Masculinity and Sexual Pluralism: The Evolution of Gendered Practices and the Affirmation of Sexual Orientations in the Romanian Public Space

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Abstract: This study explores the emergence of new cultural models of masculinity in the context of the freedom of expression and consumer society in post-Decemberist Romania. The decriminalization of homosexuality facilitated the expression of both gay and heterosexual identities in the public space. Simultaneously, the development of consumer society, aligned with the European consumer market, contributed to the emergence and expression of new representations and forms of masculinity, distinct from those of the communist period, which were hegemonic due to the limits of expression imposed by the regime. The study examines how these masculine patterns began to be expressed in both small towns and large cities, amidst rising affluence and the proliferation of consumer goods that enabled the cultural instrumentalization of masculinity through new gendered practices. It further exemplifies how gay individuals have objectified representations of masculinity through sexual fantasies, shaping their understanding of gay sexuality. Cultural masculine models have been instrumentalized through culturally gendered practices, with different sexual identities leading to the emergence of sexual pluralism.

Keywords: Masculinities, Sexual Identity, Sexual Fetishism, Sexual Objectification, Sexual Pluralism

Rezumat: Acest studiu explorează apariția unor noi modele culturale de masculinitate în contextul libertății de exprimare și al societății de consum din România post-decembristă. Decriminalizarea homosexualității a facilitat exprimarea identităților atât gay, cât și heterosexuale în spațiul public. Simultan, dezvoltarea societății de consum, aliniată cu piața europeană de consum, a contribuit la apariția și exprimarea unor noi reprezentări și forme de masculinitate, distincte de cele din perioada comunistă, care erau hegemonice datorită limitelor de exprimare impuse de regim. Studiul examinează modul în care aceste modele masculine au început să fie exprimate

atât în orașele mici, cât și în orașele mari, în contextul creșterii abundenței și al proliferării bunurilor de consum care au permis instrumentalizarea culturală a masculinității prin noi practici de gen. De asemenea, exemplifică modul în care indivizii gay au obiectificat reprezentările masculinității prin fantezii sexuale, modelându-și înțelegerea sexualității gay. Modelele culturale masculine au fost instrumentalizate prin practici culturale de gen, diferite identități sexuale ducând la apariția pluralismului sexual.

Cuvinte-cheie: Masculinități, Identitate sexuală, Fetișism sexual, Obiectivizare sexuală, Pluralism sexual

Preamble

The events of December 1989 in Romania laid the groundwork for the emergence and development of a liberal society, built upon key concepts such as respect for human rights, the rise of the market economy, and the gradual establishment of a consumer society. Homosexuality had been criminalized under Article 200 of the Penal Code, adopted in 1969, which stipulated that sexual relations between individuals of the same sex, if conducted in public or causing public scandal, were punishable by imprisonment for up to five years.[1] Therefore, the matter was then brought into the public discourse. Both of the Criminal Procedure Codes adopted during the communist regime—the 1948 Criminal Procedure Code and the 1969 Criminal Procedure Code—incorporated provisions criminalizing homosexuality from the interwar period, when it had been criminalized under the 1936 Criminal Code. In all of these Romanian penal codes, homosexuality was criminalized in relation to the concept of "public scandal," which significantly hindered the social and cultural expression of the local gay community. Following extensive parliamentary debates, Article 200 was repealed in 2001 under the government of Adrian Năstase, pressured by different non-governmental organizations, including the *Accept Association*, founded in 1996. These organizations emerged in Romania after receiving external funding from donors such as the Open Society Institute, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and PHARE. In the absence of an active civil society in Romania, the movement for the social

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[1] *Penal Code of 1968*, Art. 200, accessed February 15, 2025,
https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/38070.

rights of LGBTQ+ individuals was largely driven by these non-governmental organizations, with their members often working independently of an active gay community.[2] Thus, a series of myths and narratives regarding the appropriateness of decriminalizing homosexuality in Romania have emerged and been perpetuated in the public discourse. Among the most common of these claims is that Romania does not have a "gay problem." In the collective imagination of both the public and political elites, homosexuality was viewed as a phenomenon specific to Western society and, therefore, as a Western vice, with the West often being accused of imposing these so-called "anomalies" on the country.[3] Following these public debates, more than 20 years after the decriminalization of homosexuality, members of the LGBTQ+ community began to express themselves freely, leading to the emergence of a visible local gay community in Romania. Today, the gay sexual identity is openly expressed in the public space alongside the heterosexual identity, with members of both communities undergoing a process of mutual cultural hybridization of gender practices, particularly those defined as masculine.[4]

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[2] Shannon Woodcock, "Gay Pride as Violent Containment in Romania: a Brave New Europe," *Sextures – A Virtual Forum and E-journal for Sexualities, Cultures and Politics*, no. 1 (2009): 1-17.

[3] This is one of the generic opinions expressed by members of the Romanian political class during that period, who accused the West of attempting to erase what they considered to be the true Romanian values, defined as traditional. The opinion quoted was voiced by MP Emil Teodor Popescu, who served in the 1996–2000 legislature. The transcripts regarding the repeal of Article 200 are available on the official website of the Chamber of Deputies under the "Parliamentary Debates" section. For a more comprehensive analysis of these debates among the Romanian political class, see Florin Buhuceanu, *Homoistorii. Ieșirea din invizibilitate*, 2nd ed. (Bucharest: Editura Maiko, 2016), 104–105.

[4] The observation regarding the existence of a cultural process of hybridization of gender practices defined as masculine, in relation to biological sex, between heterosexual and homosexual individuals, is made by R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, who have questioned the historical and cultural process of redefining traditional/hegemonic masculinity through cultural hybridization, driven by changing gender practices. According to gender studies theories, masculinity and femininity are not fixed, normative categories, but rather undergo changes depending on the cultural and social context in which individuals express their gender practices. For further details, see R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (December 2005): 845; D. Z. Demetriou addresses the same process of approximation of gender practices, mentioning their reconfiguration and adaptation, see D. Z. Demetriou, "Connell's Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critique," *Theory and Society* 30, no. 3 (2001): 355.

This study, utilizing the tools of historical anthropology, explores how the transition from a totalitarian state to a democratic one has influenced the redefinition of male cultural models in contemporary Romanian society. Moreover, particular emphasis is placed on how these male cultural models emerge and are publicly expressed in Romania, and how they impact homosexuality. This study is part of my doctoral dissertation entitled *Masculinity and Sexual Identity in Contemporary Romania*, which aims to identify the main male cultural categories that have become sexually relevant within the gay community in Romania. The study involves seven participants and traces the process of hybridization of gender practices that define and shape masculinity between individuals with gay sexual identities and those with heterosexual identities. It also investigates the sexual desires and fantasies of young gay individuals, aged up to 30, in relation to members of the heterosexual community. Through access to consumer goods and Western fashion, the heterosexual community has redefined the relationship between gender, attitude, and dress—factors that also influence the sexuality of young gay individuals. All participants in this research were aged between 18 and 30 and were educated in the post-Decemberist era. The research is qualitative in nature and was conducted through direct, non-directive interviews with both gay individuals, who provided information on the relevance of masculine cultural models for their own sexuality, and individuals who identify as heterosexual, offering personal motivations regarding gender expression and dress codes influenced by new Western brands. Male cultural models that instantiate masculinity through various culturally gendered practices have become sexually relevant within the gay community, with the entire process contributing to the emergence of forms of sexual pluralism.[5]

Thus, cultural models of heterosexual identity become relevant not only for women but also for gay men, with masculinity, formed through culturally universal gender practices, acquiring a dual significance in terms of sexual identity and the messages it conveys. The primary research area is the municipality of Brad, a city of approximately 14,000 inhabitants in Hunedoara

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[5] For a discussion on sexuality, which, beyond its unquestionable biological foundation, is shaped by social and cultural constructs, leading to the emergence of forms of sexual pluralism, see Fatmagül Berktay, "The Social Construction of Sexuality and the Debate over 'Sexual Pluralism'," *Kadın Araştırmaları Dergisi* 7 (2001): 65-74.

County, though the study also includes individuals from larger cities such as Timișoara, Arad, Oradea, Cluj-Napoca, Sibiu, Alba-Iulia, and Deva. The gay community in Brad gravitates towards these very cities, a process mirrored throughout the country, though with inherent fluctuations and discontinuities shaped by specific sexual desires, as well as by the search for gay partners on dating apps such as Grindr, where such sexual fantasies can be fulfilled. It is important to note that the sexual exploration discussed in this study is specific to a segment of the gay community and does not represent those individuals who do not affirm their sexual identity or actively explore their sexuality.

Masculinity and Sexual Identity in Liberal Societies: Toward a Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The public expression of sexual identity is a phenomenon specific to liberal societies built on respect for human rights, market economies, and consumer culture. In 1993, more than 30 years after World War II, when the consumer society had developed in Western European countries and the decriminalization of homosexuality had been achieved through the direct civic activism of gay individuals during the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, American historian John D'Emilio highlighted the direct relationship between liberalization, capitalism, consumer society, and the expression of gay sexual identity. He argued that the emergence and expression of sexual and feminist identities are closely tied to individuals' financial independence in a liberal and capitalist society, which also entails social independence. As individuals no longer belong to an interdependent family system but participate in the labour market, this financial and social independence is also reflected in terms of identity and sexuality. The transformation of traditional family structures has allowed homosexual desires to become part of one's personal identity, which is freely expressed in a liberal society.[6] Processes such as industrialization, followed by urbanization and demographic growth, have undermined traditional family structures

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[6] John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale and David M. Halperin (New York, London: Routledge, 1993), 470.

and their power dynamics, wherever these phenomena have occurred, thus creating the conditions for the expression of sexual identities, as well as other forms of identity, such as the post-colonial ones.

In this climate of liberalization and social emancipation, which contributed to the decriminalization of homosexuality, the consumer society has fostered and promoted the development of masculine and feminine cultural models. Cultural models associated with gay sexual identity have not been an exception, gradually incorporating elements of gender representation and dress patterns from masculinities associated with heterosexual identity, resulting in a process of cultural hybridization of gender practices. This process of hybridization between heterosexual and gay cultural patterns began to be observed and recorded soon after 1900, when the expression of homosexual behaviour by certain individuals also led to the emergence of homosexual gender expressions and gay masculinities.[7] The process continued throughout the interwar period until the rise of totalitarian regimes, which re-criminalized homosexuality and imposed stricter measures against it.[8] As a result, this cultural expression was halted, only to be resumed in certain countries in the post-war period. In England, France, and the United States, the expression of sexual identity was similarly slowed by economic crises and war.

The liberalization that characterized post-war Western societies, along with economic growth and the emergence of welfare states, facilitated a new expression of sexual identity. During this period, the understanding of sexuality and sexual orientation became increasingly tied to the cultural expression of gender, thus contributing to the development of the theoretical and conceptual framework of gender studies. Homosexuality ceased to be viewed as a form of degeneracy based on sexual behaviour, and no longer regarded as a eugenic issue, as it had been prior to World War II. Instead, the homosexual was reconceptualized as an individual category, or "species,"

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[7] For an overview on the expression of gay sexual identity in the early 20th century, see Florence Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe,* vol. 1 & 2 (Berlin, London, Paris, 1919-1939), part I, "A Brief Apogee: The 1920s, A First Homosexual Liberation; The Homosexual - Between Dandy and Militant."

[8] Homosexuality was re-criminalized by the Soviet regime in 1934, following its initial liberalization under the Bolshevik government. Meanwhile, the relative tolerance that gay individuals experienced in Italy and Germany was replaced by outright persecution after the rise of Fascism and Nazism.

as Michel Foucault termed it, in which sexual orientation is integrated into gender, and the gay individual is understood as a subject with a culturally constructed identity.[9] This conceptual framework emerged and developed only in the post-war period, following decolonization, which catalysed the expression of post-colonial, non-heteronormative, and feminist identities. The expression of gay sexual identity in Western public spaces, alongside gender practices defined as universal, regardless of sexual orientation, contributed to the development of a conceptual model that began with a limited empirical foundation, but that gradually expanded into a comprehensive research framework for masculinity patterns across diverse cultural contexts.[10]

The evolution of the Romanian state and society from a totalitarian regime to a democratic state, particularly the decriminalization of homosexuality, coupled with the emergence of a consumer society and the financial independence of individuals within the market economy, inevitably facilitated the expression of gay sexual identity in Romania. This process mirrors, with inherent chronological differences, the stages of gay sexual identity affirmation that occurred in Western European countries.

The Expression of Sexual Identity in the Post-Decembrist Society: The Decline of Hegemonic Masculinity and the Emergence of New Masculinities

The redefinition of masculine patterns in Romania has been a gradual process, evolving alongside the expansion of the consumer society that emerged after 1990. Prior to the December 1989 revolution, the expression of masculinity was constrained by the egalitarian principles of the communist regime, which emphasized moral and reproductive order, discipline, and social equality. The cultural expressions of masculinity were primarily confined to the image of the worker, the central symbol of the regime, who was portrayed as contributing to the country's prosperity, or to the "comrade," if one belonged to the ruling party, its leadership, or the intellectual elite. The social pressure on the individual and the shortages of the 1980s, driven by the regime's self-inflicted economic crisis, further restricted the cultural expression of gender.

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[9] Tamsin Spargo, *Foucault and Queer Theory* (UK: Icon Books, 1999; USA: Totem Books, 1999), 20.
[10] R.W. Connel and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (December 2005): 845.

Sensuality, eroticism, and sexuality, especially when associated with personal identities—particularly masculine ones— were rarely recognized as elements worthy of valorization, often inhibiting individual gender expression.[11] Men were required to wear their hair short and to be clean-shaven, in accordance with the image promoted by the regime. Because of these cultural patterns imposed by the regime, masculinity in the communist period had a hegemonic character, even if the hegemony was not strongly enforced. The absence of consumer society and consumer goods in the context of the economic crisis also meant that masculinity during the communist period was unitary, not segmented by consumer goods, and had a somewhat monolithic character[12]. In the aftermath of the revolution, as gender practices began to diversify with the advent of consumer goods, a narrative emerged in the public discourse: at that time, individuals who did not conform to societal norms were at risk of being apprehended by the authorities, who would then shave their heads and force them into employment, often under threat of detention.[13]

After 1990, new male models and cultural patterns gradually emerged, which had been suppressed under the totalitarian regime. Following the entry of Western brands into the Romanian market after 2000, these brands promoted new cultural images and postures of masculinity, which were appropriated by both heterosexual and homosexual individuals within the evolving mass culture. The proliferation of these patterns was further accelerated by the rise of the internet and social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok.[14] However, smartphones played an even more significant role than the brands themselves, as individuals, unable to always

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[11] For a discussion on the condemnation of eroticism during the communist regime, see the chapter "Tot ce trebuie să știm despre sex. Din cărți," in **Alexandru Ofrim**, *Farmecul discret al patinei și alte mici istorii culturale* (Bucharest: Editura Humanitas, 2019), 39.

[12] For a discussion on the concept of monolithic masculinity in economics as a division of consumer goods, see Salim L. Azar, "Exploring Brand Masculine Patterns: Moving Beyond Monolithic Masculinity," *Journal of Product & Brand Management* 22, no. 7 (2013): 502-512.

[13] This type of narrative remains prevalent in society, particularly among older individuals who lived during the communist regime and who did not fully embrace the changes introduced by the December 1989 Revolution, which brought to the forefront the concepts of freedom and individual choice in areas such as gender, profession, and personal life.

[14] The social media networks mentioned are among the most prominent platforms that have contributed to the expression of new masculine gender identities. While these networks may evolve in response to changing trends, the internet and social media continue to play a key role in the dissemination and promotion of these models.

afford original clothing, sought alternative or second-hand items that aligned with the new cultural patterns emerging in the internet age. The post-2000 period, marked by globalization, not only facilitated the development of the LGBTQ+ movement in line with its transnational nature, but also promoted new gender patterns within the broader cultural discourse.

Attitudes towards the body and sexuality underwent significant transformation after the state abandoned its pro-natalist policies, and eroticism became increasingly dissociated from procreation, coinciding with the broader availability and use of contraception. In the context of consumer society, ideals of masculinity have evolved, particularly among young people aged 18-40, where male role models have become more diverse and more prominently emphasized. Masculinities now interact within a broad process of cultural, social, and psychological exchange, and social networks, by enhancing individual interactions and the visibility of the body as a form of cultural expression, have contributed to the spread of masculine models and patterns across both heterosexual and homosexual communities. The cultural hybridization of masculinities is unfolding within both groups. Heterosexual men are increasingly engaging in bodybuilding, attending fitness gyms, or adopting grooming practices such as shaving their legs, while gay men are embracing masculine traits by frequenting fitness centres, adopting heterosexual masculine codes, cultivating facial hair, getting tattoos, piercings, or wearing sportswear to reinforce their masculinization process. Fitness and bodybuilding gyms are ubiquitous in every city, and attitudes toward the body are evolving among youth not only in large urban centres, but also in smaller towns. While traditional collective structures persist in many cities and in rural areas – where the consumer society has taken hold more gradually while continuing to uphold certain norms –, the process of social emancipation on an individual level is expanding and becoming increasingly visible in both small and medium-sized communities, not only in major cities. Traditional life patterns based on marriage, family, and reproductive norms are no longer singular; they are increasingly challenged by attitudes influenced by the relaxation of state pressure on procreation, which has simultaneously facilitated the emergence of modern masculinity models inspired by consumer society. In contrast to the post-war emancipation movements in the West, which were characterized by large-scale mobilizations in urban centres against restrictive state policies, emancipation in Romania

is more gradual and occurs at an individual level. However, this process is reshaping and competing with traditional models, diminishing their former dominance.

Models of masculinity expressing gay sexual identity have begun to assert themselves and gain visibility in both public and online spaces. For gay individuals, fashion has always served as a significant mode of expression. On the one hand, fashion can perpetuate the invisibility of gay groups lacking a communal identity, while, on the other hand, it can subtly signal adherence to codes not readily embraced by the general population. In Romania, the expression of these masculinities and sexual identities is still often perceived by the wider public as a mere emergence of masculinities and styles within the new consumer society. However, among heterosexual models, gay individuals are increasingly infiltrating and publicly expressing themselves, thus redefining traditional masculinity. Practices such as tweezing, shaving legs, wearing trousers with bare ankles or tight fits, which have become widespread among heterosexual men, have been significantly influenced by gender practices specific to the gay community. Whether the hybridization process has occurred through local gay influences or through the adoption of Western masculinities promoted on social media, the impact is clear. Over the past decade, as the visibility of the gay community in public spaces has grown, the hybridization between heterosexual and gay masculinities has largely occurred via the heterosexual intermediary model drawn from Western consumer society, with its influence spread through advertisements, Western brands, and the internet.

The general population in Romania has largely ignored the expression of gay identity in the public sphere, as they do not clearly distinguish between the two identities. However, certain remarks, occasionally made by individuals who also lived under the former regime, such as the perception that men have been "effeminized,"[15] suggest that some people are aware of the broader

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[15] On a considerable number of occasions, I have observed discussions in which men over the age of 50, who had experienced the pre-consumer society era, voiced opinions about the masculinities around them. For instance, in the summer of 2019, in the commune of Băița, Hunedoara County, during a visit to the village shop, a woman remarked that all men "look gay" and that being gay has become fashionable. Such opinions were also reported by other gay and heterosexual individuals whom I interviewed for my anthropological research. These views are particularly prevalent in rural areas but are not exclusive to rural populations; they

transformation of masculinities in Romania. For most, these dress codes are associated with masculinities linked to a gay sexual identity: *they appear gay, dress gay, think gay*. Yet, such opinions are often expressed in a vague manner, especially when the individuals being referred to do not openly identify as gay. In Romania, few have had the courage to openly assert their sexual identity. Gay men remain somewhat distant in the public imagination, particularly in small towns and rural areas, and in large cities, they often blend into the crowds. They are still perceived as part of a small minority within the social imagination, yet their culture and masculinities interact with the broader process of masculinity transformation, contributing to the reshaping of gendered practices. Despite this, individuals who interact with openly queer people can often identify them. The interaction between openly gay individuals and their accepting heterosexual friends inevitably leads to the paradox that other gay men, who express their masculinity without publicly affirming their sexual identity, are recognized by heterosexuals who have openly gay friends. Ultimately, the growing public discourse around gay identity reflects the increasing visibility and acceptance, in Romania, of sexual identity expression and the redefinition of masculinity ideals through new gender practices.

Ten years ago, in Brad, a small provincial town in Hunedoara County with a population of 14,000, discussions about gay individuals were limited to associating certain people's dress styles with Western gay cultural models or hybridized masculinities, without any direct link between the cultural models expressed and the sexual identities of those embodying them, as no one in the town had openly affirmed their sexual identity. Today, the situation has changed, with more than ten openly gay local individuals, aged between 16[16] and 25. At the very least, their close friends are aware of their sexual orientation. They come out in some contexts, but remain closeted in others, depending on the individuals they interact with. Extending the area around

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emerge wherever there are noticeable discrepancies between new cultural patterns and traditional masculinities.

[16] It is important to note that the age of sexual consent in Romania is 16, and the expression of sexual orientation typically begins during adolescence. However, the sexual fantasies of some gay individuals involving people over the age of 16—whether they are 17, 18, or 19—represent a reality that I could not exclude from this study, which was conducted with the consent of adults over the age of 18, under strict confidentiality.

the town to a 15 km radius, including the surrounding countryside, the number exceeds twenty. Some openly affirm their sexual identity to close friends, and their families are aware of their orientation, which allows them to disregard any rumours that may circulate. Although they are often advised not to make it widely known, each individual shares their orientation with a limited circle of close friends, which gradually expands due to the curiosity of others. In the town, some people who are familiar with these individuals take an interest in their sexual orientation. As a result, the topic of gay people becomes a subject for social reality testing, often mixed with jokes and mean-spirited comments intended to provoke small subcultural conflicts and test opinions on the matter. The presence of gay individuals in the town matters primarily insofar as certain social subgroups take notice of them. For those who do not, the topic of sexual identity affirmation remains merely a rumour not worth exploring. However, for others, it becomes an interesting subject, particularly when the individuals involved are well-known, and for those who have interacted with at least one openly gay person, sexual identity becomes a certainty.

The process of expressing and affirming sexual identity is not linear and is characterized by numerous discontinuities, influenced by the social environment in which individuals live, as well as by personal or family values. In contrast, the situation is significantly more dynamic in larger and medium-sized cities in the surrounding areas, such as Timişoara, Arad, Oradea, Cluj-Napoca, Sibiu, Alba Iulia, and Deva, where the gay community can express itself freely. In these cities, members of the community often use dating apps such as Grindr, which facilitate easier connections with other men. In these urban areas, where the business and IT sectors dominate, traditional patterns of masculinity, influenced by reproductive norms still prevalent in some rural regions or provincial towns, have been more extensively disrupted. This shift has led to the emergence and more visible expression of new masculinities, both homosexual and heterosexual, influenced by Western cultural models and the fashion promoted by major brands, particularly through the presence of shopping malls and large retail stores, which have become widely frequented by Romanians.

Fetishizing Male Models: From Brand Fetishism to Sexual Fetishism

In the evenings, urban areas often witness groups of young people gathering to socialize. Their fashion choices are heavily influenced by Western brands and labels, which align with broader global cultural trends, particularly in terms of masculinity. Small towns, such as Brad, are no exception to this cultural expression. Young men, in particular, distinguish themselves from older generations through their clothing, often opting for popular Western brands such as Nike, Adidas, Jordan, and North Face. These choices are prominently displayed, often alongside symbols of status like cars or other behaviours that signal strength and assertiveness. Such young men are frequently labelled as "bombers"[17] by outsiders—a term typically applied to a social group of individuals aged 16-21, often unemployed (although some may be students), who use brand-name clothing as a means to assert their still-developing sense of maturity and to impress peers, both male and female.

The manifestation of new masculinity models, particularly through visual cues, can stimulate sexual attraction, fantasies, and desires, especially among gay individuals. Sexual arousal is a cognitive process that occurs in the brain, with individuals responding to sexually relevant stimuli. These stimuli are present in both heterosexual and homosexual contexts and are shaped by both biological factors and, predominantly, cultural influences. The physical appearance of an individual, coupled with their style, dress, and behaviour, plays a critical role in this process. Visual sexual stimuli combine these physical and behavioural elements, which are inseparable in how masculinity is both represented and perceived. Whether individuals are heterosexual or homosexual, the perception of attractiveness integrates both physical traits and clothing choices, with people constructing mental representations of those they find appealing. As individual expression continues to diversify, preferences and tastes vary widely among individuals,

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[17] The term "bombers" is predominantly used in small towns, where the social divide between the affluent and the less privileged is more pronounced. In these contexts, the distinction between those who have adopted Western cultural models and those who do not fully conform to these patterns is more noticeable. In contrast, in Romania's larger cities, this label is gradually losing its relevance, although the underlying motivations for adopting these brands and the relationship between clothing and gender remain unchanged.

adding complexity to how masculinity and attraction are understood and experienced.[18]

For instance, a 28-year-old man expresses attraction to peers of his own age but also does not exclude the possibility of engaging in sexual relationships with younger men over the age of 18, whom he meets on Grindr, a popular gay dating app. He acknowledges having sexual encounters with a diverse range of male cultural identities, although he is particularly drawn to younger men and has sexual preferences that involve certain elements of bodily transgression:

> *All boys are beautiful. And these ugly guys, like, with the skin... they're cute... they're, like, raw, they're smooth. They turn you on more. And so they are. There aren't really any uglies. They're pretty much all good. When I see them dressed sporty in Nike pants, and Jordan sneakers for example, or Nike with their white socks up, slender, I can smell their body odour and their socks. It turns me on to the max. I can almost feel their flesh. I want to taste them, smell their socks. Feel them on my nose. I want to kiss them hot and feel their saliva, almost experience the feel and smell of his flesh. That's why I like to be dominated.* (Adrian – 28 years old)

In the conceptualization of sexual attraction, both cultural patterns and physical appearance play a significant role. The example provided illustrates the relationship between body, clothing, and behaviour. Individuals who may not conform to conventional standards of beauty are often considered attractive due to the cultural models they represent. Sexual arousal can be triggered by cultural symbols, such as Nike or Jordan footwear, or other clothing brands, which over time have acquired sexual significance due to their association with the behaviours and personalities they are perceived to promote. It is important, however, to exercise caution when using terms like "ugly," as these terms may overlook certain physical features, particularly

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[18]A significant body of research exists on the influence of culture on sexuality, covering both social and cultural studies and medical research that examines how individuals respond to sexual stimuli. For example, a medical study has analysed such responses through eye movement tracking, shedding light on the effects of these stimuli, Peter Fromberger et al., "Initial Orienting Towards Sexually Relevant Stimuli: Preliminary Evidence from Eye Movement Measures," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 41, no. 4 (August 2012): 919-28, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-011-9816-3; Regarding the relationship between sexuality and culture, see Steve Loughnan et al., "Exploring the Role of Culture in Sexual Objectification: A Seven Nations Study," *Revue Internationale de Psychologie Sociale* 28, no. 1 (2015): 125-152.

those related to face or body. While cultural attitudes and modelling may mitigate these physical limitations, they cannot entirely compensate for them. Additionally, the individual in question acknowledges consuming pornography that promotes male sexual role models characterized by rebellious or playful attitudes. His attraction to physical traits such as body odour or the desire to wear certain socks further underscores the inseparable link between physical appearance, clothing, and attitude. Items such as socks or sneakers are emblematic of the behaviours, language, and temperament associated with certain subcultures. Sexual fetishes, including sock fetishes, foot fetishes, or spit fetishes, are closely intertwined with brand identity, physical appearance, and attitude. In the imagination of individuals, boys wearing branded footwear like Nike, Jordan, or Adidas are often associated with the emerging "bomber" subculture and linked to attitudes of defiance or naughtiness.

In consumer society, where brands have become widely accessible, brand fetishism has emerged and evolved. This phenomenon has given rise to universal cultural role models, including male cultural figures. The example provided, in which an individual expresses sexual desires based on attitudes, physical appearance, and dress codes explicitly linked to individuals wearing brands such as Nike, Jordan, or Adidas, exemplifies brand fetishism.[19] In this context, brand fetishism intersects with pornographic cultural models that individuals visualize, transforming it into sexual fetishism. This process, often referred to as the objectification of individuals,[20] involves reducing people to their physical attractiveness and sexual utility, as defined by culturally constructed gender norms. For gay men, brand fetishism often unconsciously transitions into sexual fetishism, where sexual desires and fantasies about men dressed in sportswear—typically involving imagined expectations of rebelliousness or naughtiness—are projected onto culturally embodied individuals. In this process, the desired person is perceived holistically (appearance, style, and gender), rather than as merely a physical body.[21]

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[19] Regarding brand fetishism, see Katya Asaff, "Brand Fetishism," *Connecticut Law* 43, no. 1 (November 2010): 83-148; On brand eroticization, see Maja Gwóźdź, "Footwear on, underwear off: fetishism and brand eroticization," *Porn Studies* 3, no. 4 (2016): 460-463.

[20] Regarding sexual objectification, see Rae Langton, *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Aura Schussler, "Pornography and Postmodernism," in *Postmodern Openings* 4, no. 3 (September 2013): 7-23.

[21] Roger Scruton, *Dorința Sexuală – o cercetare filosofică*, transl. by Teodora Nicolau (Bucharest: Editura Humanitas, 2019), 145.

Sexual attitudes such as naughtiness, spitting, or aggression are frequently mentally constructed within these sexual expectations, as individuals may have limited knowledge of the sexual fantasies of the men they are attracted to, who may, in fact, be heterosexual. Just as gay men may fetishize male cultural role models, heterosexual boys may similarly fetishize these role models to affiliate with subcultures, such as the "bombers" subculture, the majority of whom are heterosexual.

Another interviewee sees a boy who attracts him: *I was turned on by a 19-year-old guy with black earrings in his ears, blond hair dye and a tattoo on the back of his neck in the shape of wings. A friend thought he was gross. She said he was a "cyut," but I was attracted to him*. The interviewee then spends two months reflecting on his sexual orientation, only to conclude that he is heterosexual. Subsequently, in real life, boys with wing-shaped tattoos on their necks become sexually relevant cultural role models for him, even if the tattoo alone is the defining feature. When he notices such individuals on the street, he is immediately drawn to them, comparing the first person to others. If they evoke the same attraction, they become models similar to the initial sexually relevant individual. All such individuals then become sexually relevant and intriguing for his sexual fantasies. At the level of fantasy, this represents just the beginning of a new journey—the search for similar men on platforms like Grindr. On Grindr, without much effort, he can find individuals with similar features and fulfil his sexual fantasies. Despite the app lacking specific search filters for niche details such as tattoos, it is still possible to find partners with similar tattoos and comparable age, as the winged neck tattoo has become a universal trend within consumer society, with tattoos serving as an expression of bodily consumerism.

Other sexual fetishes emerge in a similar way. White socks worn with Air Force 1 shoes are considered sexually attractive, as are the legs, which convey virility and strength through their musculature. Interestingly, several individuals have reported developing a sexual fetish for white socks in young men. In all cases, white socks are emphasized by footwear, and together they enhance the attitude and movement of the leg or highlight the hairiness of the legs when paired with shorts. White inspires both purity and dirt, because on white, dirt and dust are much more visible. Thus, an imaginary of dirtiness emerges in which the white sock worn is contaminated with human residues such as foot perspiration, which is associated in the imaginary with the virility and odour of the wearer. These elements create sexual

arousal produced by a number of internal chemical factors, which are triggered by this stimulus that has become sexually relevant and will inevitably lead to physiological internal states such as faster blood circulation or one's own sweating, which creates sensations different from those of the body when not in a state of arousal. The sweating and the smell of the young fetishized boy's socks are imagined and are perceived through his own state changes, determined by the chemical factors involved in this process. One's own perspiration and physiological changes alter the senses, perceiving, on an imaginary level, the sweat of the other's socks.

White socks and Air Force 1 brand footwear, which are fetishized by the wearer because they are fashionable and are initially taken up as a brand fetish, become sexually relevant to another boy who will perceive them as a sexual fetish. The sock is a leftover, it becomes impure by being worn by a 19-year-old. During an imaginary or real sexual act, placing it somewhere other than on the young man's leg, namely on the genitals or on the nose, contributes to heightening arousal and creating a pattern or classification scheme in which the initial sock-shoe relationship model, which is equivalent to a simple accessory, is transformed into a new relationship pattern in which sock-shoe becomes by association foot-young man's foot-smell. These impressions of the dirty imaginary are schematically determined from the beginning. The initially impure leftover is mentally re-schematized and becomes useful because, even if the used white sock is initially associated with a leftover, for the gay individual it is a leftover of the desired person, a useful leftover. However, if the sock belonged to an individual with no attitude, or to a man of a different age than these young men, or with body deformities, the change would remain merely a leftover, repulsive by association, given that the dirty sock would no longer be associated with the young man's body but with something sexually unattractive. At that point, the sexual fetish disappears.[22] However, white Nike socks and Air Force 1 shoes are indeed overwhelmingly worn by young boys. All other fetishes are imagined and constructed in the same way, as is the sexual attraction to the models of masculinity that

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[22] In explaining this schematization, I have used the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 1984), 37, which explains the associations that individuals make with certain categories of objects. The paper was cited in the article, George Alexandru Condrache, "The Edge as the Rest, the Rest as the Edge. Two Case Studies: Milan Kundera and Attila Bartis," in *Marginea ca rest, restul ca margine*, eds. Valentin Trifescu et al. (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2016), 85-95.

have emerged in society, sexuality thus being heavily influenced by cultural expression.

Objects and accessories that enhance the body and highlight its parts have all become sexually relevant stimuli. It is worth noting the following comment by a 45-year-old heterosexual man from the rural area surrounding Brad on the role of piercings in enhancing the body and sexuality, and a comparison of the current situation (from his perspective) with the time of his grandfather's youth, born at the end of the First World War.

> *It's the age of tattoos, piercings. Guys do it for girls a lot to look good on women, but 100 men look after them. Look at that one, I'd suck his dick. You think old people today when they were young didn't have fantasies? Grandpa Avram used to tell me how they measured their dicks by the centimetre, looked at each other when they pissed. They got excited in a way, but they stopped, they didn't suck each other, they had a certain fear, but I don't think they didn't get excited.* (Laurențiu – 45 years old)

Without knowing the details of my own research on this topic, his observation actually demonstrates the interest of rural male inhabitants in the sexual organs of other men, even if such testimonies are rare and harder to identify. The prudishness of the peasant world and the values of this world did not lead to the recording of such testimonies, and the gazing and observation of same-sex sexuality was often done in an unconscious way. In any case, what we are interested in is that homoerotic attraction has been a fantasy of many men throughout the ages, but it did not develop as a perpetual sexual behaviour correlated with an affirmed masculine gay male archetype, as it will in modernity. Liberalizing homosexuality has created individuals who have expressed their gay sexual identity. In turn, the gay individual who related to the other male models in society fetishized and worshipped them. Piercings, tattoos, and clothing emphasized the body in new relationship schemes and cultural associations that also involved sexuality. The succession of brands and objects shaped and influenced various categories of individuals. These elements configure and activate moods and impulses. The evolution of sexuality in relation to consumer goods reflects the culture of the present – a culture of an industrial nature that derived from the industrial revolution that started around 1760 and that made man, an

individual with cultural value, almost mechanical, like the industrial society in which he lives and in which the multiplication of goods has acculturated attitudes and gestures, the body thus becoming a capital, a consumer object in relation to the current structures of production/consumption.[23] To this re-schematization of the cultural imaginary, which has become a sexual one, pornography has also contributed, as we have seen, by becoming a relevant cultural material in terms of the sexual imaginary. Pornography and its models were superimposed on the social realities of the consumer society, in which new masculine patterns emerged. The masculine patterns in pornography and their sexual behaviours have restructured the sexual imaginary, which, coupled with individual freedom, has led to the expression of sexual identity and the search for people interested in the same sexual fantasies.

Cultural Pluralism and Sexual Pluralism. The Influence of Culture on Sexuality

The cultural overlap between the cultural pattern of male groups with heterosexual identity and the same male cultural pattern but with homosexual identity shows how cultural norms transform and dilute in a society where genders become multilayered and are used for different purposes. The cultural pattern of heterosexual youth (e.g., that of the social sub-group of bombers) instrumentalizes the same shoe brands and brands that gay people instrumentalize. For heterosexual young people, these footwear brands are used to maintain a dominant attitude within their groups. In this sense, for instance, a brand such as Jordan's is a brand of footwear produced to be used as sportswear in the game of basketball, and any deviation from the original purpose is an example of a change in the meaning of the use of this particular product. This dilution of the meaning of goods for different purposes expresses how consumer society has led to this explosion of cultural patterns and found new meanings and uses for them. Beyond the sexual scenario imagined by a particular gay boy, beyond their appearance and attitude, for a gay individual not sexually attracted to this model of masculinity, these boys are perceived as *inwardly timid, they epitomize this style, but in reality, they have the courage of a frog*. (Valentin, 30 years old)

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[23] Jean Baudrillard, *Societatea de consum: mituri şi structuri; La Société de consommations*, transl. by Alexandru Matei (Bucharest: Editura Comunicare.ro, 2008), 166.

The closeness of masculinities through common gender practices, irrespective of sexual orientation, often confounds expectations about the latter. Individuals exploring their sexuality engage in the pursuit of possible sexual partners as a type of game, in accordance with the cultural models to which they are attracted. Gay people can often be confused with heterosexuals. Regarding these masculinities, Rareș states that: *very many gay people have a kink to corrupt straight people. What you can't have you covet very much.* In reality, this is not a corruption in the true sense of the term, but an interrogation of the sexuality of the other, which thus becomes uncertain through the closeness of masculinities and the increasing diversity and interaction of the two communities with different sexual identities. Uncertainty sustains fantasies, while imagination maintains the ongoing play and exploration of the other. Imagination is sustained by various cultural patterns, attitudes, furtive glances and biological impulses. Some have *a slightly frowning, fierce look enhanced by the density of arched eyebrows.* Others have *stumpy, bony, big gym-worked fingers* that inspire masculine strength. Still, others *have youthful faces laden with acne, taut lips combined with a seemingly insensitive expression, cropped hair on the side with a low bob revealing fine skin, bare ankles revealing a slight pilosity* or *short pants showing off the calves* – these are just some of the physical and cultural characteristics that spark the imagination.

Individuals become veritable constructs that incorporate a multitude of physical and cultural traits. In the case of cultural constructs, heterosexuals can be mistaken for homosexuals.[24] But even within the same culturally constructed patterns of masculinity, physical features and attitudes create differences. The uniqueness of the self is inexhaustible, and the idolatry that

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[24] For example, Murray Healy, in *Gay Skins: Class, Masculinity and Queer Appropriation* (Sexual Politics) (UNKNO: 1996), describes how young gay men in England have taken up the cultural pattern of expression of skinheads (young working-class masculine men, shaved, tattooed and wearing boots), a cultural pattern that belonged to heterosexual men, sympathizers of the far right. The adoption of this pattern of masculinity by gay people led to the spread of this cultural model among gay people, making it very popular and leading to the initial groups of heterosexual skinheads of the far right being overshadowed by gay groups who took over and used this pattern for sexual purposes, which led to heterosexuals being mistaken for homosexuals. This made the former feel anxious and outnumbered. In the West, the parodying and instrumentalization of these masculine stereotypes has been very visible due to the expression of sexual identity, but also due to the high population density in big cities which allowed the affirmation of various social groups.

mentally builds around these cultural models, fostered by the online environment, drives the individual to seek out other similar models to fulfil their sexual needs and fantasies. The game then moves to social networks, where desires can be expressed directly and approaching an individual becomes easier. Imagination play is enhanced by smiles, smells imagined based on attitude, interpretable gestures and impressions. An *energetic, hot lad with an earring* can only convey masculine energy and vitality, and pairing his image with Nike Air Force1, Nike Air Max III Plus grey or black Nike Air Max III Plus shoes or other sporty models, maintains this idea which materializes into a sexual fantasy. He can be approached on Instagram if known, or quizzed through mutual friends. The smile of a bearded young man in a store (who seems to fit the *bear* masculinity) becomes a reason for sexual interrogation for one of the gay individuals in town. The supposedly straight man knows the other man's sexual orientation but continues to smile suspiciously whenever they meet. Among the younger generation, flirting between boys takes place openly and without much inhibition. Things get more complicated in a society where *you don't know who is who.* For example, a local 19-year-old boy received a message on Instagram from another boy, who playfully complimented him, implying that he found him attractive. The boy's response was simple and candid: "No offense, but I don't really hang out with boys like you." Although the other boy apologized, this exchange was not regarded as problematic in a society increasingly open to the inclusion of various sexual identitites and where individuals are aware of their sexual orientation, but simply an honest expression of identity: *it's no big deal, but I just told you what I'm about.*

Gay boys are not corrupters in the true sense of the word. However, some are explorers of sexual desires and experiences and, by taking on models of masculinity within their own sub- groups and exploiting cultural genders to fulfil sexual fantasies, they go beyond the limits of sexual exploration that heterosexuals face. Sexuality involves a lot of imagination. For some gay individuals, men wearing certain sports brands of pants, T-shirts or footwear, such as Nike, Adidas, Jordan are associated with certain imagined sexual practices, such as spitting or smelling socks. If, in real life, male cultural role models exude virility and symbolic violence by going to the gym, having tattoos, wearing sportswear or engaging in habits such as spitting, these aspects of social attitudes and behaviour stimulate the sexual imagination. Because they appear socially and culturally animalistic, they are also sexually animalistic in the imagination:

18–19-year-old boys who wear tracksuits and go to the gym are so brawny. They look really good. They're big, well-built. They appear to be well hung. They're getting pretty hormonal and super good-looking. Most of them seem to have it thick, you can tell. There was one... he was scratching his dick...gosh, what a sight he was! (Alex - 25 years old)

In these gay depictions of masculinity, we see the fascination with the other and the inner metamorphosis. Sexuality transcends cultural barriers imposed by class and social status, and fantasy and imagination take the place of social reality. Because they are *massive, full-bodied, hormonal and beautiful,* they become, by association, *well hung.* If, in reality, there is no conditionality between an individual's corpulence and penis size, in the imagination, corpulence becomes an indication of the latter. The inner metamorphosis is obvious and actually goes beyond the sense of reality. Different social classes fascinate as much as different masculinities, and sexuality becomes a form of communication. The social perception of certain masculinities as dominant creates, in the imaginary, the desire for vigorous, violent sexual acts that emphasize the imagined representations of masculinity, generally heterosexual masculinity, because it is the majority. Though dating apps, individuals who have such fantasies will find other gay individuals who have masculinized heterosexual social dominance in the homosexual sexual act. If, for heterosexuals, masculinity means power and a socially dominant image, the image of dominant masculinities becomes a model of sexual attitude for the fulfilment of these homoerotic fantasies. Below, we render two examples of sexual acts with fetishized cultural models in which the sexual fantasies described above are enacted. The first testimony is that of the dominant who plays the role of the heterosexual boy perceived as energetic and violent:

I was on Grindr, but, like, I was talking to another guy. He said he wanted to be a slave and for me to humiliate him. I'm like, let's meet up. We met right in front of the Profi (small grocery store – author's note)*, and then we went to an abandoned building and walked around there. He gave me oral... I gave him two slaps and pulled his hair... and shoved him down to suck me off right there. Then I gave him a phlegm... He said it louder, louder. I pushed in his mouth up to his throat and stuck two fingers in his mouth... then I stuck my dick in his ass. He said he wanted it rough and I shoved it up his ass, deep. And I'm like, shut up! and zbang!, I slapped his ass twice. That felt so good. I took all my*

frustration out on him. I was fucking him to the max. But I couldn't take it no more, brother. I was banging him like I was banging a doll. Then I took off the condom and I was like this (he mimics rubbing his penis when he tells the story – author's note)*. You know how it came out. On his hair! He was full, from the forehead to the hair, he had a little in his hair. There was a lot of it, from his mouth to his hair. I took it all out on him - for all the people who had made me suffer.* (Paul - 23 years old)

The second testimony belongs to a boy who allows himself to be dominated in a sexual act, fulfilling his sexual fantasy with boys perceived as energetic and violent. Even if it is fulfilled with a gay individual merely playing the role of the dominator, in the sexual imaginary the fantasy with heterosexual individuals is thus fulfilled:

He told me he was a soldier. He was young anyway. He made me get down on my knees. He pushed my head down to suck his cock. He looked into my eyes with a penetrating gaze. Then he actually told me to stick out my tongue. He spit in my mouth. He kissed my tongue, then he kissed my lips. Then he took off one of his sneakers and put it on my face. Then he slapped me twice, made me smell his socks and then grabbed me by the head and put me back down to sucking his cock. It was the hottest sexual experience. (Andrei – 24 years old)

The concepts of the dominator and the dominated are highly technical within the framework of sexual hierarchy. However, they are not merely reduced to the sexual submission of one partner to another; they also encompass the ideas and images these terms convey, which in turn dominate the psyche. These concepts construct sexual scenarios based on existing fantasies, with sexual acts unfolding according to fictional narratives generated by images and social representations of dominant masculinities, typically associated with the heterosexual identity. In sexual acts between men, these roles adopt social attitudes and behaviours associated with marginalized groups. The imagery of "dirtiness" is enacted through energetic sexual acts, in which sexual violence is mediated and, due to arousal and physiological changes, is not perceived by the body as actual violence. In this context, the sexual imaginary is elevated – a view articulated by a heterosexual individual who recognizes that his socially dominant heterosexual behaviours are being instrumentalized by members of the gay community into a form of sexual dominance: the act of

making sex an art. Simultaneously, through this form of sexual communication, the confrontation between culture and nature emerges, specifically between the cultural aspect, or gender, and the underlying biological attitude.

Conclusion

The transition from a totalitarian to a democratic regime and Romania's integration into a global consumer society, following the Western model, have visibly contributed to the emergence of new models of masculinity in the Romanian public space. The new masculine cultural models have redefined cultural norms and have decisively contributed to the emergence of new representations, hypostases and social perceptions of masculinity and sexuality. In parallel with this general process of cultural expression of masculinities with heterosexual sexual identity, models of masculinity with gay sexual identity have also been increasingly openly asserted, especially among young people. This has led to a process of cultural hybridization of gender practices between heterosexual and gay individuals, where the same male gender identity is expressed through different sexual orientations. Thus, cultural models of masculinity influence the sexual fantasies of gay individuals, with masculinity and its typologies becoming cultural images and markers of gay sexuality. In the sexual acts of gay individuals, they adopt social attitudes and behaviours from fetishized social groups, including members of the heterosexual community. These attitudes are then culturally and sexually re-instrumentalized and reintegrated into a culture of homoerotic sexuality. The examples presented in this study, such as the clothing styles of young men influenced by Western brands, represent just one model of how cultural expressions of masculinity influence sexuality. Sexuality, in turn, is always shaped by various cultural factors, which are constantly in flux.

Without intending to make predictions, and within the context of the emergence of new cultural models of masculinity, it is anticipated that, in the near future, these new masculinities will become increasingly more visible in Romania's public and social spaces. This cultural process is expected to further influence the expansion of cultural hybridization and, by extension, the fostering of tolerance and accommodation between members of the gay and heterosexual communities.