

Chapter 17

Class Act: Gay Culinary Adventures in Pietermaritzburg

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Introduction

South Africa is generally applauded for its efforts to legally protect citizens against unfair discrimination on one or more grounds, including sex, gender and sexual orientation (Nel and Judge 2008). Consequently, LGBT individuals, communities and activism have been prominent in mainstream society. Yet public opinion in South Africa remains divided on LGBT issues, as evidenced by the ongoing battle against violence targeting LGBT people. Violations of LGBT rights, such as hate speech, also occur much too frequently across South African society which renders many in the gay community stigmatised, marginalised and oppressed, despite the constitutional protections afforded to them by the government. This is especially true for gay men and women who do not have class privileges to protect themselves, make choices about where and how to live, or be selective in their entertainment or leisure options. In the face of social marginalisation and denigration, or vulnerability to attacks and homophobia, some gay men and women seek to affirm their values symbolically. This is consistent with Ellemers, Spears and Doosje's (2002) research, which found that people who feel that their group and individual identities are constantly threatened, tend to engage in behavioural responses, including status consumption, to affirm and enhance their identity in society.

Status consumption is a phenomenon theorised by Thorstein Veblen, who advanced that many goods and services purchased function as signifiers of social class, thereby affording consumers prestige (McDonnell 2016; Memushi 2013; Veblen 2017). Eastman, Goldsmith and Flynn (1999: 41) further suggest that status consumption is 'the motivational process by which individuals strive to improve their social standing through the consumption of consumer products that confer and symbolise status both for the individual and surrounding significant others'. This is especially true in the case of gay men whose 'subculture of consumption can be viewed as an attempt to justify the rights they have lost in their lives and to also signify their identity as members of the gay community

through their economic activities' (Creekmur and Doty as cited in Hsieh and Wu 2011: 391). These economic activities include the consumption of status symbols, such as leisure travel, branded clothing, luxury cars and art while ignoring the consumption of food as a status symbol (Dib and Johnson 2019; Hsieh and Wu 2011; Kates 2002; Rink 2019). In terms of the above, "food" is obviously more than just a source of nutrition. It is also a symbolic product whose preparation, distribution and consumption are socially determined.

Against this background, this chapter narrates one individual's journey, referred to as Max, as he turns to food as a pivotal symbolic resource for defining his status regarding race, class, region, gender performance and sexual orientation. Max's story contributes to the small body of work on consumers in South Africa who are black and gay, since existing literature highlights the experiences of white gay men from the global north who are conspicuous consumers with large amounts of "pink capital".

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Max was selected from a larger study on the status consumption of food among black gay men due to his unique social position. Among the ten participants interviewed, Max stood out for actively participating in the status consumption of food to counter prevalent homophobia and to strengthen his identity within the gay community. His motivation stems from feeling further marginalised within his gay social circle, which he attributes to his unemployment and perceived low social status within the group's hierarchy. Max's insights, gathered through observation and a semi-structured interview, were analysed using the social identity and critical consciousness theories.

It is important to acknowledge that individuals' motivations for status consumption are complex and multifaceted, and these theories provide frameworks for analysis rather than definitive explanations. Moreover, the experiences and motivations of black gay men vary, which indicates that not all gay men engage in status consumption for similar reasons. The difference in motivation for status consumption is discussed in this chapter.

An African who is considered un-African: Experiences of being gay in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal

Max is 31 years old and identifies as a black and gay Zulu man from Pietermaritzburg. Pietermaritzburg is an emerging city in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province of South Africa. Compared to major

cities such as Cape Town, Johannesburg or Pretoria, the city of Pietermaritzburg presents a generative space for examining vulnerability and resilience among LGBT persons. The city reflects and extends the late Zulu King's negative beliefs about sexual minorities. As a public figure who wielded great cultural and political power in the province (KZN) in which Pietermaritzburg is situated, the late King Goodwill Zwelithini's homophobic stance and utterances on LGBT issues continue to inform anti-LGBT societal attitudes in KZN. These heteronormative and patriarchal discourses and practices silence and negate sexual minorities as "un-African" and against religion. This occurs against constitutional protections for sexual orientation, the introduction of same-sex marriage and generally affirming LGBT legislation and policies. While violence (including murder) against black lesbians has been widely reported and condemned, black gay men in this province also experience extreme forms of violence, discrimination, and social stigma. Some have been killed because of their sexual orientation and identities (Makhaye 2021). Max's experiences deepen the understanding of how black gay men navigate the anti-LGBT social norms that increase their vulnerability to homophobic discrimination and violence in Pietermaritzburg. Amid Pietermaritzburg's social hierarchy that subordinates gay men, Max is motivated to purchase and display his food consumption to gain social status and respect. Max always seeks to buy or display his food consumption for the status it confers, despite his social class level.

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Sometimes, I go to town with enough money to buy a few clothing items. However, I do not buy what I intend to because I tend to prioritise food experiences. They make me feel unique and differentiate me from my community members who discriminate against me. I like that most of them cannot afford to dine at the restaurants I frequent and the food I eat. This gives me comfort because it feels like I am avenging myself for the treatment they give me. I always post pictures of my restaurant experiences to show them that although I may be gay and taken for granted, I am above them because I can afford what they cannot.

There are similarities between this consumption behaviour explained by Max and the one described by Belk (1988), Eastman et al. (1999) and Mason (1984) who argued that even consumers with a lower social status indulge in status consumption before they have satisfied their basic needs, such as food, clothing and shelter. These authors further argued that this consumption behaviour is motivated by the social advantage the purchase offers its consumer in the eyes of significant others. For Max, the significant others he is trying to enhance his identity for are not only his community members who discriminate against him based on his sexual orientation. Max also struggles with

being discriminated against by his fellow gay men because he is unemployed and considered not to have the social capital required for one to be accepted in some gay circles that are defined by one's socio-economic status.

The broken rainbow: A black gay man's experience of "community"

One might assume that the discrimination faced by LGBT people from mainstream society motivates them to be a close-knit community. However, this is a fractured community. Some LGBT people experience rejection based on their sexual orientation, class, race, gender expression, markers of masculinity, markers of attractiveness and income. Gay men and lesbian women often seem to be at opposite ends of an awful divide. For example, in 2012, the South African lesbian and feminist group called the One in Nine campaign, disrupted the Johannesburg Gay Pride parade to call for a minute's silence in honour of black lesbians and transsexual persons who have been murdered. They blocked the road, a route for the pride parade, with banners written "No cause to celebrate". Some laid their bodies on the ground to prevent the parade from continuing (McLean 2013; Schutte 2012). This protest highlighted how the Johannesburg Pride had become deeply depoliticised and affected by racist, lesbian-exclusionary, and transphobic gender issues. The pride organisers brawled with the protestors and were caught on camera violently pushing them, threatening to drive over them, and shouting, '*Go back to the location*' (McLean 2013; Schutte 2012), which suggested that the event was exclusive to middle-class and mainly white people who lived in suburbia.

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In the face of these deep divides, many socially marginalised LGBT people create different subcultures based on their multiple marginalised experiences, for example, being poor, black, and gay. This can be seen in Max's experience of navigating the gay community as a black gay man who is unemployed. It becomes evident that many of the class and income criteria for categorising gay men within the gay community are integrally connected to attractiveness. For example, the restaurants one frequents and their food consumption habits are motivated mainly by the prestige they afford the consumer in the face of others. This attitude leads to Max being overly preoccupied with the need to compete for status and acceptance within the gay community, which marginalises him because of his socio-economic status. Max is acutely aware of, and often reminded of, his unemployment and the fact that this affects his buying power and social capital, since he cannot define himself as Max, who is employed as X. In his gay circles, middle-class gay men with prestigious jobs are afforded prestige and status and can afford a better quality of life. Moreover,

Max is feminine, and within the gay community to which Max belongs, “effeminate” gay men are considered socially inferior to gay men who perform hegemonic masculinities since the latter are usually regarded as dominant and economically powerful figures in gay partnerships. The cycle of humiliation and social subordination that Max experiences because of his unemployment is evident in the following quote:

I am unemployed and rely on my parents and partner for money. As a result, I do not have enough money to buy expensive gadgets like iPhones and designer clothes that will make me feel accepted by the crowd. They look down on gay people like me without jobs and cars. This greatly stresses me because it makes me feel useless and lonely.

Max’s narrative highlights that the stigma and marginalisation he experiences within the group he appears to belong to is often more acute than the distress he experiences in relation to a broader society, where straight people and homophobes marginalise him because of his sexual orientation. Max experiences such shame and loneliness because he expects to find a sense of solidarity, acceptance and belonging among other men whose racial designation and sexual orientation echo his own. This aligns with Pachankis’ (2014) research findings on gay men’s mental health. Pachankis (2014) found that the high rates of poor mental health among gay men resulted not so much from discrimination or marginalisation by people outside the gay community, but mainly from experiencing and perceiving prejudice from fellow gay men. Max attributed his poor mental health to how he felt about the gay subculture’s obsession with status, competition, and intolerance towards socially diverse gay identities. He also revealed that his intersecting identities of being black, gay and unemployed made him feel he had to fight discrimination on many fronts. Two of the most critical fronts are the discrimination outside the gay community, and the discrimination and rejection from the gay community.

Max has struggled with isolation and loneliness since losing his job, which impacted his social capital and relegated him to a lower social status within his gay community. Consequently, Max now has few close friends since his friendship circle has shrunk, and he also struggles to maintain his romantic relationships because there is a common belief in his community, according to his experience, that suggests that one can only maintain a relationship when they have money. Max believes his trajectory would be different if he still had a job because he could finance his food consumption experiences, which are central to his community’s identity. This shows how Max,

although he has parents who provide meals for his sustenance, is more concerned about his food experiences outside his home, because the food serves two functions for him: nourishment and portraying his perceived affluence and prestige.

This mirrors the arguments of Eastman and Liu (2012), Madinga (2016) and Mason (1984) who state that status-conscious consumers derive satisfaction from society's reactions to their possession of status goods, rather than deriving it from the goods' functional utility. This behaviour also aligns with Gysman's (2023) findings, who reports that for individuals obsessed with social status, consumption entails dynamic, innovative, thoughtful, and complicated practices aimed at reconstructing a sense of self, fostering group identity, and cultivating individualised group distinctiveness.

Food porn: A gay pursuit of social status and dignity

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'If the casserole is missionary style, food porn takes its devotees into the foodie Kama Sutra. It glistens. It drips. It uses props. It is both lusty and intimate. For those who partake, it is an obsession' (McDonnell 2016: 239). McDonnell (2016) further explains that food porn focusses on how food is portrayed aesthetically through photographs on social media platforms to portray specific messages and social status. The group of gay men with whom Max socialises and generally connects with are status consumers who also engage in food porn since they own other status symbols, such as branded cell phones, branded clothing, and luxury cars. This group always dines at upmarket restaurants that enhance their image and social prestige. Part of their performative claiming of being successful in counteracting their othering as gay is their fixation with photographing themselves in relation to food, and this is consistent with the research conducted by Zhu et al. (2019), who found that when dining out in restaurants, some people take photos of their food and post them on social media platforms—almost like a ritual similar to saying grace before eating.

Gysman (2023) corroborates these discoveries in her research on the interactions of the black South African middle class with social media and digitised food cultures. The study reveals that contemporary members of the black middle class in South Africa employ social media, narratives surrounding food, and messages concerning taste, culinary proficiency, and food knowledge to construct empowering self-perceptions. For example, Instagram posts of photos with the hashtag "food" have increased from 800 000 in March 2013 to almost 250 million in July 2018 (Infogr8 2018; Uno Cookbook 2013). As a result, dining in restaurants has become a tool for self-expression and

communicating with others. Although it is generally argued that people are likely to consume status-signalling products to seek symbolic value (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Yang and Mattila 2014), taking photos and posting photos of dining experiences becomes a tool which projects this intangible experience into the public domain.

Pietermaritzburg has an excellent selection of exclusive restaurants symbolising affluence, wealth, and prosperity. The most popular restaurant is Fire & Vine, which is often frequented by the group to which Max belongs. This restaurant is a “modern classic style” and multi-cultural charm food outlet with a special and unique aura. Their cheapest meal is two rolls of sweet cornbread served with chutney and herb-flavoured butter for R29. At the same time, a person who feels like having their most costly dish from the mains section must be willing to pay R399 for a 350 g sirloin steak or a 320 g lamb rack served with poached apricot, fresh gremolata, red pepper pesto, lamb sauce and potato pavé.

This restaurant is popular among gay men, including members of Max’s group, who frequent the establishment weekly. Max mentioned how some of them can sometimes go to the restaurant three days a week for lunch and dinner. I thought this was an exaggeration until Max showed me his friend’s social media posts on his phone. From what I observed, they would sometimes have lunch and dinner at this restaurant on two consecutive days, however, I also realised a common trend in their posts. Their food consumption experiences are always combined with the display of other status symbols they own. For example, in the photos, which are heavily edited and modified as though they belong to an international food magazine, their dishes are always strategically positioned on the same table, next to their iPhones, black bank cards and keys for their German sports cars.

At first glance, the photos may appear like ordinary pictures of people enjoying a meal. However, once you take a closer and more analytical look, you can start seeing that the photos convey a message about their social and economic status as well as the kind of dignity they want others to afford them based on these two traits they have portrayed through the photos. This performative claim of gay affluence, success, good taste, cosmopolitanism, and uniqueness signals to the mainstream community, which is perceived as homophobic, that gay people have status and excessive income that affords them a table at these exclusive spaces. These restaurants are considered exclusive because they are not easily accessible to the mainstream community of Pietermaritzburg, which

has high socio-economic vulnerabilities due to the growing population and increasing levels of poverty and unemployment (Nel and Judge 2008). In addition, evidence shows that gay men have higher incomes than heterosexual men. These gay men are cultivating a unique expression of their blackness and masculinity, akin to other black people who share a particular social and political interest in fostering their visibility and social recognition by publicly portraying their tastes, distinctive identities and socially determined values as a group (Gysman 2023).

The cosmopolitan and mainly European food they eat in many ways is a marker of their superior taste, since whiteness is at the hierarchy of food standards and taste (Gysman 2023). It is as though they are refusing the stereotype of being black South Africans who only eat out at chain restaurants such as South Africa's popular *Spur Steak Ranch*. Equally significant is their defiance of a stereotype of black South African masculinity: the figure of the "down-to-earth" man whose favourite food is *braaied* meat, whose favourite drink is a beer and who considers prestigious meals including oysters and champagne as frivolous. By emulating a taste for cosmopolitan foods often enjoyed by elite men in the global north, the group also affirms a particular kind of hegemonic masculinity. This may be "frivolous" and marginal in South Africa, yet it is dominant within a global landscape of identity expression and food taste. By surrounding itself with consumer status objects, the group of gay men cannot be seen mechanically adopting white or western tastes. Instead, their choices are strategic and fully aligned with their social positioning and efforts to re-position themselves socially. Through food, this group refuses its ascribed position as powerless and subordinate; instead, they claim their agency and dignity by affirming tastes culturally superior to those generally associated with being heterosexual black men.

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Max's position concerning all these consumption habits is complex. He believes meeting genuine friends who are not fixated on looks, status and money is difficult. Since he does not have the means to afford status symbols such as iPhones and fine dining experiences, Max now avoids making friends with people with a higher social status than himself, since he feels that they always brag about what they have and end up making him feel inferior. Max also struggles to maintain his romantic relationships because he believes one cannot be romantic without money. If he dates someone who has money or can provide for him, his self-esteem makes it challenging to maintain the relationship, since he always feels inferior and emasculated. In a statement that reveals the centrality of food in Max's sense of his eroded social status, he stated:

I used to be taken seriously by my friends when I was still employed because I could afford nice things like the latest fashion and eat at expensive restaurants. My friends and I would have breakfast at a restaurant and spend the whole day there. We would have breakfast, lunch and sometimes dinner at the same restaurant in one day. You will not believe that my friends are now distant because I no longer have money to pay for all these things. They always make excuses when I reach out and no longer invite me when they spend time together. Gays are cruel. They only want you when you have something to offer.

From the comment, '*They only want you when you have something to offer*', it is evident that due to his unemployment status, Max is perceived as being useless without any social capital that can afford him to be included in the gay circle, he used to be part of. Max feels less important and dehumanised by how his group members' behaviour marginalises him. Through his food consumption habits, he has found a mechanism to dissociate himself from this identity of lacking the capital to fit in with his in-group. After all, Max often revealed that he attaches importance to using food and other commodities as a status enhancer.

Edible revenge: Rediscovering agency through food

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Max mentioned that he was not always unemployed, and like the other gay men who were his friends, he drew comfort and a sense of dignity from being good-looking, well-dressed, reasonably affluent and "eating well". However, he no longer frequents the prestigious Fire & Vine restaurant because he does not feel he is a desirable patron, since he is unemployed and lacks the symbolic resources, such as an iPhone and the latest fashion trends, that the other patrons always display. Max reclaims his sense of self despite his circumstances by opting for alternative restaurants such as Elephant & Co, adjacent to Fire & Vine. Gay men also frequent this restaurant; however, this group of gay men belong to a class significantly lower than those who frequent Fire & Vine. Although the restaurant is not on the same level as Fire & Vine, Max shares that it still affords him some perceived prestige and improves his social standing when he compares himself to those unemployed gay men who cannot afford to dine there. He further explained that he might not be in the upper class of his in-group's social hierarchy, but he is aware that there is a class of black gay men below him, and he uses his food practices to separate himself from them. Max confirmed this superiority by insisting he is "flashy" compared to many unemployed black gay men he perceives as inferior. This is apparent in the quote below:

I may not have money for Fire & Vine. However, I can still create an impression that I am also classy by dining at Elephant & Co. because their interior and plating are beautiful, even though their prices are lower and affordable. I know that some gays cannot afford to eat at Fire & Vine and Elephant & Co. So, even though the Fire & Vine gays may reject me, I can also look down on those who cannot afford Elephant & Co. The gays who eat from fast food outlets. It is all about levels.

From this quote, one can note that for Max, what affords a gay man prestige and status, is having money and the ability to engage in status consumption, especially food status consumption. This boasting about affluence and class superiority—alongside Max’s critical remarks about the class arrogance of the wealthy black gay man he knows—might seem contradictory. However, if one considers the charged racist and homophobic context within which black gay men seek visibility, dignity and respect, then Max’s anxiety about falling into a class of gay men who only know fast food is understandable.

370 Max also mentions that he cannot achieve his social prestige and the status he desires if he does not share his food experiences with others and ensure that his food consumption becomes publicly visible. Like the elite class he does not fit in with, Max also posts photos and videos of his food experiences on his Instagram account and has carefully curated an image of himself as a food status consumer who is very discerning about the food he posts. Max is adamant that he only posts when he has a fine dining experience. When asked to elaborate further, he shared that he sometimes eats from fast food outlets like McDonald’s and KFC. However, he never takes or posts pictures of those experiences because they do not fit his image of a tasteful and sophisticated gay man who is conscious of his public appearance. Max further mentioned that he must find the interior of these restaurants classy enough to appear on his social media profiles. His reference to the décor and physical appearance of where he eats is unmistakable evidence that food and literal taste are part of a broader repertoire of symbols that, when photographed together with a subject, collectively work to situate that subject socially. Therefore, decor, setting and food all function simultaneously to create a superior social status for Max.

Discussions with Max made it clear that knowledge of what is “tasteful” and “elitist”, especially regarding food, is critical to his cultural capital (Bourdieu 2018) and ability to acquire social prestige. Veblen (2017) argues that upper-class members consume luxury products to dissociate themselves

from those they perceive as a lower class. In contrast, those who belong to or identify with the lower level, consume luxury products to imitate or associate themselves with the wealthy class (Han, Nunes and Drèze 2010; Rink 2019).

This is often the case with Max. His socio-economic status does not afford him the prestige enjoyed by black middle-class gay men. However, because of his need for social prestige, he desperately engages in the status consumption of food from restaurants below the elite gay class, yet above the unemployed gay class. Max opts for these restaurants because, although they are not elite enough for those above him, they are still exclusive and inaccessible to those he wants to dissociate from. As a marginalised black gay man within the gay in-group, Max has curated his prestigious image and continues to consume food for status reasons within his financial means. Max believes this behaviour affords him influence in society and fuels his self-esteem. Consequently, this status-seeking behaviour helps Max to lessen the chances of being discriminated against as a social inferior.

Fake it until you make it: Grocery shopping as a communicated message

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Max's public use of food to signal his social status continues beyond dining experiences. He also reports that he has a desire to do his grocery shopping at more elitist grocery stores such as Woolworths and Checkers Hypermarket. However, since Max is unemployed and relies on his parents to pay for groceries, he must accept low-end grocery stores such as OK and Shoprite, where they shop. Max shares that whenever he accompanies his parents or is sent to buy groceries, he carries the grocery items in Woolworths shopping bags because they signal status and success. He does not want to be seen in these grocery stores or carrying bags provided by the shops because it would be embarrassing for him. To ensure he does not get embarrassed, Max often buys groceries away from his neighbourhood or shopping malls where he does not have a high chance of being seen by his gay friends. He says he finds solace in knowing that even if they see him carrying groceries from low-end stores, they will be disguised as Woolworths-bought groceries.

Grocery retailer selection has been a subject of investigation across academic fields. Researchers have found that the attributes consumers consider important when selecting a supermarket, influence the images they form regarding the supermarkets (Carpenter and Moore 2006; Mafini and Dhurup 2015; Theodoridis and Chatzipanagiotou 2009). Studies of supermarket attributes

conducted by De Morais Watanabe, De Oliveira Lima-Filho and Torres (2013) and Ghosh, Tripathi and Kumar (2010), reveal that consumers select a supermarket based on convenience, in-store personnel, in-store atmospherics, and services as well as product and price. Max's narrative does not affirm these findings, focussing on buyers' practical needs. This suggests that much research into food consumption patterns highlights concerns such as efficiency and convenience while neglecting cultural and sociopsychological factors such as Max's social aspiration.

For Max, shopping at Woolworths makes him feel successful, because Woolworths has marketed itself as a South African store with a long history of selling fresh and high-quality foods that tend to be more expensive than those sold at other South African grocery stores. When asked which attributes he likes most about Woolworths, Max mentioned the interior design of the shop, the black and white labelling, which he considers classy, and the fact that they sell fresh and good quality products. The image Max has formed about Woolworths' branding as tasteful and sophisticated, influences his wish to buy groceries there and his performance to others that he does do so.

372 This aligns with the findings of Dib and Johnson (2019) which suggest that gay men's consumption habits are also influenced by their varying needs for uniqueness. Max's supermarket choices are also influenced by his desire to be unique, and he often curates his foodways to reflect a quirky and highly individualistic self-image. Although Max's buying patterns are aspirational, often emulating what members of a superior class eat and value, he also often seems to want to differentiate himself from others. In Max's circles, those who are unemployed cannot afford groceries from Woolworths. Instead, they are expected to purchase groceries from low-end retailers, such as OK and Shoprite. Although these retailers are within what Max can afford, he strives to be unique from his in-group of unemployed black gay men by curating a public image of an unemployed black gay man who buys his groceries from Woolworths, by disguising his groceries bought from OK and Shoprite in Woolworths shopping bags. This makes him unique and exclusive among his in-group, because although he is considered "poor" and expected to shop at a low-end retailer, his public image proves otherwise.

This performativity affords Max social prestige and respect from the social group above him and the one he belongs to, but wants to differentiate himself from. The Woolworths shopping bags Max uses as a disguise for his groceries offer him a sense of exclusivity, which improves his need to be unique and enhances his self-esteem and self-concept. By demonstrating his uniqueness from

others, Max also registers his freedom to express himself autonomously—irrespective of how others might discriminate against him. This behaviour is consistent with the findings of Lynn and Harris (1997) that suggest that people seek to avoid sharing similarities with others.

Besides the need for uniqueness, Max's consumption habits are influenced by his need to appear successful, despite being unemployed and relying on his family and partner for financial support. Most people regard gay men as educated and monied (Dib and Johnson 2019). Therefore, some gay persons, like Max, affirm the stereotype by searching for luxury restaurants and exclusive food experiences that uphold their "image" of success. Given the fact that this image is not something that gay men enter the world with, the idea is maintained through constant monitoring and adjusting the self through consumption practices (Schembri, Merrilees and Kristiansen 2010), as we have seen with Max's curated self-image that is made public through his Instagram posts. Linked to this need for success, is Max's notion that luxury food consumption is related to his pride. For example, Max experiences a sense of pride from posting pictures of himself dining in a fine restaurant compared to a non-elite restaurant such as McDonald's. Max's feelings of pride are related to his sense of success. Therefore, it can be assumed that his pride in dining at exclusive and elite restaurants is directly linked to his feelings of being more "successful" than those he perceives as subordinate. Both feelings of success and pride help Max reaffirm his identity and social status within the gay community. To some extent, these feelings provide him with the confidence and capital to respond to the homophobia he experiences from heterosexual people as well as the marginalisation and rejection he experiences within the gay community.

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Conclusion

Max's status consumption of food highlights that in South Africa, particularly in Pietermaritzburg, KZN, LGBT people are still subjected to violence and discrimination when they should be enjoying legal protections. His consumption habits also indicate that the desire to seek status and prestige in society is notable, especially for people who belong to or identify with a marginalised, stigmatised, or low-status group. Notably, Max's experience highlights that even though status consumption is primarily regarded as a mechanism used by people who seek to enhance their prestige and differentiate themselves from others when it occurs in the context of people who feel that their group and individual identities are under constant threat, it becomes a political response to the marginalisation, discrimination and loss of dignity they are subjected to in society.

This also shows us that South Africa still finds it difficult to translate its pro-LGBT laws into reality. Max is still discriminated against in his society for being gay. However, if a discrimination-free society is achieved, the desire to counter homophobia and other prejudices through status consumption may decrease, because social equality would have been ensured. Nonetheless, Max is resilient amid the discrimination and prejudice he encounters from his in-group and the community. Max claims his agency through his food consumption habits, enhancing his social status and self-image.

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