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Tyler H. Sutton

Introduction

Previous anthropological studies have emphasized the extensive variation in homosexual identity formation among different cultures. However, contemporary research and evidence points to the emergence of a male global gay identity that is bridging countless cultural barriers. I intend to argue in the following article that the intensification of the essentialism versus constructionist debate, the growth of mass media, and the development of international gay movements, have each contributed to the solidification of a contentious male global gay identity. The examination of these social and cultural factors reveals a significant trend for homosexual identity formation intricately woven into the complexity of globalization.

All around the world various cultures contain specific and unique norms, values, and traditions regarding sexuality. From small villages to complex nation-states, every social unit produces different relationships based on varying sexualities. Although these sexual norms have evolved throughout human history, recently homosexuality is emerging as an arguably international sexual development. Anthropologists have spent a lot of time and energy trying to categorize the varying homosexual relationships found in cultures based on gender, sexuality, and sex acts, among many other things. It is clear from recent anthropological works that it is far too complex to label men around the world who have sex with other men as simply gay or homosexual and it has become quite ‘anthropologically incorrect’ to make such broad generalizations. However, despite all of the research and theory suggesting that gay sexuality around the world is diverse and divided, it is evident that there is an emerging international identity of the ‘gay man’.

One of the most important factors in the development of a universal gay identity is globalization. Easier travel, expansive communication networks, and better access to information have exposed various homosexual lifestyles and ideologies to almost every culture on Earth. In order to better understand whether a global gay identity is truly emerging, it is important to explore various aspects of globalization that contribute to, or impede, the construction of such a controversial international identity. The essentialism versus constructionism debate, which is defined in the subsequent section, has factored significantly into the exploration of a global gay identity. There are various patterns that suggest homosexuality is a universal phenomenon and others that indicate cultural specificity, and this conflict is clear in the research of many gay communities around the world (Altman 2001). The media has also emerged as one of the most important features in the study of a global gay identity. In many cases, the onslaught of Western media has precipitated identification with the global gay identity in many countries (Boellstorff 2001). However, there has also been mounting resistance to the Western homosexual culture that has been so pervasive in the international homosexual circuit (Donham 1998). Finally, the
emergence of international gay organizations, communities, and movements are important because they indicate the level of ‘brotherhood’ among gay men cross-culturally and the amount of acceptance that exists for homosexuality on an international scale (Adam et al. 1999). Despite the cultural variance and intolerance of male homosexuality that exist around the world today, all of these factors contribute to slow the development of a global gay identity.

The Global Gay Identity and the Essentialism Versus Constructionism Debate

The emergence of a male global gay identity is controversial and believed to be ‘imagined’ by many individuals and communities cross-culturally (Schippers 1989). The issue arises over the process in which a gay identity is formed. Essentialists believe that the homosexual identity develops universally from intrinsic human characteristics and behaviours, while constructionists argue that homosexuality is a cultural invention constructed to define sexual behaviour (Schippers 1989:139). Essentialism does not account for the cross-cultural differences which have emerged in homosexual behaviour, and conversely, the constructionist view fails to account for the ‘premature’ feelings that many men express for other men before learning about the concept of homosexuality (Schippers 1989:143). In the past few decades, this debate was fed by psychoanalytical research. Jan Schippers (1989) identified the appositional consciousness, in which sexual and emotional urges develop, and the propositional consciousness, which allows for the cognitive recognition of actions and identity. Schippers (1989:142) argued that with the increase in homosexual exposure cross-culturally, the gay urges of the appositional consciousness are reinforced and more easily solidified into an identity in the propositional consciousness.

Identity formation at an individual level indicates the processes that gay men experience in coming to identify with the homosexual community. However, contemporary research recognizes the significance of culture and socialization in the construction of identity, especially the formation of a global identity (Altman 1971). Dennis Altman (1971) has produced a series of works exploring homosexual identity construction at a national and international level. In one of his first books, Altman (1971:15) stated, “the very concept of homosexuality is a social one, and one cannot understand the homosexual experience without recognizing the extent to which we have developed a certain identity and behaviour derived from social norms”. Altman acknowledged the importance of societies and the global community in particular, in forming homosexual identities around the world today. Altman (1971:10) explained that “homosexuals have, for the first time in modern societies ‘come out’ in large numbers and asserted rather than apologized for themselves”. Interestingly, Altman recognized that the global gay identity is firmly constructed on the basis of oppression. Without opposition and intolerance around the world, homosexuals would have no need to cling to their gay identities in an effort to protect their rights and gain acceptance in a community. With less of a global divide between sexual orientations,
Altman (1971:239) suggested that homosexuality will become simply an adjective to describe behaviour and no longer a noun to describe an identity.

More recently, Altman (2001) began to explore the cultural variations in homosexuality as expressed by constructionist scholars. Altman (2001:86) stated that “the question is not whether gay exists—it does in almost every society we know of—but how people incorporate it into their sense of self”. It is important to realize that although homosexual activity occurs all over the world, the cultural meaning and significance of these acts and identities vary greatly, despite globalization. For example, in Latin America a homosexual is one who rejects dominant gender roles, so sex with another man does not identify that man as a homosexual if he conforms to the male gender role (Altman 2001:90). Although Western ideologies are slowly seeping into Latin American culture, distinct and divisive homosexual patterns do remain. Peter A. Jackson (1998:955) explained that Latin American homosexuality appears to be quite homogenous and similar to its North American counter-parts, but local specificity of homosexual discourse varies greatly between communities. Jackson also recognized the bias that exists among contemporary Western scholars and its significance in the study of a global gay identity. Jackson (1998:955) stated that “the theoretical lenses scholars use to view erotic cultures can predispose them to seeing either similarity or difference”. The former, over the latter, has become increasingly problematic in the perception that gay communities all over the world, despite their differences, are merging into one homogenous international community (Jackson 1998:955). Although this pattern is emerging, its speed and intensity is hyperbolized by Western scholars because the global gay identity is looking more and more like the Western gay identity.

The Global Gay Identity and the Mass Media

In the past few decades, the homosexual identity has emerged as one of the most distinct and contemporary in Western culture. Globalization is exposing billions of people around the globe to the evolving lifestyles of homosexuals in the Western world. Although the variation between the behaviour, experiences, and identities of gay men within Western nations is great, there is an emerging concrete homosexual stereotype that not only pervades Western discourse, but saturates cultures in every corner of the globe. Some of the characteristics that define this homosexual stereotype include a predisposition for fashion and beauty, an avaricious sex life, and an innate femininity (Das and Harry 1980). This stereotypical identity has taken root in Western culture and Altman (2001:94) poignantly stated that “it is as impossible to prevent identities and categories from traveling as it is to prevent pornography from traveling across the Internet”. However, before the internet surged into the mainstream media, newspapers and television provided the greatest flow of homosexual culture and identity from the West to the rest of the world (Boellstorff 2001). Through these mediums, men all over the world are exposed to the achievements, failures, lifestyles, and stereotypes of a select group of homosexuals in developed Western nations. There are many stereotypical attributes of Western gay
men that have become the model for the
global gay identity (Das and Harry 1980).
Among these homosexual identity markers
in Western culture are hairdressing, acting,
decorating, outdoor nudity, and attending the
opera (Das and Harry 1980:46).
Creativity and individualism have also
emerged as stereotypical values of
homosexuals (Das and Harry 1980:48).
These values and characteristics, although
certainly accurate for some Western
homosexuals, represent the
commercialized, mainstream, middle-class
gay identity, not necessarily the poor
urban gay or the 'closeted' conservative
business executive (Das and Harry 1980).
Regardless of these incompatibilities, men
around the world who are exploring their
sexuality often identify with the
stereotypical gay identity oozing from the
media.

Television and video have played
significant parts in the transmission of
homosexual Western culture to the rest of
the world. Neil Miller (1992) described
the effect pornography has had on gay
men in Thailand. Self-identified
homosexuals in Thailand had rigid gender
roles between sexual partners, but with the
exposure to gay sex in the Western world,
Thai men have begun to experiment as
both ‘king’ and ‘queen’ in sexual relations
(Miller 1992:360). In Tokyo, gay
communities have studied tapes of gay
seminars and meetings in New York and
San Francisco as a model to develop their
own organizations (Miller 1992:360).

Tom Boellstorff (2001) presented
one of the most compelling cases on the
effect the media can have on homosexual
identity formation cross-culturally.
Boellstorff (2001:228) explored
homosexual culture in Indonesia and
stated “nearly 90 percent of my gay and
lesbi informants cite mainstream mass
media as the means by which they first
knew they could understand
themselves through the concepts
‘lesbi’ or ‘gay’”. Even if these
Indonesian men and women heard
about the homosexual categorizations
from a friend, more often than not the
friends first heard it from the
mainstream media (Boellstorff
2001:228). Unfortunately, the media
message received by the Indonesians is
often incomplete, negative, and
centered on Western celebrity gossip
(Boellstorff 2001:228). Boellstorff
(2001:229) explained that for some
time many Indonesian men referred to
themselves as gay and lesbi
interchangeably because they were
never told the difference between the
two Western identities. A common
misconception in the West is that gay
men in non-Western countries have
affluent lifestyles because they are less
bogged down by traditional family and
religious values, free to pursue
economic enterprises (Boellstorff
explained that in Indonesia, most gay
men are poor, do not speak English,
and have never traveled beyond the
Indonesian islands. Clearly, the media
connection between Western gay
culture and the rest of the world has
many faults and distortions. However,
it is evident that globalization has
brought Western gay culture closer to
homosexual men all over the world.

Although European nations, as
well as Canada and Australia, have
contributed to the transmission of
homosexual culture, America has
produced the most resilient model for
the global gay identity (Altman 1983).
Ironically, America does not have the
most tolerant or liberal culture in
which homosexuality typically thrives.
However, the American hegemony on
globalization has allowed its homosexual culture to infiltrate various markets all over the world. Altman (1983) described how homosexuality has gripped the nation and in turn Americanized homosexuality around the globe. Altman (1983:216) explained that the powerful dichotomy of gender in America and the idea of a distinct homosexual minority has become a model to the entire First World. In contrast, Europe has traditionally had far less separation between homosexuals and heterosexuals, blurring the lines and reducing minority status (1983:216). The European model is found in many non-Western cultures and it provides greater integration into society (Altman 1983:217). The American model, however, has created a global gay identity that strives to be different, risks persecution for personal rights, and embraces gay solidarity (Altman 1983:217). Altman (1983:217) stated that “it is possible with time that the American model of self-conscious gay separatism will become established elsewhere”.

With the American gay anthem ‘In the Navy’ playing in every gay bar around the world, Altman (1983:217) was confident the Americanization of the global gay identity is near completion.

The Global Gay Identity and International Gay Movements

Beyond the media and the saturation of American popular culture, other global movements and developments have helped with the construction of the contemporary international gay identity. Political movements in particular have shaped the global gay identity and allowed it to grow in certain areas of the world more prominently than others (Adam et al. 1999). “All round the world gay and lesbian movements influence and learn from each other” (Adam et al. 1999:345).

The similarities of these movements include their mass demonstrations, institutionalized around pride and AIDS awareness, and the lack of violence in said demonstrations (Adam et al. 1999:347). The differences between these movements, however, speak to the cultural uniqueness that still exists despite globalization (Adam et al. 1999). Gay movements differ cross-culturally based on the meanings of symbols and expressions, the role of national politics, the presence of religious hegemony, the lack of ‘sibling movements’, and the impact of AIDS on the population (Adam et al. 1999:359).

Despite all of these differences, however, Adam and colleagues (1999:368) stated that “the question is whether we should still speak of national histories, or whether the international context has become so important that we might talk of a global movement”. The global gay identity, which more and more men adhere to around the world, exists because of the achievements of gay movements that span national boundaries. In 1991, Amnesty International agreed to tackle the situation of gay prisoners of conscience, and in 1992, Canada became the first North American nation to accept a man as a refugee based on the anti-gay policies of his country of origin (Miller 1992:364).

One of the most powerful examples of international movements affecting gay identity is the emergence of gay culture in South Africa. Pressure from international leaders and lobbyists brought the apartheid system in South Africa down and with the monumental change came a revolutionary gay culture (Donham 1998). In the late
1980s, the multiracial gay rights organization, Glow, developed in South Africa and pride parades began, modeled on similar parades in New York and San Francisco (Donham 1998:11). Before the collapse of apartheid, many South African leaders of the African National Congress (ANC) were in exile, and during this time they became exposed to international ideologies (Donham 1998:12). After the collapse of apartheid, the ANC lawyers and politicians returned to South Africa and brought with them liberal Western notions of gender diversity, as well as the legitimization of gay rights (Donham 1998:12). Recently, ANC leaders have become the most pronounced gay rights lobbyists in the country (Donham 1998:12). With the rebuilding of South Africa, gay men, as well as most other South Africans, have developed strong nationalism and liberalism. Donham (1998:16) stated that “gay identity in South Africa reverberates—in a way that it cannot in the United States—with a proud, new national identity”. Evidently, the global gay identity feeds off of the progress and achievements of communities, organizations, and movements around the world.

The global gay identity is beneficial for many men around the world. By providing gay men with a community to relate to, the global gay identity helps them to discover more about themselves. However, despite these superficial benefits, the global gay identity can also cause severe issues for men that do not quite fit the stylized mold. David A. B. Murray (2000) described the experience of gay men in Martinique. These gay men are forced to conceal their sexualities or face persecution and most of them aspire to move to Quebec or France where they can assume the role of the global gay man. Unfortunately, upon arrival in Quebec or France, Martinican men face intense racism in the economy and the gay community, as well as exoticism by the general public (Murray 2000:265). It is quite difficult for French black men to embrace the restrictive global gay identity and this produces identity crises for these Martinican men, as well as many others around the globe (Murray 2000). Murray (2000:267) concluded that, “these men identify with and desire, to some extent, the (ostensibly) ‘liberated’ public expression of same-sex desire that they have seen in these global gay products”; however, “they recognize their exclusion from it”. In many cases, men reject the global gay identity completely in favour of their traditional ideologies. In Honduras, for example, researchers expected to find the traditional ‘heterogender form of homosexuality’, in which stark gender identities exist between male partners, to be eradicated by the emergence of the global gay identity (Babb 2004:227). However, this traditional Honduras form of male homosexuality has persisted (Babb 2004:227). Scholars recognized that the gay men of Honduras “desire to remain different even when such difference is not viewed as properly ‘modern’” (Babb 2004:228). Evidently, the global gay identity, though powerful and growing, has not yet pervaded every culture.

Conclusion

Globalization is one of the most significant forces in the contemporary world and this is reflected in the plethora of research and academic work on the topic. The great cultural divisions that once separated people around the globe are
breaking down and allowing international identities to form. The global gay identity is emerging from the contributions of many complex processes; evolving perceptions of identity, media expansion, and political and social movements are all combining to construct an identity that gay men around the world can relate to. However, this global gay identity lacks both impartiality and diversity. Western gay discourse, particularly American ideology, continues to dominate the construction of the global gay identity and men of incompatible cultures must choose whether to conform or reject it. Despite obstacles and detriments, a global community of gay men is developing internationally in an effort to combat AIDS, obtain human rights, and secure an identity that for so long has been ignored, persecuted, or rejected. It remains to be seen whether the future brings an absolute global gay identity or a harmony between international ideology and discrete cultural differences.

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