

**BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY, CLUJ-NAPOCA
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DOCTORAL SCHOOL: "HISTORY. CIVILISATION. CULTURE"

**MASCULINITY AND SEXUAL IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY ROMANIA
CULTURE, GENDER PRACTICES, AND HOMOEROTICISM
(DOCTORAL THESIS)**

SUMMARY

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This doctoral thesis is presented to the reader as an anthropological investigation into masculinity and sexual identity, conducted through qualitative research methods. It aims to explore how individuals in Romania make sense of social realities concerning the influence of culture on gender in the post-December era, which marks the country's transition to a democratic and liberal regime. From a conceptual standpoint, the thesis is grounded in gender theory as a cultural construct, as articulated by poststructuralist philosophers, theorists, and cultural critics from the Western academic space, such as Judith Butler (American philosopher), Michel Foucault (French philosopher and historian), Jeffrey Weeks (British sociologist and gay rights activist), Craig Griffiths (member of the RGSi Group—Race, Gender, Sexuality, Identity—at Manchester Metropolitan University), Jeffrey Merrick (Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, known for his publications on the history of homosexuality in Ancien Régime France), Dan Healey (pioneer in the study of the history of homosexuality in Russia), Harry Oosterhuis (specialist in the history of sexuality and gender at the University of Manchester), among others.

Fundamentally, these theorists argue that gender is a cultural expression, and that the affirmation of gay individuals represents a phenomenon specific to modernity, whereby such individuals express and embrace their sexuality as part of their gender identity. The manifestation of sexual identity is thus a phenomenon inherent to contemporary modern societies. American historian John D'Emilio emphasized the direct relationship between liberalization, capitalism, consumer society, and the expression of sexual identity. He demonstrated that the emergence and affirmation of non-heteronormative sexual identities, as well as feminist identities, are linked to the financial independence of individuals in liberal capitalist societies. Such independence also entails a degree of social autonomy, as individuals are no longer part of interdependent family systems but are integrated into the labor market. In societies where individuals become financially and socially independent, this independence also extends to identity and sexuality. The transformation of traditional family structures enabled homosexual desires to become integrated into personal identity, and in liberal societies, such desires are expressed freely. Processes such as industrialization, followed by urbanization and demographic growth, eroded traditional family structures and their power dynamics in every society where they occurred, creating the conditions for the emergence of sexual identities and other identity forms such as postcolonial ones.

In Romania, the development of a 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 had a hegemonic character due to the restrictive nature of the regime. The affirmation of the LGBTQ+ movement and the decriminalization of homosexuality occurred after the fall of the communist regime, largely under Western pressure. These topics remain sensitive within the Romanian political class and among Romanian neoconservatives, who continue to invoke the narrative of a Western conspiracy against traditional Romanian values. The debates and anxieties within Romanian society - particularly neoconservative fears regarding the erosion of indigenous values - have been contextualized in relation to Western developments, helping to dispel widespread myths such as that of cultural Marxism or the notion of Western moral decay. The Romanian situation, along with its specificities, has been examined comprehensively in relation to developments in the Western world, reflecting the transnational character of the LGBTQ+ movement and the associated scholarly literature. The transnationalism of the LGBTQ+ emancipation movement is visible not only in public pride marches but also through academic scholarship and specialized literature produced in the West, covering diverse disciplines such as history, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychology, political science, and gender studies. However, this transnationalism is less evident in Romania, where local authors have not yet gained recognition in the Western academic space, and where research environments remain underdeveloped and still closely tied to civic activism, unlike the transnational and transdisciplinary academic landscape of the West.

Regarding male gender practices and the redefinition of masculine patterns, this process in Romania has developed gradually alongside the expansion of consumer society after 1990. Until the December 1989 Revolution, the expression of masculinity was constrained by the egalitarian rules of the communist regime, which was based on moral order, reproductive discipline, and social equality. Cultural expressions of masculinity were limited to the image of the worker - symbol of the regime, laboring for national prosperity - or that of the comrade, if the individual belonged to the Party, leadership structures, or the intellectual elite. Social pressure and the material shortages of the 1980s, generated by the regime's self-induced economic crisis, further limited the cultural expression of gender. Sensuality, eroticism, or sexuality - specially in relation to masculine imagery - were not publicly endorsed as expressions of individual identity and were, in fact, inhibited. Men were expected to conform to strict grooming standards, including short hair

and a clean shave, in accordance with the regime's norms. Consequently, masculinity during communism assumed a hegemonic, albeit softly enforced, character. In the absence of a consumer society and under conditions of material scarcity, masculinity remained relatively uniform and monolithic, unfragmented by consumer goods.

After 1990, new masculine models and cultural patterns gradually emerged, models that had been suppressed during the totalitarian regime. Western brands entering the Romanian market after 2000 introduced new cultural representations and expressions of masculinity, adopted by both heterosexual and homosexual individuals within a new mass culture. The rise of the internet, social media, and smartphones played an even greater role than the brands themselves, as many individuals, unable to afford original garments, turned to alternative or second-hand clothing aligned with the new cultural patterns popularized in the digital age. The post-2000 period, marked by globalization, not only advanced the development of the LGBTQ+ movement in accordance with its transnational framework but also contributed to the cultural promotion of new gender patterns.

Attitudes toward the body and sexuality also shifted after the state abandoned natalist policies, and eroticism became separated from procreation, in parallel with the expansion of contraceptive methods. In the consumer society, the aesthetic ideals of masculinity transformed, particularly among younger individuals aged 18 to 40, where masculine models became more diverse and more prominently represented. Masculinities influence one another through complex processes of cultural, social, and psychological interaction. Social media, by increasing individual connectivity and the visibility of visual self-representation as a cultural form, has facilitated the dissemination of masculine models and patterns across diverse practices of gender expression.

The cultural confusion that emerges between the cultural patterns of male groups with a heterosexual identity and those with a homosexual identity demonstrates how cultural norms metamorphose and become diluted in a society where gender becomes multilayered and is mobilized for different purposes. The cultural pattern of heterosexual youth instrumentalizes the same footwear brands and fashion labels that are also appropriated by homosexual individuals - this phenomenon being referred to as sexual and cultural pluralism.

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