Are 'queers' really 'queer'? Language, identity and same-sex desire in a South African online community

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Abstract

This study investigates *meetmarket*, a South African online community for men who are looking for other men. Utilising a quantitative approach to queer linguistics, the article presents a textual analysis of a large corpus of personal profiles in order to map *meetmarket*'s 'libidinal economy'. More specifically, the article seeks to tease out the ways in which the members of this community valorise, and thereby make more *desirable*, certain identities at the expense of others. This then makes it possible to understand the extent to which these men (re)produce or, conversely, contest and overturn dominant forms of social categorisation in their expressions of same-sex desire.

Keywords

Corpus-assisted discourse studies, masculinity, online communities, queer linguistics, queer theory, race, South Africa

Introduction

In the wake of South Africa's transition to democracy, two well-known activists – Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron – forcefully stated:

> Apartheid legislated who we were, what work we could do, where we could live […] and what kind of sex we could have. Asserting a lesbian or gay identity in South Africa is thus more than a necessary act of self-expression. *It is a defiance of the fixed identities* – of race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality – *that the apartheid system attempted to impose on us*. (Gevisser and Cameron, 1995: 5; emphasis added)

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Without downplaying the importance of the euphoria permeating the historical moment in which these statements were made, the question that remains to be answered is whether asserting a gay or lesbian identity is an act of insubordination against stable identities or is instead a performance that reproduces the status quo.

In an attempt to understand whether, and if so, how, same-sex desire might be bound up with the reproduction and/or defiance of various axes of difference, this article investigates *meetmarket* (http://www.meetmarket.co.za/login.asp) – an online environment that serves as a meeting place for men who are seeking other men. I intentionally avoid calling *meetmarket* a gay website or a gay online community not only because many of the men registered there define themselves as bisexual or transgendered, but also because some of them contest any form of pigeon-holing in terms of sexual identification. It should also be noted that the login page of the website contains a visual representation of a raw T-bone steak as the background for the word 'meetmarket'. This serves as a powerful multi-modal pun playing with the homophones *meet/meat*, highlighting the nature of the website as an online space in which to find sexual encounters.

This particular social network was chosen as a rich 'epistemological site' (Sunderland, 2004) for research on language, identity and desire in contemporary South Africa due to two main factors. Most importantly, *meetmarket* is part of *Mambaonline*, a website which targets an almost exclusively South African audience, as opposed to similar virtual spaces (e.g. Gaydar, Manhunt, Planet Romeo) that have a more transnational reach. The other distinguishing aspect of *meetmarket* is the fact that full membership is free of charge, thus attracting as wide a pool of users as possible in the context of South Africa's high poverty rate.

Overall, *meetmarket* can be described as a discursive space where men, irrespective of racial categorisation and social class, can come into mutual contact by means of expressing their desire for other men. In order to do so, they mobilise different semiotic resources (language and images) to style themselves and their 'desired Other' in particular fashions. This gives rise to an array of different identities which are differentially valued in this virtual marketplace.

The aim of this article is to provide a textual analysis of a large corpus of personal profiles on *meetmarket* in order to map the social network's 'libidinal economy' (Lyotard, 2004). More specifically, the article aims to tease out the ways in which the members of this online community valorise, and thereby make more *desirable*, certain identities at the expense of others. This then makes it possible to understand the extent to which these men (re)produce or, conversely, contest and overturn dominant forms of social classification in their expressions of same-sex desire. By investigating a heretofore unexplored online community of men looking for other men, the article not only provides a window into the construction of same-sex desire in contemporary South Africa, it also adds new empirical data to a body of scholarship that has thus far privileged Western-based websites.

The main assumption underpinning this article can be described as follows:

> Personal ads are […] good examples of the way that different kinds of desires get articulated and circulated in society. By documenting the structure and content of the ads, linguists plot a *map of desire*, showing how particular desires seek to attach to a variety of bodies, objects, statuses and relationships. (Cameron and Kulick, 2003: 114; emphasis added)

Admittedly, online profiles are very different from conventional personal advertisements in terms of their textual structure. Yet, they share with the more traditional genre the characteristic that 'the seeker has to give a kind of shop-window description which casts out a net that hopefully catches the desired other as one of the respondents' (Shalom, 1997: 190). From a consumer culture perspective, online communities are perhaps the most 'virtual' manifestation of the late-modern commodification of the Self (see Thorne and Coupland, 1998), according to which 'we are all in and on the market, simultaneously customers and commodities' (Bauman, 2004: 91).

A key principle underlying this article is that corpora of online profiles are like geological accumulations (cf. Deleuze and Guattari, 1996), albeit ephemeral ones, that illustrate how 'different kinds of relations emit desire, fabricate it and/or block it, exhaust it' (Cameron and Kulick, 2003: 111) inter alia by mobilising a plethora of identity categories. As I will argue in the next section, the dissection of these large semiotic deposits of identity and desire requires a 'promiscuous' analytical framework that brings together two approaches which have traditionally not 'attracted' each other, namely queer theory and corpus linguistics.

A quantitative approach to queer linguistics

In an oft-cited quote, Halperin states that 'queer is whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant' (1995: 61). Likewise, Jagose highlights that queer academic endeavours embrace a critical stance on the concepts of norm*ality*/norm*ativity* in relation to gender and sexuality. As she puts it, queer can be thought of as an act that problematises 'normative consolidations of sex, gender and sexuality – and that, consequently, is critical of all those versions of identity, community and politics that are believed to evolve "naturally" from such consolidations' (Jagose, 1996: 99).

In other words, queer theory acknowledges that sex, gender and sexuality may be separate categories, but they have been socially and historically intertwined in such a way that they have developed a 'unique relationship' (Sauntson, 2008: 274) with each other (see also Baker, 2008). Thus, a queer academic stance tries to draw attention to the ways in which biological sex (the dichotomy between males and females on the basis of organs of reproduction) has been mapped onto gender (the opposition between men and women, masculinity and femininity), and how these dyads are in turn the foundations on which heterosexuality rests (Butler, 1999: 194).

Moreover, a queering enterprise seeks to highlight how some of the ties between sex, gender and sexuality are socially (re)produced as 'normal' and 'desirable' (typically, the attraction between two allegedly opposite and complementary sexes/genders that underpins heterosexuality), while others are devalued as 'deviant' and 'unwanted' (usually, same-sex desire). As such, work inspired by queer theory questions the social conditions that enable and uphold hetero-normativity (Motschenbacher, 2011), that is, 'those structures, institutions, relations and actions that promote and produce heterosexuality as natural, self-evident, desirable, privileged and necessary' (Cameron and Kulick, 2003: 55).

Being an antagonistic form of rebellion, however, a queer approach 'rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favour of a more

thorough resistance to regimes of the normal' (Warner, 1993: xxvi). Therefore, just as hetero-normativity should be brought under the queer critical spotlight, so too should the processes that normalise and legitimise some expressions of same-sex desire (e.g. monogamous, committed homosexual relationships) while (re)casting others into the domain of abjection (Bourdieu, 1998) (e.g. sadomasochist sex and uncommitted, multi-partnered relationships). *Critical homo-normativity* research would thus also fall under a queer ambit.

Partly due to its origins within literary and cultural studies, queer theory has only relatively recently had a breakthrough in (socio)linguistics (see Baker, 2008; Livia and Hall, 1997; and Motschenbacher, 2011, for useful overviews). This breakthrough has given rise to queer linguistics (QL), an eclectic approach that combines a queer eye on issues of gender and sexuality with an interest in mapping how identity categories and social reality are (re)produced or contested *through language*. Whereas studies in the social sciences and humanities that are inflected by queer theory have traditionally been more qualitative in nature, the cross-pollination of queer theory and linguistics has led to a methodological compromise that 'favors combinations of quantitative and qualitative analyses to arrive at mutually qualifying perspectives when looking at discourses' (Motschenbacher, 2011: 166). It is this methodological synergy that has been mobilised for the purpose of this article. Quantitative data (wordlists, concordances and collocates) generated with the help of the corpus linguistic software WordSmith Tools have been complemented by textual analysis of relevant excerpts and social analysis informed by queer theory.

Building and analysing the corpus

When this research project started in June 2010, *meetmarket* contained approximately 14,000 profiles. Because of time and financial constraints, it was impossible to analyse the website in its entirety. Therefore, I decided to concentrate on a sample that included the largest number of profiles in one geographical area, namely the 4738 profiles registered under the location of Gauteng – Johannesburg. Of these, 4506 profiles contained open-ended self-descriptions of the community members in the section 'About me', while 3589 yielded narratives of their 'desired Other' under the heading 'What I am looking for'.

Methodologically, the project involved three phases. First, two research assistants downloaded the textual sections of each profile over a period of three months and saved them as electronic text files (.txt); all screen names were deleted and substituted with a numerical code. This generated a corpus of 428,174 words (tokens) to be analysed with the help of the computer corpus analysis package WordSmith Tools during phase two. The shortest text selection contained one word (token), whereas the longest consisted of 607 words (tokens). Interestingly, despite the multilingual character of South African society, the texts were almost exclusively in English, with only occasional words and sentences in Afrikaans, isiZulu and seSotho. The data was further tagged using the identifiers <self>, </self>, in order to be able to conduct more precise corpus linguistic counts of concordances and collocates related to forms of Self- versus Other-identification (see also Baker, 2003).

The second phase comprised the actual discourse analysis of the corpus. This involved processing all the text files with the help of WordSmith Tools, which gave us: (1) frequency information, that is, how many times a word has been used; (2) concordances, a list of the contexts in which a particular word occurs; and (3) collocations, pairs of words that consistently occur near each other. As the next section will illustrate, this corpus-based methodology allowed us to assess which lexical items were employed to create *desirable* online identities. This in turn enabled us to understand 'the ways in which sexuality […] [is] inflected by other kinds of socially salient differences' (Cameron and Kulick, 2003: 144) on *meetmarket*.

At a later stage, I also conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 15 white South African men about their engagement with *meetmarket* and other social networking sites. In this article, however, I only refer to the interview data when necessary to clarify the meaning of some of the categories that emerged from the quantitative textual analysis.

Wordlists: Identity categories emerge

Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the 30 most frequent content words employed in the 'About me' and 'What I am looking for' sections of the *meetmarket* profiles. The choice of focusing primarily on lexical words rather than on grammatical words stems from the observation that function words do 'not always reveal much of interest' (Baker, 2006: 100), since it is difficult to extrapolate discourses from them. Thus, content words are the most common entry point for such an enterprise of 'discourse digging'. Admittedly, some function words such as personal and indefinite pronouns (*I*, *you*, *someone*) could be important, not only because of their high frequency on *meetmarket*, but also because they can unveil some of the discourses employed by men to define themselves and their objects of desire. However, a closer look at the collocates of these pronouns reflects the same scenario as displayed in the wordlists generated from the texts about the Self and the Other. Therefore, this section concentrates on content words. More specifically, because the aim of this article is to understand how certain identities are (de)valued in same-sex desire, the focus is mainly on nouns and adjectives that index identity categories, rather than on nouns or verbs which offer insight into sexual practices and processes.

The frequency of the words *last*, *like*, *know*, *get*, *things*, *really*, *bedroom*, *holiday*, *celebrity*, *book*, *movie*, *TV*, *porn* and *masturbate* in Table 1 has been 'inflated' by the headings of the fields in the *meetmarket* website. With this caveat in mind, the word *guy* appears to be the most frequent content word as well as the most common category in the texts about the Self (*N*: 1694; this figure increases to 1801 if we consider the lemmatised form GUY, which also includes occurrences of the plural form *guys* and the genitive *guy's*). GUY is also the most recurrent lemma that categorises the men's object of desire (*N*: 1787), followed by MAN (*N*: 1034).

The fact that an online community of men who are looking for other men displays such a high frequency of male identity categories is not particularly unexpected (see also Baker, 2003, for a similar case in point in the context of personal ads in the British gay press). However, it is nearly an axiom among sociolinguists and critical discourse analysts that speakers must constantly select among a variety of semiotic resources when

Table 1. The 30 most frequent lexical words about the 'desiring Self'.

Ranking	Word	Frequency	Percentage
15	last	2494	0.85
16	like	2484	0.84
17	know	1968	0.67
18	get	1860	0.63
20	things	1817	0.62
22	really	1737	0.59
23	guy	1694	0.58
24	time	1670	0.57
25	bedroom	1668	0.57
26	live	1643	0.56
27	read	1607	0.55
28	now	1587	0.54
29	have	1580	0.54
30	TV	1512	0.51
34	love	1470	0.50
35	best	1442	0.49
36	right	1430	0.49
37	book	1419	0.48
39	show	1411	0.48
40	holiday	1407	0.48
41	place	1406	0.48
43	spot	1389	0.47
45	listening	1354	0.46
47	moment	1326	0.45
48	memorable	1322	0.45
49	masturbate	1292	0.44
50	movie	1266	0.43
51	celebrity	1251	0.42
53	satisfying	1225	0.42
54	good	1167	0.40

representing reality. Whether conscious or not, these choices are not random. Rather, they are the textual manifestations of deeper ideological processes that tell us something about the very specific ways in which individuals categorise human experience by foregrounding some aspects and backgrounding others (see Baker, 2006; Fairclough, 1992; Stubbs, 1996).

In light of this, not only is it important to underscore that GUY and MAN are the most popular male-identity categories in this online community vis-a-vis other possible categories such as: BOY (*N*: 413), DUDE (*N*: 180), BROTHER (*N*: 174), BRO/BROTHA (*N*: 23) or LAD (*N*: 13); it is also crucial to uncover whether GUY and MAN are the bearers of similar or different connotations. In this regard, the notion of discourse prosody (Stubbs, 2001: 65) is a useful tool with which to capture the subtle ideological differences surrounding semantically similar words.

Table 2. The 30 most frequent lexical words about the 'desired Other'.

Ranking	Word	Frequency	Percentage
3	looking	3992	2.99
16	fun	1456	1.09
21	guys	1042	0.78
29	like	754	0.56
30	good	738	0.55
31	guy	732	0.55
34	man	658	0.49
37	meet	569	0.43
38	life	560	0.42
39	friends	557	0.42
40	want	545	0.41
41	love	535	0.40
46	all	433	0.32
48	sex	410	0.31
50	one	395	0.30
52	know	390	0.29
54	men	374	0.28
57	honest	361	0.27
58	knows	360	0.27
60	people	347	0.26
61	friendship	330	0.25
67	make	303	0.23
68	relationship	292	0.22
71	nsa*	285	0.21
72	time	282	0.21
77	person	267	0.20
81	black	239	0.18
83	other	237	0.18
88	hot	225	0.17
90	same	220	0.16

* nsa = no strings attached.

Discourse prosody is the ideological 'aura' (Louw, 1993: 157) that words carry by virtue of their tendency to co-occur with a particular set of other words. Through analysis of the collocates of GUY and MAN, it is possible to establish the discourse prosodies of these two lemmas and thus to ascertain whether they constitute the textual materialisation of different discourses of masculinity. Another word that will be included in the investigation is the racial category *black*, which features in the top-30 content words for the 'desired Other' (Table 2). The choice of this specific word is not only due to its quantitative presence in the data set; it has also been driven by the dearth of linguistically informed studies which overtly engage with the ways in which gender and sexuality intersect with racial differences (see, however, Leap, 2005).

Table 3. Thirty strongest collocates of GUY and MAN in texts about the 'desiring Self' and the 'desired Other' with a −5 to +5 span.

GUY (Self)	MAN (Self)	GUY (Other)	MAN (Other)
looking	young	looking	like
earth	gay	meet	real
fun	black	like	knows
normal	half	fun	looking
young	two	other	other
acting	old	white	older
nice	bi	black	meet
loving	straight	prefer	want
average	single	normal	black
decent	looking	friendship	prefer
good	holiday	nice	top
straight	show	hot	gay
Indian	African	decent	bi
door	handsome	acting	man's
gay	boyz	Indian	good
bi	spot	straight	rock
next	love	good	wants
easy	good	young	love
black	acting	age	hairy
going	like	slim	strong
old	cry	bi	behave
cool	year	younger	world
professional	masculine	top	fun
str8	mature	honest	mature
year	normal	fun	enjoy
single	tall	right	married
type	white	similar	masculine
simple	married	fem	all
honest	loves	earth	acting
friendly	professional	kind	humble

Zooming in on GUY and MAN

From a lexicographic perspective, *guy* and *man* are synonyms. In fact, according to the *Oxford Dictionaries Online* (http://oxforddictionaries.com/), *guy* is the 'informal' variant of *man*, which, in turn, is defined as 'an adult human male'. Thus, the two words are distinguished by register or style rather than by content, as both refer to an individual with particular biological attributes. However, a closer look at the list of collocates surrounding these words on *meetmarket* (Table 3) reveals that they carry slightly different discourse prosodies of masculinity within this online community.

Table 3 shows the 30 strongest (content word) collocates of the lemmas GUY and MAN, listed in decreasing order of log-likelihood index. As categories of

Self-identification, both MAN and GUY strongly co-occur with diverse attributes related to age (*young*, *old*, *mature*), masculinity (*straight/str8-acting*, *masculine*) and sexual identification (*gay/bi*). Furthermore, both lemmas are associated with several general 'social and relational descriptors' (Shalom, 1997: 201) such as *normal, decent, average*, *honest*, *next-door*, *easy-going* and *down-to-earth*. As for race, however, GUY collocates with *Indian* and *black*, whereas MAN is linked to *black* and *white*. Notably, the collocational strength of the phrase *black man* (320.24) is much higher than that of *white man* (43.59). That MAN seems to be more tied to 'blackness' is further substantiated by the strong collocational link between MAN and the adjective *African*, which has a log-likelihood value of 72.45.

When used to describe the 'object of desire', GUY continues to be associated with a plethora of racial descriptors (*white*, *black*, *Indian*), physical attributes (*hot*, *slim*, *good-looking*) and general characteristics (*decent*, *nice*, *fun*, *next-door*). MAN retains its racial undertones, as can be seen by a robust tendency to co-occur with *black*. However, GUY and MAN become more polarised along age lines: GUY is linked to youth (*young*, *younger*), whereas MAN is tied to maturity (*older*, *mature*). MAN also seems to be the crystallisation of a strong gendered discourse of hyper-masculinity, which has its most patent linguistic manifestations in the adjective *real* and the cluster *A MAN'S MAN*. Further evidence of sexual desire for the hyper-masculine Other is provided by the collocations of MAN with *hairy*, *strong* and *married*. Body hair and physical strength are obviously two of the most normative signifiers of what counts as masculine. *Married*, on the other hand, is an indicator of the fantasy surrounding the 'essential masculine' (Heywood, 1997: 197) – a man in a heterosexual relationship who engages in same-sex activity on the down-low.

Despite these differences, GUY is no less masculine than MAN. The collocation of GUY with *fem* should not lead us to conclude that the desired GUY carries feminine traits. In fact, the numerical prevalence of one word over another, or a stronger collocational index between two words, does not inherently entail a more positive discourse prosody, because these words could be used in negative grammatical constructions together with words such as 'no', 'not', 'don't', etc. In this specific case, although *fem* ranked 28th in the list of collocates of *guy*, it is employed almost exclusively in a negative way, being dismissed as an unattractive attribute in a potential partner. Moreover, similar to MAN, GUY shows strong ties with *top* – the penetrative role in anal sex – which is stereotypically equated with a higher degree of masculinity, whereas the receiving role is associated with femininity (see, however, Phua, 2002, for empirical proof of the spuriousness of this stereotype). Finally, GUY collocates with (*straight/str8-*) *acting*, a rather controversial term in male same-sex contexts, which I will discuss in more detail in the next section.

In conclusion, a careful reading of the concordances of GUY and MAN shows that both these lemmas are carriers of positive discourse prosodies, being employed as highly valuable categories through which members of *meetmarket* style a masculine 'Self' and a no less manly 'Other'. Such virile idyll, however, is not left completely undisturbed. As I demonstrate next, the analysis found a few instances in which straight-acting masculinity was brought into question.

Table 4. Concordances of the straight acting Self.

1	**Str8 acting** Gay couple am 39 my partner is 33. We do enjoy life
2	I am a **straight acting** guy brown hear blue eyes who enjoys a lot of
3	Yung blk **str8 acting** dude Celebrity: JayZ, Anthony Hamilton, Lira. TV
4	Genuine romantic I'm an easy-going, **straight acting** handsome gay guy
5	I am boringly normal. I'm not **straight acting** … I don't act. What you see is what you get!

Table 5. Concordances of the straight-acting Other.

1	am not looking for fats, fems or queens. A well looked after **str8 acting** man who
2	**Straight acting**, straight looking guy, no fems please. Independant. Age between
3	Please **straight acting** guys only!! I want a guy who is intelligent
4	must be very very str8 looking and **str8 acting** as . 8 looking and str8 acting
5	your average gay guy, even the ones that claims to be very **str8 acting** … are'nt really, so stop kidding yourselves…

'Straight-actingness' and its discontents

Recent sociological work on masculinity has highlighted how s*traight-acting* has become somewhat of an obsession among homosexual men across various socio-cultural contexts (Clarkson, 2005; Eguchi, 2011; Phua, 2002). Scholars disagree about how to interpret this phenomenon, which is reminiscent of those traits of hegemonic masculinity that are pre-requisites for a heterosexual man to be viewed as 'normal'. As Connell (1995) has argued, hegemonic masculinity is the most valued form of masculinity in a particular context, and it typically goes hand in hand with the subjugation of women and the vilification of homosexual men.

Gramsci (1971), however, reminds us that hegemony cannot take place without the *collusion* of those who are being subordinated. Reasoning along similar lines, one could argue that the hegemony of normality can only be upheld with the complicity of deviance. This is not only because the 'deviant' – whatever or whoever this may be – can be seen as the 'constitutive outside' of the 'symbolic universe' of normality, 'defining [its] limit or exteriority, one which, were it imported into that universe, would destroy its integrity and coherence' (Butler, 1997: 180); it is also because those who are viewed as 'deviant' may themselves (re)produce and value – fetishise even – characteristics typically associated with normality. An example from the *meetmarket* data of this process of normalisation is the adjectives *normal* and *decent*[1] being employed as positive characteristics of Self- and Other-identification.

A linguistic demonstration of such complicity can be found in the highly recurrent usage of the adjective *straight/str8*, together with the present participle *acting* as a positively laden attribute through which members of *meetmarket* present themselves (*N*: 218) and describe their object of desire (*N*: 196) (see Tables 4 and 5).

As in the case of heterosexual hegemonic masculinity, the valorisation of a straight-acting identity in the aforementioned concordances goes hand in hand with an overt disavowal of femininity (see e.g. lines 1–2 in Table 5). This is manifest in the negative

prosody surrounding the adjectives *feminine/fem/fems*, of which the cluster NO FEMS is an obvious example. The overt promotion of 'straight-actingness' suggests that *meet-market* is characterised by what Baker (2008) calls 'hegemonic homosexuality', a homosexual mirror image of 'heterosexual hegemonic masculinity'. The very existence and maintenance of these hegemonies of masculinity require femininity to be overtly and strongly rejected. It may also be the manifestation of 'fear' of anything that is feminine, termed 'sissyphobia' by Bergling (2001).

From a political point of view, the promotion of a straight-acting identity on *meetmarket* could be interpreted as a sign of assimilationist trends among South African homosexual men, who prefer to gain acceptance by conforming to a hegemonic masculine script rather than taking advantage of their constitutional rights (see also Clarkson, 2005). To this, Sonnekus (2009) would add a racial dimension. His analysis of mainstream gay visual culture suggests that straight-acting homo-masculinity is over-layered with an exclusively white coating. However, the appreciation of masculine attributes and the concomitant stigmatisation of male femininity in *meetmarket* should not necessarily lead to the hasty conclusion that South African men who desire other men are colluding in the workings of hegemonic masculinity. Neither should absolute links be posited between a straight-acting identity and whiteness.

First, the emphasis on masculinity in *meetmarket* could be read as a way through which South African men who desire other men contest widespread societal discourses that stereotype them as intrinsically effeminate, discourses which view the very notion of *homo-masculinity* as a contradiction in terms. I strategically employ 'homo-masculinity' instead of 'gay masculinity' (Nardi, 2000) in order to refer to the performances of gender by all men who are attracted to other men, irrespective of how they identify themselves in sexual identity terms. In doing so, I draw upon the Greek origin of the prefix 'homo', meaning 'the same'. Such a terminological choice is also political insofar as it aims to re-appropriate and re-cast 'homo-sexuality' in a new, less pathologising manner. Having said that, I want to highlight that I distance myself from those who imbue homo-masculinity with either overly positive or very negative connotations (see Sonnekus, 2009).

Second, those macho personas that are so cherished online might just remain a chimera to long for, as they do not necessarily coincide with the gender performances of the actual people with whom the men on *meetmarket* have sex or engage in long-lasting relationships (see also Eguchi, 2011: 52). Third, the collocations with both *white* and *black* attest that the adjective *straight/str8* does not bear racially uniform connotations.

Lastly, 'straight-actingness' is not always unambiguously championed on *meetmarket*. Line 5 in Table 4 is one of the few cases (*N*: 7) indicating an outright rejection of *straight-acting* as a characteristic of Self-identification. This denunciation of *straight-acting* does not mean, however, that masculinity is also discarded. On the contrary, the author dismisses a straight-acting identity on the basis of it being a theatrical performance. By proxy, the writer's manhood – whatever this might be – is portrayed as 'real', perceivable and verifiable ('What you see is what you get!').

By the same token, line 5 in Table 5 contains another repudiation of the valorisation of masculine attributes, this time in relation to a prospective partner. Here, the ambivalence regarding '*str8 acting*' is the effect of a humorous *perspectivation* (Wodak, 2001), that is, a tongue-in-cheek attitude (see e.g. Heywood, 1997; Thorne and Coupland, 1998)

on the part of the author vis-a-vis the propositional content of his utterance (see also Benwell, 2004). In order to unveil this mocking undertone, we will need to delve into a more detailed qualitative analysis of the text from which the concordance was taken.

Masculinity and its camp doppelganger

In an analysis of gay and lesbian personal advertisements in the UK, Thorne and Coupland have pointed out that the expression '100% straight' in their data 'is iden-tifiable to a gay readership as ironic' (1998: 247). They go on to propose that '[o]nce irony is identified as a rhetorical principle at work in the texts, "ordinary" lifestyle markers can be re-evaluated' (1998: 247). Although I do not dispute that this might indeed be the case in their data, I hesitate to draw the same conclusion with regard to the meaning of 'straight' and 'straight-acting' on *meetmarket*. The concordance lists in Tables 4 and 5 above seem to indicate that the members of this online community are generally serious in defining themselves and their object of desire as straight-acting.

That being said, there are a few instances in which 'straight-actingness' is ironically put into question. The following extract contains the full description of the desired Other from which line 5 in Table 5 was taken:

> One thats hung like a donkey, more loaded than Donalt Trump and hotter than Brad Pitt … lol. No … just a relatively handsome looking, caucasian guy thats professional and decent, someone who looks after himself, a little bit of diet and exercise won't kill u (but oops if it does … i'm so sorry!) Also someone who's not very efeminate, u don't have to be mega butch, cause your average gay guy, even the ones that claims to be very str8 acting … are'nt really, so stop kidding yourselves … and just be real!! I would prefer someone with a sense of humor, not some stuck up pretencious little lable queen… (A1725)

Interestingly, the extract begins with apparent praise of traits stereotypically associ-ated with male homosexuality: an admiration of very well-endowed genitals, a preoc-cupation with money and commodities and an obsession with physical appearance (see Halperin, 2012, for a recent reflection on gay stereotypes). However, the hyperbolic tone of the similes, together with the computer-mediated expression of laughter (*lol*) and the negation 'No', serve to destabilise the propositional content of such an accolade. The ironic tone is sustained in the following sentence in which another practice stereotypi-cally attributed to homosexual men – physical activity – is at the same time reinforced and mocked.

It is important to note that the author of this extract is not immune from disavowing femininity ('not very efeminate'). He admires masculinity, but in a way that is not entirely straightforward. Through a strategy of 'illegitimation' (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005), the writer not only questions the degree to which 'average gay guys' actually embody straight-acting traits, but also seeks to 'denaturalise' (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005) such masculine identity by highlighting that it does not come naturally to anyone but needs to be performed (see also line 5 in Table 4). Taking this argument further, this would mean that even heterosexual men are 'straight actors'. As Butler (1999) pointed out,

there is no such thing as a 'real', 'authentic' identity as opposed to one that is a theatrical act, for identity is not a quality or trait that we *have*, but something that we *do*.

The importance of this extract lies as much in its form as in the content. Examined from a purely quantitative level, the complex meaning of *str8 acting* would have gone unnoticed – an occurrence aggregated with many others in a wordlist or a collocate table. What is interesting here, however, is the strategy of perspectivation (Wodak et al., 1999) enabled by humour, which, as Bakhtin (1984: 127) has taught us, operates like a carnival mirror of the world. Humour is both a conformist and an insubordinate rhetorical weapon which simultaneously *reproduces* and *contests* dominant beliefs and stereotypes (see also Benwell, 2004). If we leave content aside for a moment, I would suggest that the humorous tone of this extract is also the manifestation of a particular type of camp sensibility, which can be defined as:

> a mode of seduction – one which employs flamboyant mannerisms susceptible of a double interpretation; gestures full of duplicity, with a witty meaning for cognoscenti and another, more impersonal, for outsiders. (Sontag, 2001: 281)

Reasoning along these lines, one could argue that the wittiness in this extract is a seductive rhetorical strategy used to generate desire among other members of the online community and thus to attract potential partners.

In conclusion, the men on *meetmarket* do reproduce dominant forms of masculine identification for the Self and the desired Other, seemingly *hyper-conforming* to normative ideas about what defines a 'man'. In doing so, however, they might not be paying lip service to hegemonic masculine patriarchy; they may actually be shaking it by making the oxymoron homo-masculinity a visible reality (see also Ratele, 2011, for a similar argument). Moreover, no matter how central the straight-acting person may be on the virtual stage of *meetmarket*, it is not alone; it is accompanied by an ambiguous *doppelganger* (Rank, 1971) that, from the fringes, puts a mirror in front of 'straight-actingess' and sneeringly discloses its artificial character as a *performance*.

The racial geography of same-sex desire

It was mentioned earlier that GUY and MAN carried different racial connotations, especially when they were used in descriptions of the 'desired Other'. The adjective *black* is also very frequent in texts about the Other, appearing 239 times. This figure increases to 273 if we consider the lemma BLACK, which includes other possible spellings (*blk*, *blck*) and the nominalised plural *blacks*. Of these 273 occurrences, 265 have a racialised connotation. Furthermore, with the exception of five instances, the concordances of BLACK suggest that it carries a very positive discursive prosody, being viewed as a highly desirable attribute in a prospective partner. BLACK is even more prominent in texts about the Self (*N*: 355, of which 286 carry a racialised meaning).

In contrast, the lemma WHITE occurs less frequently – only 63 times as a racial category in texts about the Self and 138 times in portrayals of the Other. With the exception of two instances, it is always invoked as a desirable trait. Although not a culturally significant word in the South African context, CAUCASIAN also occurs in the data set

(*N*: 47), exclusively in descriptions of prospective partners. The utilisation of this category might have been triggered by the architecture of the *meetmarket* website, because the 'Ethnicity' field in the section 'About me' includes 'Caucasian' as an option, but not 'white'. Alternatively, Caucasian could have been employed as a less loaded and more politically correct substitute for 'white'. The other racial categories used in descriptions of the Self/Other include INDIAN (84/54) and COLOURED[2] (32/40). Except for two instances, INDIAN is viewed as a desirable category, and in all but one case, COLOURED is invoked with positive connotations in descriptions of the desired Other.

What is particularly noteworthy is that, unlike in the more mainstream South African gay media (see Sonnekus, 2009), blackness and other 'non-white' racial categories are neither obscured nor erased on *meetmarket*. The situation actually reflects the reverse, as non-white racial categories are thematised more frequently than whiteness. Why this is the case can only be speculated on. It could be that whiteness is the unmarked, invisible norm in this online environment; it is something that is so self-evident that it does not even need to be mentioned, especially in a sample like the one investigated here where the majority of the Johannesburg users (56.65%) ticked the category 'Caucasian', of those offered by the *meetmarket* architecture. It could also be the case that the lower frequency of WHITE is the result of a post-apartheid discursive regime (Butler, 1997), in which a white man stating his object of desire in white racial terms could be perceived as *more racist* than a black man's overt appeal for 'blackness' in a prospective partner. Of course, one could object that white men's sexual rejection of black men is no more racist than the barring of 'white' men by 'black' men.

Even the usage of such categories could be considered to be racist in itself. Yet, Eusebius McKaiser (2012), a well-respected South African media commentator who self-identifies as 'coloured', has recently counter-argued that expressing skin colour preferences in the sexual realm is not a rac*ist* but rather a rac*ial* discursive act. Although this distinction might sound razor-thin, it is mainly geared towards toning down the discriminatory force of racial preferences in the domain of the erotic. Either way, because of the history of apartheid and the concomitant power imbalances between white and black South Africans, any form of exclusion performed by a white person against a black person is interpreted as potentially more racist than the other way around. This is a point that emerged very prominently in the interviews with white South African men about their sexual desires and practices.

Whether the effect of the 'invisible hand' of a local norm or of a politically correct practice of self-monitoring, it is predominantly self-identified black men (59.14%)[3] who overtly refer to blackness in their descriptions of the desired Other. Following a similar pattern, it is mainly men who identify as white (64.91%) who explicitly state that they are looking for white men. From this distribution, it could be inferred that desire on *meetmarket* often runs *along* rather than *across* racial lines. If we agree with Eckert that 'purely physical attraction is a mystification – a dehistoricised version of what is in fact an eminently social course of learning' (2002: 109), then the fact that race still seems to be an element structuring same-sex desire is not surprising in a context like South Africa, where apartheid legislation not only criminalised homosexuality, but also banned inter-racial intimate relationships (see also Ratele, 2009).

Table 6. Concordances of BLACK together with other racial categories.

1	whether **black**,coloured indian or white it doesnt matter as long as he has a dick
2	RACE NO ISSUE. **Blacks** Indians,Asian whites all welcome.
3	SEX WIT WHITE, **BLACK**, INDIAN,AND COLOURED MEN, enthralls me!
4	I like **BLACK** guys white (muscled only or gym defined) and Middle Eastern (hairy) guys
5	looking to meet new guys for no strings sex **black** white or coloured

In a sense, then, the same-race layering that laminates same-sex desire on *meetmarket* reproduces, rather than challenges, the deeply ingrained process of intimate self-regulation (Foucault, 1989) that was forged by the apartheid ideology of racial segregation. The results of this study thus offer quantitative evidence supporting Crawhall's statement that '[f]or a White gay man to sleep with a Black gay man is still transgressive, and considered to be a low-status activity. So entrenched is this mentality that it still appears logical and normal. It is unspoken and unquestioned' (Crawhall, 2005: 277). I would add that an inter-racial homosexual relationship can be perceived as an unruly act for a black man as well.

If erotic desire is the ultimate litmus test that determines the degree of social transformation in a democratic South Africa, then the results of this study attest to a continuation of the status quo rather than social change. What is perhaps most remarkable is that the average member of this online community is a male in his late 20s, someone who has lived his entire adult life *after* apartheid.

Yet, just as the picture of *straight-acting* is not straightforward in this online community, so, too, the geography of racial desire is not entirely clear-cut. Not only do black men (29.03%) and white men (21.92%) explicitly express desire for each other, but the category 'Indian' is activated as desirable by white and black men (42% and 11%, respectively). Similarly, 'colouredness' is invoked by white and black men (37.83% and 32.43%, respectively) as a positive trait in the desired Other. Moreover, the concordances of *black* and *white* show that there are a few cases (*N*: 13) in which the two words co-occur and bear positive connotations, often together with other racial categories (see Table 6).

Finally, a closer look at the lemma RACE (*N*: 90) illustrates that *any*, *all*, *issue* and *welcome* are the strongest collocates, giving rise to the clusters ALL RACES WELCOME and RACE NOT AN ISSUE. Therefore, it is perhaps premature to determine whether the apartheid yoke of racial segregation and regulated intimacy has been thrown off by post-apartheid South Africans. A diachronic comparison in a few years' time as well as more ethnographically informed investigations are needed in order to better understand the racialisation of desire in contemporary South Africa (see e.g. Sherman and Steyn, 2009 for an interesting analysis of heterosexual inter-racial desire).

Conclusion: Are 'queers' really 'queer'?

Jagose has argued that 'queer is a category in the process of formation […] its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics' (1996: 1). It is this semantic slipperiness that lies at the heart of this article's title. On the one hand, the

term 'queers' has been used in a 'lay' connotation to refer to all those who do not see themselves as fitting into the matrix of heterosexual desire – those who would generally fall under the daunting acronym of LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Intersexual and Asexual).

On the other hand, 'queer' has also been mobilised by an academic tradition that treats it as a synonym of 'rebellious', 'anti-normative' and 'against the normal' (Halperin, 1995; see also Halperin, 2012: 15, for a similar mobilisation of the semantic duality of 'queer'). Thus, the question investigated by this study is whether men who desire other men on *meetmarket* are indeed 'anti-normative'. In a queer fashion, I am reluctant to bring closure by offering a definitive answer. Instead, I will summarise the main points of this article, which provide partial answers while opening up a multitude of new questions.

In many ways, the 'libidinal economy' (Lyotard, 2004) of *meetmarket* seems to follow a well-known hegemonic system of gender 'normality' in which masculinity is the most valuable currency and femininity is rejected as worthless and undesirable. In the South African context, it could be suggested that the legal rights accorded to sexual identity by the post-apartheid dispensation and the ensuing increased visibility of non-normative sexualities have gone hand in hand with a process of normalisation (McCormick, 2012). The incorporation of homosexuality into the South African body politic on a constitutional level, has had the side-effect of taming 'excessive', anti-normative gendered behaviours (see also Posel, 2004), at least for the 'urban, trendsetting, Internet connected gay male', as *meetmarket* describes its target user. Similarly, the content of the online *meetmarket* profiles also indicates that the tapestry of same-sex desire is woven in racially monochromatic patterns, most likely a vestige of the past regime's enforced 'sexual normality'. Thus, members of *meetmarket* do not seem to be rebelling against the 'normal', but are instead happily reproducing different 'normalities' in which the past intersects with the present.

That being said, the study data also complicates these apparently hegemonic arrangements. The preoccupation with masculinity was at times derisively ambivalent, and the racial uniformity of same-sex desire co-existed with a few variegated trends. Perhaps it does not really matter which identity categories the men on *meetmarket* reproduce or contest. They are '*defiant*' in their act of publicly putting words to the domain of the erotic, a domain which remains untold in any type of sexual rights-based legislation. The worship of the penis and other body parts as well as sexual fantasies about men who are married, single, bi, black, white, straight(-acting) or otherwise all join the discursive orgy of same-sex desire that makes these men '*deviant*', and hence 'queer', for large segments of the South African population, which, despite the liberal constitution, still remain deeply homophobic (see Msibi, 2009).

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Notes

1. *Decent* is a fairly vague attribute. The collocational analysis did not yield a clear-cut picture of the connotations of this adjective in the corpus. However, the interview data suggest that decency ranges from a very broad meaning of 'non-promiscuous' to a more specific meaning which is related to family values, especially within the Afrikaans community.
2. 'Coloured' is a controversial category still employed in post-apartheid South Africa that refers to people of 'mixed race', many of whom are descendants of the slaves brought from the Far East during colonial times.
3. These percentages and those that follow have *not* been calculated on the basis of *all* the men on *meetmarket*, but rather only those who have employed a specific racial category in their description of the 'desired Other'. Thus, the 59.14% reflects the fact that out of the 186 men who have used BLACK to describe their potential partner, 110 of them are self-identified black men.

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