 1960, mostly younger Germans started revolting against Paragraph 180 of the German criminal code [StGB], which put a prison sentence on the *facilitation of premarital sexual intercourse*, and therefore made it de-facto illegal for a landlord to rent out an apartment to a non-married (cohabiting) couple (Der Spiegel, 1968). The law was ultimately reformed in 1973 (Die Zeit, 1973).

Today, the summer of 1969 is most widely known among LGBTQ populations around the world for the New York City *Stonewall Riots*, where members of the LGBTQ community for the first time organised, took their fight to the streets, and publicly revolted against arbitrary raids and harassment by the New York police in Manhattan's Christopher Street (Carter, 2004; Edsall, 2003; Holy, 2012). Likewise in West Germany, the *gay paragraph* [Schwulenparagraph] 175 was reformed in September of 1969, making consensual sex between men over the age of 21 years legal (Holy, 2012; Pretzel & Weiß, 2012). This legal objectification of emerging enabling representations initiated a process that should ultimately lead to end 97 years of outright criminalisation of gay sex since the introduction of paragraph 175 into the German Empire's criminal code in 1872, and paved the way for decades of progress for non-heterosexual consumers' civil rights (HAW, 1975; Pretzel & Weiß, 2010, 2012, 2013; von Wahl, 2011). Further legal liberalisation followed in 1973 with a comprehensive reform of laws governing sexual offences (Die Zeit, 1973).

Shortly after the first liberalisation of Paragraph 175, the premiere of gay filmmaker Rosa von Praunheim's documentary *It Is Not The Homosexual Who Is*

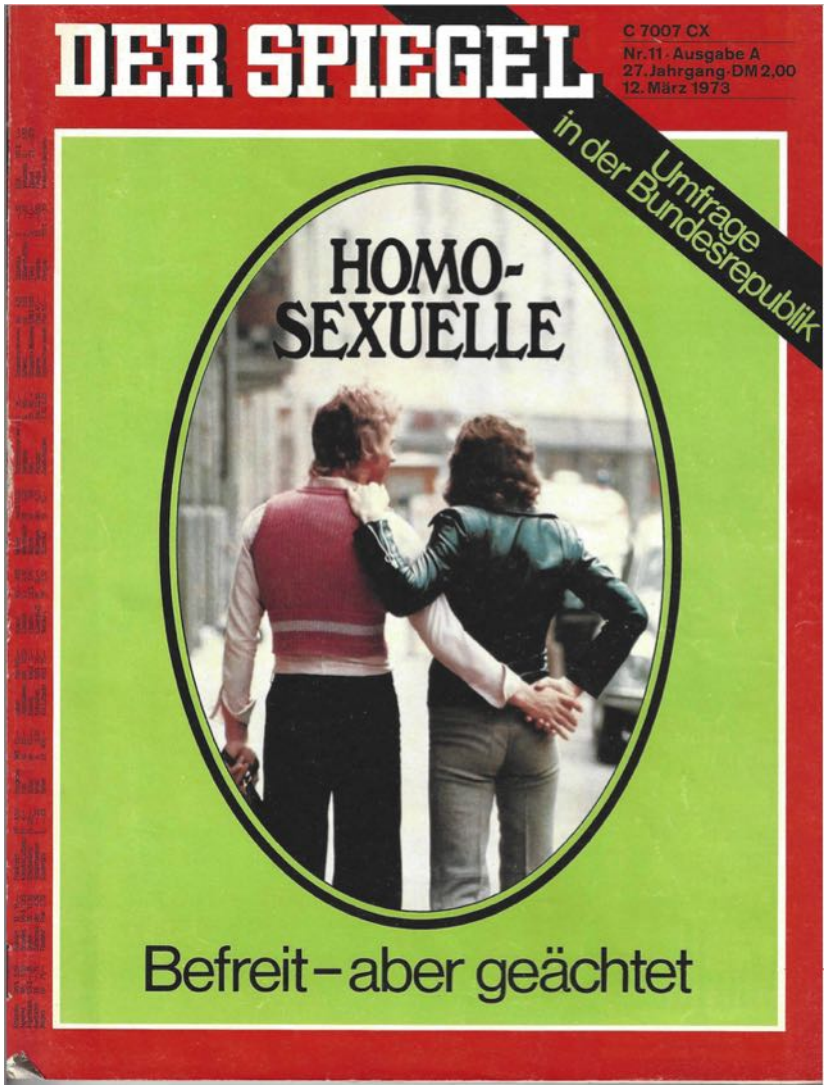
Perverse, But The Situation In Which He Lives [Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers, sondern die Situation, in der er lebt] at the 1971 *Berlinale* Film Festival was widely perceived as a transgressive social moment that co-initiated the emergence of enabling representations among a broader public (von Praunheim, 1971; von Praunheim & Keitsch, 2012). Condemned as a scandal in the eyes of many conservatives at the time, the movie also marks the beginning of overground gay identity politics and the organised gay rights movement in post-war West Germany, and made the struggles and lives of gay men accessible to the general public for the first time while sparking a lively public controversy (Die Zeit, 2016).

In von Praunheim's 90-minute-long documentary-style feature, actors portray everyday struggles and moments in the lives of gay men at the time, accompanied by a voice-over explanatory narrator. All through the movie, the narrator reads a libretto authored by sociologist and gay rights activist Martin Dannecker, who later in 1974 rose to fame by publishing the first extensive empirical study of homosexual men in Germany, entitled "The Ordinary Homosexual" ["Der Gewöhnliche Homosexuelle"] (Dannecker & Reiche, 1974). At the first nationwide broadcasting of von Praunheim's movie on public television in 1972, the Bavarian public broadcasting company (Bayrischer Rundfunk), well-known for promoting a conservative worldview, opted out of the national association of German public broadcasters' (ARD) common program. Instead of broadcasting von Praunheim's documentary on the life worlds of gay men, Bayrischer Rundfunk showed an alternative program to Bavarian households (von Praunheim & Keitsch, 2012). At the time, many viewers (holding mostly oppressive representations) felt offended by von Praunheim's work, and these oppressive representations objectified shortly afterwards in death threats and violent physical attacks against the director (Holy, 2012; von Praunheim & Keitsch, 2012).

Later in the same year of 1972, the Federal Republic's first gay civil rights

organisations formed in West Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, and Cologne ('Homosexuelle Aktion Westberlin', 'Rote Zelle Schwul', 'Gay Liberation Front') (HAW, 1975; Holy, 2012; Plastargias, 2015; Pretzel & Weiß, 2012). One year later, West Germany's first public political demonstration for gay rights took place at the University of Münster, and by the end of 1973 around 70 gay rights groups had formed all over West Germany as part of the new *Schwulenbewegung* [gay liberation movement] (Holy, 2012). Civil rights organisations such as the predecessors of what would eventually become the Gay Association of Germany (Schwulenverband Deutschlands, SVD), and later the Lesbian and Gay Association of Germany (Lesben- und Schwulenverband Deutschlands, LSVD) amplified these emerging enabling representations and channelled them into political activism.

In March of 1973, leading German weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel* (1973) featured a title story on the new gay movement entitled: "Homosexuals: Freed - but ostracised" ["Homosexuelle: Befreit – aber geächtet"], in anticipation of the long and rocky path from decriminalisation towards social recognition and respect. My analysis of this and other historic sources of the time reveals that, despite broad remaining disapproval of homosexuality among the general German public at the time, watershed moments such as decriminalisation, von Praunheim's documentary, and the newly emerging interest into the life-worlds of homosexual men following these events facilitated the emergence and ultimately proliferation of enabling representations of gay men, particularly among left-liberal, artistic-creative, and educated milieus.



Excerpt 12 - Der Spiegel, Homosexuals — Freed but Ostracised, 12.03.1973, Scan: author, physical copy retrieved from the archives of Der Spiegel, Hamburg, Germany

In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its official Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (Drescher, 2015), two years later the American Psychological Association followed (APA, 1975). As such, also first professional bodies that represented the legitimacy of medical and psychological science challenged outright oppressive representations and facilitated a *re-anchoring* of homosexuality by means of a new scientific discourse which considered homosexuality no longer an illness or mental disorder.

Along with decriminalisation and a first emergence of enabling societal representations among some, an alternative, overground, and partly commercial

infrastructure of gay associations, clubs, bars, book stores, publishers and community centres emerged. While no longer criminalised, these social structures were still widely stigmatised, but yet represent prime objectifications of a new political subcultural gay identity (Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996; Pretzel & Weiß, 2012). Expert informant Laura Halding-Hoppenheit, who has been running one of the oldest German gay dance clubs since 1977 (Kings Club Stuttgart), and who has kindly consented to be named in this thesis, remembers well those times after decriminalisation, when oppressive representations still dominated, but enabling representations of gay men first emerged:

> *"During the day they [gay men] were all sad, but the night was wonderful. And the people have cried in my arms and told me stories how bad it is at their workplace, and that they can't tell anyone they are gay. Mothers must not now. Families must not know. They were living double lives. They have a boyfriend that they adore and love incredibly, but they got to go back to their wives and children. Everyone had their drama, but at night they were all blissfully happy." (Laura, 72, expert informant)*

Laura, herself a heterosexual, divorced mother in her early 70s, looks back at well more than four decades as an activist and service provider to the LGBTQ community. Having received the Cross of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany [Bundesverdienstkreuz] for her lifelong social engagement for sexual minorities, she reflects on the struggles of gay men in Germany faced with oppressive representations even almost a decade after decriminalisation. Emerging enabling representations, however, had paved the way for (legal) overground marketplace offers to emerge, that were equally commercial in nature, just as they served as community centres, safe spaces, and sanctuaries for those having to cope with the still dominant oppression of

everyday life “during the day”. Living “double lives”, while not a desirable position to occupy, was still arguably better than outright criminalisation and legal persecution on top of the symbolic annihilation a discovery as gay would entail. At least “at night”, emerging enabling representations allowed gay consumers the “wonderful” experience to be “blissfully happy”, if only for a few hours.

The following photograph of an exhibit at the Gay Museum in Berlin colourfully illustrates these early years of commercial underground sociabilities or, as we could say, an early decriminalised yet underground gay consumer culture.

Excerpt 13 - Tino Bierling (1979) - Schwule in Bewegung [Gays in Movement], ink drawing, colourised, Collection Gay Museum Berlin, photograph: author

In his 1979 painting, artist Tino Bierling shows how emerging enabling representations objectified in a regulatory legal, yet still socially stigmatised environment less than a decade after decriminalisation. The drawing is particularly interesting as it combines aspects of an early (legal, yet still underground) subcultural gay consumer culture, with public spaces, different identity and subject positions, and

subtle social critique. For example, in the lower left corner, the artist depicts a gay cruising spot in a public restroom [German: “Klappe”], as an explicitly non-commercial infrastructure for sexual consumption as it is written on the wall: “Eintritt frei” [free admission]. Also the cruising park on the upper right is representative of such re-purposed urban public infrastructure (Skeggs, Moran, Tyrer, & Binnie, 2004; Turner, 2003). In contrast to these public spaces, the gay sauna club, bar, and disco in the centre of the picture represent explicitly commercial market offerings (“Entree 15.-“; the price list behind the barkeeper).

The artist represents gay men across spectra of age, body types, class, and aesthetic preferences, including leathermen (next to the bar), bears (barkeeper), drag queens (at the corner Klappe / Bar/Disco, also the poster behind the bar), bodybuilders and slender-framed twinks (poster behind the bar, also leaning against the steam room’s outer wall), likely double-life-living (rich) suit-wearing patrons (entrance to Klappe, guests at the bar, voyeur in the park), party-men in fancy clothes (on the disco’s dance floor), and regular men in everyday casual attire (e.g., inside the Klappe). Notice further the artist’s critical perspective on gay men’s experienced minority stress, and their coping through, for example, the use of alcohol as a numbing agent (around the bar area, particularly the customer in the blue suit before the curtain), the prevalence of hard drugs and prostitution (the injecting person leaning against the inside of the disco wall, and the significantly older and visibly financially well-off possible *john* gazing at him), or the person behind the gate to the Lustgarten [lust garden] cruising park, wearing a pink triangle on his white t-shirt — the symbol the Nazis used to mark gay concentration camp inmates. In sum, the picture describes an early *discrete* (see below) gay consumer culture of the 1970s, where decriminalisation and other objectifications of emerging enabling representations have laid the foundations for a somewhat tolerated, yet still widely stigmatised parallel existence of gay consumers within

German society.

Despite this emergence of enabling representations, also the 1980s marked a decade in which gay consumers in Germany still remained predominantly anchored in notions of perversion, decadence, femininity, or hyper-masculinity, which were widely objectified in popular consumer culture. For example, the stereotypical images of the *Blue Oyster Bar* in the Hollywood franchise *Police Academy* depicted tall, strong, dangerously-looking gay men in black leather clothing and moustaches forcing their (heterosexual) prey to slow dance against their will. The screen capture below shows the infamous scene in which two opponents of the movie's hero *Sergeant Mahoney* are being tricked into *The Blue Oyster*, where their sexual self-determination is violated as they fall prey to a group of gay leathermen.

Excerpt 14 - Leatherman at The Blue Oyster force a villain to tango, Police Academy (1984), Warner Bros., capture: author

These media objectifications still anchored gay men in concepts of rape, perversion, and threat, but with a new, pseudo-ironic undertone that would now ridicule gay men rather than prosecute them by law, or outrightly oppress them through physical

violence. Although they were far from being normalised as respectable citizens, the stigmatised otherness of gay men now at least served the purpose of making the heterosexual audience laugh at the expense of a stigmatised minority group. While such portrayals of gay men likely confirmed or even reinforced the oppressive representations held by some viewers, they equally elevated gay men and their (presumably stereotypical) lives from the position of symbolical outcasts, that simply did not exist in the public sphere, to a topic of debate, polarisation, and often: ridicule.

Media coverage of the HIV/AIDS crisis from the late 1980s reinforced such fearful sentiments of gay men as the dangerous, immoral, and promiscuous Other. At the same time, some more nuanced reporting on the suffering and dying of mostly gay men at the time, predominantly by left-leaning media outlets, directed public attention to the psychological and physical ramifications of gay men's struggle with stigma and discrimination, and offered new empathetic anchorings of non-heterosexual men as fellow human beings among some members of the German public. The iconic objectification of such anchorings through, for example, the public suffering and dying of rock-band *Queen*'s former lead singer and early AIDS-victim Freddie Mercury, who spent considerable time in the city of Munich from 1979 until 1985 (Jackson, 2011; Simply Munich, n.d.), contributed to a proliferation of enabling representations about gay men among a broader public in Germany and beyond.

The first gay kiss on the popular prime-time public TV show *Lindenstrasse* in 1990 marked a new era of mainstreaming enabling representations of non-heterosexual identities in German media and political discourse (Die Zeit, 2016). For those holding oppressive representations about gay men, this first sympathetic portrayal of a gay character in a mainstream television show constituted a major media scandal, sparking not only fierce protests and verbal insults, but also death threats against actors and bomb threats against the show's production set (Borg, 2006). Only a year after the

Lindenstraße Kiss, it was once again director Rosa von Praunheim who *outed* a set of German celebrities and media personalities as gay, against their will, live on national television (Die Zeit, 2016). Von Praunheim later justified these outings as "a cry of desperation at the height of the AIDS crisis", as it was his intention to demand these celebrities to show public solidarity with the gay community, and to no longer keep on living their lives as gay men in private (Handelsblatt, 2011). Today, von Praunheim's forced outings of comedian *Hape Kerkeling* and talk show host *Alfred Biolek* are widely considered a watershed moment that "changed [German] society" (ibid.), and encouraged German society and its media outlets to *re-present* gay men in more and more enabling ways (Pretzel & Weiß, 2012, 2013).

Along this proliferation of enabling representations, and in the absence of alternative means of sociality such as over the internet —given the times—, new gay commercial offerings emerged, and in the streets of many major cities, annual lesbian and gay parades became objectified spectacles of political resistance against oppressive societal representations (Pretzel & Weiß, 2013). In 2001, and after almost a decade of campaigning by gay rights organisations (Queer.de, 2017b), a new centre-left federal government introduced the Civil Registered Partnership Act in Germany [Lebenspartnerschaftsgesetz - LPartG] (Deutscher Bundestag, 2001). At the time, this first-ever codified legal recognition of same-sex couples in German history was widely praised as progress among non-heterosexual consumers and a liberal public alike (Heichel & Rinscheid, 2015). However, the exclusively homosexual civil partnership, that was not available for opposite-sex couples, was designed to be legally and symbolically subordinate to (heterosexual) marriage, and was thus a prime example of objectified enabling representations — promoting tolerance rather than equality and respect.

Still, the introduction of civil union legislation fuelled a zeitgeist that gave rise

to an unprecedented visibility and recognition of non-heterosexual life in the German public sphere. 2001 also marks the year of the first coming-out of a top German politician, as —then social democrat's candidate for the office of Governing Mayor of the city of Berlin [Regierender Bürgemeister]— Klaus Wowereit famously proclaimed at a party rally: "I am gay, and that's a good thing!" ["Ich bin schwul und das ist auch gut so!"], in an attempt to outmanoeuvre political critics' plans to instrumentalise Wowereit's sexual orientation to render him an unsuitable candidate (Deutsche Welle, 2021; Wowereit & Schumacher, 2007). Wowereit won the election and served as the country's first out elite politician for 13 years, holding the office as the Governing Mayor of Berlin.

Excerpt 15 - Then candidate for the office of Governing Mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit (SPD), saying the by-now historic words "I am gay, and that's a good thing" at a party rally on June 10th 2001, marking the first public coming-out of a German top politician; video credits: SPD Berlin, YouTube; capture: author

The proliferation of enabling representations among the broader German society through this time is also well-documented by representative polls: While in 2000 17% of the German public stated that same-sex couples were generally morally unacceptable,

this number had decreased to only 6% in 2015 (Allensbach Institute, 2015). At the same time the number of supporters of same-sex marriage has surged from 24% in 2000 (Allensbach Institute, 2015) to 65% in 2015, and an equal number believes that same-sex parents can be as good parents as heterosexuals (YouGov, 2015).

Alongside this diffusion of enabling representations of gay men in German society came a first wave of co-optation of *stereotypically gay* consumption practices among urban, heterosexual avant-garde consumers (Rinallo, 2007; Visconti, 2008). The creative adaptation of *exotic*, or "feminine" (Visconti, 2008, p. 121) fashion styles (for example, skinny jeans or colourful tops), music tastes (for example, Eurovision Song Contest, Lady Gaga), and bodily aesthetics by celebrities such as football hero David Beckham or German pop-music producer Dieter Bohlen (for example, male grooming, cosmetics, tanning) led to a market-mediated proliferation of such styles, and as such, a spreading of enabling representations of gay men (and *gay styles*) in Germany and many Western societies.

In sum, today's enabling societal representations range from anchoring gay men in mere tolerance of gay consumer culture, to anchoring them in fashionability, creativity, and cultural leadership. Yet despite these new, positive anchorings, enabling representations still perpetuate subtle forms of discrimination, preventing normalisation. For example, when gay men are being seen as having "a better reputation for creativity and innovation" (Visconti, 2008, p. 132), but then are seen as less suitable as kindergarten teachers, plumbers, or professional football players, for instance, such enabling representation may either continue perpetuating *old* stereotypes, or give rise to *new, more benevolent*, but no-less stigmatising stereotypes (Kram, 2018). While enabling historically stigmatised social groups (such as gay men) to pursue an overground, tolerated, and possibly conditionally accepted existence, enabling representations still uphold and affirm the qualitative differences that "reduce" gay men

"from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman, 1963, p. 3).

4.1.3 - Normalised Societal Representations

Social representations that I call *normalised societal representations* recognise markers of difference such as sexual orientation, gender identity, race, religion, or ethnicity, but do not instrumentalise them to construct social hierarchies. In contexts where normalised representations prevail, stigmatising oppression has largely been overcome, and political emancipation is no longer necessary because legal and symbolic equality are taken for granted. Importantly, normalised representations are not the result of an imposed assimilation or subordination under heteronormative norms and ideals (Duggan, 2002). Instead, they reflect the views and actions of those within a society that respectfully anchor the social group in concepts such as common human dignity, equality in difference, and liberal democratic pluralism. The simultaneous co-existence of oppressive-, enabling, and normalised societal representations gives rise to a specific type of a *post-dominant* stigma configuration which I call *fragmented stigma*.

In my research context of Germany, normalised representations of gay men prevail in contexts in which derogatory stereotypes or conditional tolerance have been replaced by a variety of images, emotions, statuses, and consumption styles too diverse to coalesce into a single dominant societal representation that could be used to label, separate, and discriminate gay men as Others (Gamson, 1995; Ghaziani, 2011; Link & Phelan, 2001). As a result, a person's sexual orientation and identity no longer serves to devaluate and subordinate that person, so that this socially selected marker of difference sufficiently characterises the individual (Goffman, 1963). This new pluralism in anchorings and objectifications allows gay men to occupy respectable identity positions that were previously inaccessible to them. Germany's former national soccer player and current club manager Thomas Hitzlsperger, the current German Minister of Health Jens

Spahn, or Apple's CEO Tim Cook are just three of many examples, where gay men are no longer evaluated in their professional roles by reference to their sexual orientation by those holding normalised representations. Normalised representations also enable not only gay, but also heterosexual consumers to enjoy market offerings such as drag shows (Campana et al., 2020; Canavan, 2021), or Eurovision Song Contests without fear of symbolic contagion from stigmatised (discrete) gay identities (Motschenbacher, 2016).

Through my historical analysis, I trace the first emergence of normalised societal representations of gay men to the early 2000s, when civil union legislation opened a narrow but viable path to a normalisation of non-heterosexual relationships within broader German society. While still inferior to heterosexual marriage *by design*, same-sex couples living in civil unions continued their fight for equality and nondiscrimination in front of the law. From the mid 2000s onward, the German Federal Constitutional Court (Bundesverfassungsgericht) ruled in favour of a series of complaints by same-sex couples against discrimination and unequal treatment in domains such as taxation, adoption rights, public benefits, or healthcare (Bundesverfassungsgericht, 2009, 2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b). In these decisions, the country's highest court ruled the still widely ongoing practice of legal discrimination between same-sex civil partners and married heterosexuals unconstitutional, and therefore mandated Angela Merkel's conservative government at the time to incrementally alleviate these inequalities through appropriate legislation.

Just as the Federal Constitutional Court had to drive government before it, so did societal progress through a proliferation of normalised representations at times outpace its regulatory underpinnings: When openly gay, at the time German vice chancellor and foreign minister, Guido Westerwelle entered into a civil union with his long-term partner Michael Mronz in 2010, several leading German news outlets, including *Der Spiegel*, *Die Welt*, and tabloid *Bild*, progressively adopted (heterosexual)

terminology calling it a *marriage, and* describing the *exchange of vows* at their *wedding,* although the correct legal term would have been the rather unromantic *registration* of a *civil union*; just as one registers a new car with the local authorities (Bild Online, 2010; Der Spiegel, 2010; Die Welt, 2010).

This objectification of normalised representations in *language* (by anchoring gay civil unions to heterosexual marriage) illustrates how media framing and progressive agenda-setting can contribute to the normalisation of human diversity, and hence, also to a normalisation of historically stigmatised social groups. This normalising effect of media representation also shines through the coverage of Westerwelle's tragic death of cancer in 2016 at the age of 54, when even populist-leaning tabloid *Bild* managed to publish empathetic and unsensationally normalised reporting of how his loving partner accompanied Westerwelle throughout his battle with cancer and carried him through his final days. The below screen capture from *Bild*'s website on the day of Westerwelle's death illustrates this normalisation of gay relationships. The caption reads: "Guido Westerwelle (1961 - 2016) and his last greeting to the world: 'We have fought. We had the goal in sight… Love remains'".

Excerpt 16 - Screen Capture of Bild.de on the day of Guido Westerwelle's death, 18.03.2016, capture: author

One year after Westerwelle's death, the German federal parliament passed legislation to establish full marriage equality on June 30th, 2017. And while neither the right to join heterosexual couples in the institution of marriage, nor the existence of some privileged normalised gay men in exposed public roles are by themself sufficient to attest a general sentiment of normalisation of non-heterosexual identities within a society at large, these widely visible and popularised examples of objectified normalised representations are witness of a proliferation of normalising beliefs, values, and attitudes towards gay men within the broader German public.

Excerpt 17 - The German federal parliament [Deutscher Bundestag] debates and votes on the same-sex marriage bill (Ehe für Alle), establishing marriage equality on June 30th, 2017, photograph: author

Also other state-run and private organisations have made important progress in objectifying normalised representations of non-heterosexual consumers in the first 20 years of the 21st century. For example, the German armed forces [Bundeswehr] in 2000

issued a decree that would formally end institutional discrimination against non-heterosexual soldiers, and for the first time made the career as an officer attainable for out lesbian and gay soldiers (Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, 2000). 13 years later, the armed forces officially signed the *Charter of Diversity* [Charta der Vielfalt], a public registered association whose aim is the voluntary commitment of employers to be dealing with (sexual) diversity in a proactive, respectful, and appreciative manner (Charta der Vielfalt e.V., 2012). Started by four private-sector corporations in 2006, more than 3,900 organisations and institutions employing over 14 million people have since signed the *Charter* (Charta der Vielfalt e.V., n.d.), making the Charter a powerful symbolic objectification of normalising representations gaining momentum also within the work life of more and more members of the German general public (Frohn et al., 2017).

Alongside such codified legal and symbolic objectifications of normalised representations, popular film and television programs began portraying LGBTQ+ characters not only much more frequently, but also in a more multifaceted way than ever before since the early 2000s (GLAAD, 2016). As such, these pop-cultural products no longer framed a non-heterosexual identity as a character-defining, politicised marker of difference (Goffman, 1963), but as merely one trait among many. Influential examples of such "gay mainstreaming" (Ng, 2013, p. 260) in popular television shows include Russell T. Davies' *Queer as Folk* (from 1999, adopted by Showtime for the North American market from 2000), ABC's *Modern Family* (from 2009), or HBO's *Game of Thrones* (from 2011).

Of particular interest with regard to its contribution to the proliferation of normalised representations is Fox's highly successful coming-of-age musical comedy series *"Glee"* (2009-2015), scripted around the adventures and struggles of an Ohio-based high school show-choir and its members. Across its six seasons, the show tackles

a variety of contemporary social issues including racism, teenage pregnancy, drug use, antisemitism, ageism, body-shaming, mental illness, and coming-out and living as a lesbian, bisexual, gay, or trans*-person, among others (Johnson & Faill, 2015). While sometimes criticised for its homonormative scripting of queer characters, for example regarding the idealisation of long-term monogamous couple-relationships (Dhaenens, 2013), the careful character-work of the show's writers allows its viewers to empathetically engage with the life worlds of these characters, developing an emotional understanding through knowledge encounters and intersubjective perspective-taking (Jovchelovitch, 2007; Marková, 2016).

Excerpt 18 - Darren Criss's Blaine (left) and Chris Colfer's Kurt as a homonormative gay couple in Fox's Glee

The contribution of shows like *Glee* to the proliferation of normalised representations of non-heterosexual identities therefore lies not in the fact that queer

characters in *Glee* are being represented as normalised, widely respected, and without their own life-struggles. To the contrary, queer characters in *Glee* regularly encounter oppressive or enabling representations in the form of discrimination, social exclusion, or even physical violence toward the social group constituted by their marker of difference. Instead, the show's writers make these encounters accessible to a broader audience, highlighting their psychological as well as social ramifications, and stage a morality play in which oppressive and enabling representations are eventually overcome by the characters, supported by their (enlightened) peers and adult Others holding or acquiring normalised representations of appreciative respect towards human diversity.

Unlike in *Glee*, where non-heterosexual characters do struggle with stigma and oppression, the openly gay couple in Paramount's *Star Trek: Discovery* (since 2017) inhabits a post-stigma utopian future so typical for the franchise (Kozinets, 2001). While being the first openly gay couple in the 55 years-long history since *Star Trek - The Original Series* first aired, the same-sex relationship between science officer *Paul Stamets* (Anthony Rapp) and *Discovery*'s chief medical officer *Hugh Culber* (Wilson Cruz) is never elevated to a particular object of interest by the show's writers. Neither do any of the characters have to go through a *coming out experience*, nor do the characters *announce* their relationship or find it problematised by either fellow crewmen or other characters in the show. Instead, it is the notable absence of spectacularisation, the deliberate overlooking of the mere possibility that their relationship or sexual orientation could constitute a possible source of stigma and personal devaluation for the two officers in the eyes of Others, that marks the contribution of *Star Trek Discovery* to the proliferation of normalised representations of gay men among a boarder public.

Excerpt 19 - Medical officer Culber (left) and science officer Stamets on board of Discovery, credits: Paramount

Further examples of media representations that fuelled the diffusion of normalised representations within German society are many, and include Hollywood movies such as *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Moonlight* (2016), or *Call Me by Your Name* (2017), popular music such as Lady Gaga's *Born this Way*, and novels such as Hanya Yanagihara's (2015) highly acclaimed *A Little Life*. As illustrated in the above remarks on TV-show *Glee*, the contribution of these pop-cultural products to propagating normalised representations does not necessarily reside in these works' normalised depictions of non-heterosexual characters as universally respected and accepted *per-se*, but rather in the visibility of multidimensional LGBTQ characters that allow heterosexual Others to empathise with, and possibly challenge and re-anchor their oppressive or enabling representations about a historically stigmatised social group. Although most of the above-mentioned pop-cultural works were originally conceived in North American popular culture, these TV-shows and movies are widely consumed by a global audience, particularly within other Western consumer cultures (Bielby &

Harrington, 2008). As such, they nonetheless contributed to a changing social sentiment in Germany alongside internationally less known domestic productions, such as the German coming-out movie *Sommersturm* (2004), for example.

The spread of normalised representations can lead to the interesting phenomenon that those heterosexual Others who hold these normalised representations might begin to morally police, or even sanction those heterosexual Others who keep perpetuating oppressive or enabling representations. In this way, normalised representations can at times find unlikely allies, when those allies find the promotion of normalised representations to be opportunistic. To illustrate this phenomenon, see how certain actors within the industry of professional football [American: soccer] displayed tokens of symbolic solidarity with members of the LBGTQ community during the UEFA Euro 2020 championship in June 2021.

Excerpt 20 - FC Bayern München's Allianz Arena lighting up in rainbow colours during the Euro 2020 championship in 2021, credits: Allianz Arena

Illuminating football stadiums in rainbow colours, or issuing tweets seeking to promote "tolerance" rather than *respect*, such as by FC Bayern München's CEO Oliver Kahn (2021), could be interpreted as opportunism, or, at best, objectifications of

enabling rather than normalised representations. As contributions on the "battleground of social representation[s]" for representational dominance (Howarth, 2006, p. 72), however, such symbolic affiliation with the life-worlds of historically stigmatised social groups may in fact serve the purpose to publicly call out those still clinging to oppressive or enabling representations. The so-staged drama on questions of moral superiority may then very well fall into the well-known *in-group versus out-group dynamics* of West versus East, urban versus rural, rich versus poor, or educated versus uneducated (Hogg & Turner, 1987; Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Such mainstreaming of LGBTQ symbolisms may therefore contribute to a proliferation of normalised representations among some populations, but could equally lead to a reactionary backlash among others, the extent of which future research will have to uncover (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

Excerpt 21 - Manuel Neuer, captain of Germany's national football team, wearing a rainbow-flag captain's armband in solidarity with Pride Month during the Euro 2020 championship in June 2021, credits: Eurosport/Getty Images

There is little doubt, however, that this public display of solidarity on the part of elite athletes and their professional associations is indicative of a broader shift in social

sentiments where the political devaluation of non-heterosexual life is becoming problematised by an increasing share of society as a moral transgression, similar to phenomena such as racism, sexism, or antisemitism. In fact, a representative survey conducted by PEW Research in 2020 found that by now 86% of Germans find homosexuality to be generally "acceptable", and that there is a strong positive correlation across Western societies between higher levels of acceptance of homosexuality and younger age, higher income, lower religiosity, and higher levels of education (Pew Research, 2020).

In sum, my analysis of social representations of gay men in Germany shows that the mitigation or amelioration of this group's stigmatisation has progressed neither linearly nor uniformly. Instead, I have shown how oppressive, enabling, and normalised representations of gay men in German society have historically come into being, and continue to coexist and compete with each other over interpretive dominance until present day. As I will show next, this fragmentation of social representations of gay men among the German general public does not equally afford all gay men an opportunity to live and consume without discrimination. Instead, the fragmentation of societal representations has led to a fanning-out of what earlier research has theorised as a single gay subculture, which appeared homogenous when observed from the outside, yet protean and kaleidoscopic when explored on the inside (Kates, 2002). This subcultural collective has since broken up into five analytically distinct subgroups that are oppressed, enabled, or normalised in different ways, and therefore use consumption for very different strategic purposes.

4.2 - Self-Representations and Consumption Strategies of Gay Men under Fragmented Stigma

Once their stigma has fragmented in the ways described above, historically stigmatised social groups, such as my gay consumers in Germany, are no longer forced to represent themselves to themselves and Others as a homogeneous, stigmatised, and oppositional "subculture" (Kates, 2002, p. 387). Instead, they can act on those internal kaleidoscopic differences that have also existed before, but could not come to fruition under the constant social pressures from dominant (Kates, 2002), or even total stigma during times of criminalisation. As a consequence of such easing outside pressures, the social group of gay men has disintegrated into five ideal-typical *self-representations* which constitute the subgroups that I call *underground*, *discrete*, *hybrid*, *anti-stigma*, and *post-stigma* social group, respectively (see right column in Figure 1, page 136).

These subgroups, my analysis suggests, emerged gradually, and in tandem with the shifts in German society described above. However, they did not emerge through a linear top-down process in which simply societal representations shape self-representations. Instead, these subgroups and their constitutive self-representations emerged through the *structurating* (Giddens, 1984) effects of gay men's countless situated encounters with heterosexual Others, including families, friends, and work colleagues, but also service providers, (social) media contacts, and bystanders in public spaces. Although forms of *underground* and *discrete* social groups have already been observed under earlier total and dominant stigma configurations, their self-presentations and consumption strategies have changed subtly under fragmented stigma.

In the following sections, I will theorise each of these subgroups and their constitutive self-representations, explain the conditions under which gay men enact them, and show which consumption strategies they enforce, enable, or afford. Throughout these sub-chapters I will draw on excerpts from my data corpus to illustrate self-representations as well as their characteristic consumption strategies.

4.2.1 - An Underground Social Group — Consumption as Hiding and Denial

Consumers who belong to historically stigmatised social groups, and who live and consume in contexts where relevant Others predominantly hold oppressive representations of their group, self-represent as members of an *underground social group*.

Under such conditions, powerful outside Others do not allow these consumers the space and legal recognition to exist openly, to consume visibly in the public sphere, to show solidarity with one another, or to form overground social support structures or marketplace offers — even if this is possible elsewhere. In such contexts, consumers who belong to a historically stigmatised social group are being forced to *go underground*, and self-represent as members of a collectivity that I call an *underground social group.*

In my research context of gay men in Germany, such underground consumers anchor the social identity derived from their group membership in concepts of victimhood, oppression, marginalisation, self-loathing, unworthiness, and misery. Emotionally, they anchor themselves and their group in feelings of fear, shame, guilt, hate, pain, and suffering, in perceptions of internalised homophobia, and in antinomies of excluded versus included, perverted versus normal, sinful versus virtuous, and unnatural versus natural.

For gay men who are being faced with such oppressive societal representations (see above), *coming-out*, and becoming recognisable as a member of a sexual minority, would entail substantive social, material, and professional risks: Consequences of their accidental discovery include the risk of social exclusion (even by their closest friends and family members), the possibility of job loss and financial hardship, or even psychological or physical violence. As such, *underground* gay men must meticulously avoid to objectify their sexual identity to outside Others. For themselves, however, their

self-denial and repression of emotions and longings often objectify in anxiety or depression, stress-related conditions, physical illness, self-loathing, or even (attempted) suicide as they perceive themselves as living "unliveable lives" (Cover, 2012, p. 1; Hatzenbuehler, 2011, 2014; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013).

When the gay men featured in my dataset self-represented as a member of an underground social group, they did so not by choice. Instead, this self-representation positionality was imposed on my underground informants by outside Others (or imagined Others) whose power position allowed them to label, stereotype, and discriminate against these gay men, and as such to meaningfully impact their overall social- and life prospects (Link & Phelan, 2001; Pescosolido & Martin, 2015). Moreover, informants self-representing as underground men were usually not easily able to escape the influence of such oppressive Others without facing severe consequences. However, while not free to self-represent in more liberated ways (see below), even the most oppressed informants I encountered were thoroughly aware that enabling and normalised representations of gay men co-existed in German society, and that therefore gay men in other contexts were offered with more degrees of freedom to self-represent and consume according to their wants, needs, and identity preferences.

Most of my underground informants were also able to, if only temporarily, escape their oppressive surroundings every once in a while and enjoy the more liberated (overground) consumption practices of a *discrete social group* (see below). After such escapist excursions of consumption and culture tourism (Kozinets, 2001; Oswald, 1999), however, my underground informants had to return to their habitually cautious underground lives.

Underground consumers enact a consumption strategy which I call *consumption as hiding and denial.* This strategy aims to consciously avoid any affiliation with, or display of insignia of non-heterosexual consumption in the eyes of outsiders, such as

"skinny jeans," "golden Adidas sneakers," or "plucked eyebrows" (Jan, expert interview). Also, my underground informants avoided any public display of bodily aesthetics, music tastes, gender performances and the like, that could have been read as signifiers of a non-heterosexual identity (Kates, 2002; Rinallo, 2007; Visconti, 2008). When they consumed gay marketplace offers, underground gay men paid close attention to shield such consumption from the public view of relevant onlookers when they, for example, visited infrastructure for sexual consumption (such as bathhouses or porn cinemas), or when using dating apps to meet other gay men on their mobile phone.

As such, consumption as hiding and denial is a "non-dialogical" (Jovchelovitch, 2007, p. 111) consumption strategy that contributes to the invisibility of gay life in the public sphere, and that enacts rather than challenges Others' oppressive representations and feelings toward gay men.

As an illustration of this consumption strategy, meet informant Deniz, an 18-years-old apprentice who grew up in the early 2000s in a conservative family of Turkish heritage, and where he deeply internalised their depictions of gay men as amoral, perverse, and repulsive. Most of his friends and peers stemmed from similar conservative Middle-Eastern backgrounds, and held comparable oppressive representations about gay men. Through countless everyday encounters during his teenage years, Deniz learned to internalise and enact these oppressive representations of gay men. In our interview he recalls these situations as follows:

> *"When I was out with heterosexual friends, and they picked on someone, it was always like: 'that's such a gay T-shirt', or 'look how this guy walks, that's so gay'. How are you supposed to come out when you hear things like that from your friends? For me, it was a huge burden that none of my friends or family knew I was gay and that I always had to dissimulate in front of people that did*

not and must not know about my sexuality." (Deniz, 18, consumer interview)

Confronted with his friends' oppressive representations, and their anchorings of gay men to particular fashion styles, bodily appearances, and performances of masculinity, Deniz, at the time a financially dependent teenager, was given no other choice but to go *underground*: to hide and deny ("dissimulate") his homosexuality. In order to achieve this, as I learn further in the interview, Deniz not only habitually adjusted his posture and voice to *appear more manly* and to confirm to heteronormative expectations, he also strategically adjusted his consumption to avoid any possible *symbolic contagion* from being affiliated with an effeminate gay stereotype. As an illustration, consider the following excerpt from our conversation as the interview continued:

> *"There's this story about my septum [nose piercing]. I really wanted to have that, but I was a bit afraid about how my friends would react. How they would perceive it. I ended up getting it anyway, because the great thing about a septum is that you can flip it up your nose and then you can't see it. [...] When I was out with my straight friends or when I was with my family, or at some Turkish event, I flipped it up. But when I was out at gay places I flipped it down [so it was visible]." (Deniz, 18, consumer interview)*

For Deniz, being recognisable as gay among his friends, family, or "at some Turkish event", where oppressive representations prevail, bears considerable symbolic and material risks. In order to still being able to fulfil some of those consumption desires, which relevant Others might interpret as incommensurable with a performance of heteronormative masculinity ideals and aesthetics, Deniz stages a sophisticated

masquerade: He situationally “flipp[es] up” his septum nose piercing when in perceived oppressive contexts, and “flipp[es]’ it down” when in more liberal environments, for example when protected by a *discrete* gay community (see below).

Interestingly, I further learn from Deniz how he set up a secret chat profile on the (in Germany famous) gay dating platform *Planet Romeo*, in order to meet fellow underground gay men of his age, and of similar Middle-Eastern backgrounds. As with Deniz, the short biographies in these men's dating profiles are written in Turkish, and neither Deniz nor his chat partners provide publicly visible, and recognisable photos of their faces to prevent accidental discovery by curious Others. I learn from Deniz, that the strategic rationale behind using Turkish language texts (instead of German or English) in their dating profiles is to exclusively attract other gay men from a similar ethnic and cultural background. Therefore, these men might be able to better empathise with, or might even be in a similar position as Deniz, equally surrounded by Others holding oppressive representations, and therefore forced into an *underground* position. About once a month, Deniz managed to meet some of these online friends in real life, and joined them for a few hours of carefree party bliss at a [gay] nightclub almost two hours from his home town. This nightclub, I learn from Deniz, runs an “Gay Oriental Night” party series, dedicated to gay Middle-Eastern men, and featuring the familiar Turkish aesthetics, music, and cultural modes of expression Deniz had so far been unable to reconcile with his own sexual identity.

Despite Deniz’ most careful efforts to hide and deny his sexuality among his friends and family, he eventually *got caught* by one of his cousins, who then *outed* (emic term) Deniz among his family. In what followed, Deniz’ father called Deniz “a disgrace for all Turks and for his family”, and threatened that “he would first kill [Deniz], and then kill himself” (interview excerpt). After several weeks of being locked up by his family after work to prevent him from seeing outside friends, Deniz, with the

help of activists from a local gay rights charity, managed to escape his family's home in the middle of the night. Equipped with only a few belongings packed up in a suitcase, a social worker from the gay rights charity took Deniz to the nearest major train station, where he boarded a midnight train to the country's capital Berlin, many hours away from his hometown. Once in Berlin, friends of said gay social worker offered Deniz a place to stay, and helped him getting support from the Berlin youth welfare office [Jugendamt] and social security office [Sozialamt], as at the time Deniz was still only 17 years old. Eventually, with the help of local (discrete) support structures (see below), Deniz managed to continue his apprenticeship, and started a new life in Berlin. At the time of our last contact, Deniz had re-established occasional phone contact with his sister and his mother. He had not spoken to his father again ever since.

The case of Deniz is arguably one of the more extreme cases where we must see oppressive societal representations and underground identities at work in contemporary German society. However, throughout my ethnographic field work, I have encountered gay men from various conservative religious- (Catholic, Evangelical, Muslim), or cultural (German, Polish, Russian, Italian) backgrounds who engaged in similar practices of strategic symbolic consumption to hide and deny their gay sexual orientation, or who specifically sought to consume in particularly hyper-masculine ways to dispel any possible onlookers' doubts about their heterosexual identity. Also informant Timo, a 34 years old teacher remembers such episodes of underground hiding and denial during his coming of age:

> *"For some of my peers, who came from more traditional, conservative background, some were Polish and Russian immigrants, for them coming out as gay was kind of a rebellion against the system they grew up with. For example, some were threatened [by their parents]: If I ever catch you with a guy, I'll send*

you off to boarding school. Or I'm sending you away. Or to the military, or something like that. And that was really scary for me, because for me coming out wasn't that difficult." (Timo, 34, consumer interview)

For men like Timo, living in environments in which enabling or normalised representations prevailed, coming out was much less of an issue than for his peers living in oppressed contexts, who were forced underground to not being sent "to boarding school" to "the military", or even simply "away". As these men grow up, and become financially independent from their parental homes, they likely encounter oppressive representations only in one or a few specific life contexts (for example around their conservative family), and rarely as ubiquitously as Deniz or their earlier selves. Aided by technological innovation, even widely oppressed men can access thriving gay marketplaces, online communities, or dating apps through the internet, unobserved by oppressive Others.

Some gay men I encountered during my investigations encountered oppressive representations in only one specific life context. Informant Samuel, for example, spends most of his time in the company of gay friends where he can openly live and express his homosexuality. However, Samuel works as a nurse in a Catholic hospital which openly communicates and objectifies its rejection of non-heterosexual life, and even reserves the right to fire openly gay (or divorced) employees by reference to *Catholic moral values*. At work, Samuel therefore strategically adjusts his consumption practices to hide and deny his homosexuality. For example, he avoids casual conversations about his love life, and carefully guards his mobile phone, on which he uses gay dating apps, from the curious gaze of work colleagues, so as not to be accidentally outed and to possibly lose his job.

Some men's need to hide and deny their homosexuality is also known to

marketplace actors, for instance to popular gay online dating app *Grindr*. To cater to underground men's needs, Grindr (2020) offers a selection of "discreet app icons" that allow its underground users to plausibly hide and deny their use of the app, and hence their homosexuality, by avoiding the iconic Grindr *mask* logo. Instead, underground men can choose among a selection of *sanitised* icon choices that obfuscate the Grinder app to appear as a "Camera", "Music", "Notes", "To Do", or "Calculator" app instead (Grindr, 2020).

Excerpt 22 - Discreet App Icons offered by Grindr to hide and deny app usage

Some gay men choose to go underground to hide and deny their being gay also when they only perceive the mere *possibility* that oppressive societal representations about gay men might dominate a particular context or social setting. See, for example, how Tom, a 31-year-old civil servant, describes how his husband enacts pre-emptive everyday precaution:

> *"My husband is always very careful, because, sadly, he's afraid of negative reactions [from Others]. And he would never walk around with me holding*

hands. And I know that from a lot of other couples as well, who self-constrain, and display their anticipatory obedience, so to say." (Tom, 31, consumer interview)

Being firmly aware of the existence of oppressive representations within German society, for Tom's husband, and "a lot of other couples as well", it seems the most reasonable choice to act in "anticipatory obedience" and not give away clues about their sexual orientation. A sad, but understandable choice in the face of the recent homophobically motivated murdering of a gay man and the almost killing of his partner on the streets of the East-German city of Dresden (LSVD e.V., 2021), overall increasing numbers of anti-gay hate crimes (Queer.de, 2020a; Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2016b), and a coordinated effort by right-wing political populists to ignite new (and old) anti-gay hatred (Datta, 2018).

While evidence suggests that polarisation on the margins of society and within online echo chambers has on average increased over the past years (Cinelli, De Francisci Morales, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi, & Starnini, 2021; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), oppressive representations about gay men have been —on average— on decline (Pew Research, 2020; Wissenschaftliche Dienste des Deutschen Bundestags, 2016). Encouraged by countless openly gay public figures and increasing legal protection and equality, many gay men have eventually broken free of their underground existence, some of which have begun to self-represent as members of a discrete social group.

4.2.2 - A Discrete Social Group — Consumption as Collective Resistance

Consumers who belong to historically stigmatised social groups, and who live and consume among Others who still maintain oppressive representations, but who nonetheless can still rely on enabling representations to provide them at least some

degree of legal protection and social tolerance for an above-ground existence, tend to represent themselves as members of a *discrete social group*.

Under such conditions, discrete consumers perceive themselves as surrounded by a hostile, unwelcoming society that offers at most tolerance, but never true acceptance or respect for their being different. Underground consumers feel that they are united by specific biographical (e.g., the experience of coming out), cultural (e.g., being subjected to discrimination and homophobia), or biological (e.g., "born this way") differences, and that these differences make them not so much a community of choice, but one of common destiny (Lewin, 1948).

In my research context of gay men in Germany, underground consumers anchor their social group-derived identity still in concepts of victimhood and oppression, but also in more liberated notions of being different, collective resistance, creativity and uniqueness, and of belongingness, solidarity, and community. Therefore, emotional anchors such as fear, shame, and guilt (see above) are rarely found among discrete consumers. Instead, pride in difference, relief from outright oppression, and anger at remaining inequalities and life opportunities are dominant emotional anchorings for discrete consumers. The antinomies of discrete social groups no longer revolve around social exclusion and an outright dominated (underground) social positionality, but around a more self-conscious and confident us-versus-them oppositionality that privileges the group's own modes of being, doing, and consuming over that of mainstream culture, and grounds its unique identity primarily in its stigma marker.

The consumers in my data objectify these anchors in unique jargons, tastes, aesthetics, cultural products, images, places, people, and events that portray their group as *different* from the mainstream, but not as *inferior* or *subordinate* (Halperin, 2012). As a consequence of this us-versus-them opposition, discrete gay men often continue to, or prefer to live in local gay districts that emerged under dominant stigma conditions of

earlier decades (Coffin et al., 2019; Ghaziani, 2014; Kates, 2002). They also prefer to consume and structure much of their professional, social, and intimate lives around distinct discrete marketplace offers organised around matters of sexual identity, and targeted at, and run by other gay men (or members of the broader LGBTQ community). Such local, discrete communities offer consumers on one hand the opportunity for deeper identity investments with a stigmatised counter-cultural identity (Hall & Jefferson, 1973; Hebdige, 1979; Thornton, 1997), but on the other hand still serve the important function of collective coping with minority stress and the remaining pressure from oppressive and enabling societal representations. It is the communitarian structures of these discrete communities that welcome men like Deniz (see above), and others who might find that they are lacking the capitals and intersectional markers of social status that would allow them to live a more liberated gay life (Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020).

Therefore, in my data set, vulnerable, emotionally wounded, and older gay consumers were most likely to self-represent as members of a discrete social group. Older gay consumers have often experienced first-hand the legal and symbolic discrimination during the dominant or even hegemonic stigma configurations of their lifetime. Consequently, they tend to feel most comfortable among other discrete gay men who seek to together "take care of their own kind" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 188), and perpetuate those clear insider/outsider distinctions of the underground and subcultural formations they grew up with (Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996). Also younger gay men who have experienced anti-gay oppression among family, friends, and in their professional lives often feel safest and protected in those discrete local communities of men, who are empathetic and responsive to their own particular needs (e.g., "Queer Covid-19 Support", Queer.de, 2020b).

Many of the men in my dataset transitioned at least for some time in their life

through such discrete self-representations and the identity positions they afford: Other than, for example, ethnic minority or immigrant youth, who usually grow up in families *of their own kind*, most gay men are being born to heterosexual parents, and into heteronormative family structures. After a self-alienating coming out to themselves and relevant Others, discrete communities offer young gay men a temporary "utopian refuge" (Kozinets, 2001, p. 67) to regain their self-confidence and re-build their identity as a gay man (Kates, 2002; Schouten, 1991). Some of these men then move on into environments that allow for even more liberated forms of gay identity expression (see below).

Meet, for example, Jonathan, a 26-year-old student and part-time sales representative, who reflects on his coming out, which he describes as a process of socialisation into a discrete gay community:

> *„If I were heterosexual, I would have likely been much more self-confident from early on. How come? Maybe there are really such things as gay genes, or is it rather because I had to go through such hard times and to learn to manage my emotions? But I can probably say that I wouldn't have become so sensitive if I were straight. I had to go through a period in which I had a lot to do dealing with myself early on, and other kids didn't have to go through this, they could just take things for what they were. This is definitely a reason why I keep saying that this makes me different if I compare myself to my straight friends, for example." (Jonathan, 26, consumer interview)*

The othering experience of being different from "other kids", and having "a lot to do dealing with [himself] early on" demarcates the collective experience of LGBTQ youth with that of Jonathan's "straight friends", who have the luxury of growing up in a

heteronormative environment in which their developing sexuality is neither stigmatised nor politicised. From early age on, Jonathan realised the discrepancy between other people's (oppressive and enabling) representations imposed onto him in the form of normative expectations about the enactment of acceptable scripts for heterosexual adolescence, and his own *deviant* feelings of being attracted to boys rather than girls. Dealing with such emotions is stressful, and requires "learn[ing] to manage [one's] emotions" (Hochschild, 1983). Jonathan engages in a nature versus nurture debate, tracing the origins of his "sensitiv[ity]" and lack of "self-confiden[ce]" to either biological or social factors along his journey of coming to terms with his identity as a gay man. As I learn through further conversations with Jonathan, the discrete gay community and commercial infrastructure has gradually lost relevance for him over the years, particularly after having met his by-now husband, and after establishing themselves as a young, educated, middle-class, urban gay couple that can afford to live a mostly *post-gay* lifestyle (see below). While Jonathan's experience as a member of a discrete social group was rather transitional in nature, some gay men cannot or will not leave the social embeddedness, mutual solidarity, and feeling of community behind.

Such consumers, who self-represent as members of a discrete social group, use a consumption strategy which I call *consumption as collective resistance*. This strategy aims to preserve their distinct, *discrete* identity and consumer symbolics, but also to resist gay men's ongoing oppression in broader society. While discrete gay men do not remain invisible like an underground social group's consumption as hiding and denial, consumption as collective resistance is nonetheless a "non-dialogical" (Jovchelovitch, 2007, p. 123) consumption strategy that seeks an upholding of symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002); provocation and confrontation with mainstream beliefs, values, and practices, rather than reconciliation and integration with them. Consumption as collective resistance therefore emerges where (discrete) gay self-representations

encounter the "more powerful knowledge system[s]" (Jovchelovitch, 2007, p. 125) of oppressive and enabling Others.

During my analysis, consumption as collective resistance manifested itself, for example, in my informants strategically frequenting gay-owned and gay-friendly businesses, while avoiding or even proactively punishing brands that do not recognise the interests of gay consumers (Kates, 2004). My discrete consumers also openly and proudly displayed non-normative, or anti-normative, *stereotypically gay* fashion styles, aesthetics, music tastes, or jargons. They organised drag shows or *gay champagne receptions*, contributed to gay pride festivals, volunteered at LGBTQ community centres, celebrated Eurovision Song Contest parties, or worshipped gay icons such as Conchita Wurst, Lady Gaga, Freddie Mercury, or Tom Daley to celebrate their otherness and resist gay oppression (Kates & Belk, 2001).

The following vignette from my interview with informant Tom, a married 31-year-old civil servant, in which he responds to a typical social encounter in which both oppressive and enabling social representations were present, exemplifies the consumption strategy of consumption as collective resistance:

> *"What happens quite regularly when my husband and I book a hotel room is that either they believe we are brothers, or that, well, we are simply two men, and so they want to give us a twin room or to separate our beds. This happens very often. And they don't even consider it to be within the realm of possibility that we could be a gay couple that possibly also shares a bed." (Tom, 31, consumer interview)*

In social encounters like the one described above, consumers like Tom find themselves represented by service providers as *impossible Others*—as members of a

historically stigmatised social group that, despite decades of fighting for legal and symbolic recognition, lies outside the "realm of possibility". As a consequence of many such discouraging encounters, Tom, his husband, and their friends identify strongly with the radical, oppositional spirit of the gay rights movement of the 1970 and '80s (Pretzel & Weiß, 2012, 2013), and boycott mainstream, "straight" (emic term) market offerings. Therefore, they prefer to spend most of their income on explicitly LGBTQ-friendly or LGBTQ-led products and services, and even invest additional time and resources to seek out such specifically *queer* marketplace offerings.

Also decades after the dominant stigma configuration that gave rise to subcultural modes of existing and consuming (Kates, 2002, 2004; Peñaloza, 1996), consumers like Tom sustain the well-documented existence of parallel markets for gay hospitality, leisure, media, or professional services, among others. A prominent example of such discrete LGBTQ marketplace offerings is the "Spartacus International Gay Guide" (Bruno Gmünder, 2017), a travel guide that collects approximately 21,000 listings from 135 countries, including hotels, clubs, restaurants, and other points of interest for LGBTQ travellers.

Excerpt 23 - Spartacus International Gay Guide 2016 (45th edition) — Photo taken during fieldwork at gay bookstore "Erlkoenig" in Stuttgart, August 2016

Through their consumption as collective resistance, discrete gay men enable, protect and perpetuate a distinctly gay consumer culture (Kates, 2002; Keating & McLoughlin, 2005; Peñaloza, 1996), similar to black middle-class consumers (Crockett, 2017) or plus-sized fatshionistas (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Unlike these groups, however, discrete gay men do not demand "respectability" (Crockett, 2017, p. 554) or "inclusion" into mainstream markets (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013, p. 1234), but merely the parallel existence of distinct, gay market offers—i.e., "safe space[s]" (Kates, 2002, p. 386) to be and consume "among one's own kind" (Simon, consumer interview). My interview with Jens, a 26 years old student, illustrates the on-going relevance of such safe consumption spaces for discrete gay consumers:

"It's easy to make new friends [in the gay scene]. You feel comfortable and

understood, and also to some extent safe. If you think of 'gay community' in terms of parties and clubs, then this is where you can have what everybody else has in 'normal' life, in heterosexual life, and what I didn't have before my coming out. Having the opportunity to gaze after someone, to be flirty, to feel good and be at ease with yourself." (Jens, 26, Consumer Interview)

For Jens, gay bars or clubs offer protected consumption spaces with clear-cut and stable symbolic boundaries in which he as a gay man can feel "safe" and live a "normal life" (Kates, 2002).

Excerpt 24 - Express your pride in being different — bar mat at a gay dance club in Cologne, Germany. Photo taken during fieldwork in November 2018

For Jens, and his middle-class upbringing, the gay scene provides not only a consumption scape do enact collective resistance against oppressive and enabling societal representations, but also a space to celebrate his pride in difference. Also some major brands, like the above pictured *Absolut Vodka*, have leveraged such narrations of discrete gay identities grounded in difference and opposition, and aspire to capitalise on such counter-cultural sentiments (Kates, 2002).

However, discrete gay commercial infrastructures can also provide literally life-saving support to consumers such as Deniz, whose story we have encountered already in the previous section. With the help of local (discrete) LGBTQ community centres and NGOs, Deniz was able to escape the oppressive environment of his *family of origin*, and to eventually start a new life among other discrete queer (and gay) friends who make up his new *family of choice* (Weeks et al., 2001). The following excerpt from my expert interview with Max, the owner of gay bathhouses across several major German cities, illustrates how commercial discrete gay infrastructure can sometimes serve even the most oppressed men to, every once in a while, experience a glimpse of freedom. After the war in Syria had led to an influx of more than one million refugees into Germany in 2015, some of which seeking to also escape the oppressive and homophobic regimes of their home-countries, LGBTQ service providers across several German cities have come together to organise their services also for queer refugees (Queer Refugees Deutschland, n.d.). Max recalls:

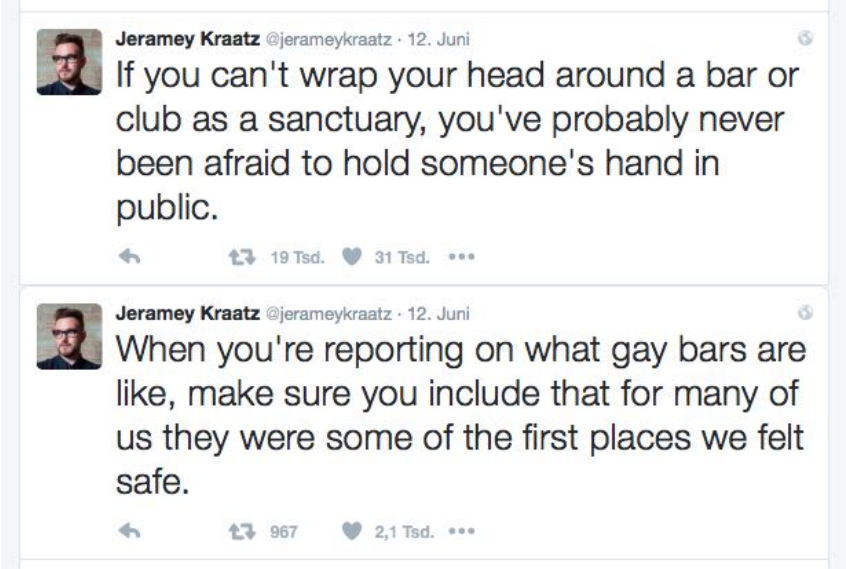
> *"We have a special offer that refugees get free admission [at the gay sauna], to show them: here's a protected space for you. Last month we had two young Syrian guys, both in their mid 20s, who have been a couple for 3 years already, and who were living together in Syria. Officially they were just student flatmates. And now they've fled Syria and have come to [city], and they are now*

in a refugee shelter, and share a room with 14 people. Nobody must know that they are gay, let alone that they are in a relationship. And after a couple of beers, they started to really warm up and were beaming at each other. And of course, other guys were starting to flirt with them, and that was really beautiful to watch from behind the bar. And when we closed that evening they hugged me, and said thank you for a thousand times, and how nice and great that evening was for them. And how awful it would be to go back to the shelter, and they couldn't tell anyone, people mustn't know where they were, and they mustn't touch or be close to one another anymore." (Max, 56, expert interview)

The above vignette by Max powerfully underscores that also in liberal Western democracies of the 21st century, oppressive societal representations force some gay men into underground positions of hiding and denial. The transformational difference such sometimes mundane commercial infrastructure for sexual consumption can make in those men's lives should therefore not easily be discounted. The continuous physical and emotional relevance of these discrete and protected spaces, as well as the continuous existential threats that render them necessary, also shines vividly in the tweets of author Jeramey Kraatz (2016) after the mass shooting hate crime at the Orlando LGBTQ nightclub "Pulse" in 2016—a tragedy that sparked ample solidarity and protest among LGBTQ consumers in Germany and around the world (Queer.de, 2016a):

"If you can't wrap your head around a bar or club as a sanctuary, you've probably never been afraid to hold someone's hand in public. When you're reporting on what gay bars are like, make sure you include that for many of us they were some of the first places we felt safe." (@jerameykraatz, June 12th,

2016)



Excerpt 25 - Jeramey Kraatz Twitter Feed — 12 June 2016, capture: author

In his tweet, Kraatz captures not only the essence of such liberated, almost spiritual, alternative worlds where gay consumers first feel safe after the othering experience of coming out, but he reminds also gay men in Germany of their (sometimes residual, but still existential) vulnerability. Discrete social structures and identities, and the consumption practices that objectify and uphold them, are therefore likely *retreat areas* in which members of a historically stigmatised social group can come back together for collective coping and community-building, once events such as the Orlando massacre or an unfavourable Supreme Court ruling have shattered the fragile flower of narrations on social progress in the collective memory of the social group. Under conditions of *fragmented stigm*a, where oppressive representations can violently resurface at any time, some gay men find comfort in living their lives as members of discrete social groups. However, some men eventually move on to more liberated self-representations, such as those of hybrid social groups to which I will turn next.

4.2.3 - A Hybrid Social Group — Consumption as Reformation

Consumers who belong to historically stigmatised social groups, and who encounter predominantly enabling societal representations in their environment, tend to represent themselves as members of a *hybrid social group*. Hybrid consumers are neither outrightly oppressed nor unconditionally respected by relevant Others in society. Instead, they are being *tolerated* as *exotic Others* from a cautious distance (Bonsu, 2009).

Under enabling societal representations, hybrid consumers have virtually the same legal rights and protection than everyone else, and are sometimes also *benevolently* singled out for their creativity, bodily features, or unique and original tastes or talents. However, outside Others still establish qualitative differences, reserving some realms of institutional, professional, and social life the privilege of the more powerful mainstream society.

In my research context of gay men in Germany, such hybrid consumers anchor their social group in concepts such as progress, innovation, avant-gardism, cultural change, self-respect, and political agency. Unlike underground or discrete consumers, hybrid gay men do not anchor their marker of difference as stigma-bearing, as in emotions of fear, shame, or guilt. Instead, they anchor themselves and their social group in positive emotions associated with playful cultural expression, exploration, a can-do-attitude, and the self-discovery and realisation of human potential. At heart of a hybrid social identity lies the belief that social change is possible, necessary, and eventually unavoidable, and that change agents, such as themselves, have historically paved the path to new acceptabilities, leaving behind the dusty traditions of the past. The preceding us-versus-them antinomies have given way to a constellation of neither-us (discrete, stereotypically homosexual)-nor-them (old-fashioned, traditionally heterosexual) but something in between.

Hybrid gay men objectify these anchorings through micro-political acts of *reflexive bricolage* (Lévy-Strauss, 1967). Such acts incorporate symbolic and political resistance against both, an overly isolationist and stereotypically self-constraining discrete gay community *and* an old, stuffy, and unimaginative heterosexual and heteronormative mainstream society. Rather than resisting stigmatising representations of gay men per-se, and as such adopting and legitimising the same representational frame of reference and its anchorings, hybrid gay men seek to redefine and reform social acceptabilities for both, non-heterosexual and heterosexual consumers, seeking legitimacy for new, hybrid ways of being, doing, consuming, and having sex.

Self-representing as a member of a hybrid social group is a non-trivial endeavour that, in order to be successful, requires social and economic capital, and sensitivity in dealing with Others (Bourdieu, 1984). In my dataset, hybrid gay men therefore tended to be those who are educated, financially independent, occupy favourable social network positions, and are able and confident enough to challenge social conventions without the support of a discrete gay community, or facing possibly grave consequences. Hybrid gay men were generally sensitive and empathetic enough, yet also willing to seek reform and reconciliation, rather than merely provocation, demarcation, and division as some of their *discrete* counterparts. Most of my informants who perpetuated hybrid self-representations stemmed from a heteronormative middle-class upbringing and, at times, spent a constitutive period after their coming-out under the protective wings of a discrete, local gay community. For those with a transitional phase as discrete consumers, the collective discrete experience of resisting oppressive representations was an important (consumption) strategy during their coming-of-age and early years as an adult. As more mature and established individuals, however, they have acquired the freedom to take a more conciliatory, creative, and at times *cheeky* approach to addressing remaining inequalities from an eye-level-, rather than a

subordinated social positionality.

Hybrid consumers enact a consumption strategy which I call *consumption as reformation*. This consumption strategy aims to sensibly and considerately reform overly traditional, dogmatic, or stereotypical homosexual *and* heterosexual representations of masculinity, sexuality, aesthetics, fatherhood, familiness, or marriage, for example. Hybrid consumers achieve this through the confident yet playful introduction of new, hybrid, forms of consuming that bridge, fuse, or *queer* (emic term) consumption styles across the spectrum of sexualities and their prescriptive identity propositions (Butler, 1990, 1993). These "dialogical encounters" foster not only the mutual understanding between gay and non-gay consumers, but also representational change on the level of societal representations through the "hybridization of knowledge systems" (Jovchelovitch, 2007, p. 124).

To illustrate the concept of hybrid consumption as reformation, let me introduce expert interviewee Peter, who is a 49-years old business consultant, and a former member of the German federal parliament [Deutscher Bundestag], where he served as spokesperson on LGBTQ rights for his party. Peter considers himself a "rainbow family father" (emic term), who lives with his partner Robert in a civil union. Peter and Robert together share the social role as fathers for Rosie, who is Peter's biological child, and who Peter has conceived a woman, who is herself in a lesbian relationship by means of in-vitro fertilisation.

In an average week, I learn from Peter, Rosie spends two days with Peter and Robert (the "dads"), and the remaining days with her "moms". Peter carefully plans his weekly schedule and consumption activities around his duties as a rainbow family father. He also visibly enjoys his role as a non-traditional, boundary-crossing dad. At Rosie's Kindergarten, for example, he casually chats with other parents about mundane consumer topics, such as children's toys, but for Peter, these conversations also acquire

significance as micro-political acts that seek to establish epistemological legitimacy for his non-traditional way of family life with two moms and two dads (Jovchelovitch, 2007). In such moments, Peter finds himself in a context of cultural hybridity in which neither the representational configurations of discrete gay lifeworlds, nor those of the heteronormative nuclear family seem applicable. Rather than hiding his gay identity, or resorting to discrete gay spaces, however, Peter and Robert proactively participate in mainstream society. They do so, however, not in imitation of heteronormative acceptabilities, but rather by demanding legal as well as symbolic recognition for their hybridised, non-traditional ways of parenting and consuming that combines elements from both, discrete gay, and a heteronormative straight life-worlds.

It is, however, not only with their parenting style that Peter and Robert enjoy playing with boundaries. The following excerpt from my interview with Peter illustrates the intricacies of his hybrid cultural entrepreneurship, and the irritations it can cause when challenging straight as well as discrete gay representations of acceptable intimacies and fatherhood:

> *"As soon as you live in a civil union and have a child, you seem to have become a completely different person for some people in the [gay] community. For example, on [the casual dating app] Grindr, somebody texted me like: 'Oh my god, you live in a civil union, you've got a child, what are you doing here?' As if I was totally heterosexualised. But there are nuances between 'we are different' and still having the same benefits that many heterosexuals enjoy. To bring these together is obviously difficult also for parts of the [gay] community. We simply have an open relationship, even though we are civil partners and have a child. I believe many heterosexuals find the idea of living this kind of openness hard to accept. It's also hard for some gays [to accept], and I experience these*

boundaries." (Peter, 49, expert interview)

Peter's consumption of the online casual dating app *Grindr* as a rainbow family father nicely illustrates his hybrid consumption as reformation of social representations on both, the level of gay men as a social group, and society more broadly: Through mixing and matching elements from both mainstream and discrete gay cultural spheres, he aims at promoting winning "nuances" in the consumption space between a discrete gay "we are different" and a "heterosexualised" imitation of heteronormative family values. Notice the politicality in Peter's rejection of the normative framework imposed by his chat partner to condemn his use of Grindr for the consumption of casual intimacy, given his identity as a family father. Consider equally, Peter's struggle with being accepted by heterosexuals for whom this sexual "openness" would be "hard to accept". By using a gay casual dating app despite his socially ascribed role as a married father, Peter hybridises heteronormative representations of monogamous marriage and fatherhood with (seemingly incompatible) discrete gay representations of polyamorous sexual freedom. As he notes, this hybrid practice receives pushback from both gay and straight consumers, because one side rejects it as a violation of heteronormative representations of fatherhood, and the other side rejects it as incompatible with (discrete) gay sexual liberty.

Such agentic infusion of discrete gay representations into mainstream cultural domains—and vice versa—is a theme I find recurring in multiple objectifications of hybrid representations and consumption as reformation. Informant Sven, for example, is a 39-year-old manager who grew up in a rather religious-conservative protestant family, but who has —since then— found pleasure in the creative boundary play he can now afford as a well-educated, and financially successful urban professional. Ever since being a teenager, football [for American readers: soccer] has been Sven's biggest

passion, although the history of homosexuality and professional football is complicated, to say the least (Cashmore & Cleland, 2014). Sven is member of a so-called Queer Football Fanclub (QFF), an association of non-heterosexual fans, who collectively support their team inside and outside the stadium (QFF, 2021).

At the time of writing, the European Association of Queer Football Fanclubs counts more than two dozen such non-heterosexual fan associations across Germany, who regularly infuse discrete gay aesthetics and practices into a bastion of macho masculinity through their characteristic outfits, chants, and dance performances. As such, they challenge heteronormative, and at times heterosexist, representations of athletic, rugged masculinity, as well as stereotypical representations of gay men as effeminate, weak, and non-competitive; all this in a micro-cultural context in which fans have frequently used words such as "gay" or "faggot" as slurs intended to humiliate opponents and referees alike (Cashmore & Cleland, 2014). At the same time, however, these Queer Football Fanclubs challenge discrete gay representations that readily embrace stereotypical associations of gay men's expertise to be limited to the domains of, for example, Broadway musicals, fashion design, and fine arts, rather than in competitive, full-contact team sports (Halperin, 2012).

See, for example, the below pictured float of Queer Football Fanclub *Stuttgarter Junxx* of German Premier League [Bundesliga] club *VfB Stuttgart* at the 2016 Stuttgart pride parade consumption spectacle. Not only does the float feature a unique version of the football club's crest, hybridised with the iconic rainbow flag. Also does the float's main banner pose the provocative question "Gays and Lesbians inside the stadium?" [Schwule und Lesben im Stadion?]; a humorous boundary play with the stereotypes promoting an apparent incompatibility of professional football and non-heterosexual life also prevalent in parts of the LGBTQ community.

Excerpt 26 - Float of Stuttgarter Junxx at the 2016 Stuttgart Pride Parade; credits: Stuttgarter Junxx, Facebook

During my further investigation of the phenomenon of Queer Football Fanclubs, I encountered the following, particularly humorous hybrid consumption-as-reformation pun by the queer fan club *Herta Junxx* [loosely translated: "Herta Boyzz"] of German Premier League [Bundesliga] club *Herta BSC Berlin*:

Excerpt 27 - Queer Football Fanclub "Herta Junxx" show a bannes saying: "Gay Fans are Hertha [harder] than you think! Screenshot: Online fieldwork, January 2020

The banner in the photograph bears the slogan: "Gay Fans are harder than you

think!", whereas the German word for "harder" [härter] is creatively swapped for the football club's name "Hertha", which is pronounced in a similar fashion. Using this pun, the *Herta Junxx* playfully ridicule stereotypes about gay men's inherent weakness and inadequacy as both, fans and players alike.

Another empirical example to illustrate the hybrid strategy of consumption as reformation constitutes the domain of marriage. Coincidentally, the legalisation of same-sex marriage (i.e., full marriage equality and not civil unions) by the German federal parliament in 2017 overlapped with the data collection period for this study. As such, I was able to experience first-hand a transitional moment in the collective history of my historically stigmatised social group under investigation. Through formal and informal interviews and my multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, but also through on-going media coverage in queer and mainstream media, I was able to accompany my informants during this process of social transformation and witness, for example, the key historic parliamentary debate and vote on gay *marriage equality* [German: "Ehe für Alle"]. Thus, I was able to document the role hybrid consumption as reformation played in leading towards this representational reformation.

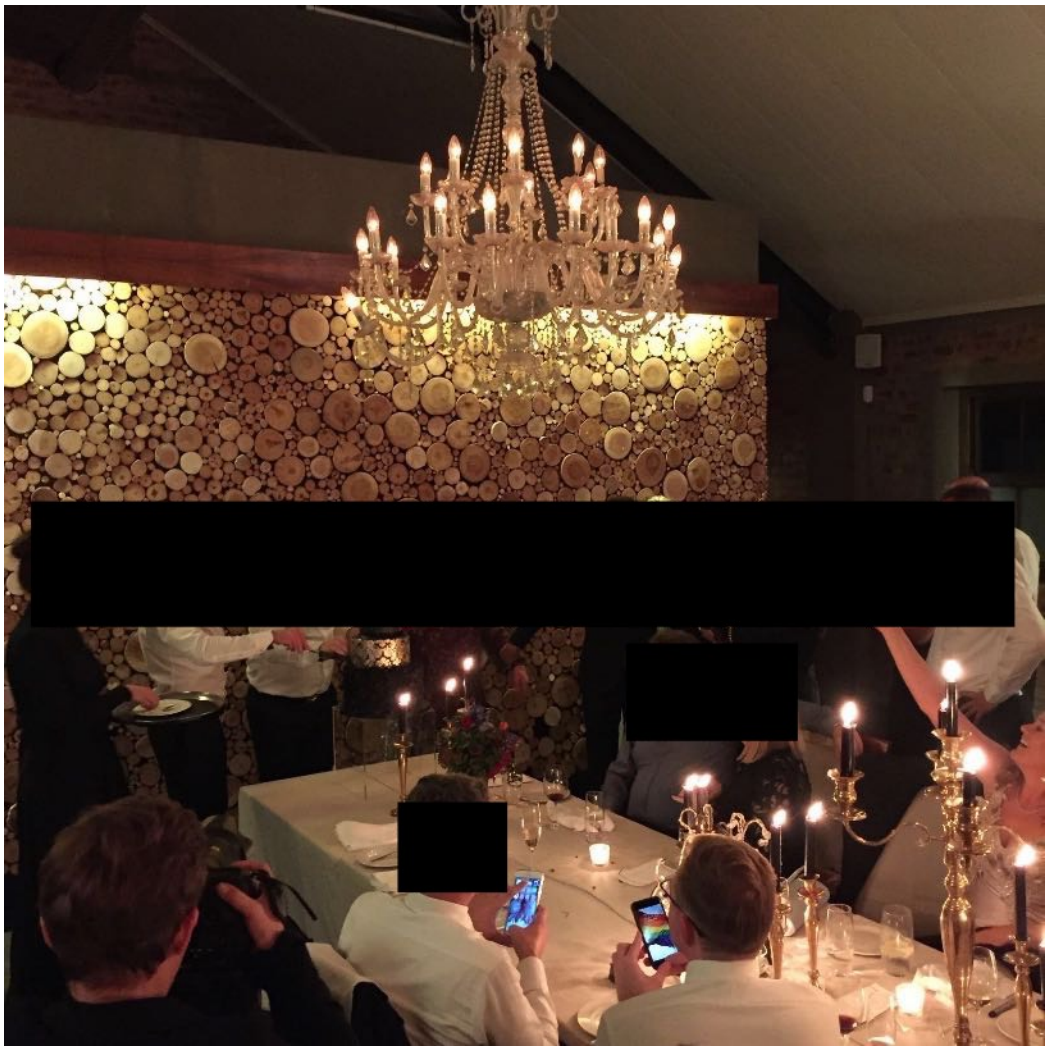
The photograph pictured below, which I took during fieldwork at the 2016 pride parade (i.e., before marriage equality) in the city of Stuttgart, shows such an act of public consumption as reformation: The picture features a flamboyantly-dressed all male bridal couple waving rainbow flags, campaigning for full gay marriage equality. Note the gender-queering performance of the male *bride*, wearing a classic white wedding dress alongside a full beard and fluffy chest hair. While the arrangement of imagery might appear carnivalesque at first sight, the picture elegantly captures the essence of hybrid consumption as reformation:

Excerpt 28 - Gay Bridal Couple campaigning for marriage equality at Stuttgart Pride, fieldwork, 30.07.2016

Consumption as reformation requires not merely the resistance against, and rejection of the traditional, heteronormative institution of marriage, a position argued by some of my *discrete* informants ("since when is marriage a path to liberation?", field note from informal interview). Nor does consumption as reformation imply the apolitical imitation and assimilation of mainstream-cultural beliefs, values, or practices (as some of my *anti-stigma* informants preferred, see below). Instead, hybrid consumption as reformation seeks to combine elements from both, (mainstream) straight and (discrete) gay representational repertoires to re-interpret (*re-present*) and *reform* socially acceptable ways of *doing* a wedding and *being* married. It is through these micro-political acts of reflexive bricolage that existing societal representations of, for example, the institution of marriage become re-negotiated. The crucial analytic insight to be taken from the photograph shown above is therefore neither the resistance against, nor the imitation of a traditional heterosexual wedding ceremony. Instead, these consumers' political aspiration is to establish new, hybridised ways of *performing a wedding*, that are, however, no less *real*, *legitimate*, or *valuable* than its traditional

heteronormative interpretations.

During my fieldwork, I encountered such hybrid consumption as reformation, for example, at a gay wedding ceremony, where the bridal couple first arranged a rather traditional civil marriage ceremony with groomsmen, wedding car, matching suits, and flower girls, but then staged a distinctively gay reception and wedding party featuring shirtless male waiters, a drag queen host, and a music playlist that catered to (discrete) gay music tastes. This hybridisation of cultural modes of expression from *both worlds* likely challenged representational orthodoxies for both, heterosexual and non-heterosexual wedding guests.



Excerpt 29 - An almost traditional gay wedding reception; courtesy of one informant's personal memorabilia

Excerpt 30 - An almost traditional wedding cake, infusing the iconic rainbow flag into a heteronormative ritual; courtesy of one informant's personal memorabilia

Importantly, whether it is Peter's conspicuous hybrid consumption as reformation of representations of fatherhood, Queer Football Fanclubs' hybridisation of straight and gay aesthetics in the football stadium and the pride parade, or the hybridised gay wedding ceremony: Hybrid consumption as reformation almost always takes place in public or semi-public spaces, in which its micro-political interventions cause knowledge encounters between two or more formerly incompatible representational systems (Jovchelovitch, 2007).

As my analysis reveals, hybrid gay consumers, do not "try to escape the mainstream market" like Fatshionistas (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013, p. 1245) or retreat into segregated consumption spheres like discrete gay men or earlier subcultural gay consumers (Kates, 2002), but to promote "a greater range of practices" (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013, p. 1245) for all consumers. Yet while fatshionistas still struggle to change mainstream beauty ideals, gay men's reformist consumption practices have

already inspired countless new market offerings tailored, for example, to newly accepted representations of partnership (e.g., open relationships), family (e.g., rainbow families, families of choice), or masculinity (e.g., the groomed metrosexual man or the bearded lumbersexual) (Baxter, 2014; Coad, 2008; Rinallo, 2007; Shugart, 2008; Visconti, 2008).

As I will show in the next section, however, not all gay men faced with enabling representations within their social environment use consumption strategically to collectively resist (discrete) or reform (hybrid social groups) oppressive or enabling representations about them. Some rather make strategic use of consumption to deconstruct differences between gay and heterosexual men, grounded in the self-representations of an *anti-stigma* social group.

4.2.4 - An Anti-Stigma Social Group — Consumption as Deconstruction of Differences

Consumers who belong to historically stigmatised social groups, and who live and consume in contexts where normalised representations exist, yet enabling representations also prevail, tend to represent themselves as an *anti-stigma* social group—or *anti-gay* in my research context. These consumers appear to be more or less fully accepted in their social environment, but only on the condition that they abandon political aspirations to resist and reform, and rather imitate and assimilate into mainstream culture and its beliefs, values, and practices.

In line with heterosexual Others in their environment, anti-stigma gay men reject discrete consumers' resistance to perceived oppression and mainstream-societal norms, practices, and beliefs as obsolete, anachronistic, and annoying. This surfaces in (emic) remarks such as "I don't have anything against gays, but why do you always have to show off your being gay?". Gay activist and award-winning author Johannes Kram

(2018) brilliantly exposes the social sentiments underlying such remarks as a *new homophobia* that, unlike its traditional (*old*) counterpart, is no longer mostly a concern of conservative and neo-right circles. Instead, according to Kram (2018), this *new* homophobia is more frequently found among liberal, educated, and left-leaning self-identified "straight allies" (emic term). Following the author's observations, said new homophobia acknowledges the stigmatising and discriminatory legacy of right-wing, religious, and often structural *old* homophobia, but at the same time inverts the victim-offender relationship by blaming non-heterosexual consumers for their ongoing *acting out* and political activism as the *true* reason for remaining social inequalities (ibid.).

Anti-gay consumers anchor their social group predominantly in concepts such as heteronormative normalcy, cultural collectivism and assimilation, individual social mobility by means of meritocracy (Sandell, 2020), and sexual identity as a private and personal, rather than a political and public matter (Duggan, 2002). As such, anti-gay consumers re-anchor discrete and hybrid social groups and their provocative and emancipatory representations of pride in difference, representational entrepreneurship, and exoticism in concepts such as provocation, hypocrisy, and stridence, as well as in emotions of disgust, embarrassment, and entitlement. The central antinomy of anti-gay self-representations is no longer a vertical "us" (gay men) versus "them" (society) conflict among contestants with unequal access to cultural and interpretive dominance (Howarth, 2002, 2006; Jovchelovitch, 2007; Link & Phelan, 2001). Instead, anti-gay men engage in horizontal us-versus-them battles for social recognition, particularly with discrete gay men, where anti-gay representations privilege desexualised, depoliticised, and invisible gay men over those who cannot or will not conform to mainstream social norms (Duggan, 2002). Some anti-gay consumers, however, aspire to "changing society from within" (fieldnote) through subtle reform by being "respectable gay role models" (fieldnote).

In my research context of gay men in Germany, I found anti-gay self-representations to be most prevalent among well-established, middle-aged, and (sub-) urban professionals stemming from conservative working-class or middle-class backgrounds, and who live in monogamous long-term couple relationships. Among my informants, anti-stigma gay men tended to have few discrete gay friends ("we really don't have anything to do with *those* guys," Manuel, consumer, group discussion, emphasis in original), were remarkably attuned to recognise social status markers (such as prestigious job titles, designer clothes, or luxury watches and other material consumption objects), and spent most of their time with other anti-gay "alpha gays" (emic term describing a gay elite) or heterosexual colleagues, friends, and family.

These anti-stigma gay men represented themselves as members of an anti-stigma social group because the social identity position derived from such representations allowed them to reap the status privileges of a conformist, middle-class consumer lifestyle, while avoiding gruelling and cumbersome micro-political conflicts. Most of the anti-stigma informants I encountered through interviews and my ethnographic data collection turned to anti-gay self-representations after escaping precarious underground, or confrontational discrete self-representations. These transitions presupposed that they had acquired sufficient social, cultural, and economic capital to advance socially by emulating, and assimilating into a conditionally accepting mainstream society. A minority of anti-gay consumers I encountered during data collection, however, grounded their anti-gay representations and derived self-identity in a class-conscient sense of entitlement, stressing that "apart from being gay" (field note), they indeed belonged to a privileged socio-economic or cultural elite. During the course of this study, I found no evidence of anti-stigma gay men abandoning these self-representations, presumably because of the potential status risks and threats that such shifts might pose to their established identities.

Anti-stigma gay men in my dataset engaged predominantly in a consumption strategy which I call *consumption as deconstruction differences* between gay men and the heterosexual mainstream. This strategy aims at blending-in to a broader society and its norms, values, and beliefs, not through emancipatory reform, but through imitation and assimilation. This consumption strategy therefore seeks to *un-do* differences through anticipatory obedience, sometimes with undertones of internalised homophobia. Some of the anti-gay men I encountered during my data collection were outright reflexive about their imitation of mainstream-cultural modes of being, articulating their belief that "you first need to be respected by [others] before you get a chance to change [their] mind[s]" (fieldnote).

Notwithstanding such occasional political agency *from within*, consumption as deconstruction of differences is mostly a non-dialogical strategy, as it neither seeks to critique, nor to reform the only conditional societal acceptance of gay men in particular, and non-heterosexual individuals in general. Instead, this consumption strategy readily and willingly enacts the "powerful knowledge system[s]" of heteronormative Others (Jovchelovitch, 2007, p. 125), transforming homosexuality from a public and contested to a private and apolitical matter (Duggan, 2002; Wiegman & Wilson, 2015).

The following excerpt from my consumer interview with Florian, a 27-year-old self-employed caterer, illustrates the consumption strategy of deconstruction of difference:

> *"Have we ever really been so different? Do we really want to be so different? I think we [gay men] have moved away from this quite a bit. We needed to show that we are different back then [in the 1970s and 1980s], to call attention to ourselves, to show society: we are here, and we are no less normal than you are. But at heart we were simply longing for the same conservative rights that*

everybody else has. I think we have acted out and partied long enough. Now we long for the classical 'coming home' to that little detached house with a garden, a dog, and a picket fence. Basically, the example our parents set for us. Because, if we think about it, it wasn't too bad back home." (Florian, 27, consumer interview)

For Florian, discrete and hybrid self-representations are instrumental, temporary stages in a progressive journey through history that moves societal representations of gay men from outright oppression toward normalisation. Starting from the provocative question "Have we ever really been so different?" Florian traces the evolution of the collective *we* through gone-by periods of discrimination, resistance, and emancipatory activism. By now, however, these sentiments have become outdated, and gay men might find a good life in a metaphorical *coming home* to the blissful middle-class consumer domesticity of their parental homes.

Since Florian no longer faces oppressive representations in his social environment, he appears to generalise his own social position to most, if not all gay men, who —by now— should cease to occupy an identity position grounded in *otherness* and a history of discrimination. Instead, for Florian, gay men should eventually indulge in a conservative, consumerist lifestyle that mimics that of their middle-class upbringing. For Florian, the hedonistic "acting out" and partying of the past were necessary transgressive, yet transient political acts at the time. By now, however, such acts of symbolic resistance have lost their legitimacy not only in the eyes of heteronormative mainstream society, but also in the eyes of other anti-gay men. For Florian, social recognition and respect is now conditional on gay men living a "conservative" (i.e., heteronormative) lifestyle. Those who do not confirm to this ideal, such as discrete gay men (see above) pose a threat to Florian's romanticised middle-

class consumer bliss, and might as well "contaminate" (Goffman, 1963, p. 4) the very representations that would allow Florian a respectable life in his home "with a garden, a dog, and a picket fence."

Informant Daniel, a 24-year-old student at a highly-regarded *elite* business school in Germany, describes his discontent with discrete, emancipatory interpretations of gay identity:

> *"The Stonewall Riots, and Gay Pride Parades are a politically motivated extreme reaction to an extreme situation which is oppression. And we all know that people are sociable as long they are not faced with existential threat. But under this threat we can all turn into murderers, in principle. And that's the fade-out of an extreme political protest movement caused by extreme inequality." (Daniel, 24, consumer interview)*

Also for Daniel, resistance is justified during times of "extreme (.) oppression" and "existential threat". The "extreme political protest movement" of the past, however, is about to be "fade[d]-out". Consequently, for Daniel, times of discrete resistance, or hybrid emancipatory reformation are over.

Instead, consider the perspective of informant Manuel, a 29-year-old business school graduate and start-up entrepreneur, who considers himself a devout Catholic, is in a committed, long-term couple-relationship, and has decided to marry only under conditions of full marriage equality (which, at the time we met was not yet a legal option). In our group discussion, I learn that both Manuel and his partner are white, middle-class, urban professionals. They have few gay friends, mostly avoid gay venues, and do not identify with a discrete gay lifestyle, which in many ways is at odds with their conservative, middle-class identity:

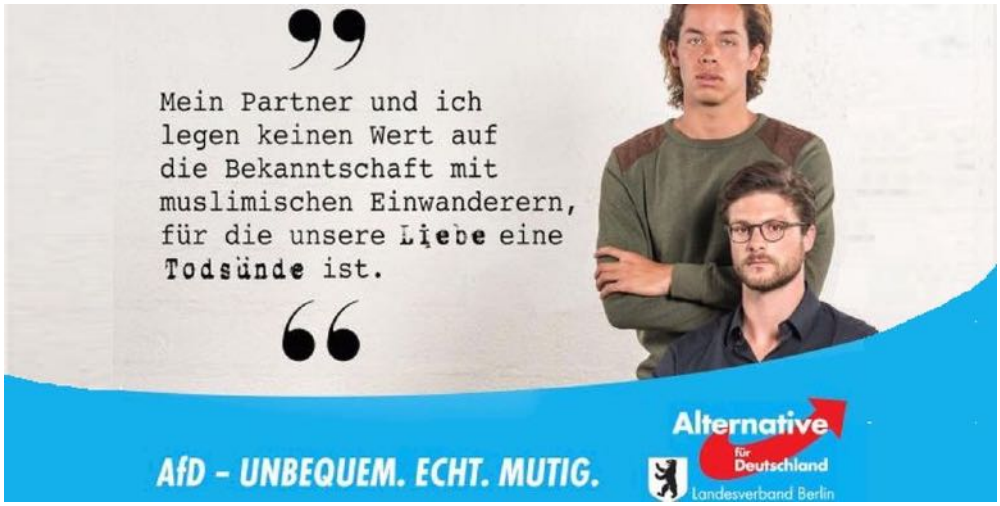
"How do you feel when you're walking down the street and you see a guy who behaves very effeminate or dresses like a woman? Well, I still think this is strange, too shrill, and I feel that I wouldn't accept him like 100%. I discover that I am myself a bit homophobic. [other discussants laughing] And if I have some fear of contact myself already, how can I blame my grandmother if she sees something [sic] like this [and does not approve]? [...] If somebody talks about 'gay', then it's always about LGBT already, there's a lot coming along that somehow should belong to oneself, right? And that is somehow not me, because I think that's again a minority of a minority, and it makes me think: Okay, we really don't have anything to do with those guys, right? [...] I sometimes even find it strange to see two men are kissing on the street. And that's somehow a strange thing to say, because [my partner and I] live together, and of course we do that at home too." (Manuel, 29, consumer group discussion)

Manuel is unapologetic about his dislike of presumably "effeminate" behaviours, gender-fluidity, or extravagant fashion styles—that is, consumption practices traditionally associated with discrete gay men (Kates, 2002)—which he considers "too shrill". He goes as far as to stigmatise and devalue such Others as not "100% acceptable" and confesses that he would rather avoid contact with such consumers, most likely to protect his higher status position against the threat of symbolic contamination (Goffman, 1963; Jodelet, 1991). Ironically, Manuel's non-approving stance toward non-normative gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, or trans* people—"a minority of a minority"—serves as a proxy to legitimise homophobia and stigmatising oppressive or enabling representations in wider society, as exemplified by

Manuel's apologetic note about his grandmother.

Manuel's performance of the urban, gender-conforming professional in smart-casual attire, his lack of empathy and solidarity toward other sexual minorities, and the absence of symbolic markers of difference in his consumption behaviour serve the deliberate purpose of dissociating himself and his identity from representations of the more stigmatised, discrete gay consumer (Kates, 2002). Instead, by saying "we really don't have anything to do with those guys", Manuel associates himself with a subgroup of privileged "alpha-gay" (emic term) men, who only deem "straight-acting" (Martino, 2006, p. 35) gay men acceptable. Such straight-acting men present themselves as desexualised, depoliticised, and invisible (Duggan, 2002), while rendering those as inferior who do, can, or will not comply to broader societal norms (Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010). Thus, Manuel and his fellow anti-gay consumers contribute to the invisibility of non-heterosexual life in the public sphere, reinforcing subtle forms of domination and symbolic inequality.

Catering to the sentiments of such conservative anti-stigma consumers are, among others, right-wing organisations such as the German AfD party [Alternative for Germany], who have found fertile grounds for their own populist thought in anti-stigma consumers' willingness to stigmatise and discriminate against other minorities: The below visual, by the AfD Berlin Regional Association, depicts a presumably gay couple next to the quote: "My partner and I don't value acquaintance with Muslim immigrants, for whom our love is a mortal sin." [Mein Partner und ich legen keinen Wert auf die Bekanntschaft mit muslimischen Einwanderern, für die unsere Liebe eine Todsünde ist.]. The ad closes with the tagline: "AfD - Uncomfortable. Real. Brave." [AfD - Unbequem. Echt. Mutig.]



Excerpt 31 - AfD visual seeking to attract anti-gay islamophobic voters, source: AfD Berlin, Queer.de

As documented by the journalists at Queer.de (2016b), the local Berlin AfD branch sought to propagate these images particularly within Berlin's gay district around *Nollendorfplatz* in *Schöneberg*, as we see in the image below.

Excerpt 32 - Anti-Immigrant ads by right-wing AfD party within Berlin's gay district in Schöneberg

Like with independent music enthusiasts who seek to "insulate the field of indie consumption from the stigmatizing encroachments of the hipster myth" through sophisticated demythologisation practices (Arsel & Thompson, 2011, p. 803), anti-

stigma consumers consume strategically to protect themselves and their fellow anti-stigma men from the stigmatising association with stereotypical, flamboyant discrete gay men ("if you walk around [dressed] like that, you don't have to wonder why you're discriminated against"—Jan, expert interview). The so-called *straight-acting* of anti-gay consumers also bears similarities to the consumption tactics of black middle-class consumers who strive to avoid stigma by "mastering whiteness" (Crockett, 2017, p. 558). In consequence, and not unlike Crockett's black middle-class consumers, anti-gay consumers seek to achieve respectability through subordination under, rather than by liberation from mainstream normativities.

Likely, for many historically stigmatised social groups with an un-concealable marker of difference, living as members of a well-assimilated anti-stigma social group, and reaping the crops of enabling and normalised representations' conditional respectability, is possibly the least stigmatised identity position available to them. However, for gay men in contemporary German society, my analysis revealed a fifth, even more liberated self-representation which I will introduce next.

4.2.5 - A Post-Stigma Social Group — Consumption as Expression of Individuality

Consumers who belong to historically stigmatised social groups, and who live and consume in contexts where relevant Others almost exclusively hold normalised social representations, so that these consumers rarely ever encounter enabling and oppressive representations in their daily lives, tend to represent themselves as members of a *post-stigma social group*—or post-gay social group in my specific research context of gay men in Germany.

Because their common marker of difference no longer serves relevant Others to stereotype, separate, devalue, or discriminate members of that social group (Link & Phelan, 2001), their marker of difference is no longer instrumentalised or politicised to

establish social hierarchies, and thus, no longer makes a qualitative difference in such consumers' lives. Living within those liberal contexts, these consumers feel that their days of subordination, discrimination, and oppression have been overcome, and thus they have finally acquired equal respect, acceptance, and social recognition within their regular environment.

Post-stigma gay men in my study anchor their social group in concepts such as humanism, equality, diversity, mutual respect, and individual freedom; in positive, or indifferent feelings towards their sexual orientation; and in us-and-them constellations that no longer involve binary antinomies. Post-gay consumers objectify these anchorings through individualistic, omnivorous consumer lifestyles; creative, and apolitical consumption driven by hedonic and experiential rather than by identity affiliation; and through markets where historically stigmatised and mainstream consumers mingle freely without fear of symbolic contagion.

Like my anti-gay consumers, post-gay consumers do not depend on those local (discrete) communities to offer them support and protection from oppression or mere tolerance. While post-gay consumers do maintain relationships with other gay men, they do so without an explicit interest in deeper identity investment and association with their social group (discrete), advancing a reformist political agenda (hybrid), or to perform normalcy to not endanger their favourable social positionality (anti-stigma social group). Instead, post-gay consumers freely consume across the repertoire of available options, simply to enjoy their own lifestyle and facilitate their own personal identity work.

Among the gay men in my dataset, those who self-presented as post-gay were on average younger, educated and financially well off. They have hardly experienced oppression first-hand, have cosmopolitan, nomadic attitudes, and have adequate economic, social, and cultural capital to be socially and physically mobile (Bardhi et al.,

2012; Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015). Such gay men typically reside in urban rather than rural environments, work in liberal and knowledge-intensive industries, and seek to surround themselves with heterosexual Others who share similar configurations of social and economic status. Those Others tend to represent gay men in normalised ways so that they have "little need to link their sexuality to their personal identity, attitudes, values, politics, religion, or life philosophy" (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 7). Across my dataset, I have not encountered cases in which gay consumers did abandon post-gay self-representations voluntarily or permanently. Instead, they temporarily go underground and hide and deny their homosexuality when, for example, traveling to oppressive countries, navigating unfamiliar and ambiguous public environments, or encountering new work environments where the extent of their stigmatisation is still unknown to them.

Post-gay consumers enact a consumption strategy which I call consumption as expression of individuality. Such consumers consume LGBTQ market offerings as, for instance, bars, dance clubs, bathhouses, or dating apps for their utilitarian or hedonic value, but not so for micro-political purposes or identity affiliation. Like hybrid gay men, post-gay consumers mix and match consumption elements from across the spectrum of discrete gay and mainstream brands, tastes, and fashion styles, but they do so for their expressive value and individual identity work alone. Therefore, the consumption strategy of expression of individuality is what we may call a *post-dialogical* strategy with regard to research on knowledge encounters in a social representations tradition (Jovchelovitch, 2007; Marková, 2016). This post-dialogical consumption no longer seeks to avoid, resist, reform, or enact Others' representations of gay men. For an illustration of this strategy in my data, see the following excerpt from my expert interview with Jan, a 48-year-old social worker:

"There are even straight guys who go to gay parties, simply because they're great and fun. But these days, I don't go to a bad party just because it's a gay party. Back in the days you had to, that's the big difference. Now there's more competition, and you have the choice to pick the best offers. I feel that back then there was a pressure toward a different form of solidarity, because you were much more vulnerable. We depended on one another." (Jan, 48, expert interview)

Jan juxtaposes consumption practices of a past and present to illustrate how, in his eyes, the mere existence of (discrete) gay products, brands, and services is no longer a sufficient reason to warrant the patronage of post-gay consumers like himself. While Jan and his friends may still consume gay market offerings, such as LGBTQ parties and pride parades, they no longer do so as a public displays of collective resistance (discrete), transgressive acts to facilitate representational reform (hybrid), or consider them symbolic threats to their social status (anti-stigma). Instead, for post-stigma consumers, such events have become merely commodified consumption spectacles (D'Emilio, 1993; Duggan, 2002; Kates & Belk, 2001). As Jan notes, the apolitical spectacularisation of market offerings that were historically perceived as stereotypically (discrete) gay (Kates, 2002), even allows heterosexuals and other non-gay consumers to enjoy such events, because gay consumption spheres and styles no longer carry the risk of symbolic contagion (Rinallo, 2007; Visconti, 2008).

Alongside the diminishing risk for symbolic contagion comes the diminished risk to experience stigma, or even violent oppression under normalised representations. This can also cause trouble to discrete gay commercial infrastructure, as expert informant Peter (49) explains:

"Apparently the demand for gay bars is no longer big enough to make them feasible in many cities. Particularly those without a dark room have to fight for survival. Also because in big cities nowadays nobody has to fear facing repressive measures just because you touch your boyfriend at a mainstream bar. Maybe he's getting some strange looks, but he's not getting beaten up any more. (laughs)" (Peter, 49, expert interview)

With a proliferation of normalised representations in broader German society not only more gay men may afford living individualistic, post-gay lifestyles, as peter explains. Also non-specialised venues that do not serve the utilitarian purpose for casual sexual encounters, such as gay bars "without a dark room", find it harder to maintain a loyal, identity-invested (discrete) customer base that renders their offers economically "feasible". Also from the perspective of informant Markus, a 34-years old consultant, post-gay consumption has moved away from identity-affiliation to a mere utilitarian and hedonistic approach to discrete gay commercial infrastructure:

„There are many examples of people among my friends and acquaintances who say: I use the gay subculture to find guys to have sex with. And apart from that I go to the nice party in some [straight] dance club (laughs)." (Markus, 34, consumer interview)

Informant Florian seconds this observation from a longitudinal perspective, grounded in his own coming-of-age experience:

"When I started to come out and go out gay, the scene was a place that offered a certain safety. When you went out at night and you were among your own kind

you didn't have to fear to be stared or frowned at, or even to experience physical violence. By now it seems to be normal that there is a vivid exchange about sexuality among the younger people in society, and that young homosexuals don't depend on the scene any longer in its classical sense. Instead they can go out partying at night with their heterosexual friends without fear of exclusion, physical violence, or mobbing." (Florian, 29, consumer interview)

Interestingly, Florian not only describes an increasing momentum of normalised representations of gay men in broader German society. He also assesses that the micro-political (hybrid) consumption as reformation has contributed to changing representations of sexuality among "the younger people in society" who nowadays engage in much more normalised, destigmatised "vivid exchange[s] about sexuality". Among such heterosexual Others championing normalised representations, grounded in respect and diversity, post-gay men "can go out partying at night with their heterosexual friends without fear of exclusion, physical violence, or mobbing", experiences unlikely to having been achievable for the subcultural (or discrete) consumers in earlier consumption studies on gay men (Kates, 2002). This popularisation of consumption styles and aesthetics originating in discrete gay communities (ibid.) is also noticed by expert informant Jan, who we have met already above:

"What used to be explicit gay aesthetics like 20 years ago has become part of a general youth aesthetic. You could study the performances of young people [today], the codes that once belonged to the subculture and how they have been taken up."

I: "What do you mean by performance?"

"Well, their haircuts, fashion, I don't know. That's the student who looks down

on himself and says: I look gay, as he realizes that he's got plucked eyebrows, that he's going to the tanning studio, that he's wearing tight pants and golden Adidas sneakers." (Jan, 48, expert interview)

According to Jan's observations, consumption styles such as "tight pants" and "golden Adidas sneakers", alongside bodily aesthetics such as "plucked eyebrows" and practices like "going to the tanning studio" —formerly classic objectifications of discrete gay styles, or "subculture", as Jan puts it— have diffused into mainstream markets and have become "part of a general youth aesthetic". Alongside a proliferation of normalised representations among the general German public, also Jan supports Florian's (above) generational observation of a blending-in of styles between gay and non-gay young consumers. Alongside post-gay consumers, these heterosexual consumers appear to be culturally omnivorous, and make their consumption choices rather based on individual taste than as being structured around, or even mandated by, their sexual orientation and identity. In the same vein, see how expert informant Laura, who has been running one of Germany's oldest gay dance clubs for almost 40 years, explains this post-stigma amalgamation of discrete gay and mainstream consumption practices:

"The young [gay] generation, they are totally like the heterosexuals. Basically, there's no difference. Well, sometimes, when they colour their hair or something. But the straight guys also colour their hair. Straight guys are also fashionable. The young generation is totally diverse. They also don't want that identity anymore. They don't want to have this stamp [mark; German: "Stempel"] of being gay. Straight guys also wear makeup, have coloured hair and also wear the same fashionable clothes. Sometimes I am proud when I see

the young folks dancing here with their hands up high. They are like my children. I fought for you to be so free today. I like that. I feel so happy and tell myself: I contributed to this." (Laura, 72, Expert Interview)

Laura describes the blurring of symbolic boundaries through the proliferation of consumption practices, which formerly demarcated discrete gay modes of being from those of the broader society. While colouring one's hair, wearing makeup, or displaying certain fashion tastes and styles used to be symbolic consumption statements that signified gay men's affiliation with a subcultural identity under dominant stigma configurations (Haslop et al., 1998; Kates, 1999, 2000, 2002; Keating & McLoughlin, 2005), today they are expressions of individuality beyond the categories of sexual identity and group affiliation. As a consequence of these shifts, Laura's dance club has gradually transformed from a 1970s men-only underground venue with a secret door and restrictive entry policy, into a 21st century party venue that proudly caters to a variety of sexualities; a place where spotting a kissing different-sex couple on the dance floor has become all but uncommon.

Excerpt 33 - A portrait of Laura, dubbed "the mother of all gay men", at Laura's dance club "King's Club" in Stuttgart, Germany; fieldwork 29.04.2016

Omnivorous consumption, and the decreasing relevance of their sexual orientation in the presence of normalised representations for post-gay consumers, is a consumption phenomenon also observed by expert informant Max (56) who owns a chain of gay saunas and sex clubs across Germany, and, as such, has a professional interest in staying attuned to contemporary consumption trends and styles across his male customers:

> *"[Today], being chic and alternative, that's less a question of whether I am recognisable as a gay man, but that's rather a lifestyle decision. Am I the guy in*

a shirt with that expensive accessory, or rather someone who's playing the Hipster alternative chic? And the sexual gets really mixed up in these lifestyles today." (Max, 56, expert interview)

Max observes that in the absence of oppressive and enabling representations, omnivorous post-gay consumption may focus on individualistic identity projects and "lifestyles" rather than being mandated by subcultural gay aesthetics (Kates, 2002). Depending on the individual consumer, social status may be derived from wearing a tailored suit alongside "a shirt with that expensive accessory", or rather through the "alternative Hipster chic". Sexual orientation and sexual identity thus become secondary to individual tastes and lifestyle decisions, as being "recognisable as a gay man" is no longer necessary under normalised representations where "sexuality gets really mixed up in these lifestyles today".

Asked about whether he believed that a proliferation of normalised representations towards gay men in German society would necessarily lead to a dissipation of (discrete) gay consumption spheres and collective identities, expert interviewee Joachim (48), a prize-winning author, blogger, and gar rights activist contemplates:

„We [gay men] will always stay a minority. Even if we are not an oppressed minority. That's just like there's an American minority in Berlin, and they also have their organisations and clubs and there's also nobody saying: Why do you need to have these? You'd have to also see this cultural aspect that exists beyond discrimination, and that's based on collective experience, even if you're not being discriminated against anymore." (Joachim, 48, expert interview)

Gay men, as Joachim rightfully points out, will always stay a minority group within German society, with a common history that binds them together. Despite the privileged social position of some post-gay consumers, these post-stigmatised men are neither liberated and enchanted postmodern consumer subjects (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995), nor members of consumerist neo-tribes (Goulding et al., 2002), or merely consumption communities (Chalmers Thomas et al., 2012). Instead, they remain members of a social group structured around an enduring marker of difference that may become re-politicised and re-stigmatised at any time as societal conditions change. This residual sense of vulnerability surfaced in the wake of the 2016 mass murder of 49 people at the LGBTQ+ nightclub *Pulse* in Orlando, Florida, or the recent stabbing of two gay tourists by a homophobically motivated Islamic terrorist in the city of Dresden (LSVD e.V., 2021). Such tragic events temporarily, yet substantially, shake also post-gay consumers' sense of "ontological security" (Phipps & Ozanne, 2017, p. 361), as it brutally reminds them once again that members of sexual minorities—including those lucky enough to lead post-gay lives—share a "common fate" (Lewin, 1948, p. 166) that, if the going gets tough, inevitably sets them apart from mainstream society.

4.3 - Summary of Findings Chapter

In this chapter, I have presented the findings from my empirical inquiry into gay men's consumption in contemporary Germany, in order to answer my question of how historically stigmatised social groups consume, once their persistent, unequivocal, and dominant stigmatisation within a society has fragmented, and can no longer be taken for granted.

Based on my concept of stigma configurations, that is, ideal-typical combinations of *social representations* that shape the collective identities, consumption

strategies, and life prospects of stigmatised social groups in characteristic ways, and aided by the analytic lens of Social Representations Theory, I was able to identify a previously un-theorised configuration of co-existing *oppressive*, *enabling*, and *normalised* societal representations about a historically stigmatised social group in my research context. Taken together, this co-existence of three distinct, and mutually incommensurable *societal representations* about gay men in Germany gives rise to a new, *post-dominant* stigma configuration, which I have further defined as *fragmented stigma*.

Under conditions of fragmented stigma, gay men relate to their social identity, grounded in the marker of difference that is their sexual orientation, in five different ways, and consume accordingly. Specifically, gay men in my research context *self-represent* as members of five different sub-groups, which I call an *underground, discrete, hybrid, anti-stigma (contextualised: anti-gay),* or *post-stigma (contextualised: post-gay) social group*, depending on the societal representations that dominate a particular social encounter, and other factors, such as configurations of individual status markers and privilege.

Each of these five social groups has their own characteristic *consumption strategy*, through which gay men *enact, reject,* or *reform* these self- and societal representations in objectified marketplace encounters, and through which my gay informants achieve different utilitarian, symbolic, or political ends. I have named these strategies *consumption as hiding and denial* (underground), *consumption as collective resistance* (discrete), *consumption as reformation* (hybrid), *consumption as deconstruction of differences* (anti-stigma), and *consumption as expression of individuality* (post-stigma). I have furthermore theoretically defined each consumption strategy, and explained how each strategy relates to its subgroup and the key anchorings and objectifications that constitute its self-representations.

The below visual summarises and consolidates my conceptual model of consumption under fragmented stigma. It differs from Figure 1 shown on page 136 only in so far as that the visualisation presented below offers a more fine-grained perspective on my theorisation. In detail, the below visual contains key anchorings and objectifications for both, societal and self-representations, and features select consumption examples to illustrate each consumption strategy within situated encounters between self-representations and configurations of societal representations.

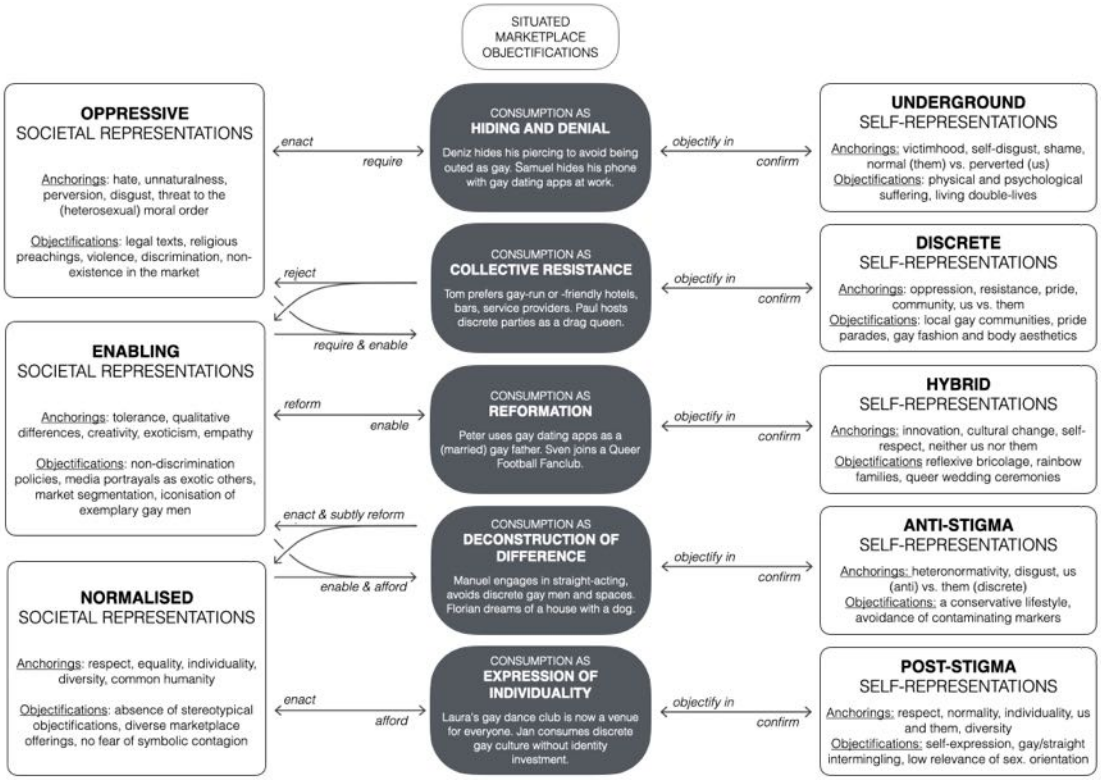


Figure 2 - A Conceptual Model of Consumption under Fragmented Stigma with Main Anchorings, Objectifications, and Consumption Examples

With this summary I close my findings chapter. In the following chapter I will discuss my findings and its contributions before the backdrop of existing research on historically stigmatised consumer groups within marketing and consumer research.

5 - DISCUSSION

How do members of a historically stigmatised social group consume strategically, that is, to "reach several different life goals" (Swidler, 1986, p. 277) across temporal, spatial, and social contexts, when they have achieved greater recognition, status, and respectability in society?

As existing consumer research could not answer this timely and important question, I have in the above chapters approached my research question through a qualitative, interpretivist study of contemporary gay men's consumption in Germany — a historically stigmatised social group which has become almost equal, but not quite yet. Drawing on Social Representations Theory as my analytic lens, I have structured my above stated main research questions into three sub-questions:

First, *how are gay men being represented within contemporary German society?* I had to first ask and answer this question because, unlike in earlier studies on the consumer behaviour of sexual minorities (Coffin et al., 2019; Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996), which rightfully assumed a *dominant*, ubiquitous, and uniform stigmatisation of gay men across social domains, I could no longer assume such a dominant stigmatisation of gay men in my research context. After almost three decades since the first theorisation of gay men as an outright stigmatised consumption *subculture* (Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996), and the manifold achievements of the LGBTQ civil rights movement ever since —ranging from civil unions and marriage equality to celebrity coming-outs and LGBTQ media-mainstreaming— the question of gay men's stigmatisation in contemporary German society became an open empirical one. I approached this question by collecting a wide arrange of contemporary and historical archival data, expert and consumer interviews, consumer focus groups, and ethnographic data points, to analyse the changes in *societal representations*, that is, the

beliefs, values, and attitudes held about and towards gay men among members of the broader German society, since the end of the Second World War.

My historical analysis revealed the simultaneous coexistence of three such societal representations that represent gay men in *oppressive*, *enabling*, *and normalised* ways (see Figure 1, page 136, left column). I have defined and traced the historical origins of these three societal-level social representations, and I have conceptualised the plurality of their complex, contested, and uneven distribution within contemporary German society as a *fragmented stigma configuration*. This compares to earlier research on gay consumers under what I call a *dominant stigma configuration* (Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996), where prior research has not identified those systems of beliefs, values, and attitudes towards gay men which I subsume under the notion of *normalised societal representations*. Arguably, a change of this magnitude in the composition and configuration of societal stigma towards a historically stigmatised social group suggests equally substantial changes in this social group's collective identity work and consumption strategies, especially when *avoiding*, *coping with*, and *resisting* such dominant stigmatisation constitutes the key defining assumption for the consumer behaviour of said social group (Hall & Jefferson, 1973; Kates, 2002; Keating & McLoughlin, 2005; Peñaloza, 1996; Thornton, 1997). I therefore turned to my second step in answering my research question outlined above.

Second, *how do gay men represent themselves as members of a historically stigmatised social group, given how they are being represented within broader society*? I had to ask and answer this question in order to assess how the above transition from dominant to fragmented stigma affected the ways in which gay men in contemporary Germany relate to their identity as member of a sexual minority, or, in my social representations terminology, how they *self-represent* as members of the social group constituted by their sexual orientation. Prior research had described non-heterosexual

consumers as a consumption "subculture", that appeared "protean" and "kaleidoscopic" on the inside (Kates, 2002, p. 383), but was still "highly stigmatized and policitized" on the outside (Holt, 1997, p. 341), and therefore "enact[ed] consumption practices centered around a single coherent framework of tastes expressive of a particular social identity" (ibid.). The fragmentation of dominant societal stigma, the subculture's constitutive identity marker, therefore required me to treat the question of *self-representations* among contemporary gay men in Germany as again an open empirical one, with a *subcultural identity* as only one of several possible outcomes.

My analysis revealed that gay men in contemporary Germany do no longer self-represent as members of a single, yet internally heterogeneous, consumption subculture, structured around *avoiding*, *coping with*, and *resisting* a *dominant* societal stigma against their social group. Instead, under conditions of *fragmented* stigma, my gay informants self-represent in five theoretically distinct ways, as members of what I call *underground*, *discrete*, *hybrid*, *anti-stigma*, and *post-stigma social groups* (see Figure 1, page 136, right column). I have defined each of these five self-representations alongside their key anchorings and objectifications, and explained how and why gay consumers self-represent in either of these five ways when encountering *oppressive*, *enabling*, or *normalised* representations —or a blend of these— across social contexts and domains of everyday life.

As consumer culture research has documented to an impressive extent, consumption plays a central role in the construction, maintenance, and renegotiation of identities across members of historically stigmatised social groups, and these groups do use consumption strategically to *avoid*, *cope with*, and *resist* their dominant stigmatisation (Adkins & Ozanne, 2005; Crockett, 2017; Hamilton et al., 2014; Jafari & Goulding, 2008; Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1994; Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Visconti et al., 2014). In order to fully answer my research question

outlined above I have therefore turned to my third and final analytic step.

Third, *how do contemporary gay men in Germany use consumption strategically, given the complex interplay of being represented ("they about us") and self-representing ("we about us"), and across temporal, spatial, and social contexts?* I had to ask and answer this third question as, under conditions of fragmented stigma, I could neither any longer assume a single, uniform, dominant stigmatisation of gay men within contemporary German society ("they about us"), nor could I any longer assume a single, uniform, and characteristic identity and consumption response as *subcultural consumers* ("we about us"). Instead, the question of gay men's strategic consumption in contemporary Germany became an open empirical one.

My analysis revealed that under conditions of fragmented stigma, gay consumers no longer exclusively ground their identities in opposition against a dominant stigmatising heteronormative mainstream society and therefore no longer use consumption strategically to *avoid*, *cope with*, and *resist* their dominated social positionality. Instead, I have shown how each of the five self-representations introduced above affords its own unique, and theoretically distinct consumption strategy. These consumption strategies range from consumption as *hiding and denial* (the primary strategy among underground social groups), via consumption as *collective resistance* (discrete social groups), consumption as *reformation* (hybrid social groups), consumption as *deconstruction of differences* (anti-stigma social groups), to consumption as an *expression of individuality* (post-stigma social groups) (see Figure 1, page 136, middle column). I have defined and characterised these theoretically different strategies; shown how and why they emerge under particular representational configurations and situated encounters and what strategic purpose they serve; and I have illustrated examples of these consumption strategies as enacted marketplace objectifications of their underlying self-representations (see also Figure 2, page 223).

In the following sections, I will discuss the theoretical contributions of my *conceptual model of consumption under fragmented stigma* to consumer culture theory research on historically stigmatised social groups, examine boundary conditions, and offer suggestions for further research. I will first outline contributions and implications of my theoretical turn away from assuming dominant sigma, towards empirically analysing stigma configurations. I will then discuss how my theorisation relates to the analytic frame of subculture studies adopted by prior research. In the subsequent section I will contrast and compare each of the five consumption strategies emerging from my analysis to consumption strategies theorised in relevant prior studies within consumption studies. Next, I will discuss contributions of this study to research on market-mediated morality-plays, before addressing the question if and how, under fragmented stigma, consumption can contribute to destigmatisation.

5.1 - From Assuming Dominant Stigma to Analysing Stigma Configurations

A first contribution this study seeks to make to the body of consumer culture theory work on historically stigmatised social groups is through the introduction of the concept of *stigma configurations*. Most of the available work on stigmatised consumer collectivities, including non-heterosexual consumers, was carried out at times and in contexts where the unequivocal stigmatisation of the researched social group could be, or rather *had to be* taken for granted (Crockett, 2017; Kates, 2002; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Due to their oppressed, or at least severely disadvantaged social positionality, these consumer collectivities were conceptualised as subordinated "sub-cultures" (Thornton, 1997, p. 14) who were systematically labelled, stereotyped, and discriminated against across life contexts (Link & Phelan, 2001).

In many Western societies, however, sentiments towards gay men have

developed significantly over the past three decades, and gay men's life chances and consumption opportunities have widened to an extent that we can no longer take their dominant and uniform stigmatisation for granted. I introduce the notion of *stigma configurations*—that is, ideal-typical bundles of stigmatising social representations about and among social groups—to capture this new, *fragmented* appearance of stigma that had emerged within German society. The concept of stigma configurations allowed me to contrast and compare this new, post-dominant stigma configuration to its predecessors of *hegemonic* and *dominant* stigma configurations. Drawing on the theory of social representations enabled me to study this new fragmented stigma via its ideal-typical anchors, objectifications, and re-presenting practices, and to trace its emergence and evolution over time.

My analysis, however, also raises some new questions. For instance, in the present study, I examined a context in which normalised representations of gay men still remain unevenly distributed across, but are nevertheless firmly established within broader German society. As I have shown, this emergence and proliferation of normalised societal representations opened up new consumption possibilities for many contemporary gay men in the present context. However, this study can only give an indicative answer to the question of where exactly the *tipping points* lie between different stigma configurations. In my research context, I have sought to arrive at such insights based on the socio-historical particularities of the gay (and LGBTQ) civil rights movement in Germany, and through my analysis of a broad arrange of archival datapoints. However, future studies may seek to examine, and maybe also measure, for example, how widespread enabling- and normalised representations must have become for a stigma configuration to be considered fragmented versus still dominant?

For example, electing a black man as president or a black woman as vice president of the United States may—like gay marriage legislation—contribute, as a

prime objectification, forcefully to the construction, diffusion, and propagation of normalised representations about black Americans. However, these acts by themselves do not imply a widespread normalisation of black people across all parts of American society, let alone could they evidence a substantial decline of racially-motivated assaults, police brutality, or systemic market discrimination based on skin colour (Crockett, 2017). Further research is needed in order to better understand if, how, and why such key historical turning points do contribute to sigma amelioration on average, and to an overall erosion of stigma dominance.

However, further research is also needed to explore the socio-political conditions under which such events may trigger backlash and lead to polarisation within a society. That is, even when normalised representations have gained much influence—as in my present empirical case—most historically stigmatised groups may still face the possibility of oppressive representations resurfacing, and objectifying once again in hate crimes, political agitation, and coordinated efforts to roll back their hard-won freedoms (Datta, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The brutal shooting of queer folks at an LGBTQ night club in Orlando, Florida (Queer.de, 2016a), the recent attack on a Jewish synagogue in the German city of Halle in 2019 (BBC News, 2020), and the instrumentalisation of social representations promoting anti-Mexican sentiments by the Trump government are only three among the most recent examples of such backward developments.

In my empirical context of non-heterosexual consumers, I therefore urge caution when using terms such as *post-gay* (Ghaziani, 2011; Ng, 2013) to describe broader societal conditions, or transitions that might falsely suggest a linear and uniform amelioration of stigma, equally attainable for all, or most members of a social group (Coffin et al., 2019). The theorisation of fragmented stigma, as brought forward in this study, may hopefully prove helpful for researchers seeking to decipher the complex

interplay of multiple, coexisting, and mutually incompatible representations about and within a social group, and thus to examine the possibility for social progress without losing sight of enduring resistance, emerging in-group conflicts, and political instrumentalisation.

5.2 - What Happens to Subcultures when Stigma Fragments?

Consumer research has theorised some historically stigmatised social groups as subordinated *sub-cultures*, which was appropriate at the time, because these groups were systematically and pervasively labelled, stereotyped, and discriminated against in society (Link & Phelan, 2001). What happens to these subcultural social formations when stigma no longer dominates their lives? Do these collectivities and their segregated spaces become meaningless, obsolete, co-opted, or salvaged by the commercial mainstream (Ghaziani, 2014; Holt, 2002; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007)?

This research project has shown that subcultures and their typical, well-theorised consumption patterns, do not simply disappear under conditions of fragmented stigma. Instead, the remainders of their prior existence as a consumption subculture now coexist and compete as a *discrete social group* with four other self-representations, each with their own unique consumption strategy. Before, in the next section, I will in detail contrast and compare my five consumption strategies under fragmented stigma with those consumption strategies theorised by prior research under dominant stigma, I will now discuss some the broader implications for subculture-theorisations in post-dominant stigma contexts. Because under stigma fragmentation, self-representing as a discrete, *sub-cultural* group is no longer the only or the dominant option, the social role and relevancy of *discrete* social groups has shifted vis-à-vis prior theorisations in three

notable ways.

First, under dominant stigma, stigmatised consumers tend to be deeply invested in their subcultural lives and consumption practices, since they are building their identities around being subjected to and resisting universal stigma (Hall & Jefferson, 1973; Hebdige, 1979; Kates, 2002). The almost unavoidable and inescapable role *gay subculture* played at the time shines through in Steven Kates (2002, p. 383) assessment that, citing the work of Bruce Bawer (1993), "virtually every gay man has some sort of relationship" with the gay subculture, whether they liked it or not. In the absence of the internet, and given the still widespread stigmatisation at the time, the gay subculture was virtually the only way to meet other gay men while not putting one's social standing at risk. In contrast, under fragmented stigma, many previously dominated gay consumers are now enabled to leave their segregated neighbourhoods (Coffin, 2020; Ghaziani, 2014), reconfigure their social networks (Oswald, 1999), or abandon unwelcoming communities (McAlexander et al., 2014) in search for more liberated social settings where they can self-represent as members of hybrid-, anti-, or post-stigma social groups. However, the viability of abandoning their self-representing as members of a discrete social group depends on various individual and social factors, which are not favourably aligned for everyone (Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). Further consumer-level research may explore, for instance, how intersections of personal experiences with stigma, professional roles, family, and friendship relationships impact on the viability of such transitions.

Second, research conducted under conditions of dominant stigma has described stigmatised subcultures as internally heterogeneous and diverse (Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996; Visconti, 2008). Under conditions of fragmented stigma, such discrete social groups may still be internally diverse, but also compete with four other self-representations that offer alternative identity propositions on how to be, for example, a

gay man (Halperin, 2012). This fanning out of what used to be theorised as one single subculture, into now five self-representations and their subgroups, creates potential for new horizontal representational battles within the social group of gay men (Howarth, 2006). The present study explains, for instance, that discrete social groups oppose hybrid social groups because hybrid consumption as reformation perforates the very symbolic boundaries upon which discrete groups build their oppositional identity. Discrete social groups also oppose anti- and post-stigma social groups, since these groups' consumption practices deem discrete gay consumption outdated and counterproductive (anti-), or simply consume them as a commodity without *giving back* to the *gay community* (post). Thus, the straightforward subcultural anchoring of stigmatised social groups to vertical us versus them (gays vs. straights; dominated vs. dominant; us vs. them) antinomies has given way to significantly more complex, multidirectional constellations of oppositions.

Third, I have offered a theoretical explanation of why some gay consumers resist mainstream co-optation (Duggan, 2002; Hebdige, 1979; Kates, 2002; Wiegman & Wilson, 2015), while others welcome such "blurring and damping of symbolic boundaries" (Rinallo, 2007; Visconti, 2008, p. 132). My above analysis reveals that gay consumers who self-represent as hybrid or anti-gay social group welcome the mainstream co-optation of "tight jeans," "golden Adidas sneakers," and "plucked eyebrows" (Jan, expert interview) as evidence for their successful representational reformation (hybrid) or deconstruction of differences (anti-gay). These consumers, similar to Visconti's (2008) gay men and Scaraboto and Fischer's (2013) fatshionistas, do not build their identities *in opposition to* a heteronormative mainstream, but in *extension* or *imitation* of it, and therefore welcome representational shifts toward culture-blending and co-optation. In contrast, gay men who self-represent as members of a discrete social group oppose market co-optation as they consume, and try to

protect, distinctly gay fashion styles, music tastes, artistic genres, or body aesthetics as symbolic markers of difference as well as objectifications of their decades-long resistance to heteronormative domination (Duggan, 2002; Halperin, 2012; Wiegman & Wilson, 2015). Yet, since fashion markets in particular feed on creative subcultural (Arsel & Thompson, 2011) or even stigmatised styles (Sandıkcı & Ger, 2010), discrete gay men may find themselves fighting an uphill battle on authenticity and (sub-)cultural authority with regard to their co-optable consumption practices and objects that form the basis for their collective resistance. Future research will therefore have to establish *whether* and *how* discrete gay men may manage to escape the *branding mill* over time (Holt, 2002; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007), fall prey to it (Clark, 2003; Hebdige, 1979), or eventually commodify and depoliticise (Duggan, 2002).

5.3 - Consumption under Fragmented Stigma versus Dominant Stigma

Prior research has shown how historically stigmatised social groups faced with a dominant stigma configuration consume strategically to *avoid* their stigmatisation individually, as well as how such consumers organise to *resist* and *cope* with their stigma collectively. Yet, as their stigma within broader society begins to fragment, these internally heterogeneous, and "kaleidoscopic" (Kates, 2002, p. 363), *sub-cultures* do no longer depend on group cohesion and unconditional solidarity in the eye of a dominant stigma that once bound this diverse group together in the first place. As a result, the internal heterogeneity of these social groups, and their members' divergent ideas about how to achieve social recognition, has led to the emergence of five coexisting, competing, and largely "imagined" (Anderson, 2006) collectivities grounded in the self-representations shared among their members. In the sections below, I will therefore discuss how consumption strategies that emerge under fragmented stigma differ from

the well-documented consumption under dominant stigma, and how findings from my research context may compare to other contexts of historically stigmatised consumer collectivities.

5.3.1 - Underground Social Groups and Consumption as Hiding and Denial under Fragmented Stigma versus Consumption under Dominant and Hegemonic Stigma

Existing consumer research on sexual minorities and other stigmatised consumer collectivities has predominantly applied a subculture theory lens in order to explore identity construction and consumption among social groups that ground their identity in opposition to mainstream society (Kates, 2002; Kozinets, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Consequently, this stream of research has been conducted under, what I call above, *dominant*, rather than *hegemonic*, or *post-dominant* configurations of stigma. While this prior research acknowledges subcultural consumers' contested social positionality, it has assumed, and empirically focused on, social groups that enjoy sufficient legal protection and societal tolerance to express their subcultural identity, and to co-exist alongside mainstream consumers (Belk & Costa, 1998; Goulding et al., 2002; Kozinets, 2001; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Seregina & Weijo, 2017).

My analysis of stigmatising processes and outcomes through the analytic toolkit of Social Representations Theory, in turn, allows me to surface the self-representation of an *underground social group* that exists in a significantly more stigmatised and oppressed social space, where overground sociality and identity expression is not an option. While Kozinets' (2001, p. 74) Star Trek enthusiasts, for example, also sometimes "conceal or cover over" their fan identity to avoid stigmatisation, my above theorised *underground* social group exists under significantly more oppressed societal conditions, where members may face criminalisation, pathologisation, outright hate, and

grave physical violence when being recognized as gay. I therefore show how underground self-representations give rise to a previously un-theorised consumption strategy, through which gay consumers hide, or plausibly deny, their belonging to an oppressed social group.

This *underground social group* and its consumption practices is arguably closer to consumer research on *hegemonic* stigma configurations as pioneered by the work of Hirschman and Hill (1996; 2000), than it is to North-American middle-class leisure activities such as Harley riding (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Other than in the hegemonic stigma configuration studied by Hirschman and Hill (1996; 2000), under fragmented stigma, oppressive representations do not exist exclusively within a society, or are even legitimised by the state, but coexist with enabling and normalised representations of the social group inside an otherwise pluralistic and liberal democracy. Therefore, as I have shown in my historical analysis, while gay men in Germany have indeed once faced the hegemonic, total, and absolute stigmatisation and organised persecution and killing in the very same concentration camps studied by Hirschman and Hill's (1996; 2000), consumption as *hiding and denial* under fragmented stigma takes on different forms than *invisible* consumption under hegemonic stigma, because contemporary underground consumers are aware of enabling or even normalised societal representations of their social group in other social contexts or geographies. I have shown how, for example, some of my informants only hide and deny their sexual orientation in some life contexts (e.g., the workplace), while living, for example, discrete identities elsewhere.

Moreover, existing consumer research has shown in great detail how historically stigmatised social groups consume strategically to avoid a dominant societal stigma. For example, contemporary black middle-class consumers in the United States disavow "the stigma that blackness is disorderly and unprofessional", by proactively engaging in

"neat and orderly" (Crockett, 2017, p. 566) consumption practices grounded in notions of "normative respectability" (p. 559), that is, they seek stigma-avoidance through dissociation from stigmatised black consumption practices with regard to, for example rap music, sportswear fashion-styles, and *ghetto culture* (ibid).

Similar to many immigrants and religious minorities around the world (Jafari & Goulding, 2008; Luedicke, 2015; Peñaloza, 1994; Visconti et al., 2014), Crockett's (2017, p. 559) American black middle-class consumers have internalised that some stigmatised consumption practices, symbols, and identities can, at worst, become "precursor[s] to violence", and must therefore be avoided. The murder of George Floyd by a white American police officer, or the recent killing of a gay tourist and the almost-killing of his partner by an Islamist homophobe in the German city of Dresden (LSVD e.V., 2021) shed some light on the magnitude and relevance of mastering strategies of *avoidance* when deemed existentially necessary.

Apart from sharing similar goals, consumption as *avoidance* under dominant stigma differs notably from consumption as *hiding and denial* under stigma fragmentation: Consumption as hiding and denial among *underground* social groups presupposes that consumers are both, able and pressured to hide their stigma marker to the best of their abilities. Therefore, for underground gay men, even being identified as gay by Others—this may include even their own family and friends—would almost certainly result in unmasked hatred, social exclusion, or even physical violence (Queer.de, 2020a).

Therefore, underground gay men do not primarily use consumption strategically to "lessen the effects of stigmatized treatment" (Crockett, 2017, p. 556), but to *hide and deny* their stigma marker altogether in order to socially, physically, and mentally survive. I would therefore expect consumption as hiding and denial to occur primarily among consumers stigmatised based for their sexual orientation (Kates, 2002; Peñaloza,

1996), illiteracy (Adkins & Ozanne, 2005), faith (Jafari & Goulding, 2008), or certain forms of mental disability (Parcesepe & Cabassa, 2013), for example, as these properties can reasonably be hidden from oppressive onlookers. Consumption as hiding and denial, however, may not be a viable consumption strategy among those stigmatised for features that are difficult or impossible to hide, such as their skin colour, ethnic background, or body mass (Crockett, 2017; Peñaloza, 1994; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013).

Under fragmented stigma, even the most oppressed consumers are vividly aware of more liberated self-representations of members of their social group — and may it only be through the internet. Further research may therefore explore how underground consumers use social media technology, for example, to gather courage for leaving their oppressive contexts, but also how underground consumers may collectively seek to mobilise, and sow the seeds for political movements—for example in the 69 countries that still criminalize homosexuality today (ILGA, 2019).

5.3.2 - Discrete Social Groups and Consumption as Collective Resistance under Fragmented Stigma versus Consumption under Dominant Stigma

My above conceptualisation of a *discrete* social group maps most readily on the kinds of subcultural identities found in subcultural studies by prior research (Kates, 2002; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Specifically, my analysis shows how some gay men in Germany — possibly similar to Harley Davidson bikers, Star Trek fans, and role- and cosplayers, but also ravers and at least some black consumers — inhabit a discrete identity where oppressive and enabling societal representations co-exist (Belk & Costa, 1998; Crockett, 2017; Kozinets, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Seregina & Weijo, 2017; Thornton, 1995). I situate and contribute to these studies by explicating the societal-level representations and *re-presenting processes* under which

such a discrete positionality emerges and sustains, even under post-dominant stigma configurations.

Just as subcultures, discrete social groups perpetuate *oppositional identities*. Therefore, for those self-representing as members of a discrete social group, consumption does not occur to demand generalised respect or inclusion (Crockett, 2017; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Instead, it aims at improving discrete consumers' life conditions by resisting objectified market oppression (Kates, 2004), and by instilling a sense of community and celebratory pride in difference among themselves (Kates, 2002; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Wiegman & Wilson, 2015). Discrete gay consumers demand from a broader society to legally *protect* and *tolerate* their parallel existence, without necessarily having to understand, like, or respect their alternative ways of being (Hall & Jefferson, 1973; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Thornton, 1995).

As a consequence, discrete gay consumers seek to actively construct and uphold symbolic boundaries through consumption, rather than to undo them (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Visconti, 2008). Like for Harley bikers, who consume the stigma of the "outlaw stereotype" (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995, p. 53) to construct an oppositional identity, or Star Trek fans who can only pursue their utopian fantasies in a protected social space clearly demarcated from mainstream society (Kozinets, 2001), also gay discrete consumers build on their alternative and anti-normative ways of consuming, being, loving, and having sex. Current debates among LGBTQ activists and scholars echo these insights, with some voices advocating (discrete) identities grounded in a radical anti-normative opposition, while other voices seek reconciliation and integration into mainstream culture (Wiegman & Wilson, 2015).

Moreover, prior consumer culture inquiries into the consumer behaviour of historically stigmatised social groups were able to highlight several of the ways in

which these consumers collectively cope with and resist their stigmatisation through collective consumption (Crockett, 2017; Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1994). Under societal conditions that perpetuate a dominant stigma configuration, consumers were virtually forced to retreat into gay ghettos (Kates, 2002), segregated ethnic neighbourhoods (Crockett, 2017; Peñaloza, 1994), or virtual online communities (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) to consume undisturbed according to their subcultural preferences (Kates, 2002). Where they find it permitted by the power-relations and symbolic constraints of their environments, such consumers may also use consumption strategically to outwardly resist their stigmatisation in the marketplace—in the countercultural spirit so characteristic of many Brimingham-style subcultures (Fox, 1987; Hall & Jefferson, 1973; Hebdige, 1979; Kates & Belk, 2001).

The present study offers evidence that, counterintuitively, historically established subcultural social structures and markets do not entirely lose relevance under conditions of fragmented societal stigma. Instead, they may persist in the ideal-typical form of *discrete social groups*. Gay men who self-represent as member of a discrete social group still use consumption as *collective resistance* as a symbolic response to situated encounters with stigmatising Others (or imagined Others). However, their resistance does not, or no longer, serve the purpose to convince members of broader society to empathise with, like, or even include those discrete consumers into mainstream markets (Crockett, 2017; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013).

Instead, discrete social groups collectively resist (market) oppression to gain equality in front of the law, to foster a sense of community of destiny, and to show their pride in difference and their own historical heritage as a civil rights movement (Halperin, 2012; Kates, 2002, 2004), while leaving broader political ambitions for representational *reform* to their hybrid counterparts. Some of these discrete consumers might be well able and equipped to occupy subject positions in which their individual

identities are less defined by their belonging to a sexual minority. However, because discrete consumers find a sense of purpose, community, and exoticism within a discrete identity, and because their social group may as well face societal redress and re-stigmatisation as social sentiments turn, these consumers deliberately adhere to their familiar, anti-normative identity, in which they do not seek to erase symbolic boundaries through their consumption (Visconti, 2008), but to uphold, and defend them (Gamson, 1995; Wiegman & Wilson, 2015). It is important to notice, however, that also under conditions of fragmented stigma, severely oppressed *underground* social positionalities do exist, as in the case of informant Deniz shown above. Discrete communities and social (and even commercial) structures may therefore be the first to offer protection and help to those seeking to escape *underground* positionalities and the reign of oppressive societal representations that not only stigmatise, but psychologically or physically endanger some members of a historically stigmatised social group.

Further research is indeed needed to unpack the conditions under which discrete social groups perpetuate their unique way of being or may eventually dissolve altogether. For example, this research suggests that discrete groups thrive in less liberal, rural settings where collective resistance is still widely needed, but are likely to be met with (anti-gay) incomprehension in "more urban, culturally creolized" environments (Luedicke, 2015, p. 125). However, more systematic sampling across, and analysis of such socio-demographic factors would be most welcome. In addition, further analysis on the level of the individual consumer and their configuration of capitals and privilege is needed to understand the conditions under which identifying as "perceived victims" (Campbell & Manning, 2018, p. 115) could even be a *desirable* social position for some. While my dataset did allow some preliminary insights into differences across consumer demographics, future research should systematically seek to analyse the role that different levels of education, income, religiosity, urban/rural divides, and

generational differences may play in the *enacting*, *rejecting*, and *reforming* of *discrete* consumer identities.

5.3.3 - Hybrid Social Groups and Consumption as Reformation under Fragmented Stigma versus Consumption under Dominant Stigma

Like the hybrid gay men in this study, black middle-class consumers (Crockett, 2017), fatshionistas (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), veiling women (Sandıkcı & Ger, 2010), and roller derby *grrrls* (Thompson & Üstüner, 2015) may at times operate in contexts where they are socially enabled to re-anchor, re-objectify, and re-present stigmatised identities in creative ways without fear encountering of excruciating sanctions. I make a first contribution to this literature by explicating the role of enabling societal representations for the emergence of such agentic consumption that allow, for example, the gay men in my research context, to creatively combine *discrete* and mainstream consumption practices in order to seek representational reform under conditions of fragmented stigma. Under dominant stigma configurations, existing studies in socio-cultural consumer research have illustrated several micro-political consumption strategies that do bear similarities to what I above describe as *consumption as reformation* by *hybrid social groups*. However, also these strategies differ from my theorisation upon closer scrutiny:

For example, Crockett (2017, p. 556) showcases how black middle-class consumers seek "institutional reform" and convince "others to shift (expand) the boundaries of propriety" (ibid.) through a re-anchoring or black consumption practices in more positive, "(nonstigmatized) representations of blackness" (p. 568). Similarly, fatshionistas seek to counteract a "widespread stigmatization of fat bodies" in broader society (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013, p. 1238), and veiling Turkish women "adopt a stigma symbol" *tesettür* (Sandıkcı & Ger, 2010, p. 30), and seek to directly destigmatise

a “stigmatized practice” for it to “become fashionable” (p. 15). Different from fatshionistas seeking to destigmatise fat bodies, veiling women seeking to destigmatise a particular consumption practice, or black consumers’ tactics to “destigmatize” black culture by “using black culture as a source of high status” (Crockett, 2017, p. 554), however, hybrid gay men’s consumption as reformation does not primarily seek to destigmatise homosexuality, specific (discrete) gay consumption practices, or (discrete) gay consumer culture *per-se*.

Instead, hybrid consumption as reformation seeks to establish new acceptabilities within broader society through the creation of hybridised discrete gay and mainstream (heterosexual) modes of consumption that may very well face pushback from heterosexual consumers, *but also* from gay men and other LGBTQ consumers invested in discrete (and as such oppositional) or anti-stigma (and as such assimilationist) modes of being (Wiegman & Wilson, 2015). This potential for resistance against consumption as reformation from both sides separates my hybrid gay consumers theoretically also from Sandıkcı and Ger’s (2010) veiling women, who experience pushback against transferring a religious consumption practice, that is perfectly legitimate in an Islamic conservative context, into a secular urban one, but not the other way round.

Also, different from activist fatshionistas that seek alliances with “fat activist celebrities” (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013, p. 1244) and “more powerful institutional actors” (p. 1246), or veiling women that form “a new Islamic elite (…) with significant material and discursive resources” (Sandıkcı & Ger, 2010, p. 31), hybrid gay men’s consumption as reformation through, for example, membership in a queer football fanclub, does not regularly depend on the availability of such symbolic, economic, or cultural resources. As such, hybrid consumption as reformation seems to be less dependent on extraordinary leaders and privileged social positionalities, and seems

therefore a more widely accessible consumption strategy to the average gay consumer.

In the same vein, hybrid consumption as reformation bears similarities to Thompson and Üstüner's (2015, p. 235) "ideological edgework". Their regular American middle-class roller derby "grrrls" (ibid.) blend indie music counterculture, female athletics, and third-wave feminism into a creative cultural process that "resignifies" (ibid.) market-mediated gender stereotypes towards high-status, hyper-masculine "toughness" (p. 248), much in the spectacularised sense of a WWE women's wrestling match. Similarly, hybrid gay men blend discrete gay and mainstream social representations that anchor gay men as a social group to new cultural meanings. However, in contrast to roller grrrls, or fatsionistas' "quest for greater choice in mainstream markets" (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013, p. 1234), hybrid gay men's reformist "queering" (emic term) of consumption practices does not only seek to expand their own group's consumption possibilities, but also expands straight men's [and other genders'] consumption opportunities as well.

Indeed, straight men and other non-heterosexual consumers might find themselves encouraged by hybrid gay men's consumption as reformation to embrace, for example, *metrosexual* (Rinallo, 2007; Shugart, 2008), or other non-conventional performances of masculinity (Visconti, 2008); to experiment with polyamorous, or other non-heteronormative relationship arrangements (Haritaworn, Lin, & Klesse, 2006; Weeks et al., 2001); or to *do family* or *fatherhood* differently from merely choosing a "particular identity project from the range of discourses that are available" (Üstüner & Holt, 2007, p. 43). Hybrid consumers' consumption as reformation does therefore differ significantly from immigrants' forming "hybrid identity projects" (Üstüner & Holt, 2007, p. 42) or contextually "swapping" between established self-representations of their social group (Oswald, 1999, p. 303), as these earlier-described identity projects do usually not seek to influence or reform social representations held among the broader

public.

My findings, however, do suggest that hybrid consumption as reformation may as well help to destigmatise also *discrete* gay men *from the bottom up* (Crockett, 2017; Üstüner & Holt, 2007, p. 42) (see also below), as hybrid-consumption seeks to re-anchor discrete consumption practices to new meanings through hybridisation (Crockett, 2017; Sandıkcı & Ger, 2010). However, future research will have to further theorise these destigmatisation practices, establish their de-facto societal impacts, and explore possible boundary conditions. Such research could therefore, for example, explore how Others respond to such "knowledge encounters"—that is, "meeting[s] between two or more representational systems, expressing different subjective, intersubjective and objective worlds" (Jovchelovitch, 2007, p. 111)—with hybrid consumers; if and how more frequent and/or closer contact with otherness plays in the reformation of societal representations; and in which societal milieus and social domains hybrid consumption practices most likely find fertile ground to induce cultural change towards a normalisation of difference.

5.3.4 - Anti-Stigma Social Groups and Consumption as Deconstruction of Differences under Fragmented Stigma versus Consumption under Dominant Stigma

Extant consumer research in contexts of dominant stigma has theorised consumption strategies that appear similar to consumption as deconstruction of differences under fragmented stigma.

For example, when some American black middle-class consumers aspire to "master whiteness" (Crockett, 2017, p. 558), or when immigrant consumers "readily assimilate" to mainstream culture (Peñaloza, 1994, p. 43), they seek respectability through subordination. Similarly, my anti-gay consumers engage in symbolic "straight-

acting" (emic term) when mimicking heteronormative lifestyles and hierarchical concepts of heroic masculinity in order to be perceived as not notably different, or even as not-gay (Martino, 2006). However, unlike with skin colour or other bodily features which are impossible to hide, my anti-gay informants may regularly succeed in dissociating themselves from a stigmatised (discrete gay) identity through strategic consumption as symbolic deconstruction of difference and imitation of high-status normalcy.

Furthermore, other than my anti-stigma gay consumers, said black or immigrant consumers find themselves pushed towards such consumption behaviour by a prevailing and persistent dominant stigma against their social group within society (Crockett, 2017; Peñaloza, 1994). Therefore, they pursue such consumption practices to "make daily life more tolerable, not necessarily more equal" (Crockett, 2017, p. 555). Notice that, in contrast, the anti-stigma consumers in my analysis primarily interact with Others who are already holding enabling and normalised representations about gay men. Other than under the dominant stigma configuration faced by black or immigrant consumers (Crockett, 2017; Peñaloza, 1994), anti-stigma gay men live among heterosexual Others who already tolerate some degree of difference, as long as their more important normative beliefs remain unchallenged. This constellation of societal- and self-representations allows my gay informants to consciously select anti-gay self-representations as a viable path towards social recognition, often in extension of their (middle-class) socialisation, while avoiding political struggles, or perceiving themselves as subordinated or desexualised (Duggan, 2002).

The findings from my analysis therefore suggest that, as long as anti-gay consumers conform to heteronormative lifestyles and common interpretations of adequate gender performances in ways that do not render them as particularly different, they enjoy what we could call *conditional respectability* that allows them to live as

equals—apart from one (in/significant) difference. However, I do encourage future research to investigate the possible psychological consequences of continuous self-representing as anti-gay consumers (DiPlacido, 1998; Hatzenbuehler, 2011, 2014; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010); to explore the scope and magnitude to which the availability of anti-gay self-representations for the individual gay consumer depend on beneficial intersections of class, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or bodily features (Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020; Mirabito et al., 2016); and to uncover if and how internalised homophobia or even self-hatred may interdepend with an adoption of anti-gay self-representations (Hatzenbuehler, 2014).

5.3.5 - Post-Stigma Social Groups and Consumption as Expression of Individuality under Fragmented Stigma versus Consumption under Dominant Stigma

Prior research on historically stigmatised social groups facing dominated stigma configurations was yet unable to surface evidence of normalised societal representations, which portray a stigma marker as a recognisable difference, but not or no longer as a qualitative one (Crockett, 2017; Kates, 2002; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). This present study has shown that in contexts where predominantly normalised representations about a social group exist, members of such historically stigmatised consumer collectivities can represent themselves as belonging to a post-stigma social group, and can therefore consume to express their individuality without fear of stigma or discrimination. As such, post-gay consumers, which have historically been subsumed under the subcultural umbrella, can now engage in individualised, apolitical, culturally omnivorous modes of consumption, and therefore break beyond, and free from the symbolic boundaries and intra-subcultural taste hierarchies theorised in prior research (Kates, 2002, 2004; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Thornton, 1995), — if they wish to do so.

However, as I show above, even my post-gay informants are neither liberated postmodern consumer subjects (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2003), nor members of transient, fragmented, or hybridised neo-tribes of leisure consumption who are relatively free to escape their tribe and join another one (Bennett, 1999; Cova & Cova, 2001; Goulding et al., 2002; Maffesoli, 1996). Instead, as members of a social group structured around enduring markers such as race, ethnicity, disability, or gender identity, my post-gay consumer informants in this study are left with a residual sense of fragility as a group with a common fate (Lewin, 1948). Therefore, even post-stigma consumers do not cease to exist as a distinguishable social group but retain "at least a minimum degree of distinctiveness from other, less similar, types" (Muggleton, 2000, p. 73). In my research context, even those post-gay men who had managed to almost exclusively live around Others (or imagined Others) holding normalised representations may eventually encounter oppressive or enabling representations in new and unfamiliar social contexts, or when traveling to other countries and cultures. Post-stigma consumers will therefore remain urgently aware that also normalised representations are contingent on societal sentiments and political currents, and that for these the social pendulum can swing back toward oppression at any time (Crockett, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

In contrast to authors who have used the term *post-gay* to describe a general societal trend for gay men to move from opposition towards integration into mainstream culture (Ghaziani, 2011; Ng, 2013), this present study highlights the societal-level prerequisites and boundary conditions that mark post-gay self-representations as situated, fragile, and not equally attainable by everyone (Coffin et al., 2019). In fact, my analysis documents that despite the proliferation of normalised representations of gay men in Germany over the past decades, sexual minorities are still facing old and new types of stigmatising discourses (Kram, 2018), and therefore remain timely and relevant

social phenomena worth of scholarly attention. In Germany, those who are sensitive to a resurgence of stigma for historical reasons will continue to watch their representational environment closely for signs that the gospels of social progress and equality are based on honest convictions and not on instrumentalisation, so-called political correctness, or self-censorship.

My research context therefore mirrors Crockett's (, 2017, p. 554) arguably sad observation, that *"*in American life, racial inequality is continuous and discontinuous, always getting better and worse at the same time*"*. I contribute to this debate through my theorisation of *stigma configurations* as ideal-typical bundles of social representations that stigmatise social groups in characteristic ways, hereby facilitating more nuanced future understandings of what other historically stigmatised social groups might face after stigma dominance. At least in my present research context, I was able to show that what follows on dominant stigma is not necessarily destigmatisation (Sandıkcı & Ger, 2010; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) or outright respectability (Crockett, 2017), but a fragmentation of simultaneously co-existing stigmatising and destigmatising societal representations.

While I have shown their emergence in the context of gay men in Germany, future studies will need to explore the first emergence of normalised societal representations for other historically stigmatised social groups as they move from facing dominant to post-dominant stigma. Such research may ask, for example, in which parts and among which socio-demographics within a society normalised representations first emerge and gain traction. It may further explore the underlying representational mechanisms with which normalised representations can challenge, reform, or replace existing anchorings of a social group in notions of fear, threat, contamination, or even socio-cultural extinction (Luedicke, 2015); and whether a social group's inclusion into a new normality, and thus a levelling-out of power asymmetries, may create new political

desire for, and opportunities to re-anchor these groups in new ways of oppression (Kram, 2018).

5.4 - Consumption as Morality-Plays under Fragmented Stigma

A different stream of consumer culture research on moralism and consumption has addressed both *vertical* market-mediated "morality plays" (Luedicke et al., 2010, p. 1018) in which consumers collectively revolt against ignorant, insensitive, or outright homophobic brands (Kates, 2004), and *horizontal* conflicts in which consumers argue among themselves over incompatible conceptions of moral consumption (Luedicke et al., 2010). In prior studies on *horizontal* conflicts, consumers normally fight in *opposing* camps, such as body-positive versus fat-shaming women (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), or indie music fans versus hipsters (Arsel & Thompson, 2011).

The present study extends this literature by documenting how the fragmentation of societal stigma has led for an established *vertical* "us versus them" conflict constellation (dominated gays vs. dominant broader society) to reconfigure, and to now include two new *horizontal* conflicts and two new *vertical* conflicts. First, I show above how discrete consumers collide *horizontally* with hybrid consumers who, if seen from the outside, belong to the same social group of gay men. However, because hybrid consumption as reformation perforates the very boundaries on which discrete social groups build their oppositional identity, discrete gay consumers may see such reflexive bricolage as a betrayal of discrete gay men's (sub-)cultural heritage. Second, *hybrid* consumers' consumption as *reformation* does not only attract horizontal pushback from those gay consumers invested in non-normative, or even anti-normative modes of being (Wiegman & Wilson, 2015). It also might spark vertical resistance by mainstream heterosexual consumers to the injection of unfamiliar hybrid, and possibly from their

vantage point morally disturbing consumption practices into their lifeworlds (Sandıkcı & Ger, 2010).

Third, *anti-stigma* social groups also struggle horizontally with *discrete* consumers because anti-stigma men deem discrete consumption as collective resistance outdated, counterproductive, or even dangerous to their own social standing. This conceptualisation contributes to explaining the apparently paradoxical phenomenon of LGBTQ consumers supporting the right-wing populist party AfD in Germany, gay Americans forming the *Gays for Trump* movement, or gay journalists ranting about the "LGBT movement's intolerance of intellectual diversity and mandatory identity association" (Greene, 2018). The present study explains why is not as paradoxical as it seems that some gay men advocate far-right, anti-immigrant, or even homophobic agendas—a phenomenon known as *homonationalism* (McCaskell, 2016; Puar, 2007). Fourth, *anti-stigma* social groups may experience a new vertical conflict with members of broader society, either implicitly, by feeling constrained in their own identity work through the internalisation of Others' (heteronormative) expectations towards them, or explicitly, if and when anti-stigma gay consumers eventually decide to no longer respect the boundaries of their conditional acceptance that delineate respectable from not-respectable gay identities in the eyes of societal Others.

However, further research is needed to examine how (market) power is distributed among these competing groups in different social settings; whether gay consumers discriminate against each other in markets such as the job market, for example; or how each subgroup negotiates *how to be gay* (Halperin, 2012) or not to be gay—like Kates's (p. 393) "hopelessly extreme" and also within the subculture widely belittled "ghetto queen".

5.5 - Can Consumption Contribute to Destigmatisation?

Finally, a most timely and relevant question to ask when studying the consumption behaviour of historically stigmatised social groups under conditions of fragmented stigma is to what extent the enactment of the five consumption strategies entailed in my above presented conceptual model can contribute to the destigmatisation of a social group. Existing research under dominant stigma conditions has shown that micro-political acts of consumption can help making stigmatised consumers' daily lives more tolerable "within the scope of interpersonal interactions" (Crockett, 2017, p. 555). However, it seems, these social groups' collective consumption has not yet proven widely successful with regard to their destigmatisation within broader society (Crockett, 2017; Jafari & Goulding, 2008; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). For fatshionistas, a "slow and uneven" change toward greater inclusion seems attainable, but only under the condition that they keep exerting "steady pressure" on mainstream markets (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013, p. 1253).

My above analysis and discussion suggest that the five consumption strategies revealed in this study impact destigmatisation in very different ways, but further research is needed to explicate, and investigate the validity of these assumptions. For example, consumption as *hiding and denial* unlikely contributes to the destigmatisation of gay men in broader society, as it does not occur in the public domain, and therefore renders gay consumption virtually invisible to those Others holding oppressive representations. Consumption as *collective resistance*, in contrast, seeks to combat oppressive representations and to maintain enabling representations that offer legal recognition and tolerance for parallel existence. However, consumption as collective resistance does not seek normalisation, and its discrete gay men are sceptical towards tendencies of a diffusion or appropriation of discrete gay men's symbolic repertoire

among heterosexual Others. Thus, under fragmented stigma, discrete gay consumption not only seeks to proactively reinforce subcultural boundaries and "exaggerated cultural differences" (Kates, 2002, p. 391), but also seeks to maintain stereotypical enabling representations of gay men as, for example, shrill, promiscuous, and provocative (Wiegman & Wilson, 2015).

Hybrid gay men's consumption as reformation, in turn, appears to contribute most directly to a destigmatisation of gay men within broader society, as it aims at challenging those overly orthodox, stereotypical, or simply outdated societal representations of gay (and straight) men and their consumption practices. In line with recent representative polls by Pew Research (2020) in Germany and elsewhere, which find younger age a potent predictor of higher acceptance of homosexuality, I would argue that hybrid consumption as reformation falls on particularly fertile ground among a younger heterosexual demographic. This is because this younger heterosexual consumers might already be engaged in a renegotiation of representations and normative acceptabilities within their own vertical and horizontal conflicts; either vis-à-vis older generations, or vis-à-vis more or less socially conservative or liberal peers. However, as hybrid gay men seek to create acceptance for new, hybrid forms of consumption, they might not be contributing much to the destigmatisation of discrete gay social groups or stereotypical gay consumption styles and practices that appear to them as anachronistic and overcome.

Anti-stigma consumption as deconstruction of differences, in contrast, seems to stigmatise and destigmatise gay men at the same time. Through their heteronormative consumption, anti-gay consumers dissociate themselves deliberately from discrete gay men, thus perpetuating societal homo- and transphobia, heterosexual privilege, and the stigmatisation of other minority groups (Duggan, 2002; Puar, 2007). At the same time, consumption as deconstruction of difference may subtly destigmatise gay men *from the*

inside of society, that is, from a position of perceived higher social status, and by publicly performing gay identity as apolitical, mainstream consumers, harmless to heterosexual Others. Finally, *post-stigma* gay men consume strategically to express their individuality in a decidedly unpolitical, post-dialogical way because, for them, destigmatisation has already been achieved. I would, however, assume that post-gay men, who pursue omnivorous consumer identity projects, without feeling oppressed or merely tolerated, do still contribute to destigmatisation by signalling to the occasional onlooker holding not-yet-normalised representations that everything is fine and they have nothing to fear.

In sum, I can conclude from my analysis that consumption under fragmented stigma bears the potential to positively contribute to overall gay destigmatisation, despite stoking old conflicts and sparking new ones. Importantly, however, my social representations approach allows to pose a new, and possibly even more interesting question: Does consumption contribute to destigmatisation, and if so, *destigmatisation in who's eyes*? My theorisation therefore helps to shift the scholarly conversation on historically stigmatised consumer collectives away from a linear *stigmatised / destigmatised* relationship under dominant stigma (Crockett, 2017; Kates, 2002; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), towards analysing the complex and multidimensional configurations of social representations, held by some members of a society and not by others, that stigmatise or destigmatise some members of a society and not others. Therefore, and despite the countervailing dynamics mentioned above, the consumption practices of discrete, hybrid, anti-stigma, and post-stigma gay men inevitably add new, multifaceted anchorings and objectifications to the previously fairly reductionist, stereotypical representations of gay consumers according to their subcultural theorisation. However, more research is needed to examine the extent of these destigmatising effects; explore boundary conditions and market implications; and trace

the potential drivers of and paths to re-stigmatisation, which seem to open primarily where political populism, fake news, religious extremism, and social media warfare — *propagation* and *propaganda* in Moscovici's (1961/2007) terms— are being instrumentalised to undo the hard-earned fruits of LGBTQ civil rights activism (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

6 - IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING PRACTITIONERS

The first academic publication on the consumer behaviour of non-heterosexual consumers from a socio-cultural perspective was published merely 25 years ago, when Lisa Peñaloza (1996) first associated LGBTQ consumers with the sociological concept of *subculture,* and critically discussed the existence and viability of a distinct *queer* market segment. Until today, I do not know why Peñaloza, who at the time had already published in leading marketing journals including the *Journal of Consumer Research*, ultimately decided to publish her article in the *Journal of Homosexuality*, instead of in a disciplinary journal within the field of consumer research. After having spent seven years researching fragmented stigma and consumption of non-heterosexual consumers, however, I am tempted to not rule out the possibility that a *dominant stigma* within society made consumer research on LGBTQ issues a topic not all too attractive to journal editors and academic gatekeepers at the time. Thankfully, much has changed since then (or has it?).

Marketing practitioners, in turn, have been quite open to embrace the prospect of capitalising on the pink Dollar/Pound/Euro, which has been documented by consumer researchers (Ginder & Byun, 2015), as well as non-academic media (The Economist, 2016). In fact, it seems impossible to attend any LGBTQ pride parade or street festival across contemporary Western societies, where global brands have not yet sought to

profit of the above-described shifting societal sentiments towards normalisation and respect. While this research project was primarily focused on revealing new theory insights, the anecdotal evidence I encountered throughout my data collection (and particularly my in-situ participant observation) suggests an increasing polarisation within what is colloquially called the *LGBTQ community,* on whether to embrace, or resist such corporate sponsorships and sought affiliation (The Economist, 2016).

Through the analytic lens of my *conceptual model of consumption under fragmented stigma*, such polarised debates within the social group of gay (or broader: LGBTQ) consumers should not come all too surprising. This is because purist, *discrete* consumers will likely reject efforts by major bands and corporations seeking affiliation with the LGBTQ community with reference to a *selling out* of their ideals, and a *commodification* of their original, authentic, *sub-cultural* modes of being. In contrast, *hybrid* consumers will see such acts by major brands as an opportunity for representational reform and a creative redefinition of consumption meanings through reflexive bricolage. *Anti-stigma* consumers, in turn, will welcome brands and corporate allies as an objectification of their new legitimacy — *having arrived* as respectable citizens at the heart of society. Some anti-stigma consumers might even seek to further symbolically *sanitise* the public appearance of LGBTQ consumers, for example by "banning" the display of "sexualised" representations of LGBTQ citizens by excluding members of the "fetish community" from LGBTQ pride parades (Queer.de, 2021). Finally, *post-stigma* consumers would naturally not have any stakes in this debate, but simply consume events such as pride parades or LGBTQ festivals for their entertaining and carnivalesque qualities, and possibly for the utilitarian value of socialising or meeting new potential romantic partners.

The above example describes a simple case in which my theorisation can be helpful for marketing practitioners or brand managers by, in this case, explaining the

cacophony of responses to external sponsorship and branding efforts from within the LGBTQ community. My model therefore extends prior research, which has focused on a binary gay-friendly / un-friendly categorisation on the level of individual brands (Kates, 2004), by offering a more nuanced rubric to analyse how gay men, LGBTQ individuals, and possibly members of other historically stigmatised social groups under post-dominant stigma, respond to branding and marketing efforts directed at them.

In what follows, I will seek to offer a set of *provocations* (Pangrazio, 2017) that might elicit critical engagement with my conceptual model on behalf of marketing practitioners, or might inspire fellow researchers to future inquiry into the managerial applicability of my findings. As *provocations*, the below postulations do not aspire to provide answers to managerial questions themselves, but rather seek to "enable the social science researcher to initiate critical reflection (…) on issues that are often otherwise overlooked" (Pangrazio, 2017, p. 225), and therefore to explore, apply, evaluate, or seek to falsify my theorisation either in part or altogether. I will postulate one provocation for each self-representation revealed in my findings.

First, I postulate that marketers who seek to cater to *underground* consumers should seek to offer these consumers avenues for discreet, invisible, or hidden consumption, or incorporate the principle of plausible deniability into their market offers. I have hinted at the example of *Grindr*'s discreet app logo choices above. Moreover, in contexts where accidental discovery of underground consumers bears particularly high risk (e.g., within countries that criminalise homosexuality), marketers should seek to proactively consider ways how they, and their products, can make the life of underground consumers safer, and possibly find avenues to support grassroot activism seeking to overcome such oppressive regimes.

Second, I postulate that marketers who seek to cater to *discrete* consumers should seek to acquire legitimacy within the subcultural logics outlined by prior

research (Kates, 2002, 2004). Marketers should seek to emphasise narratives of pride in difference and opposition against mainstream culture. Narratives that promote reconciliation and integration into broader society are to be avoided. I further postulate that discrete consumers might not be those who are financially most well-off, as consumers for which intersectional markers of privilege favourably align (Coffin et al., 2019), and this includes those with considerable economic capital, will seek to leave this self-representation unless they are already heavily symbolically invested in discrete modes of being.

Third, I postulate that marketers who seek to cater to *hybrid* consumers should seek to emphasise the novelty, uniqueness, and innovativeness of their marketplace offerings. Hybrid consumers are likely to be *innovators*, *early adopters*, or *lead users* within an innovation theory framework (Moore, 2014; Rogers, 2003), and seek affiliation with avantgardism and socio-cultural elites. They are likely to be above-average educated and well-funded.

Fourth, I postulate that marketers who seek to cater to *anti-stigma* consumers should emphasise narratives of high social status, exclusivity, and acceptance by, and integration into mainstream society. Narratives of discrimination, struggle, resistance, or pride in difference should be avoided. Likely, no market offer will appear attractive to both, discrete and anti-stigma consumers at the same time. Anti-stigma consumers will likely be middle-class or upper middle-class consumers, who are financially well off, politically conservative-leaning or centrist, and are high in need for status and recognition.

Fifth, I postulate that marketers who seek to cater to *post-stigma* consumers should seek to champion narratives of diversity, equality, liberalism, and cosmopolitanism. Post-stigma consumers will, however, consume omnivorously to cater to their own individualistic ends, so they will likely be most difficult to target based on

their sexual orientation and identity. Post-stigma consumers will likely empathise more with discrete or hybrid identities than with anti-stigma consumers, as they recognise the danger of illiberal tolerance, and the fallacy of respectability through subordination.

In sum, although the formulation of managerial insights and recommendations was not a stated objective for the present study, it appears that my conceptual model of consumption under fragmented stigma can serve as a useful theoretical tool for marketing practitioners seeking to better understand, or cater to the needs and wants of historically stigmatised social groups. Future research will have to theorise, confirm, or refute my five postulations presented above. This closes my reflection on possible implications of this study's findings for marketing practitioners and brand managers. In the following final chapter, I will conclude.

7 - CONCLUSION

„Representations", Stuart Hall (1997, p. 10) notes, „sometimes call our very identities into question. We struggle over them because they matter – and these are contests from which serious consequences can flow. They define what is 'normal', who belongs – and therefore, who is excluded". Through the present study, I seek to make a humble contribution to the collective academic endeavour that seeks to unravel how representations, stigma, identities, and consumption are mutually entangled. I do so by answering the timely and relevant question how members of historically stigmatised social groups use consumption strategically when they have over-all achieved greater respectability within a society, and therefore their once dominant and unambiguous stigmatisation across life contexts has become fragmented.

I have approached this question through a seven-year long interpretive inquiry into the consumer behaviour of gay men in contemporary Germany. My multi-level

thematic analysis of *social representations about* and *among* gay consumers through empirical data derived from consumer and expert interviews, focus groups, archival data, and ethnographic data points reveals a *post-dominant* configuration of gay stigma within contemporary German society which I have named *fragmented stigma*. Constitutive of a configuration of fragmented stigma is the simultaneous co-existence of three theoretically distinct and mutually contradictory *societal representations*, through which relevant Others within broader German society represent gay men in *oppressive*, *enabling*, and *normalised* ways.

Unlike in earlier studies conducted under conditions of *dominant stigma*, gay consumers under fragmented stigma no longer exclusively use consumption to *avoid*, *cope with*, and *resist* their uniform and widespread stigmatisation through the enactment of an oppositional, *subcultural* identity and its aligned modes of being. Instead, under fragmented stigma, the societal representations prevailing in a social context *require*, *enable*, or *afford* gay men to *self-represent* as a member of one of five ideal-typical, and mostly imagined subgroups which I have labelled *underground social group*, *discrete social group*, *hybrid social group*, *anti-stigma social group*, and *post-stigma social group*. Each of these subgroups features a characteristic consumption strategy through which gay consumers achieve distinct utilitarian, symbolic, or political ends. I have named these strategies *consumption as hiding and denial* (underground), *consumption as collective resistance* (discrete), *consumption as reformation* (hybrid), *consumption as deconstruction of differences* (anti-stigma), and *consumption as expression of individuality* (post-stigma). I have defined, theorised, and illustrated these strategies through which self-representations objectify and come to bear in situated marketplace encounters. Taken together, these findings assemble a *conceptual model of consumption under fragmented stigma* (see Figure 1, page 136, for a visualisation; and Figure 2, page 223, for an extended visualisation including key anchorings, objectifications, and

consumption examples).

My findings situate, complement, and extend prior research into the consumer behaviour of historically stigmatised consumers in three major areas. First, moving beyond the assumption of dominant stigma, I introduce Social Representations Theory to empirically analyse different ideal-typical *stigma configurations*, and I reclassify existing consumer research as conducted under *hegemonic* and *dominant* stigma configurations. This allows me to move beyond existing *subcultural* theorisations, and to open up the possibility to conceptualise and empirically explore *post-dominant* stigma configurations, thereby situating existing, and enabling future research into various configurations of stigma.

Second, my data analysis reveals a specific sub-type of a *post-dominant* stigma configuration in my research context which I call *fragmented stigma*, characterised by a co-existence of *oppressive*, *enabling*, and *normalised* societal representations of a historically stigmatised social group. While this study constitutes the first empirical research into a post-dominant stigma context and, as such, is a contribution in and by itself, my findings enable future research to explore the possibility of fragmented stigma in other empirical contexts, to discover new sub-types of post-dominant stigma other than fragmented stigma, or to discover additional stigma configurations beyond hegemonic, dominant, and post-dominant stigma configurations.

Third, my conceptual model contributes to extant consumer research by establishing *five new consumption strategies* of historically stigmatised social groups under fragmented stigma beyond avoidance, coping, and resistance; by discovering *five ideal-typical self-representations* and their subgroups that extend prior accounts limited to subcultural identity work and modes of being; by contributing to questions of consumption-mediated *morality plays* and their old and new *vertical* and *horizontal social conflicts*; and by offering insights into *if*, *how*, and *why* consumption under

fragmented stigma may contribute to the *destigmatisation* or *re-stigmatisation* of historically stigmatised social groups.

My findings are derived from the empirical context of contemporary gay men's consumption in Germany and are therefore inevitably bound to its socio-historical particularities. Being *bound* to an empirical context, however, does not equate being *limited* to this context with regard to a theorisations' explanatory power. Therefore, I hope, and I have reasons to assume, that my theorisations can inform further research into historically stigmatised consumer groups, including but not limited to racial, ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities, immigrants, and consumers stigmatised due to their gender identity, bodily features and (dis-)abilities, or their mental health.

"Fixed identity categories," Gamson (1995, p. 390) argues, "are both the basis for oppression and the basis for political power." Understanding how and why such fixed identity categories, and the societal representations that constitute them, are constructed, challenged, and transformed *through consumption* appears more important than ever. I trust that my theorisation of consumption under fragmented stigma contributes to explaining why and how such identity categories shift and change, and I hope that these insights will serve to support the wellbeing and social mobility of other historically stigmatised social groups that have become almost equal, but not quite yet.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A - Overview Consumer Informants

Pseudonym	Age	Sex / Orientation	Occupation	Primary self-representation
		Consumer interview informants		
Jonathan	26	male, gay	Student	Post-gay
Ulf	25	male, gay	Bartender	Hybrid
Markus	34	male, gay	Consultant	Discrete
Daniel	24	male, gay	Student	Anti-gay
Kasper	21	male, gay	Student	Post-gay
Tom	31	male, gay	Civil Servant	Discrete
Florian	27	male, gay	Caterer	Anti-gay
Simon	27	male, gay	Employee	Discrete
Jens	26	male, gay	Student	Hybrid
Roger	26	male, gay	Media consultant	Post-gay
Uwe	33	male, gay	Accountant	Discrete
Sven	39	male, gay	Manager	Post-gay
Timo	34	male, gay	Teacher	Post-gay
Deniz	18	male, gay	Apprentice	Underground
		Consumer focus group informants		
Manuel	29	male, gay	Entrepreneur	Anti-gay
John	25	male, gay	Student	Anti-gay
Viktor	32	male, gay	Journalist	Post-gay
Adam	32	male, gay	Consultant	Hybrid
David	31	male, gay	Physician	Post-gay
Steffen	26	male, gay	Soldier	Hybrid
Christopher	43	male, gay	Consultant	Discrete
Philipp	31	male, gay	PhD student	Discrete
Sandro	26	male, gay	Student	Hybrid
Hans	34	male, gay	Teacher	Anti-gay
Kurt	26	male, gay	Engineer	Post-gay

Appendix B - Overview Expert Informants

Expert informants			
Pseudonym	**Age**	**Sex / Orientation**	**Occupation**
Friedrich	82	male, gay	Gay rights activist, former federal prosecutor
Gregor	66	male, gay	Gay rights activist, former social worker
Thomas	33	male, gay	Psychologist, diversity consultant
Peter	49	male, gay	Business consultant, former member of parliament, LGBTQ rights spokesperson
Cornelius	42	male, heterosexual	Journalist at a major German news outlet
Karl	48	male, gay	Theologian, journalist, blogger
Rudi	56	male, gay	Member of parliament, human rights spokesperson, gay activist
Joachim	48	male, gay	Author, blogger, playwright
Laura*	72	female, heterosexual	LGBTQ nightclub owner, member of the city council
Max	56	male, gay	Gay bathhouse owner, sexual health activist
Jan	48	male, gay	Family therapist, social worker at an LGBTQ community center

* Actual name, consent obtained.

Appendix C - Study Information Sheet

CITY UNIVERSITY LONDON

How Do Collective Identities Change? Towards a Framework of Post-Subcultural Consumption.
Wir laden Sie zur Teilnahme bei einer Forschungsstudie ein. Bevor Sie entscheiden, ob Sie teilnehmen möchten ist es wichtig, dass Sie verstehen warum diese Studie unternommen wird und was die Teilnahme für Sie bedeuten würde. Bitte nehmen Sie sich Zeit um die folgenden Informationen sorgfältig zu lesen und diskutieren Sie sie mit Anderen, falls Sie das wünschen. Fragen Sie uns falls etwas nicht klar sein sollte, oder falls Sie mehr Informationen wünschen.

Was ist der Zweck dieser Studie?
Diese Studie beschäftigt sich mit mit der Entwicklung schwuler (Sub-)Kultur(en) und schwuler Identitäten in Deutschland seit dem zweiten Weltkrieg. Insbesondere interessieren uns wie rechtliche und gesellschaftliche Veränderungen, wie beispielsweise die Debatte um die gleichgeschlechtliche Ehe oder die digitale Revolution, Szene, Gay Community, und individuelle Lebensentwürfe geprägt und verändert haben. Die Studie ist Teil einer Doktorarbeit (PhD Dissertation) an der City University Cass Business School.

Warum wurde ich zur Teilnahme eingeladen?
Für diese Studie suchen wir einerseits schwule Männer verschiedenster gesellschaftlicher Hintergründe, und andererseits Menschen, die selbst in und für die Gay Community aktiv sind, bzw. waren. Beispielsweise als PolitikerInnen, AktivistInnen, ehrenamtliche HelferInnen, GastronomInnen, UnternehmerInnen, Drag Queens, Medienschaffende, oder in sozialen oder beratenden Berufen.

Muss ich teilnehmen?
Es ist alleinig Ihre Entscheidung ob Sie teilnehmen möchten oder nicht. Falls Sie teilnehmen möchten werden wir Sie bitten ein Einverständnisformular zu unterschreiben. Auch falls Sie sich zur Teilnahme entscheiden können Sie Ihre Zustimmung jederzeit und ohne Angabe von Gründen widerrufen.

Was passiert, falls ich teilnehmen möchte?
- Wir werden Sie bitten an einem Interview und/oder einer Gruppendiskussion teilzunehmen
- Dies kann entweder persönlich (Face-to-Face), oder telefonisch / via Skype erfolgen
- Ein typisches Interview wird ca. 60 Minuten dauern
- Die Sitzung wir audiovisuell aufgezeichnet und in Text transkribiert
- Wir werden Sie nach demographischen Angaben fragen (Alter, Beruf, etc.)
- Wir werten die gewonnenen Daten mit Methoden der qualitativen Datenanalyse aus
- Wir werden Sie möglicherweise zu einem späteren Zeitpunkt erneut kontaktieren, um offene Fragen zu klären, oder die Studienergebnisse mit Ihnen zu teilen
- Dieses Forschungsprojekt findet in Deutschland und dem Vereinigten Königreich statt.

Kosten und Bezahlung
- Die Teilnahme an dieser Studie ist für alle Teilnehmer kostenlos
- Teilnehmer werden für ihre Teilnahme nicht bezahlt

Was wird von mir erwartet?
Wir bitten Sie, dass Sie sich für ein Interview oder die Teilnahme an einer Gruppendiskussion ungefähr 60 Minuten Zeit nehmen. Wir werden Sie zudem bitten einen Fragebogen mit demographischen Daten und Kontaktdaten auszufüllen.

Gibt es mögliche Nachteile, welche mir durch eine Teilnahme entstehen könnten?
Die Forscher sehen keine möglichen Nachteile oder Risiken einer Teilnahme an dieser Studie voraus.

Was sind mögliche Vorteile einer Teilnahme an dieser Studie?
Sie tragen zu einem besseren Verständnis subkultureller Identitäten und Dynamiken bei. Dieses Wissen kann wichtige Implikationen für politische Entscheidungen und Minderheitenrechte haben.

Was passiert nachdem die Studie abgeschlossen ist?
Wir werden die gesammelten Daten in einem sicheren digitalen Archiv für Referenzzwecke speichern.

Wird meine Teilnahme an der Studie und meine Daten vertraulich behandelt?

- Ausschließlich die an diesem Projekt arbeitenden WissenschaftlerInnen erhalten Zugang zu den gesammelten Daten
- Ohne Ihre ausdrückliche schriftliche Zustimmung werden wir Ihre persönlichen Daten mit keinem Dritten teilen
- Es kann sein, dass wir einen professionellen Übersetzer oder Transkriptionsdienstleister in Anspruch nehmen
- Ein solcher Dienstleister wird durch eine schriftliche Verschwiegenheitsvereinbarung zur Vertraulichkeit verpflichtet.
- Falls wir Zitate aus Interviews oder Gruppendiskussionen im Studienreport oder in zukünftigen Publikationen verwenden, werden wir Ihre Identität schützen, in dem wir identifizierbare Äußerungen anonymisieren und ein Pseudonym statt Ihres Namens verwenden.
- Die Forschungsdaten werden in einem sicheren, digitalen Archiv passwortgeschützt archiviert

Was passiert mit den Ergebnissen der Studie?
Die Ergebnisse dieser Studie werden Teil der Dissertationsschrift (PhD Dissertation) des ersten Forschers und können in akademischen Zeitschriften, Büchern, Buchkapiteln, Blogs, oder in populären Medien publiziert werden. Wir werden alle in Publikationen verwendete Daten anonymisieren um sicherzustellen, dass Sie als Teilnehmer der Studie nicht identifizierbar sind. Auf Wunsch erhalten Sie gerne eine Kopie des Abschlussreports / des Forschungsartikels. Bitte nennen Sie uns hierfür eine Post- oder Email-Adresse, an die wir die Ergebnisse zustellen dürfen.

Was passiert, wenn ich meine Zustimmung widerrufen möchte?
Sie können Ihre Zustimmung jederzeit ohne Angabe von Gründen und ohne Nachteile widerrufen.

Was passiert im Falle eines Problems?
Falls Sie Probleme, Bedenken oder Fragen über diese Studie haben sollten, sollten Sie zunächst mit den beteiligten Forschern sprechen. Falls dies keine Abhilfe schafft und Sie sich formal beschweren möchten, können Sie dies durch das Beschwerdeverfahren der Universität tun. Um sich über die Studie telefonisch zu beschweren wählen Sie bitte +44 20 7040 3040. Sie können dann verlangen mit dem Sekretariat des Forschungsethikkomitees des Senats zu sprechen. Nennen Sie dort den Namen des Forschungsprojekts: "*How Do Collective Identities Change? Towards a Framework of Post-Subcultural Consumption.*"

Sie können sich auch schriftlich an das Sekretariat wenden:
Anna Ramberg
Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee
Research Office, E214
City University London
Northampton Square
London, EC1V 0HB
United Kingdom
Email: Anna.Ramberg.1@city.ac.uk

City University London hält Versicherungspolicen, welche für diese Studie Anwendung finden. Falls Sie empfinden, dass Sie durch die Teilnahme an dieser Studie geschädigt oder verletzt wurden, könnten Sie unter Umständen Anspruch auf Entschädigung haben. Dies beeinflusst nicht Ihre gesetzlichen Rechte Entschädigung zu verlangen. Falls Sie durch fahrlässiges Handeln eines Dritten geschädigt wurden, dann könnten Sie Gründe haben für ein gerichtliches Vorgehen.

Wer reguliert und genehmigt diese Studie?
Diese Studie wurde genehmigt vom City University London Cass Business School Research Ethics Committee

Weitere Informationen und Kotaktdetails

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Danke, dass Sie sich Zeit genommen haben, dieses Informationsblatt zu lesen.

Appendix D - Informed Consent Sheet

CITY UNIVERSITY LONDON

Titel der Studie:
„How Do Collective Identities Change? Towards a Framework of Post-Subcultural Consumption."

		Mit Initialen bestätigen
1.	Ich stimme zu, in dem oben genannten City University London Forschungsprojekt teilzunehmen. Mir wurde das Projekt erläutert, und ich habe das Studieninformationsblatt gelesen, welches mir zum Verbleib in meinen Unterlagen ausgehändigt wurde. Ich verstehe, dass die Teilnahme beinhaltet, dass ich: • von den Forschern interviewt werde / an einer Gruppendiskussion teilnehme • den Forschern gestatte, das Interview / die Gruppendiskussion audiovisuell aufzuzeichnen • einen Fragebogen zur Erhebung demografischer Daten und Kontaktdaten ausfüllen werde • den Forschern gestatte, mich mit Bezug auf diese Studie in Zukunft erneut zu kontaktieren, falls dies vonnöten sein sollte	
2.	Die gegebenen Informationen werden für die Folgenden Zwecke vorgehalten und bearbeitet: Qualitative Datenanalyse, Anfertigung des Forschungsreports und Manuskripte zum Zwecke der Publikation, Archivierung für Beleg- und Referenzzwecke. Ich verstehe, dass alle von mir gegebenen Informationen vertraulich behandelt werden. Zugang zu diesen Daten erhalten ausschließlich die Forscher und deren beauftragte Mitarbeiter, die durch eine schriftliche Verschwiegenheitsvereinbarung zur Geheimhaltung verpflichtet sind. Informationen die zu meiner Identifikation führen könnten werden nicht im Forschungsreport oder in Publikationen verwendet, keinen Dritten zugänglich gemacht, und nicht mit anderen Organisationen geteilt. Ich verstehe, dass Vertraulichkeit nicht für Informationen garantiert werden kann, welche öffentlich verfügbar sind und / oder welche ich im Rahmen einer Gruppendiskussion anderen Teilnehmern gegenüber äußere.	
3.	Ich verstehe, dass meine Teilnahme an dieser Studie freiwillig ist, und dass ich meine Teilnahme jederzeit, ohne Angabe von Gründen, und ohne dass mir ein Nachteil hieraus entsteht, widerrufen kann.	
4.	Ich stimme zu, dass City University London diese Informationen über mich verarbeitet und verwahrt. Ich verstehe, dass diese Informationen ausschließlich für die oben genannten Zwecke verwendet werden und dass meine Zustimmung unter dem Vorbehalt erfolgt, dass die Universität allen Verpflichtungen des UK Data Protection Act von 1998 nachkommt.	
5.	Ich stimme zu an dieser Studie teilzunehmen.	

Name des Teilnehmers	Unterschrift	Datum
Name des Forschers	Unterschrift	Datum

Wenn ausgefüllt, 1 Kopie für den Teilnehmer; 1 Kopie für den Forscher.