



**UNDERSTANDING THE STATUS CONSUMPTION OF FOOD AMONG BLACK
GAY MEN TO COUNTER HOMOPHOBIA IN A KWAZULU-NATAL URBAN
COMMUNITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITY EDUCATION INITIATIVES**

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A dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the academic requirements for the degree of

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University of KwaZulu-Natal

South Africa

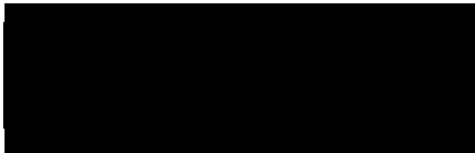
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March 2025

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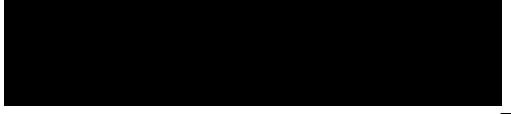
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This dissertation is submitted with my approval.



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ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER



06 December 2022

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Dear BB Sibeko,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00004402/2022

Project title: Understanding the status consumption of food among Black gay men in a KwaZulu-Natal community: Implications for Community Education

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Full Committee Reviewed Protocol

This letter serves to notify you that your response received on 08 November 2022 to our letter of 04 August 2022 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid for one year until 28 November 2023

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours faithfully



.....
Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

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INSPIRING GREATNESS

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the status consumption of food among Black gay men in the urban community of Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It examines how this marginalised group chooses food and foodscapes as means of identity construction, social status assertion, and resistance against discrimination. Using a qualitative methodology grounded in social identity and critical consciousness theories, the study sought to unravel the complexities of how Black gay men navigate and resist marginalisation through their culinary practices. Specifically, ten Black gay men were individually interviewed using an unstructured interview schedule. In addition, various online platforms where these men and others often post their visits to restaurants and food markets were identified and analysed., including Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and others. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of identity construction and social dynamics within marginalised communities. The findings highlight the interplay between race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status in shaping the food consumption behaviours of Black gay men. Like other marginalised groups, Black gay men often use status consumption as both a way to elevate their social status and as a form of resistance against their marginalisation. The study has implications for advocacy and programming for enhancing the safety, visibility, and recognition of Black gay men's diverse experiences in contemporary society.

DEDICATION

To the beautiful, resilient, and courageous Black gay men who have transformed the landscape of status consumption in food within rural and township communities, this work is dedicated to you. Your acts of defiance and self-expression through the culinary arts have not only challenged the pervasive homophobia but have also created spaces of acceptance, pride, and community. Your dedication to redefining cultural narratives and asserting your identity through food inspires us all. You have woven a tapestry of resilience, love, and resistance in your kitchens, at your tables, and through your shared meals. Often unspoken yet profoundly powerful, your stories are a testament to the strength and beauty of living authentically against all odds. May this dissertation honour your experiences, celebrate your contributions, and amplify your voices. Thank you for your unwavering spirit and for showing the world that true power lies in the authenticity of one's identity and the love shared within a community.

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CHAPTER ONE

UNDERSTANDING THE STATUS CONSUMPTION OF FOOD BY BLACK GAY MEN IN PIETERMARITZBURG: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction

Research suggests that food, while essential for nourishment, is a social artefact that symbolises how individuals define themselves within the context of their social class, race, gender, and other societal identities (Lee, 2015; Shah, 2018). Within this context, food consumption is understood as a complex social phenomenon at the intersections of identity construction, cultural expression, and, to some extent, social belonging (Puoane et al., 2006). Indeed, the idea of status consumption provides a lens through which to understand how individuals use their consumption behaviours to signify their social status and to negotiate their positions in society (Eastman et al., 1999). The research reported in this dissertation explores the status consumption of food by Black gay men living in the urban city of Pietermaritzburg, the capital city of the KwaZulu-Natal Province, in South Africa.

This study was conceptualised in the context of South Africa's progressive post-apartheid Constitution, which prohibits discrimination against any individual based on their sexual orientation (Reygan & Lynette, 2014). However, given this context and the growing evidence of acceptance of gay rights in the democratic dispensation (Mkhize et al., 2010; Reygan & Lynette, 2014), a significant proportion of South African citizens still hold anti-gay attitudes and beliefs (Campaign, 2016; Mahomed & Trangoš, 2016; Reygan & Lynette, 2014). These attitudes and beliefs remain prevalent across communities and institutions, informing the homophobia that makes it difficult for gay men to live their lives without fear and the risk of experiencing anti-gay discrimination, violence, and marginalisation (Henderson, 2015; Nel, 2014). Consequently, gay men employ various strategies to counter the homophobia they so routinely experience, including remoulding their dress and public behaviour (Ngidi et al., 2020), as well as enhancing their identities in public and private spaces (Ellemers et al., 2002).

1.2. Background to the Research Problem

Despite the existing rich body of literature on the lived experiences of gay men in South Africa (Barnett et al., 2021; Kiguwa & Langa, 2017; Ngidi et al., 2021), little attention has been paid to how Black gay men use food as a means of status consumption to navigate societal hierarchies and combat homophobia. Studies have explored food consumption (Lee, 2015; Gysman, 2023), status consumption (O’Cass & McEwen, 2004; Madinga, 2016), and gay subcultures of consumption (Hsieh & Wu, 2011), yet none have specifically examined the intersection of these themes as they relate to Black gay men in a Global South context. Other studies have examined food consumption (Lee, 2015; Fifita et al., 2020; Gysman, 2023) and status consumption (Bramoullé & Ghigliano, 2024; Ligaraba et al., 2024; O’Cass & McEwen, 2004) from the purview of diverse fields such as sociology, psychology, and marketing. However, none of these studies have centred the voices and narratives of Black gay men and their investments in the status consumption of food practices.

What has been addressed in the literature is how engaging in status-orientated consumption restores one’s self-esteem (see, for example, Sivanathan and Pettit, 2010; Goldsmith and Clark, 2012). For instance, Sivanathan and Pettit’s (2010) exploration found that individuals who are socially subjected to a compromised sense of self-worth use the acquiring of goods to symbolise their upper social status to soothe their psychological and emotional distress. The authors added that this occurs especially when other sources of validation are lacking (Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010). Likewise, Goldsmith and Clark (2012) argue that status-seeking consumers engage in consumptive behaviours regardless of their socio-economic status. Thus, as other scholars have argued, status-conscious consumers derive satisfaction from society’s reactions to their possession of status goods rather than the goods’ functional utility (see Eastman and Liu, 2012; Madinga, 2016; Mason, 2001). In relation to the research reported in this dissertation, one exceptional Taiwanese study found that gay men protect their identities and oppose homophobia and stigma through a subculture of consumption (Hsieh & Wu, 2011). In this regard, as Creekmur and Doty (1998) argued, the gay subculture of consumption can be viewed as an attempt at reclaiming the rights gay men have lost and also signifies their identity as members of a persecuted community through their economic activities.

The proposed study is grounded in the conviction that understanding the status consumption of food among gay men and the spaces where it occurs can significantly enhance community education efforts. By fostering a deeper understanding of and respect for the rights of gay

individuals, this study aims to address and mitigate the queerphobic violence that this population frequently encounters. Therefore, the primary objective of this research is to explore how these consumption practices can serve as a powerful tool for community education initiatives, ultimately promoting a more inclusive and respectful environment for gay people in various communities. This research aims to shed light on how the cultural dynamics of food consumption among gay men can inform and transform community education, encouraging empathy and acceptance, and thereby reducing instances of discrimination and violence against the LGBTQ+ community.

Therefore, as I highlighted above, the study reported in this dissertation investigated the patterns, motivations, and implications of the status consumption of food among a selected group of Black gay men in the urban city of Pietermaritzburg. By focusing on this particular social subgroup, this research contributes towards understanding how gay identities, social positioning, and cultural contexts intersect within the realm of food consumption in a Global South context. Black gay men stand out as a particularly compelling group to use as a case study because of their unique social positioning and historical experiences.

1.3. Clarification of Operational Concepts

To provide clarity, understanding, and meaning to the use of concepts in this study, I define operational concepts in this section, including status consumption (of food), status symbols, and Black gay men. In Chapter Two, I engage with these concepts at length.

1.3.1. Status Consumption (of Food)

Status consumption is defined as:

The motivational process by which individuals strive to improve their social standing through the conspicuous consumption of consumer products that confer and symbolise status for the individual and surrounding significant others (Eastman et al., 1999, p. 41).

This dissertation aligns with this broad definition because it provides a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics involved in status consumption and highlights several key aspects. First, the term ‘motivational process’ suggests that status consumption is driven by internal desires and goals. Individuals engage in this behaviour intentionally, aiming to achieve a specific outcome—improvement of their social standing (Eastman et al., 1991; Eastman & Liu, 2012). Second, the primary objective of status consumption is to enhance one’s position

within the social hierarchy. This implies that individuals are aware of their current social standing and actively seek ways to elevate it (Fan & Burton, 2002; Fifita et al., 2020). Third, the word ‘conspicuous’ indicates that the consumption is meant to be visible to others. It is not merely about possessing goods but about displaying them in a manner others can see and acknowledge (Garcia et al., 2019). Fourth, the products consumed are not chosen randomly; they are specifically those recognised within a society as symbols of status (Goldsmith & Clark, 2012). These products carry social significance and are valued not just for their functionality but for the prestige they represent.

Finally, the definition points out that status consumption affects the individual and their social network. It highlights the relational aspect of consumption where individuals consume status products to improve their standing and influence the perceptions of those around them (Han et al., 2010). Therefore, Eastman et al.’s (1999) definition of status consumption underscores this behaviour’s deliberate and socially motivated nature. It emphasises that individuals engage in conspicuous consumption of specific products to elevate their social status and to signal this enhanced status to others in their social environment. This perspective aligns with broader social identity and critical consciousness theories, where individuals continuously navigate and negotiate their social identities through material possessions and visible behaviours (Garcia et al., 2019; Han et al., 2010). This dissertation views status consumption as the consumption of food and related services to enhance and signify one’s social status regardless of socio-economic circumstances.

1.3.2. Status Symbols

Status symbols are “material signs that inform others of a person’s specific status”(Kendall, 2013, p. 111). In the context of the study reported in this dissertation, food is regarded as a status symbol or a material sign used by Black Gay men to affirm, assert, and negotiate their identities. This definition highlights several critical points. For example, the term ‘material signs’ indicates that status symbols are tangible objects. These are physical items that can be seen, touched, and possessed, differentiating them from intangible status indicators, such as education or reputation. Likewise, status symbols serve a communicative function (Mazali & Rodrigues-Neto, 2013). They are not only for the individual’s self-satisfaction but also play a crucial role in social interactions by conveying information about the individual to others (Garcia et al., 2019; Han et al., 2013).

Furthermore, these symbols provide precise information about a person's social position. This could relate to wealth, occupation, social class, or other significant social hierarchies. Thus, Kendall's definition suggests that status symbols are integral to social life, acting as a shorthand for conveying social status (see also Kendall, 2013). They facilitate social recognition and categorisation, allowing individuals to quickly assess each other's social standing based on visible cues. This definition aligns with sociological theories that view material possessions as extensions of the self and as tools for social navigation and identity construction.

1.3.3. Black Gay Men

In South Africa, social identities reflect the country's turbulent colonial and apartheid pasts, which resulted in social segregation and exclusions based on race, gender, and sexuality, among other factors. Within this context, Black gay men face oppression and marginalisation that intersect their racial, gendered, and sexual identities. In this study, the term 'gay' refers to men who self-identify as being attracted to other men. This definition excludes heterosexual men who have sex with other men and bisexual men. It aligns with the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition, which explains sexuality as comprising sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, and eroticism (World Health Organization, 2006). This dissertation adopts this definition because it does not restrict sexuality to sexual intercourse and reproduction but encompasses gender identities, sexual orientation, and intimacy (World Health Organization, 2006). The term 'Black' reflects an apartheid racial construct that continues to be used today to refer to Black Africans. Thus, 'Black gay men' are those Black African men who self-identify as being physically, emotionally, sexually, romantically, and psychologically attracted to other men.

1.4.4. Community Education

Community education is a learning process rooted in the ethos of empowerment, social justice, change, challenge, respect, and collective consciousness (AONTAS, 2000; Connolly, 2003; Engelbrecht, 2004; McKay, 2010). It builds the capacity of communities to address structural and social issues such as poverty and the exclusion of marginalised communities like women and gay people. Community educators and facilitators borrow from the work of Paulo Freire, who worked with disadvantaged communities. In his work, the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues that the situation of the oppressed is a result of broader economic, social, and political forces (Freire, 2020). Therefore, part of enabling people to break out of their situation

is to allow them to develop a critical awareness of the world around them and their place within it (Freire, 2020). This process is called ‘conscientisation.’

Similarly, community education plays a crucial role in addressing social problems like the queerphobia experienced by gay men in society. It helps communities interrogate existing narratives about marginalised groups and find possible solutions to foster social cohesion (Koulaouzides, 2017; McKay, 2010). Thus, this proposed study is informed by the assumption that understanding the narratives of gay men through examining their status consumption of food would contribute toward a critical examination of the dominant homophobic narratives in communities and potentially identify or develop strategies for addressing homophobic violence.

1.4. Gay Men’s Status Consumption and Hegemonic African Masculinities

Gender encompasses the socially constructed norms, behaviours, and roles attributed to women, men, girls, and boys, alongside their interrelationships within a given society (Edwards, 2018; World Health Organization, 2006). This fluid construct evolves and varies across cultures, reflecting societal values and expectations. Moreover, gender operates within hierarchical structures, perpetuating inequalities that intersect with other forms of discrimination, including ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, age, geographic location, gender identity, and sexual orientation (Morell, 2015; Ratele et al., 2011; Thepsourinthone et al., 2020). This intersectionality underscores the multifaceted nature of discrimination and the need for comprehensive approaches to address systemic inequities (Morell, 2015; Ratele et al., 2011; Thepsourinthone et al., 2020).

While closely intertwined, gender is distinct from sex. The latter pertains to biological and physiological attributes such as chromosomes, hormones, and reproductive organs (Connell, 2020; World Health Organization, 2006). Gender identity further distinguishes individual experiences, representing one’s deeply internalised sense of self in relation to gender, which may not align with the biological sex assigned at birth (Fisher et al., 2016; Levitt, 2019). This nuanced understanding underscores the complexity of gender dynamics and the importance of respecting diverse identities and experiences.

Understanding gender from this perspective informs the concept of hegemonic masculinities as a social construct (Connell, 2020). Thus, hegemonic masculinities are understood as embodied performativity that dictates and allows men to dominate over women, children, and

other ‘subordinated’ men (such as gay men) (Bartholomaeus, 2011; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Ozturk et al., 2020). Both men and women can perform masculinity and femininity, but women and some men cannot fit the ideal description of hegemonic masculinity in their performance of masculinity (Ozturk et al., 2020). Hegemonic masculinities are distinct from other masculinities because a minority of men fit this ideal—hegemonic masculinities subordinate other forms of masculinities. For example, informed by a hegemonic capitalist patriarchal system, white men tend to dominate Black masculinities, while Black heterosexual masculinities dominate Black gay masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Ratele, 2014). In most African contexts, although Black men dominate over women, some men dominate over other men and exercise their hegemony or dominance over these men based on their race, social class, gender identity and expression, and sexual orientation.

Within the context of hegemonic capitalist patriarchal whiteness, African masculinities are rendered subordinate, and consequently, within the context of heterosexual African masculinities, gay masculinities are further subordinated (Morell, 1998; Ratele, 2013, 2014). One reason is that hetero-patriarchal culture assumes that gay men lack the particular elements within which hegemonic masculinities tend to mobilise around (i.e., heterosexuality, homophobia, physicality, the subordination of women and children, and mental aspects such as authority and competitiveness), and even though they may not express themselves in a feminine way, they remain denigrated as feminine (Bartholomeus, 2011; Connell, 2020; Ozturk et al., 2020). Because they embody a subordinated masculinity, gay men often experience anti-gay disadvantages evident in homophobic bullying and hate crimes across various spheres of society (Ngidi et al., 2020) when compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Koc, 2021).

The literature reviewed in this dissertation suggests that across many contexts, gay men, as a sub-group that has a marginalised background, engage in consumption habits, including status consumption, to build a positive social identity and consequently counter the marginalisation they experience from hegemonic masculinities, including homophobic incidences (Haslop et al., 1998; Madinga et al., 2016). As Ngidi et al. (2020) report, in their efforts to build a positive image of themselves and avert social censure, gay men often remould their performance and identities to fit the hegemonic ‘real man’ ideal.

Available literature identifies factors such as the desire for social status and targeted marketing, amongst others, as motivations for gay status consumption. However, the intersecting role that race, gender, and sexual orientation play in motivating the status consumption of gay men

remains largely unaddressed. This research reported in this dissertation is premised on the understanding that examining this intersectionality provides insights into how societal norms, discrimination, and marginalisation influence the pursuit of status symbols among gay men. It highlights the complexity of their motivations, shedding light on the role of identity affirmation, social acceptance, and resistance to stereotypes in their consumption behaviours. Such understanding is vital for promoting inclusivity and addressing systemic inequalities in marketing and society.

1.5. Rationale for the Study

My interest in the status consumption of food by Black gay men stems from my lived experiences as a Black, middle-class gay man residing in Pietermaritzburg, coupled with my observations and engagements within the Black gay community and my work in queer activist spaces. In these environments, I have often observed distinct food consumption patterns among my gay friends and peers within broader networks and social media platforms predominantly composed of Black, middle-class individuals. Our culinary preferences frequently lean towards luxury food items sourced from upmarket restaurants, grocery shops, and organic farmers' markets. These experiences are considered unique and not easily accessible to those perceived to be of a lower class (Dib & Johnson, 2019; Rink, 2019).

For the gay community, as I have observed and shared in the consumption subculture over time, these culinary choices serve a dual purpose. Firstly, they function as a means of differentiation between socio-economically disadvantaged gay men and those who are homophobic towards our marginalised sub-population. By engaging in this consumption, we position ourselves as more affluent and culturally sophisticated, thereby gaining a measure of prestige and respect from our heterosexual counterparts. Additionally, we believe that occupying a superior social status provides a level of protection or shield against the targeted homophobic discrimination and violence that LGBTQ+ individuals often face. Ngidi et al.'s (2020) research, which was based in Pietermaritzburg, reports that upmarket gay lifestyles offer protection against anti-gay violence. However, it is also evident that not all Black gay men engage in this status consumption as a conscious act of defiance or assertion. For some, it is simply an act of conforming to what is considered a gay subculture without critiquing the underlying reasons for this behaviour.

My exploration of this phenomenon began during my Bachelor of Social Science (Honours) research, where I conducted a desktop systematic literature review to understand the scope of knowledge on the status consumption of food as a form of identity construction by Black gay men in South Africa. Through this methodology, I curated a collection of 121 eligible studies conducted between 2000 and 2020, spanning diverse geographical regions such as America, Europe, Asia, Australia, and Africa (Acikalin et al., 2009; Torres & Allen, 2009; Zhang & Kim, 2013). However, my critical analysis of the literature revealed that while extensive research has been undertaken on status consumption generally (see Mazali & Rodrigues-Neto, 2013; Shukla, 2010; van Schalkwyk & Bevan Dye, 2017), most studies were conducted in Global North contexts and focused solely on white gay men (Casey, 2009; DeLozier & Rodrigue, 1996) and university students (Fan & Burton, 2002; van Schalkwyk & Bevan Dye, 2017). Studies focusing on Global South contexts, and specifically on the status consumption of Black gay men in South Africa, were notably absent. Thus, conducting this systematic literature review helped me understand the phenomenon, its existing scholarship, and the gaps in knowledge.

The findings from my systematic literature review confirmed the need for more evidence-based studies employing qualitative methods to understand the status consumption of food by people from diverse backgrounds, including Black gay men within the South African context. Therefore, the study analysed in this dissertation contributes towards existing scholarly literature by focusing on the intricacies of the status consumption of food by Black gay men in a South African urban community. The study deepens academic understanding by amplifying the voices, narratives, and experiences of this marginalised demographic. It contributes to broader societal dialogues surrounding identity construction and consumption dynamics among Black gay men within South Africa's diverse cultural landscape.

1.6. Research Aim and Questions

As argued above, studies on status consumption suggest that people who are marginalised or discriminated against in society tend to engage in this consumption behaviour to counter the discrimination they experience. This is especially the case for gay individuals who continue to experience homophobia even in contexts where LGBTQ+ people enjoy legal recognition and protection. To make a theoretical and conceptual contribution, the study analysed in this dissertation explored how gay men's understandings of status consumption of food might

provide a window into their lived experiences of being gay in the community. Specifically, the study addressed two critical research questions:

1. *How do Black gay men in a KwaZulu-Natal urban community understand and engage with the status consumption of food?*
2. *What factors motivate Black gay men's status consumption and food choices?*

1.7. Overview of the Theoretical Framework

The analysis in this study is informed by the social identity theory (SIT) and critical consciousness theory (CCT), both of which provide different perspectives on analysing status consumption within diverse social groups, including Black gay men. Social identity theory proposes that individuals categorise themselves and others into social groups based on shared attributes that shape their social identity and subsequently impact their attitudes and behaviours (Jenkins, 2014). The theory posits that individuals seek to enhance their self-esteem by positively differentiating their in-group from out-groups. Critical Consciousness Theory, rooted in critical theory and popularised by Paulo Freire, focuses on individuals' awareness of societal oppression and their ability to analyse and challenge it critically (Hogg, 2014). It emphasises the development of a critical perspective on social, economic, and political structures. It is important to acknowledge that individuals' motivations for status consumption are complex and multifaceted, and these theories provide a framework for analysis rather than definitive explanations.

Moreover, the experiences and motivations of Black gay men vary, and not all gay men engage in status consumption in the same ways and for similar reasons. These differences in motivation for status consumption are discussed in this dissertation. Chapter three presents a more detailed discussion of the theoretical framework.

1.8. Overview of the Methodological Approach

The study analysed in this dissertation adopted a critical paradigm to explore the status consumption of food by Black gay men. Research within the critical paradigm is best understood in the context of empowerment, equality, and democracy since it is interested in emancipating and redressing social and power inequalities experienced by those who are disadvantaged and oppressed in society, such as Black gay men (Kidd et al., 2011; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Neuman, 2007). Taking a qualitative approach, the study contributes to the

existing body of knowledge about the experiences of Black gay men in the field of status consumption, particularly food consumption. A qualitative approach allows participants to authentically share their realities and experiences, facilitating a deeper understanding of their perspectives (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

The study explored the lived experiences of Black gay men and how those experiences informed their food consumption habits within their community. Data generation spanned seven months and utilised a combination of online participant observation and in-depth one-on-one interviews. Online observations on Facebook and Instagram allowed an immersive understanding of participants' online interactions and behaviours related to food consumption. I used this method to explore how identity expression and food practices intersect in the virtual realm. Further, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten adult individual participants. This qualitative method fostered an environment conducive to open dialogue and exploration of nuanced issues, including the intersectionality of race, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status.

By immersing myself in online and offline settings, I aimed to capture the complexities of status consumption among Black gay men in my community. This approach enriched my research process, yielding insights into how the participants in this study navigate their marginalised identities and discrimination and construct their identities through food consumption practices. Overall, the study aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of the social dynamics shaping these experiences of Black gay men in South Africa. Chapter four presents a detailed discussion of the research design and methodology.

1.9. Overview of the Ethical Considerations in the Study

Given the sensitive nature of the topic surrounding same-sex sexual orientation, ethical issues had to be addressed to ensure the protection of participants. Firstly, I obtained ethical approval to conduct the research from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's (UKZN) Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee under protocol number HSSREC/00004402/2022. Additionally, I obtained gatekeepers' permission from the Uthingo Network, an LGBTQ+ rights organisation based in the community where I conducted my research. Before the commencement of the study, I provided participants with detailed information about the research objectives, procedures, and potential risks. I then obtained their informed written and verbal consent, confirming their voluntary participation and understanding of the study's

implications. Moreover, I received their permission to record the in-depth one-on-one interviews, emphasising transparency and respect for privacy and autonomy. I provide a detailed discussion of the ethical issues addressed in the study in Chapter Four of this dissertation.

1.10. Location and Context of the Study

This study was conducted in Pietermaritzburg, the capital city of the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province in South Africa. Pietermaritzburg presents a generative space for examining vulnerability and resilience among LGBTQ+ persons. The city reflects and extends the late Zulu King's negative beliefs about sexual minorities. As a public figure with great cultural and political power, the late King Goodwill Zwelithini's¹ homophobic stance and utterances on LGBTQ+ issues continue to inform societal attitudes in KZN. These entrenched heteronormative and patriarchal discourses silence and negate sexual minorities, branding them as "un-African" and against religion (Msibi, 2009).

This occurs despite South Africa's constitutional protections for sexual orientation, the legalisation of same-sex marriage, and generally affirming legislation and policy. Violence against Black lesbians has been widely reported and condemned (Brodie, 2021); however, Black gay men in KZN also face violence, discrimination, and social stigma (Mkhize & Moletsane, 2023; Ngidi et al., 2020). Some have been killed because of their sexual orientation and identities. For example, in 2020 and 2021, the public murders of Lindokuhle Cele and Siphamandla Khoza demonstrated the fatal nature of homophobia in KZN. Cele, an LGBTQ+ activist and musician, was stabbed to death and left with a knife stuck in his left eye—a crime the Durban High Court ruled as hate-motivated. Similarly, Khoza (a relative of mine) was

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King Goodwill Zwelithini died on the 12th of March 2021. In his place, King Misuzulu has since taken over the reign and has expressed somewhat progressive and tolerant sentiments around gender equality in KZN. However, towards the end of 2023, South Africa's former President Jacob Zuma established a new political party called Umkhonto Wesizwe (MK) to rival his former party, the African National Congress (ANC). Using his power and influence in KZN (seen in his MK party receiving a 45 percent majority in KZN), Zuma used his political campaign to perpetuate homophobia by insisting that under his leadership he will revise the Constitution to reflect anti-gender equality and anti-LGBTI values. This aligns with his 2006 sentiments that condemned same-sex marriage.

repeatedly stabbed and dumped in a ditch near his home in Ntuzuma township. These incidents underscore the relentlessness of homophobia and its devastating impact on the lives of Black gay men in the province.

While Pietermaritzburg offers an important site for contextualising these experiences, the study deliberately focuses on the lived realities of marginalised individuals rather than the location itself. The city serves as a backdrop to explore how systemic homophobia manifests and affects individuals. Its socio-political and cultural significance lies in its reflection of broader societal dynamics within KZN, shaped by deeply entrenched patriarchal values and heteronormative beliefs.

This study seeks to amplify the voices and experiences of Black gay men, who are often erased or silenced. It prioritises their narratives and examines how they use food consumption as a strategy to navigate and resist the marginalisation and violence they experience in their communities. The justification for choosing Pietermaritzburg lies in its relevance as a site that reflects the challenges and risks faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, rather than in any inherent positivity or uniqueness of the location itself. In essence, the study is not about Pietermaritzburg as a location but about how its socio-cultural dynamics shape the lived realities of marginalised citizens.

1.11. Summary and Structure of the Dissertation

This chapter introduced the study and the dissertation. It provided a foundational understanding of the status consumption of food among Black gay men, highlighting its significance within the intersection of race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. Grounded in a critical paradigm and adopting qualitative methodology, the study analysed in the dissertation addresses the existing research gap by exploring the lived experiences and perspectives of Black gay men in South Africa through the lens of their status consumption of food. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of identity construction and social dynamics within marginalised communities by delving into the complexities of status consumption practices. Having ensured ethical and methodological rigour, the study not only sheds light on gay men's status consumption of food as an understudied phenomenon, but the findings can potentially inform advocacy programming for greater visibility and recognition of the diverse experiences of Black gay men in contemporary society. Building on this chapter, the remainder of the dissertation is structured as follows:

Chapter 2

This chapter provides an extensive review of existing conceptual and empirical research on the status consumption of food, offering insights into prevalent themes, debates, and gaps within the field. Synthesising these previous studies will provide readers with an overview of the current state of the available literature and the research gap this dissertation seeks to contribute to.

Chapter 3

Drawing on social identity and critical consciousness theory, this chapter outlines the theoretical underpinnings guiding analysis in this dissertation. This chapter details the rationale behind this choice by providing readers with the merits (and some of the shortfalls) of the theoretical framework through which the phenomenon of status consumption among Black gay men is examined.

Chapter 4

Chapter Four presents the research design and methodology used to analyse this dissertation. The chapter will start with the paradigm, which, in turn, informed my choice of methodology, methods of data generation, and analysis. In addition, I describe and discuss the ethical considerations and procedures I used and the measures I took to ensure rigour and trustworthiness in this qualitative study.

Chapter 5

This chapter delves into the food consumption practices of Black gay men in Pietermaritzburg, analysing how their food-related behaviours function as expressions of identity, social positioning, and resistance to marginalisation. I draw on the data collected through participant online observations to illustrate how food extends beyond mere sustenance to become a dynamic medium for constructing and communicating identity.

Chapter 6

This chapter is the first that presents the findings from the study. The chapter responds to the first and second research questions: 1) *How do Black gay men in a KwaZulu-Natal urban community understand and engage with the status consumption of food?* 2) *What factors motivate Black gay men's status consumption and food choices in this community?*

Chapter 7

Chapter Six presents the second set of findings that respond to the second research question: *What factors motivate Black gay men's status consumption and food choices?*

Chapter 8

The final chapter will synthesise the theoretical insights from the study, explaining the observed phenomena and their implications for the broader literature on status consumption among gay men. By theoretically engaging with the findings, this chapter will highlight the study's contributions and suggest avenues for future research, thereby advancing understanding and promoting inclusivity within the field of consumer behaviour. The next chapter presents the literature reviewed for this study.

CHAPTER TWO

THE STATUS CONSUMPTION OF FOOD AND GAY MEN'S IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1. Introduction

The phenomenon of status consumption, characterised by the acquisition and use of goods and services that signal high social standing and prestige, has received significant attention across various disciplines internationally, including marketing, economics, sociology, and psychology. Initially theorised by Thorstein Veblen in his seminal 1899 work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, status consumption refers to a consumption behaviour where individuals purchase commodities not only to satisfy their needs but also to enhance and communicate their social class (Chipp et al., 2011; McDonnell, 2016; Memushi, 2013; Veblen, 2005). While traditionally associated with the elite, status consumption has evolved to encompass a broader spectrum of society, including those with lower socio-economic status (Bagwell & Bernheim, 1996; Belk, 1988; Freedman, 1991). Bagwell and Bernheim (1996) outline two primary motives driving status consumption: 'invidious comparison' and 'pecuniary emulation'. The former involves elites distinguishing themselves from lower classes through conspicuous consumption, while the latter sees individuals from lower-status groups striving to elevate their social standing by emulating the consumption patterns of the affluent (Bagwell & Bernheim, 1996; Belk, 1988; Freedman, 1991). For instance, through invidious comparison, a wealthy individual may purchase expensive clothing to differentiate themselves from those less affluent. In contrast, pecuniary emulation might prompt a non-wealthy person to buy a designer garment to project wealth and status.

This literature review delves into the intricate and multifaceted identities of Black gay men, exploring the intersections of race, sexuality, and gender, with a particular focus on the South African context. It examines how historical and socio-cultural dynamics, including the legacies of systemic racism and ongoing struggles for LGBTQ+ rights, shape these intersecting identities. The review is structured into six key sections: Black Gay Identities and Intersectional Marginalisation (Section 2.2), Homophobia against Black Gay Men (Section 2.3), Status Consumption and Status Symbols (Section 2.4), Understanding the Status Consumption of

Food (Section 2.5), and Status Consumption in the Context of Homophobia in South Africa (Section 2.6).

Each section provides a comprehensive understanding of the unique challenges, experiences, and forms of resistance that Black gay men navigate. By focusing on these areas, the literature review illuminates the resilience and strength of Black gay communities while also shedding light on the structural inequalities and societal norms that perpetuate discrimination and marginalisation. Through this exploration, the review underscores the importance of centring the voices, narratives, and experiences of Black gay individuals in discussions of identity, representation, and social justice, advocating ultimately for a more inclusive and equitable society.

2.2. Black Gay Identities and Intersectional Marginalisation

The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), offers a framework for understanding how multiple social identities, such as race, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status, interact to produce unique experiences of oppression and privilege. Initially developed to examine the compounded discrimination faced by Black women, intersectionality has since expanded to analyse the interconnected nature of various marginalised identities. In the context of race, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status, intersectionality underscores how these dimensions intersect to shape lived experiences in ways that cannot be reduced to their individual components (Colfer, Ihalainen & Basnett, 2021; Nowaskie & Najam, 2022; Valdez & Golash-Boza, 2017). For example, Black gay men in low-income contexts navigate distinct challenges arising from the simultaneous effects of racism, homophobia, and classism, which are often overlooked in broader conversations about inequality (Bilge & Collins, 2016).

Research on the intersection of race and sexual orientation highlights how systemic oppression manifests differently for individuals at the nexus of these identities. Studies by Bowleg (2013) emphasise that Black LGBTQ+ individuals experience compounded stigma, wherein their racial identity often heightens the discrimination they face within predominantly white LGBTQ+ spaces, while their sexual orientation exposes them to homophobia in Black communities. This double marginalisation leaves them navigating social spaces where they feel neither entirely accepted nor represented. Furthermore, the intersection with socio-economic status adds another layer of complexity. For instance, low-income Black gay men often lack

access to supportive networks, healthcare, and safe spaces, exacerbating their vulnerability to social exclusion and economic precarity (Kinitz, 2023).

Socio-economic status intersects with race and sexual orientation to shape access to resources and opportunities, deepening systemic inequities (Engelhardt, Brioli & von Lilienfeld-Toal, 2023). Scholars such as Crenshaw (1991) and Bilge & Collins (2016) argue that poverty amplifies the marginalisation of LGBTQ+ individuals of colour, as they disproportionately face barriers to education, employment, and housing due to structural racism and homophobic policies. This intersection often forces Black LGBTQ+ individuals into informal economies or precarious employment, where they are more vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination (Kinitz et al., 2024).

Despite the challenges, intersectionality also reveals how individuals resist and navigate these overlapping systems of oppression (Howard & Vajda, 2017). Black gay men, for example, often draw on cultural resilience, community solidarity, and digital platforms to assert their identities and create spaces of affirmation (Schmitz, Coley, Thomas & Ramirez, 2022). Social media has emerged as a powerful tool for visibility and advocacy, enabling individuals to challenge stereotypes, build networks, and foster inclusivity. These acts of resistance illustrate the agency of marginalised groups in reclaiming their narratives and creating transformative social change. Overall, the intersection of race, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status demands nuanced attention to how structural inequalities operate and how individuals leverage resilience to navigate and resist these forces.

The identities of Black gay men embody unique challenges and experiences that underscore the intersections of race, sexuality, and gender. In South Africa, these multifaceted identities emerge within a complex socio-historical context, shaped by the struggles and successes of Black liberation and LGBTQ+ rights movements (Edwards et al., 2019; Hénaux and Stefani, 2020). Understanding Black gay identities necessitates an exploration of the distinct challenges, experiences, and forms of resistance individuals encounter as they navigate the intersections of their race, sexuality, and gender.

At the core of Black gay identities lies the interplay between these intersecting identities and their sexual orientation (Crawford et al., 2002; Kudler, 2007). Blackness, historically framed within a lens of oppression and resilience, carries a legacy of systemic racism, discrimination, and marginalisation (Crawford et al., 2002; Edwards and Esposito, 2019; Hénaux and Stefani, 2020). Icard (1986) and Loicano (1989) highlight the detrimental effects of racism within the

gay community and anti-homosexual sentiments within the Black community, contributing to negative self-concepts and inadequate coping mechanisms. Bowleg (2013) and Green (2007) emphasise the intricate and conflicting nature of these intersections, with Black gay men contending with negative stereotypes, racial microaggressions, and pressures to conform to traditional gender roles. Concurrently, sexuality introduces another layer of complexity as Black gay individuals negotiate their identities within environments that may be unwelcoming or hostile to non-heteronormative identities (Baldor, 2021; Graham, 2014; van Der Schyff, 2002).

Furthermore, gender identity further complicates the landscape of Black gay identities (Bowleg, 2013; Green, 2007). Conventional notions of masculinity and femininity within Black communities intersect with Western gender constructs, resulting in diverse gender expressions and experiences that may be scrutinised in African societies (Bonvillian, 2020; Ridgeway & Kricheli-Katz, 2013). For instance, while Western societies may accept nurturing behaviours in men, such traits may be stigmatised as weakness or excessive softness in African contexts (see, for example, Collins, 2006; Mayekiso, 2017; Mthembu, 2015). Black transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals, in particular, confront intersecting forms of discrimination based on race, sexuality, and gender identity, often encountering heightened levels of violence and marginalisation, which may not be as pronounced in some Western societies (Austin, 2016; Fiani, 2018).

The lived experiences of Black gay individuals are profoundly shaped by intersecting systems of oppression, including racism, homophobia, and transphobia (Chulani, 2019; Daley et al., 2007). Structural inequities, such as disparities in healthcare access, housing, and employment opportunities, exacerbate the challenges faced by Black gay communities (Yearby, 2018). Anti-LGBTQ+ social norms perpetuate cycles of violence and incarceration in certain contexts, disproportionately affecting Black gay individuals (Loicano, 1989). Despite these challenges, Black gay individuals demonstrate remarkable resilience and resistance in the face of adversity (Robinson & Schmitz, 2021). Community support networks, pride events, and political activism are sources of strength and empowerment, enabling individuals to confront systemic injustices and affirm their identities (Robinson & Schmitz, 2021). For instance, the ballroom culture in Harlem, USA, and the emergence of LGBTQ+-affirming churches within Black gay communities exemplify spaces where individuals cultivate belonging and affirmation, fostering collective identity and solidarity (Hobson III, 2014; Potgieter & Reygan, 2011).

Looking ahead, it is imperative to centre the voices and experiences of Black gay individuals in conversations about identity, representation, and social justice. Recognising the interconnected nature of race, sexuality, and gender is crucial for comprehending the complexities of Black gay identities. By amplifying these voices and addressing systemic inequalities, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society where all individuals can freely express their authentic selves without fear of discrimination or marginalisation.

2.3. Homophobia against Black Gay Men

As argued above, homophobia against Black gay men represents a profoundly entrenched form of discrimination that intersects with racism, heterosexism, and misogyny to create unique challenges for this subpopulation (Bryant, 2008; Fields et al., 2016; Hunter, 2010; Scales, 2020). Black gay men often face heightened levels of stigma and marginalisation due to the intersection of their racial and sexual identities and historical and cultural factors, including religious beliefs and societal norms (Jackson et al., 2020; Hunter, 2010). This discrimination manifests in various forms, including verbal harassment, physical violence, and social exclusion. Research indicates that Black gay men experience disproportionately high rates of hate crimes, homelessness, and HIV & AIDS compared to their white counterparts (Fields et al., 2016; Halkitis et al., 2013; Yearby, 2018). Moreover, systemic barriers limit access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities and exacerbate social and economic disparities for gay men (Fields et al., 2016; Halkitis et al., 2013; Yearby, 2018). Pope (2021) asserts that confronting homophobia at its root and affirming the dignity and humanity of all individuals can help societies create a more equitable and inclusive future for Black gay men. This would involve a multifaceted approach that challenges ingrained prejudices, promotes cultural competence, and advocates for policies that protect LGBTQ+ rights (Griffith, 2022; Giwa, 2016; Nyoni, 2020) and addresses the systemic barriers they encounter in communities and institutions. For example, community-based interventions, allyship initiatives, and inclusive education programmes are essential for fostering acceptance, support, and resilience within Black communities (Allison, 2023).

Homophobia against Black gay men is a deeply rooted form of discrimination that intertwines with racism, heterosexism, and misogyny, creating unique and significant challenges for this group (Bowleg, 2013; Giwa, 2016). Black gay men often face intensified stigma and marginalisation due to the intersection of their racial and sexual identities, compounded by

historical and cultural factors such as religious beliefs and societal norms (Bowleg, 2013; Giwa, 2016). This multifaceted discrimination manifests in various harmful ways, including verbal harassment, physical violence, and social exclusion (Bowleg, 2013; Giwa, 2016). The consequences are severe, with Black gay men experiencing higher rates of hate crimes, homelessness, and HIV & AIDS than their white counterparts (Halkitis et al., 2013; Herek & Sims, 2008). Systemic barriers further restrict access to essential services like healthcare, education, and employment, exacerbating social and economic disparities (Woolf & Braveman, 2011).

As a consequence, it is important to confront homophobia at its roots and affirm the dignity and humanity of Black gay men to foster a more equitable and inclusive society. A multifaceted approach is required to challenge ingrained prejudices, promote cultural competence, and advocate for policies that protect LGBTQ+ rights. This approach must address systemic barriers within communities and institutions, employing community-based interventions, allyship initiatives, and inclusive education programmes to cultivate acceptance, support, and resilience. Through these efforts, we can work towards dismantling the intersecting oppressions faced by Black gay men and pave the way for a more just and inclusive future.

2.4. Status Consumption and Status Symbols

As theorised by the American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen in his 1899 book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, status consumption is the practice of purchasing and using goods and services to display economic power and social status publicly. Veblen argues that individuals engage in this behaviour to signal their wealth and social standing to others, often consuming luxury items not for their intrinsic utility but for the prestige they convey. This consumption is driven by the desire to impress others and gain social recognition. Over time, scholars have come to understand status consumption as a process that drives individuals who belong to or identify with a marginalised, stigmatised, or low-status group to strive to improve their social standing by acquiring or consuming products that symbolise status in mainstream society (Eastman et al., 1999). Goldsmith and Clark (2011) note that this behaviour transcends an individual's socio-economic status, while Shukla (2010) characterises it as irrational behaviour in its expression and motivation. Furthermore, Madinga et al. (2016) and Mason (2001) argue that status consumers are not driven by the urge to satisfy their basic needs but rather by the satisfaction they derive from society's reactions to their possession of status goods.

Available research advances the notion that status consumption is a function of socialisation and that the goods and services purchased serve to signify social class, thus affording consumers prestige (Veblen, 2005; McDonnell, 2016; Memushi, 2013; Veblen, 2005). Likewise, as Eastman et al. (1999, p. 41) suggest, 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 the case for gay men whose subculture of consumption can be viewed as an attempt by gay men 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 (Hsieh & Wu, 2011, p. 391).

Central to status consumption are status symbols, defined as material indicators communicating a person's specific social status to others (Kendall, 2013). O'Cass and Frost (2002) add that these symbols are associated with images evoked by particular products in the consumers' minds. For any product to be regarded as a status symbol, it must have distinct defining characteristics. For example, Del Río et al. (2001) suggest that the status of a product or service depends on its social attributes, benefits, and attitudes. For a product to be considered a status symbol, it must be recognised by the intended audience, as different societies may attribute varying meanings to certain symbols (Garcia et al., 2019; Han et al., 2010). Products and services such as mobile phones, clothing, luxury cars, vacations, wellness pursuits, pets, and food continue to be associated with status (Mazali & Rodrigues-Neto, 2013; Vella, 2008).

Other goods and services regarded as status symbols include leisure travel, branded clothing, and art (Dib & Johnson, 2019; Hsieh & Wu, 2011; Kates, 2000; Rink, 2019). Food is also regarded as a symbolic product whose distribution and consumption are socially determined. Empirical evidence suggests that food is also a social artefact that symbolises how people define themselves in the context of their social class, race, gender, and so on in any given society (Lee, 2015; Shah, 2018). Within this context, food is essential to one's sense of identity, and food choices reflect one's socioeconomic background and personality (Shah, 2018; Fischler, 1988). In her extension of this idea, Almerico (2014, p. 1) argues that "food choices tell stories of families, migrations, assimilation, resistance, changes over time, and personal and group identity." More recently, Kim and Jang (2015) suggest that food is a status symbol

that maintains social differentiation and distinguishes individuals and groups. As such, the concept of status consumption, originally expounded by Veblen, extends to encompass diverse facets of identity expression, including the consumption of food as a symbolic practice that communicates social status and cultural identity within communities.

2.5. Understanding the Status Consumption of Food

Historically, status symbols such as clothing and luxury cars have traditionally been used to signal social status. However, a notable shift has been towards including expensive material possessions and participation in exclusive social activities, such as dining in upscale restaurants and making extravagant food choices (Batat, 2020; Warde & Marten, 2000). While food and cuisine are essential for sustenance and nourishment (Fieldhouse, 2013), this literature review underscores that food symbolises a given society's cultures and traditions (Bardhi et al., 2010; Bliss, 2014; Fonseca, 2008). Individuals use food to express various aspects of their lives, including gender, race, social identities, self-actualisation, esteem, cultural adaptability, and class mobility (Bardhi et al., 2010; Bliss, 2014; Kim & Jang, 2014; Lee, 2015; Shah, 2018; Tikkanen, 2007; Üstüner & Holt, 2010). For example, Mills (2010) reports that women in the United States of America use food to solidify and strengthen their relationships with family and community in the form of cooking and eating. Oncini (2019) discovered that the new aspirational class defines its boundaries through consumer awareness, an animal-rights ethos, and, to some extent, environmental consciousness.

Scholars argue that concerns about identity, social belonging, and social status heavily influence people's food choices (Herman et al., 2003; Shah, 2018). For instance, premium beef steak and caviar are considered symbols of high social status in societies where they are luxurious items (Allen & Torres, 2006). As highlighted in Chapter One, the literature reviewed in this study lacks focus on food consumption among gay men as a specific group. Therefore, in the dissertation analysed in this dissertation, I aimed to investigate how Black gay men in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, perceive and utilise their food consumption practices and related goods and services to elevate and signify their status in society. Below is a brief overview of the literature on examples of food frequently regarded as status symbols in various international communities, specifically in South Africa, which Black gay men in my community and networks often aspire to emulate as benchmarks of prestige.

2.5.1. Food and Cuisine Used as Status Symbols

Organic foods have become increasingly popular globally due to the perception that because they are produced without pesticides and fertilisers, they tend to be more beneficial for health and well-being (Winter & Davis, 2006). Scholars also suggest that organic food consumption is motivated by its status-signalling function, as consumers associate it with privilege and social distinction (Fifita et al., 2020). For example, in the United States of America (USA), the organic food industry recorded an 11% increase in 2015 (Organic Trade Association, 2016).

Similarly, historically reserved for the elite and considered a universal celebratory drink, champagne continues to serve as a symbol of luxury and celebration, with consumers influenced more by its branding and packaging than by taste (Combris et al., 2006). The study conducted by Combris et al. (2006) focused specifically on the role of champagne in status signalling. The participants tasted champagnes of different price ranges under two conditions: one, where they could see the bottles, and two, where they were blindfolded. In their experiment, the participants successfully estimated the price range of the champagne when they could see the bottles. They rated the champagne higher in taste depending on its price. The higher the price, the more status or prestige they attach to it. The opposite was true when they were blindfolded. This suggested that the participants could not accurately rank the champagnes based on taste alone. Packaging, branding, and cost also heavily influenced their perceptions of quality.

Wine, mainly imported varieties, is likewise used to signal wealth and social status, with affluent individuals investing in it as a status marker in the Global North and South, including South Africa (Hlalethwa, 2019; Harding, 2017). Van der Loos (2015) reports that wealthy people buy wine to signal their social status and invest in it since most bottles they purchase will never be opened. These consumers prefer imported fine wines to domestic ones since imported wine carries a higher status (Harding, 2017; van der Loos, 2015). A survey conducted by Barclays (2012) reports that about one-quarter of wealthy people worldwide own a wine collection, which signals their social status (Barclays, 2012).

Coffee has also emerged as a status symbol globally, especially in urban settings. As per a blog published by the Hopeless Romantic (2013), approximately 1.7 billion cups of coffee are consumed daily worldwide. For many consumers, coffee serves as their morning pick-me-up, while others rely on it to energise themselves or facilitate business negotiations. Consumers

frequent upscale cafes for coffee and the social status associated with such establishments (Kim & Jang, 2013). Holding a branded coffee cup, like Starbucks, has become a marker of social prestige, with individuals using it to signal their status on social media (Gerlach, 2016). This trend is affirmed by a former Starbucks manager, as reported on Quora by Trim (2018), who highlighted instances where customers requested empty Starbucks paper cups solely to take photos and share them on social media, giving the impression that they had purchased coffee. The manager noted that some customers expressed disappointment and even left the store upon learning that their coffee would be served in a plain white cup rather than the branded one. Some individuals requested refunds, insisting on having a branded cup (Trim, 2018).

Additionally, studies suggest that men are more inclined towards branded coffee consumption to signal their status (Tifferet et al., 2012). A study that observed sex differences in the status consumption of coffee among 1053 Israeli students found that 85% of the men bought branded coffee compared to 64% of the women (Tifferet et al., 2012). The researchers proposed that men's high prevalence of branded coffee consumption results from their strong need to signal their status. Tifferet et al. (2012) further argue that men signal their status by choosing branded products, including coffee.

Over time, status consumption has been understood as a means for individuals, particularly those from marginalised or low-status groups, to elevate their social standing by acquiring products that symbolise mainstream status (Bellezza & Burger, 2020; Molnă & Lamont, 2002). Bellezza and Burger (2020) argue that this behaviour transcends socio-economic status and is often motivated by societal reactions rather than the satisfaction of basic needs. Veblen's (2005) notion that status consumption is a function of socialisation suggests that the goods and services purchased serve to signify social class and afford consumers prestige.

Key learnings from this section highlight the central role of status symbols in status consumption. These symbols, defined as material indicators communicating a person's specific social status, must possess distinct defining characteristics and be recognised by the intended audience (Kendall, 2013; Mazali & Rodrigues-Neto, 2013). Products such as mobile phones, luxury cars, and branded clothing are associated with status (Mading et al., 2016). Additionally, food has emerged as a significant status symbol, reflecting one's social class, identity, and cultural background (Bennet, 1943; Montanari, 2006). Choices in food consumption tell rich stories of personal and group identities, migrations, and social differentiation (Atkin et al., 2021; Ray, 2004). This understanding underscores the symbolic nature of material possessions

in society and their role in shaping consumer behaviour. Furthermore, food consumption among gay men serves to signal their status and identity within their community (Kates, 2002). The literature reviewed here emphasises that food is not merely a source of nutrition but a social artefact that symbolises one's background and personality (Murcott, 2005; Statcic, 2013; Rozin, 2007).

In summary, status consumption encompasses various products and behaviours that individuals use to signify their social standing and identity. From luxury items to everyday consumables, individuals' choices in consumption reflect not only their economic means but also their cultural affiliations, personal identities, and aspirations for social recognition. Understanding these dynamics provides insights into how consumption shapes social hierarchies and underscores the need for continued research into the complexities of status signalling across diverse social contexts.

2.5.2 Drivers of Status Consumption among Gay Men

Research has long identified the significance of status consumption within the gay community compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Kates, 2002). This scholarship illustrates how it serves as a means for them to define the boundaries of their subcultural identity. As argued throughout this dissertation, status consumption plays a significant role in the gay subculture, shaping identity construction, individual self-concept, and defining the boundaries of the group (Dib & Johnson, 2019). Drawing from interdisciplinary research, this section of the literature review focuses on the various factors that drive gay men to status consumption among gay men.

2.5.2.1 The Desire for Social Status

Pursuing social status represents a universal aspiration, especially pronounced among marginalised social groups striving to elevate their standing (de Botton, 2008; Veblen, 2005). Luxury consumption frequently acts as a vehicle for signalling social status (Dib & Johnson, 2019). For example, GayWheels' (2009) study on car brand preferences among gay men illustrated a marked preference for BMW, citing its association with 'wealth' as a primary motivator. This drive for status emanates from a core human desire to differentiate oneself, shaped by perceptions of class distinctions (Veblen, 2005; Han et al., 2010). In contexts like the gay community, which often contends with discrimination (Ghabriel, 2017; Koppelman,

1994), the pursuit of social status not only facilitates access to social capital but also fortifies self-esteem and challenges societal norms (Fournier, 2009; Lange et al., 2019), thereby intertwining status-seeking behaviours with identity formation.

2.5.2.2 The Need for Uniqueness

Individuals' varying needs for uniqueness profoundly influence their consumption patterns, particularly evident among gay men who often exhibit a strong inclination towards distinctiveness in their choices (Dib & Johnson, 2019; Rink, 2019). Luxury consumption serves as a platform through which gay men assert their individuality and differentiate themselves (Belk, 1998). By acquiring luxury goods and services, they express freedom of expression and signal their social status, aligning with the uniqueness theory that emphasises individuals' avoidance of similarity (Lynn & Harris, 1997). Thus, gay men engage in status consumption to achieve this uniqueness, acquiring luxury items that set them apart from others and reinforce their distinct identities within society.

2.5.2.3 The Influence of the Gay Subculture

The emergence of subcultures contrasts mainstream societal values, offering alternative meaning systems for marginalised groups (Hebdige, 2013; Plummer, 1975). Within the gay community, a distinct subculture of consumption has developed, characterised by consumption practices and items that hold particular significance (Rink, 2019; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Luxury consumption within this subculture serves as a way for gay men to assert their identity and demonstrate affiliation with the community (Haslop et al., 1998). This consumption pattern encompasses luxury symbols such as leisure activities, branded clothing, fine art, and luxury vehicles (Casey, 2009; DeLozier & Rodrigue, 1996). Furthermore, the gay subculture provides a sense of safety and inclusivity, challenging mainstream media stereotypes (Haslop et al., 1998). According to a study by Haslop et al. (1998), respondents noted feeling safer within gay spaces compared to heterosexual spaces, countering perceptions of higher violence levels in the latter. Moreover, gay consumers refute media-generated stereotypes of a homogeneous and universally defined gay subculture, emphasising its diverse range of images and identities (Haslop et al., 1998).

2.5.2.4 Success and Pride

Significant others often influence consumption habits, as individuals conform to expectations to uphold their social image (Lertwannawit & Mandhachitara, 2012; Vigneron & Johnson,

2017). In the context of the gay community, perceptions of success are intricately tied to consumption practices, where luxury brands serve as symbols of achievement (Dib & Johnson, 2019). Thus, some individuals reinforce stereotypes by seeking luxury brands that align with their desired 'image' of success. This image is not innate but maintained through continual self-monitoring and adjustment via consumption practices (Schembri et al., 2010). Luxury consumption fulfils a need for pride, as individuals derive a sense of accomplishment and validation from owning prestigious brands (McFerran et al., 2014). This pride is closely linked to concepts of success, reinforcing one's identity and social status within the community (Dib & Johnson, 2019).

2.5.2.5 Targeted Marketing Strategies

Subcultures demonstrate strong brand loyalty towards products that align with their values and identity (McNamara & Descubes, 2016). Similarly, brand loyalty is evident within the gay community (McNamara & Descubes, 2016). Marketing strategies play a crucial role in promoting status consumption by positioning luxury brands as symbols of prestige and exclusivity (Krähmer, 2005). Within the gay community, targeted marketing campaigns that recognise and engage with their unique identity can significantly shape consumption behaviours (McNamara & Descubes, 2016). Research indicates that advertisements featuring gay and lesbian themes positively influence purchasing decisions among gay men, highlighting the substantial impact of targeted marketing on status consumption (McNamara & Descubes, 2016).

2.5.2.6 The Impact of Celebrity Endorsements

Celebrity endorsements influence consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions (Evans & Hesmondhalgh, 2006). Like other consumers, gay men often identify with celebrities who endorse luxury brands, viewing them as aspirational figures (Memushi, 2013). Endorsements by openly gay celebrities hold particular resonance within the gay community, reinforcing brand associations with success and social status (Memushi, 2013). Furthermore, celebrity endorsements are markers of social status, shaping perceptions of individuals' wealth and lifestyle choices (Memushi, 2013).

Examining status consumption among gay men reveals several significant drivers, including the pursuit of social status, the need for uniqueness, the influence of the gay subculture, and the role of success and pride (Dib & Johnson, 2019). This distinct consumption behaviour

intertwines with the community's identity formation and social positioning. For example, seeking social status is not merely about personal prestige, but it also involves acquiring social capital and challenging societal norms, illustrated by preferences for prestigious brands such as BMW (Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015; GayWheels, 2009; Solomon, 2002). Similarly, the desire for uniqueness motivates gay men to differentiate themselves through luxury consumption, aligning with theories of individuality and differentiation (Chen & Kanai, 2002; Holland, 2013).

Moreover, the impact of targeted marketing strategies and celebrity endorsements underscores the importance of status consumption within the gay community (Kallur, 2018; Memushi, 2013). Marketing efforts that resonate with the values and identities of gay consumers significantly shape their consumption patterns, fostering strong brand loyalty (Kates, 2004; Oekenfull, 2013). Celebrity endorsements, especially by openly gay figures, serve as potent symbols of success and social status, reinforcing the aspirational allure of luxury brands (Memushi, 2013). Together, these elements highlight the intricate interplay between consumption, identity, and social status within the gay subculture, demonstrating how luxury consumption fulfils personal and communal roles in expressing and affirming one's place in society.

2.6. Status Consumption in the Context of Homophobia in South Africa

As argued throughout this dissertation, South Africa stands out globally for its legal protections against discrimination on various grounds, including sexual orientation (Cameron, 2017; Christiansen, 2016; Mkhize et al., 2010; Nel & Judge, 2008). Despite these progressive legal measures, studies indicate that the lived experiences of LGBT individuals, particularly Black gay men, continue to be marked by persistent challenges stemming from homophobia, discrimination, and violence (Braunstein, 2017; Craven, 2011; Henderson, 2015; Mkhize et al., 2010; Nadal, 2020; Reygan, 2014).

In response, LGBT individuals, communities, and activists have mobilised to increase visibility across various domains, contributing to perceptions of South Africa as a safe and equitable space for LGBT people, both domestically and internationally (Currier, 2007; Epprecht, 2013; Mkhize et al., 2010; Ngidi, 2020; Soldati-Kahimbaara & Sibeko, 2012; Thoreson, 2014). However, this positive perception contrasts sharply with the entrenched realities of

homophobia and violence targeting LGBT individuals. Alarmingly, in 2021 alone, at least 24 individuals fell victim to fatal attacks believed to be motivated by their sexual orientation or gender identity (Reid, 2022; Sichinga, 2022). Furthermore, other violations of LGBT rights, such as hate speech, remain prevalent across South African society. Despite constitutional protections, gay men continue to face stigma, marginalisation, and oppression. To counter these challenges, LGBT activists have organised into a cohesive movement advocating for nationwide acceptance and rights within communities (Gevisser, 2013; Thoreson, 2014). For example, Uthingo Network, formerly known as the Gay and Lesbian Network, an LGBT advocacy organisation, commissioned research looking into homophobia in schools (Stephens, 2011) to better understand the extent and effects of homophobia in schools. The report findings were used to inform their school-based anti-homophobia interventions. OUT Wellbeing also undertook a study titled Love Not Hate (Campaign, 2016) that sought to understand anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes in South Africa.

In response to pervasive discrimination and violence, LGBT individuals often employ subversive strategies at both individual and collective levels (Boonzaier & Zway, 2015; Spade & Willse, 2000), including status consumption (Reilly & Rudd, 2007). Ellemers et al. (2002) found that individuals who perceive constant threats to their group and individual identities are inclined to engage in behaviours, such as status consumption, to affirm and bolster their identity in society. For marginalised groups, status consumption signifies social standing and prestige by acquiring goods and services (McDonnell, 2016; Memushi, 2013; Veblen, 2005). Eastman et al. (1999) suggest that for Black gay men, status consumption holds added significance as a means of asserting their identity within the gay community and countering the systemic injustices they face in a racist society (Creekmur & Doty, 1995). Thus, within the intricate landscape of LGBT rights and discrimination in South Africa, status consumption among Black gay men, the focal point of this dissertation, emerges as a nuanced response aimed at asserting social identity and resisting homophobia within communities.

2.7. Discussion

This literature review chapter has presented a comprehensive examination of the complex and intersecting identities of Black gay men in South Africa, emphasising the interplay of race, sexuality, and gender. The chapter underscores the significant socio-historical context and

systemic challenges that shape the experiences of this marginalised group. The review reveals several important findings, shedding light on the unique struggles and resilience of Black gay men in navigating their identities within a society marked by deep-seated racism and persistent homophobia.

One of the central findings is the profound impact of intersectionality on the lives of Black gay men. The review highlights how their identities are shaped not merely by their sexuality but also by the intersection of race and gender. This intersectionality exposes them to multiple layers of discrimination and marginalisation, both within the broader society and within the LGBTQ+ community itself. The literature emphasises that understanding these intersecting identities is crucial for grasping the full extent of the challenges faced by Black gay men. The significance of this finding lies in its call for a more nuanced approach to addressing the needs of this group, recognising that their experiences cannot be fully understood through a single-axis framework of identity.

The review also reveals the pervasive nature of homophobia and its detrimental effects on Black gay men's lives. It highlights how homophobia intersects with racism and misogyny, creating a hostile environment that severely limits their access to essential services, such as healthcare, education, and employment. This intersectional discrimination exacerbates their vulnerability and hinders their social mobility. The significance of this finding is profound, as it underscores the urgent need for intersectional policies and interventions that address the compounded discrimination faced by Black gay men. It also calls for a deeper exploration of the cultural and religious factors that perpetuate homophobia within Black communities, which is crucial for developing culturally sensitive and effective interventions.

The concept of status consumption emerges as another critical theme in the literature review. The review explores how Black gay men use status symbols to navigate their identities and resist systemic inequalities. As theorised by Veblen, status consumption involves using goods and services to signal social status and economic power. The literature reveals that Black gay men engage in status consumption to assert their identities and gain social acceptance in a context where they are marginalised. This finding is significant as it highlights the adaptive strategies employed by Black gay men to cope with and resist their marginalisation. It also calls for a deeper exploration of how status consumption manifests differently across various social groups and contexts.

Food consumption is discussed as a specific form of status consumption, symbolising identity and social status. The review highlights how food choices reflect one's socioeconomic background and personality. However, it notes a gap in the literature regarding specific examples of how Black gay men in South Africa use food consumption to signify their status. This gap indicates the need for more empirical studies focusing on this group's unique status consumption practices—a gap the research analysed in this dissertation contributes towards. Understanding these practices is crucial for developing targeted interventions that recognise the cultural and symbolic significance of status consumption in the lives of Black gay men.

The review concludes by examining how status consumption intersects with homophobia in South Africa. It discusses how Black gay men use status symbols to navigate their social identities in a context marked by systemic racism and homophobia. The literature highlights the challenges faced by this group in asserting their identities and gaining social acceptance. This intersection of status consumption and homophobia underscores the resilience and agency of Black gay men in resisting their marginalisation. The significance of this finding lies in its call for more intersectional analysis that considers how various identities, such as gender identity and socioeconomic status, influence the status consumption behaviours of Black gay men.

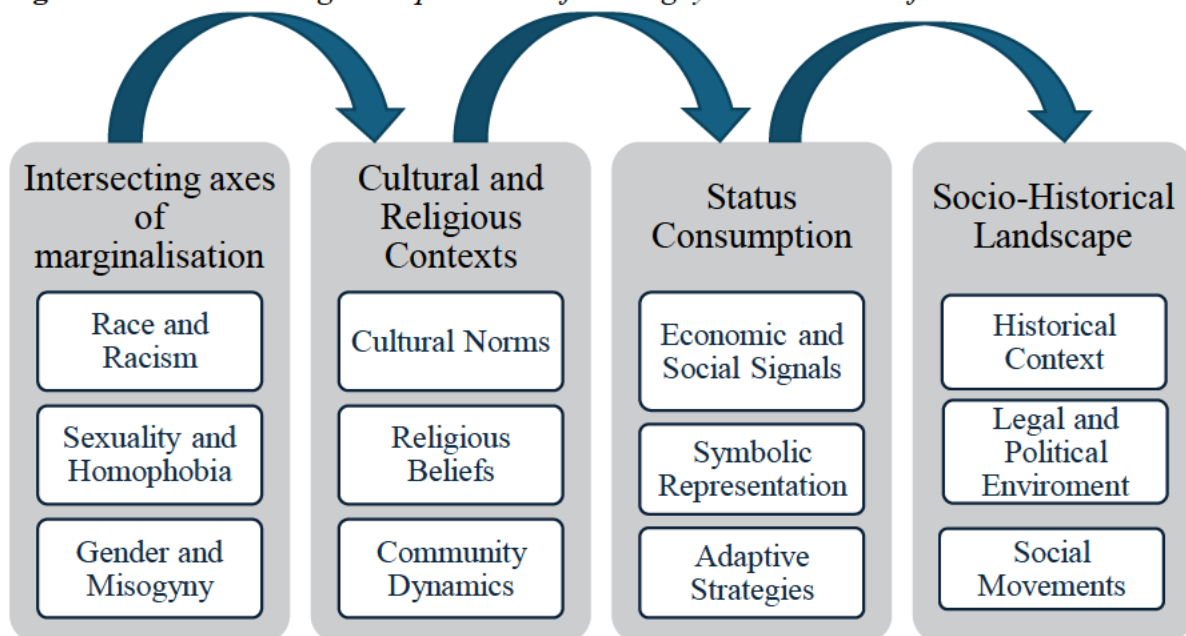
Overall, this literature review chapter presents a comprehensive and insightful examination of the intersecting identities and experiences of Black gay men in South Africa. It highlights the profound impact of intersectionality, the pervasive nature of homophobia, and the adaptive strategies employed by Black gay men to navigate their identities. The chapter underscores the urgent need for intersectional policies and interventions that address the compounded discrimination faced by this group. It also calls for more empirical studies focusing on the unique status consumption practices of Black gay men, recognising the cultural and symbolic significance of these practices. By centring the voices and experiences of Black gay men, the literature review contributes to a more inclusive and equitable understanding of identity, representation, and social justice.

2.8. Understanding the experiences of Black gay men in South Africa: A Conceptual Framework

As stated above, the experiences of Black gay men in South Africa are shaped by a complex interplay of multiple identities and contextual factors. To understand these experiences

holistically, a unified conceptual framework is necessary, integrating the key elements of intersectionality, cultural and religious contexts, status consumption, and the socio-historical landscape. Thus, emerging from the literature review in this chapter is a conceptual framework for understanding the nuanced experiences of Black gay men in South Africa, highlighting how systemic forces and personal agency intersect to influence their lives. In particular, the conceptual framework is organised around two questions: *What factors shape the identities and experiences of Black gay men in South Africa?* and *what strategies do Black gay men employ to navigate social hierarchies and assert their identities?* Figure 2.1 presents the conceptual framework that guides this study.

Figure 2.1 *Understanding the experiences of Black gay men in South Africa.*



At the heart of this framework is intersectionality, a principle that recognises the interconnected nature of various social identities (Crenshaw, 1990). Black gay men navigate a landscape where race, sexuality, and gender converge, exposing them to unique challenges. Systemic racism within both broader South African society and the LGBTQ+ community positions Black gay men at a disadvantage, often leading to discrimination and exclusion. For instance, while the LGBTQ+ community may advocate for sexual rights, it can simultaneously harbour biases against Black individuals, thus marginalising those who are both Black and gay. This dual marginalisation necessitates an intersectional analysis that acknowledges the complexities of

their identities and emphasises the need for tailored interventions that address their specific experiences.

Complementing this intersectional lens are the cultural and religious contexts in which Black gay men operate. South Africa's rich tapestry of cultures and deeply ingrained religious beliefs significantly influence societal attitudes toward homosexuality (Francis & Msibi, 2011; Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2015; Regygan & Lynette, 2014). Traditional cultural norms often uphold heteronormativity, creating an environment that can be hostile to sexual diversity (Ferfolja, 2007; van der Toorn et al., 2020). Furthermore, religious doctrines frequently contribute to the perpetuation of homophobia within Black communities (Francis & Msibi, 2011; Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2015; Regygan & Lynette, 2014). The tension between cultural identity and sexual identity becomes a significant aspect of the lived experiences of Black gay men, compelling many to navigate the challenges of acceptance within their families and communities. Understanding these cultural and religious dynamics is crucial for developing interventions that resonate with the realities of Black gay men.

Status consumption emerges as another critical component of this framework, serving as a strategy employed by Black gay men to navigate social hierarchies and assert their identities. Drawing on Thorstein Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption, status consumption is a means through which individuals signal their social status and economic power. For Black gay men, the use of status symbols—ranging from fashion choices to lifestyle indicators—becomes a vital tool for achieving social acceptance and recognition in a society that often marginalises them (Disemelo, 2015; Mathews, 2015). This consumption is not merely about material goods; it is intricately linked to identity and self-expression (Cherrier & Murray, 2004; Disemelo, 2015; Mathews, 2015). Thus, understanding how Black gay men engage in status consumption can provide deeper insights into their social positioning and the adaptive strategies they employ in the face of systemic inequalities.

The socio-historical landscape of South Africa plays a pivotal role in shaping the experiences of Black gay men (Govender & Cartwright, 2021; Reygan, 2016). The legacy of apartheid continues to influence social structures and attitudes, creating an environment where discrimination persists (Hocoy, 2020; Seekings, 2008). Despite the legal advancements that have been made regarding LGBTQ+ rights, many Black gay men still face significant barriers to social acceptance and equality (Thoreson, 2008; Tshisa & van der Walt, 2021). The socio-political context is marked by ongoing struggles for justice and equity, influencing how Black

gay men perceive their identities and rights (Gaito, 2021; Graziano, 2004). Therefore, engaging with this historical perspective is essential for understanding their contemporary challenges and the socio-political movements that aim to support them.

By integrating these elements, the conceptual framework highlights the importance of contextual sensitivity. Recognising that the experiences of Black gay men cannot be fully understood through a singular lens, the framework advocates for a holistic approach that considers the multifaceted influences on their lives. For instance, an intersectional analysis can reveal how socioeconomic status interacts with race and sexuality, further complicating the experiences of discrimination faced by Black gay men. Additionally, understanding the specific cultural and religious beliefs that shape attitudes toward homosexuality can inform targeted interventions that resonate with these communities.

This framework also emphasises the need for empirical focus in research. By grounding discussions in real-life experiences, the study reported in this dissertation examines the unique status consumption practices of Black gay men. It also provides insights into the lived realities of this group. The findings, as I discuss in Chapter Seven, have implications for policy interventions that are culturally relevant and effective for addressing the compounded discrimination faced by Black gay men.

2.9. Synthesis

This literature review highlights the relationship between the status consumption of food and the experiences of Black gay men confronting homophobia within society. Through the lens of status consumption, it shows how Black gay men navigate societal discrimination and assert their identities within a heteronormative framework. Food consumption emerges as a symbolic expression of resistance and empowerment, allowing these individuals to reclaim agency and challenge prevailing stereotypes. By interrogating the connection between identity, consumption practices, and societal norms, this review underscores the importance of understanding how Black gay men negotiate their identities and assert their presence within diverse social landscapes. The literature also reveals the multifaceted ways in which Black gay men use status consumption, particularly food, as a means of social navigation and identity assertion. This approach allows them to resist and subvert societal expectations and create spaces where their identities are validated and celebrated. The symbolic use of status markers

is especially significant in a context where traditional markers of identity and worth are often inaccessible due to systemic discrimination.

Moving forward, it is imperative to continue exploring these dynamics to inform targeted interventions that combat homophobia and promote inclusivity within communities. The next chapter will discuss the theoretical framework of this study, providing a structured foundation for understanding and analysing the complex interplay between identity, consumption, and societal norms. Building on the insights gained from this literature review, the subsequent chapters aim to deepen understanding and support efforts to create more inclusive and equitable environments for Black gay men.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORISING THE STATUS CONSUMPTION OF FOOD AMONG BLACK GAY MEN: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the analytical framework used in this dissertation. To develop this framework, I drew on two theories to analyse the status consumption of food among Black gay men in a South African township. First, I locate the analysis in this study within the Social Identity Theory, which was first advanced by Tajfel and Turner (1979) and offers insights into how individuals derive a sense of self from their membership in high-status social groups and how these identities shape behaviours. For Black gay men, navigating intersecting identities of race, sexuality, and gender within a heteronormative and racially stratified society influences their consumption practices. Social Identity Theory further explains how individuals seek to enhance their self-esteem and social standing by aligning with groups perceived as prestigious, thus affecting their consumption choices.

Second, I locate the analysis within the Critical Consciousness Theory as articulated by Paulo Freire in 1970 and later developed by Giroux in 1988. Critical Consciousness Theory emphasises the importance of critical reflection and action in challenging oppressive social structures (Watts et al., 2011). In relation to consumption, Critical Consciousness Theory highlights how individuals, particularly those from marginalised communities like the Black gay men who participated in this study, navigate and resist dominant cultural norms to assert agency and challenge inequities. For Black gay men, the theory offers a framework to understand how their consumption of food is influenced by their awareness of systemic inequalities and their efforts to gain social prestige and class.

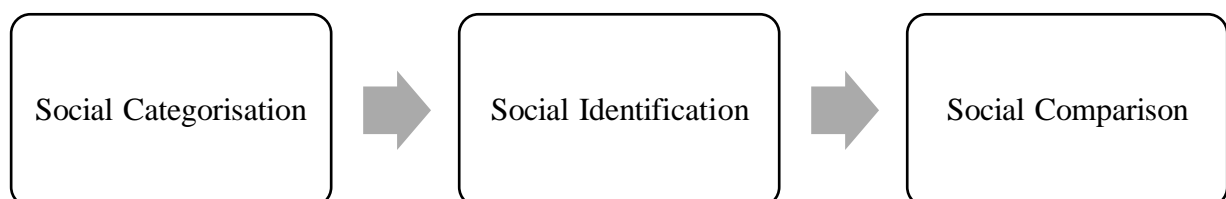
By integrating these two theories, I show the complexities of status consumption among Black gay men and interrogate the how and why of these consumption behaviours. Ultimately, this theoretical framework chapter sets the foundation for a comprehensive analysis of how status consumption of food serves as a means for Black gay men to negotiate their identity/identities, navigate societal expectations, and assert their place/location within broader social hierarchies. The chapter concludes with a set of propositions that guided the analysis of this study.

3.2. Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) analyses how members of a specific social group align themselves with their ingroup and develop biases toward those perceived as outsiders. At its core, the theory posits that people categorise themselves and others into distinct social groups, striving to uphold a positive image of their group (Jenkins, 2014). Scholars recognise social identity theory as critical for understanding fundamental human behaviours (McKinley et al., 2014), offering insights into various social dynamics such as intragroup and outgroup conflicts. Psychologists use the theory to explore the relationship between individuals and the functions of their groups (Brewer, 2001; Stets & Burke, 2000). Similarly, Madinga (2016) and Solomon (2006) argue that humans, as social beings, have an inherent need to belong to a particular group. As a result, individuals conform to and model the behaviours of ingroup members. Furthermore, Nzuzza (2018) suggests that social identity theory explains how individuals derive positive self-esteem from the groups they favour and identify with positively. Consequently, these individuals invest available resources, including status consumption of goods, to enhance their group's positive social image and gain prestige in society (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Nzuzza, 2018).

Campbell (1997) outlines the process of categorising individuals into in-groups and outgroups based on shared attributes, a process inevitably influenced by biased evaluations favouring the in-group (Stets & Burke, 2000). Expanding on this and drawing on the earlier work of Tajfel et al. (1979), Chi (2015) outlines three pivotal phases: social categorisation, social identification, and social comparison, which culminate in the reinforcement of group cohesion and the accentuation of intergroup differences. Figure 3.1 below summarises these three phases:

Figure 3.1 *Social Identity Theory Phases (Tajfel et al., 1979)*



The initial phase in social identity Theory is social categorisation, where individuals classify themselves and others into distinct social groups based on shared characteristics such as race, gender, nationality, or organisational affiliation (Jenkins, 2014; McKinley et al., 2014; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This process simplifies the complex social world by categorising people into ‘us’ (ingroup) and ‘them’ (outgroup) based on perceived similarities and differences. Social categorisation serves as a cognitive shortcut, enabling individuals to navigate and make sense of their social environment more efficiently (Jenkins, 2014; McKinley et al., 2014; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For instance, individuals might categorise themselves as members of a nationality, a profession, or a sports team. This categorisation influences their perceptions of individuals from other nationalities, professions, or rival sports teams. Typically, ingroup members are viewed more positively, while outgroup members are often perceived more negatively or stereotypically (Brewer, 2001; Madinga, 2016; Solomon, 2006).

Social identification involves individuals internalising their ingroup’s characteristics, norms, values, and goals, which fosters a sense of belonging and attachment to the group (Jenkins, 2014; McKinley et al., 2014; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This identification with the group becomes an integral part of one’s self-concept, influencing how individuals define themselves and interact with others (Campbell, 1997; Stets & Burke, 2000). Factors such as group cohesion, perceived similarity to ingroup members, and the importance of the group to one’s self-esteem and social identity can influence social identification (Campbell, 1997; Hogg & Reid, 2006; Nzuzi, 2012; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Individuals tend to adopt their ingroup’s behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs to enhance their social identity and maintain a positive sense of self (Campbell, 1997; Hogg & Reid, 2006; Nzuzi, 2012). For example, a person who identifies strongly with their ethnic or cultural group may participate in cultural traditions, adhere to group norms, and feel a sense of pride in their heritage.

The third and final phase in social identity theory involves social comparison, where individuals evaluate their ingroup relative to outgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This process enhances the positive distinctiveness of one’s ingroup and maintains a favourable social identity (Jenkins, 2014; McKinley et al., 2014; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Individuals may engage in upward social comparison, where they compare their ingroup favourably to outgroups perceived as inferior, or downward social comparison, where they compare their ingroup unfavourably to outgroups perceived as superior (Jenkins, 2014; McKinley et al., 2014; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

This three-stage social comparison process accentuates the significance of group identity over individualism (Campbell, 1997; Hogg & Reid, 2006; Nzuzi, 2012). It contributes to ingroup favouritism and outgroup derogation, as individuals seek to maintain a positive social identity by emphasising the superiority of their ingroup over outgroups (Campbell, 1997; Hogg & Reid, 2006; Nzuzi, 2012; Jenkins, 2014; McKinley et al., 2014; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These comparisons may also justify intergroup inequalities and reinforce social hierarchies (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Notably, these groups encompass various affiliations, including political, ethnic, and socioeconomic, which shape individual perceptions and behaviours (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Nzuzi, 2012). Furthermore, individuals often harbour multiple identities, as exemplified by the intersectionality experienced by groups such as Black gay men facing dual oppression due to their membership in marginalised communities (Duran, 2020; Giwa, 2016; Malik, 2021). They are marginalised both for being Black and for being gay (Duran, 2020; Giwa, 2016; Malik, 2021).

From a social identity perspective, individuals actively seek to align themselves with favourable group attributes while dissociating from undesirable ones (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; McKillop et al., 1978). For marginalised groups like Black gay men, this involves using various commodities, including food, as signals of social status and identity affirmation, as suggested by Fifita et al. (2020). Social Identity Theory underscores the strategic management of one's identity in response to societal pressures and threats, such as the homophobia faced by Black gay men in society. It also emphasises the role of social groups in shaping attitudes and behaviours. This phenomenon is evident in gay consumer research (Dib & Johnson, 2019), where status consumption serves as a means of reaffirming identity and subcultural belonging amidst discrimination. By strategically consuming and displaying certain goods, individuals within marginalised communities can navigate and counteract societal prejudices, reinforcing their social identity and group affiliation.

3.3. Critical Consciousness Theory

The second theory I draw on in this study is the Critical Consciousness Theory. Rooted in the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, this theory emphasises the development of awareness, analysis, and action to challenge oppressive social structures (Watts et al., 2011). At its core, Critical Consciousness Theory encourages individuals to critically examine the social, political, and economic forces that shape their lives (Watts et al., 2011) and to recognise how racism, homophobia, and socioeconomic inequality intersect to (re)produce their

marginalisation and injustice (Diemer et al., 2016). In working with marginalised Black gay men, as is the case in South Africa and other contexts, this theory becomes a lens for understanding and addressing the intersecting systems of oppression, including sexual orientation, race, and socioeconomic status (Diemer et al., 2016; Jemal, 2017).

Critical consciousness encourages individuals to question dominant narratives, challenge stereotypes, and understand the root causes of their oppression (Salter & Adams, 2013; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). Through critical reflection, marginalised Black gay men can better understand their own experiences and the broader social context in which they exist (Salter & Adams, 2013; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). This process involves analysing power dynamics, identifying systemic barriers, and recognising their agency in effecting change (Watts et al., 2011). By becoming critically conscious, Black gay men and other marginalised populations can reclaim their voices, assert their identities, and challenge the status quo in society.

Critical consciousness also fosters a sense of solidarity and collective action among marginalised populations (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). By recognising their shared experiences of oppression, these groups can build alliances with other marginalised populations, such as Black lesbian women, and work together to address the systemic injustices they experience. This collective action is essential for challenging entrenched power structures and advocating for social change. Moreover, Critical Consciousness Theory emphasises the importance of praxis, integrating reflection and action (Diemer, 2015). It encourages marginalised groups to critically analyse their experiences and take meaningful action to challenge their oppression. This may involve community organising, advocacy, activism, and other forms of resistance aimed at dismantling systems of inequality and building more inclusive societies.

In this study, Critical Consciousness Theory provides a framework for working with marginalised Black gay men to understand, resist, and transform their experiences of oppression. By fostering awareness, analysis, and action, critical consciousness empowers individuals to challenge systemic injustice and work towards creating a more just and equitable world for themselves and others, including future generations.

3.4. The Theories and their Critiques

Social Identity Theory and Critical Consciousness Theory, individually and together, offer valuable insights into group dynamics and intergroup conflicts. However, they have limitations in explaining intragroup conflicts, which is crucial for practical social analysis and conflict resolution. Social Identity Theory primarily addresses intergroup dynamics and overlooks conflicts within the ingroup. It oversimplifies intragroup dynamics by neglecting any group's diversity of opinions, values, and interests. Intragroup conflicts often arise due to differences in individual perspectives and goals, which social identity theory does not adequately account for (Böhm et al., 2021; Jehn, 1995). The theory's focus on social categorisation ignores power dynamics within groups. Intragroup conflicts are often rooted in struggles for power, resources, or status among group members (Böhm et al., 2021; Chun & Choi, 2014; Jehn, 1995). Its emphasis on shared identity and solidarity overlooks these power dynamics, leading to an incomplete understanding of intragroup conflicts.

For example, within a political party, conflicting factions may emerge based on ideological differences or personal ambitions, challenging the homogeneity assumed by Social Identity Theory. Furthermore, group members may simultaneously identify with multiple social categories, leading to nuanced intragroup interactions that Social Identity Theory fails to capture (Chun & Choi, 2014; Böhm et al., 2021; Jehn, 1995). For instance, within a cultural community, individuals may identify with subgroups based on age, gender, or socioeconomic status, contributing to intragroup tensions that cannot be solely attributed to intergroup biases.

While Critical Consciousness Theory offers a critical lens to understand structural injustices and external conflicts, its applicability to intragroup conflicts is also limited. The theory analyses systemic oppression at a macro level, which overlooks interpersonal or intragroup dynamics that further oppress ingroup members (Brown & Pehrson, 2019; Myles, 2021). It acknowledges societal power differentials but may neglect power struggles and conflicts within marginalised groups. For example, within a marginalised community, disagreements may arise over leadership, resource allocation, or strategies for activism, which Critical Consciousness Theory may not adequately address. Moreover, the theory's emphasis on consciousness-raising and collective action may downplay the significance of individual agency and divergent perspectives within groups (Bell, 2016; Kornbluh et al., 2021). In intragroup conflicts, individuals may hold varying beliefs, experiences, and priorities, leading to internal tensions

that cannot be resolved solely through collective mobilisation or consciousness-raising efforts (Kornbluh et al., 2021; Peng et al., 2021).

Despite their limitations, Social Identity Theory and Critical Consciousness Theory offer valuable insights into understanding social dynamics and conflicts. Integrating elements of both theories provides a more comprehensive framework for analysing intragroup conflicts. By acknowledging the role of social categorisation and intergroup biases while also considering the impact of power dynamics and structural inequalities within groups, a nuanced approach to intragroup conflicts can be developed.

3.5. Discussion: Towards a Theoretical Framework

To analyse the findings in this dissertation, I integrated the social identity theory and critical consciousness theory to develop a comprehensive framework for understanding the status consumption of food by Black gay men. As Tajfel and Turner (1979) outlined, Social Identity Theory emphasises individuals' identification with social groups and subsequent behaviours to enhance group identity. Rooted in critical pedagogy and social justice, Critical Consciousness Theory examines how marginalised groups, including Black gay men, might develop awareness of societal inequities and strive for empowerment and liberation (Diemer et al., 2015).

As the conceptual framework developed in Chapter Two suggests, Black gay men navigate intersecting identities shaped by race, sexuality, and gender, often experiencing systemic marginalisation and discrimination. Social Identity Theory explains how this population seeks belonging and affirmation within their in-groups while differentiating themselves from outgroups. In this context, food consumption becomes a symbolic act through which Black gay men assert their identity and negotiate their social standing. For instance, consuming culturally significant foods or adopting specific dietary practices reaffirms their ties to their racial and cultural heritage while expressing their unique identity within the LGBTQ+ community. Complimenting this identity formation, and as part of it, critical consciousness highlights the marginalised groups' critical awareness and resistance strategies (Diemer et al., 2016). Cognisant of societal biases and prejudices, Black gay men engage in status consumption as a form of resistance and empowerment. Through conscious choices in food consumption, they challenge stereotypes and reclaim agency over their identities. This may involve supporting Black-owned businesses, promoting sustainable and ethically sourced foods, or rejecting

mainstream narratives that marginalise their experiences. This holistic/integrated framework recognises the multidimensional nature of status consumption among Black gay men and acknowledges the interplay between social identity, consciousness, and consumption practices, offering insights into how individuals and groups navigate complex sociocultural landscapes (Benwell, 2016; Landreman et al., 2007).

Moreover, it underscores the importance of considering historical and structural factors that shape consumption practices, such as food choices within marginalised communities. This integrated analysis also sheds light on the role of social institutions and systems in perpetuating inequalities and shaping consumption patterns and the opportunities for change. By examining the intersections of race, sexuality, and class, researchers working with the participants can better understand the socioeconomic dynamics that influence food access, affordability, and consumption among Black gay men. The integrated framework offers a nuanced lens for examining the status consumption of food by Black gay men. Acknowledging the complexities of identity, power, and resistance, this framework provides a holistic understanding of how individuals navigate and negotiate their social identities through food consumption practices.

Specifically, this study engaged a group of Black gay men to understand their experiences of food status consumption, employing a framework rooted in social identity and critical consciousness theories. By utilising this theoretical framework, the analysis provides insights into the perspectives of Black gay men on their food consumption habits, particularly considering the impact of residing in homophobic and conservative communities. Consequently, the investigation examined the status consumption of food and its complex intersection with racial, socioeconomic, religious, cultural, sexual, and gender identities prevalent in these communities.

1. *How do Black gay men in a KwaZulu-Natal urban community understand and engage with the status consumption of food?*
2. *What factors motivate Black gay men's status consumption and food choices?*

Three analytical propositions were formulated in this dissertation to analyse data addressing the three research questions posed in the study. The first research question I sought to address was: *How do Black gay men in a KwaZulu-Natal urban community understand the status consumption of food?* Drawing on the framework, the analysis was premised on the assumption that food consumption serves as a symbolic assertion of a positive gay identity amidst societal

attitudes that are homophobic, often associated with social prestige and middle-class values. The second research question in the study was: *What factors motivate Black gay men's status consumption and food choices?* Linked to the critical consciousness theory, the study's analysis was premised on the assumption that Black gay men are aware of the biases and prejudices they confront, prompting them to utilise status consumption as a means of challenging and overcoming these societal barriers.

Guided by these propositions, my analysis of the data focused on food status consumption as a strategic response to the intersection of homophobic and racist marginalisation, thus empowering Black gay men to assert their identities and counter discrimination. Specifically, it examined how insights into their food consumption practices could inform community education efforts to combat marginalisation and foster inclusivity within communities and institutions.

3.6. Synthesis

In this chapter, I describe the two theories I draw on to develop the analytical framework in this dissertation: Social Identity Theory and Critical Consciousness Theory. This analytical lens is used to understand the complex phenomenon of the status of food consumption among Black gay men. Social Identity Theory provides insights into how individuals derive their sense of self from their membership in social groups and how this influences their behaviours, including consumption patterns. Applying this theory enables an understanding of how Black gay men navigate their identities within societal structures, including the intersections of race, sexual orientation, and gender, and how these intersections may influence their choices in food consumption. Critical Consciousness Theory offers a lens to critically analyse how individuals engage with the social structures that shape their lives. It enables an exploration into how Black gay men may resist or conform to dominant norms and values surrounding food consumption and how they may negotiate their identities concerning societal power dynamics. Together, the two theories form a framework that goes beyond simplistic explanations of consumption behaviour among Black gay men to one that acknowledges the complexities inherent in their experiences and recognises their agency in navigating and challenging these complexities.

The research design and methodology chapter, which follows, will build upon these theoretical foundations, aiming to uncover the nuances and intricacies that cannot be captured through theoretical analysis alone.

CHAPTER FOUR

ENGAGING BLACK GAY MEN IN UNDERSTANDING THEIR FOOD CONSUMPTION PRACTICES: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

The study analysed in this dissertation examines the status consumption of food among Black gay men in the context of a conservative and homophobic township community in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Building on the previous chapter, which outlined the theoretical framework, this chapter outlines and critically reflects on the research design and methodology employed in this study. Mainly, I reflect on the research paradigm, methodological approach, and data generation and analysis methods. I conclude the chapter by addressing the ethical considerations, underscoring my commitment to uphold the principles of integrity and respect for all participants involved in the study.

4.2. Research Paradigm and Study Design

A paradigm encompasses ontological, epistemological, and methodological components (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Ontologically, it examines the enquiries about the essence of humanity and the nature of reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Epistemologically, it explores the relationship between the researcher and knowledge, examining how understanding is acquired and validated (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Methodologically, it addresses how the world is comprehended and knowledge gained (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Axiology pertains to the researcher's values and standpoint (Creswell & Poth, 2016). These components collectively shape the researcher's perspective on the nature of research, its objectives, and the methodologies employed. They influence how research is conceptualised, executed, and interpreted, guiding the researcher in navigating the complexities of the research process.

Located within the critical paradigm, this study used narrative methodology to explore the status consumption of food among Black gay men. Narrative research is a qualitative methodology that elicits and analyses stories to understand people, cultures, and societies (Wolgemuth & Agosto, 2019). It offers rich insights into lived experiences, prioritising concrete events over abstractions (Carless & Douglas, 2017). This approach also provides a means to examine how human actions relate to social contexts (Moen, 2006) and can reveal

both personal and sociocultural aspects of psychological processes (Carless & Douglas, 2017). It can be categorised into narratives of self, society, and social justice (Wolgemuth & Agosto, 2019). Research within the critical paradigm is best understood in the context of empowerment, equality, and democracy since it is interested in emancipating and redressing social and power inequalities experienced by those who are disadvantaged, marginalised, and oppressed in society, such as Black gay men (Shah & Al-Bargi, 2013; Cohen et al., 2002; Nelson and Prilleltensky, 2005 & Neuman, 2007). Thus, informed by the critical paradigm, this study was embedded in qualitative methods prompted by my contention that there is inadequate documentation of the experiences of Black gay men concerning status consumption, particularly food consumption.

Leedy and Ormrod (2005) argue that there is a need for more qualitative studies to understand phenomena from different cultural perspectives. In most cases, issues of homosexuality have been perceived and regarded as taboo, as they are often generally considered non-existent in African communities and are thus not an issue that is most researched unless in the context of HIV & AIDS. As Tamale (2011, p. 12) notes, such issues as “issues of sexualities are often wrapped with silences, taboos, and privacies and are invisible in Africa.”

I chose a qualitative approach for this study because of its nature, which allows participants to share their realities and experiences (Dawson, 2007, p. 114), and its efficacy in seeking the essence of individual experiences when studying factors like gender and ethnicity that are not so easily quantifiable. Exploring lived experiences and realities of gender and sexualities remains complex, sensitive, and political. These matters continue to have a stigma attached to them as they are regarded as taboo despite South Africa’s progressive Constitution that promotes equality. This study generated data about the experiences of Black gay men and how they countered the discrimination they encounter in their community.

4.3. Participant Recruitment and Sampling

Sampling is the process of selecting a subset of individuals from a larger population to study since it is impractical and often impossible to study an entire population (Mack et al., 2005). Thus, sampling is a crucial aspect of research design that allows researchers to draw meaningful conclusions about populations while efficiently managing time, resources, and logistics (Morse & Richards, 2002; Neuman, 2007). Therefore, researchers use sampling techniques to gather data efficiently and effectively while maintaining their research’s integrity. Proper sampling

techniques in qualitative research ensure the trustworthiness of the findings (Morse & Richards, 2002; Neuman, 2007).

In this study, I used non-random purposive sampling, a deliberate and strategic approach to select participants with characteristics or experiences relevant to the research objectives (Mack et al., 2005). In exploring the status consumption of food among Black gay men, this sampling technique entailed purposefully selecting individuals who represent this demographic group. Leveraging social media networks like Facebook, Instagram, and local social spaces frequented by Black gay men aged 18 years or older in Pietermaritzburg, I identified potential participants who demonstrated a willingness to engage in the study and provided signed informed consent to be interviewed. By intentionally selecting these individuals who met this sampling criterion, I wanted to gather in-depth insights into their unique experiences, motivations, and challenges related to food consumption within this community. Moreover, the deliberate application of the non-random purposive sampling technique allowed me to focus my resources and efforts towards individuals who could provide rich and relevant data, thereby enhancing the depth and quality of the study's findings (Muthia et al., 2020). Using this sampling technique, I explored nuanced perspectives and experiences that may not have been captured through random sampling. Consequently, this sampling technique offered invaluable insights into the status consumption of food among Black gay men, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of their consumption habits within the context of societal norms and cultural dynamics.

4.3.1. Sampling Procedure and Screening Process

Once I was granted ethical clearance for the study by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, I contacted 15 potential participants privately using my Facebook, Instagram, and through mutual friendship circles. I sent each one of them messages on these platforms to provide them with details about my research and to request their contact details so that I might call them. I subsequently called all 15 potential participants and provided them with detailed information about the study, read out the information sheet (see Appendix B) over the phone, and gave them an option of sending an email of the information sheet if they wanted to have it in writing. After providing each individual with the background to the study during our telephone interactions, I asked each of them whether they would be willing to participate in the research. I proceeded to the screening procedure if the individual indicated their interest. This involved asking the participant if they

were over the age of 18 years, confirming their race, asking whether they were living in Pietermaritzburg at the time of the study, and confirming if they identified as gay. I conducted this screening process to ensure all individuals sampled met the sampling criteria. From the screening process, 12 participants met the criteria and agreed to participate in the study. However, I only worked with ten participants and reserved one prospective participant as a substitute should one of the recruited participants withdraw from the study.

4.3.2. Sample Characteristics

The study was comprised of 10 Black gay men aged 18 years and above who resided in the Pietermaritzburg area. Terre Blanche et al. (2006) acknowledge that qualitative researchers often work with small, non-random samples of information-rich cases that enable in-depth examination. The characteristics of the Black gay men who participated in this study are detailed in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1 *Participant Demographic Information*

Pseudonym	Age	Employment Status	Education Level Completed
Max	28	Unemployed	National Diploma
Sipho	21	Employed	Matric
Bongani	33	Employed	Master's Degree
Jason	33	Employed	Matric
Marvin	36	Employed	Honours Degree
Siya	20	Unemployed	Matric
Avela	39	Employed	Bachelor's Degree
Sphe	25	Unemployed	Matric
Mvelo	35	Employed	Honours Degree
Mandla	29	Employed	Bachelor's Degree

4.3.3. Informed Consent Process

After screening each potential participant, I scheduled an appointment to conduct our interview. I took participants who indicated they would be available for immediate interviews through the consent process. I read the consent form aloud (see Appendix B) and asked the participants to give verbal consent. I then asked each participant whether they would share their email address with me so I could send them the consent form to sign. Most were reluctant and opted instead to provide me with their verbal consent. Only four participants gave me their email addresses. I then sent them a soft copy of the consent form, and they returned signed and scanned copies.

After reading the information sheet and consent form, I allowed each participant to ask questions related to the research or raise concerns/questions they might have before data generation. This was to ensure that each participant understood their autonomy in the research. I also needed my participants to know they could withdraw from the study at any time during the interview. When a participant indicated that they could not immediately participate in the research, we would then arrange a date and time that were suitable for them.

The participants were also informed that their contributions would be kept confidential. This was particularly important for the participants in this study, as same-sex sexualities still meet with varying degrees of prejudice in South Africa and within different communities (Eslen et al., 2015). All participants were also assured that their identities would be protected using pseudonyms. The participants were also asked to consent to being audio recorded during the interview discussions using a voice recorder so that these could be transcribed later for analysis. Participants were also informed that I would take research notes of our discussions.

4.3.4 Data Generation Procedures

Data were gathered through online participant observation and one-on-one interviews conducted in various food consumption settings, including restaurants, over seven months from February to August 2023. The participant observation component (detailed at length in the next section) was conducted on Facebook and Instagram, allowing an immersive understanding of participants' online interactions and behaviours. Additionally, in-depth one-on-one interviews were conducted with the 10 participants to explore their perspectives and experiences further. The extended data generation process resulted from the initial delays in accessing participants

and the relocation of some recruited participants to cities outside of KwaZulu-Natal, rendering them no longer part of the Pietermaritzburg Black gay population during the study period.

I generated data using both English and isiZulu, depending on the participant’s choice, since I am fluent in both languages. This meant I could understand the nuances in their localised expressions, which might have been difficult for a non-isiZulu speaker to understand. Participants were allowed to communicate in the most comfortable language, ensuring they could articulate their thoughts effectively. While all participants indicated that they were proficient in English and did not require translation, some chose to respond to specific questions in English and isiZulu due to their multilingual abilities. Table 4.1 summarises the data generation methods and data sources in this study.

Research Question 1	Data Generation Methods	Data Sources
How do Black gay men in a KwaZulu-Natal urban community understand and engage with the status consumption of food?	Participant observations and one-on-one in-depth interviews.	Filednotes from online participant observations and transcripts from one-on-one in-depth interviews.
Research Question 2	Data Generation Methods	Data Sources
What factors motivate Black gay men's status consumption and food choices?	Qualitative methods: participant observations and one-on-one in-depth interviews.	Filednotes from online participant observations and transcripts from one-on-one in-depth interviews.

Table 4.1 Data Generation Methods & Sources

For policymakers, the research calls for targeted interventions to address systemic socioeconomic disparities, ensuring financial empowerment and access to inclusive social spaces so that status consumption does not become a means of identity assertion. For community organisations, the study offers practical insights for developing programs that go beyond material support to foster identity affirmation and resilience against discrimination. Educational and advocacy initiatives should raise awareness of how intersecting oppression shapes consumption patterns and social behaviours, helping

to dismantle harmful stereotypes and cultivate a more inclusive understanding of Black gay men's experiences.

The section below outlines the data generation techniques used in the study.

4.3.4.1 Online Participant Observations

Participant observation is a qualitative data generation method in which a researcher not only observes participants but also takes part in their daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events as a means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and culture (Laurier, 2010; Musante, 2015; Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Observing the status consumption of food among Black gay men on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram and taking notes provided me, as a researcher, with a unique and invaluable opportunity to gain an immersive understanding of participants' online interactions and behaviours.

Over seven months (February to August 2023), this methodological approach allowed me to explore how identity expression and food consumption practices intersected with the digital lives of participants within the context of being Black and gay in their Pietermaritzburg community. Through online participant observation, I explored the virtual and physical spaces they frequented as Black gay men, observing their posts, comments, and interactions related to food consumption between February and August 2023. This included photos of meals, restaurant check-ins, reviews of culinary experiences, and discussions about food preferences and trends. By immersing myself in these digital environments, I gained first-hand insight into the status symbols, cultural influences, and social dynamics shaping the participants' food-related behaviours online.

Furthermore, observing participants' interactions on social media gave me a window into how food consumption was intertwined with other aspects of their identities, such as race, sexuality, and social status. As a researcher, I could discern patterns and themes emerging from the online discourses, offering valuable context for addressing my research questions. Overall, leveraging Facebook and Instagram as data generation platforms facilitated a nuanced exploration of the status consumption of food among Black gay men, shedding light on the complexities of their online interactions and behaviours within the digital landscape. This approach complemented the one-on-one interviews conducted in food consumption settings, enriching the research

process and yielding comprehensive insights into the intersection of identity, social media, and food culture among the study participants.

4.3.4.2. In-depth One-on-One Interviews

I conducted one in-depth one-on-one interview with each of the then participants using a semi-structured schedule (see Appendix D). The interviews lasted between 90 and 120 minutes, and all participants completed their interviews. I initially developed the open-ended, semi-structured interview schedule questions and probing questions based on the literature around status consumption, keeping in mind my research aims and objectives. As Rapley (2001) suggested, I decided to use open-ended questions as they allowed me to interact more intimately with the issues I was studying. Using open-ended questions helped to enrich the quality of the data I collected. It allowed for clarification and ratification, which Neuman (2007) claims are essential for qualitative researchers to enhance data quality. Because sexual identity is a complex and sensitive topic, in this study, it was important to be able to ratify what the participants were saying by asking them to elaborate on interesting issues from the interview discussions. This provided the study with a rich dataset, which aided in identifying nuances in how issues that affect status consumption by Black gay men are understood and constructed.

Interviews are important because they allow participants to provide in-depth responses and express themselves based on personal experiences without fear of being persecuted or judged, particularly given the sensitive nature of the topic regarding sexuality. Babbie (2020) noted that interviews provide a platform for in-depth responses rooted in personal experiences, offering valuable insights into participants' perspectives on social norms and constructs. The conversational nature of unstructured interviews, as highlighted by Kelly (2022), fostered an environment conducive to candid dialogue and exploration of lived experiences.

Sexuality is a sensitive topic, especially in South Africa, where gay identities are still primarily seen as taboo (Eslon et al., 2015). Therefore, the privatised setting of an interview provided the participants with the freedom to speak without fear, mainly since confidentiality issues had been dealt with. Interviews are encounters between the researcher and informants, directed towards understanding participants' perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations as expressed in their own words (Mueller & Segal, 2014). These lived experiences were essential for me to explore, as they had the potential to provide insight into how the Black gay men I interviewed understood how their intersecting identities of being Black and gay inform their

food consumption habits. The quality of one-on-one interviews was important to me because, during my interaction with the participants, I attempted to identify possible factors that inform their food consumption habits and understand how they navigate the discrimination that leads to them engaging in this consumption habit.

4.4. Data Analysis

The data I generated from the in-depth interviews and my detailed field notes was recorded on Zoom and an audio recorder. It was then transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic and content analysis. Thematic analysis is the inductive type of analysis that uses common themes, concepts, and categories that the research does not impose as they appear on their own during the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Rugg & Petre, 2006), whilst content analysis requires a systematic and mechanical process of transcript coding of specific characteristics within the text (Widodo, 2014). I chose these two analysis methods as they are most appropriate in exploring the motivations that inform the status consumption of food by Black gay men. Below, I describe the six phases of my data analysis process:

4.4.1. Phase One: Becoming Familiar with Data

After spending seven months observing my participants' social media interactions and taking notes from the observations, I collected and transcribed data from the in-depth interviews verbatim. Although this process took time, it facilitated a thorough understanding of my data. I also went through the data to check if I transcribed it accurately. This step allowed further immersion into the data, preparing me for the coding phase of my analysis. Lapadat (2000) postulates that close attention required in transcription could enable close reading and interpretive skills necessary for good data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

4.4.2. Phase Two: Generating Initial Codes

Phase two marked the initial stage of generating initial coding, producing the first set of codes I identified from the data. At this stage, I manually coded every piece of text contained in the data and did not discard any 'un-patterned' data to allow for refinement at a later stage.

4.4.3. Phase Three: Searching for Themes

In this phase, I assigned meaning to the themes and structured them into groups. As defined by Lopez and Whitehead (2013), a theme is a piece of data with meaning that echoes what the interviewee deemed significant and speaks to the research question. Searching for themes is an active process, meaning I created rather than discovered them. This involved meticulously reviewing my transcribed interviews to merge the data into larger themes. These larger themes were later broken down into smaller sub-themes to provide more nuanced insights and align with the research questions posed in the study.

The basic process of generating themes involved collapsing or clustering codes that shared some unified features, thus reflecting and describing a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This approach allowed me to capture the essence of the data in a structured and comprehensive manner. To ensure the themes were relevant to my research questions, I filtered and refined them using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. This step was crucial in generating a new subset of themes that provided a focused and relevant perspective on the research questions.

By actively constructing themes and sub-themes, I was able to provide a detailed and meaningful interpretation of the data that was closely aligned with the objectives of my study. This structured approach ensured that the themes reflected the participants' views and provided valuable insights into the research questions.

4.4.4. Phase Four: Reviewing Themes

After identifying themes, I refined them to check if they relate to the coded extract and the entire dataset.

4.4.5. Phase Five: Defining and Naming Themes

After reviewing the themes, I elaborated more on the details of the analysis per theme, explaining the essence of what each theme contained. Since analysis is not limited to a linear process, I anticipated that I would still be refining themes even when finalising this study.

4.4.6. Phase Six: Producing the Report

In this phase, the focus shifted to producing the final report, which, in this case, is the dissertation. The primary aim of the dissertation is to craft a persuasive narrative about the data based on my analysis. Braun and Clarke (2012) emphasise that this narrative needs to be convincing, compelling, and clear. Additionally, it must be multifaceted and deeply embedded in the scholarly field. The dissertation goes beyond merely describing the data; it constructs an argument that directly answers the research questions. This involves interpreting the themes and sub-themes to reflect the participants' views and situate these views within the broader academic discourse. Each chapter and section of the dissertation is designed to build on the previous ones, creating a coherent and compelling argument that comprehensively addresses the research questions.

To ensure transparency and rigour in my analysis, I included evidence of the data analysis processes within the dissertation. This evidence encompasses detailed descriptions of how themes were generated, the coding framework used, and examples of how data was clustered and interpreted. By doing so, I aimed to provide a clear and replicable pathway for how the conclusions were reached, thereby reinforcing the credibility and reliability of the findings. In summary, the dissertation presents the findings from the data analysis but also weaves these findings into a structured, well-argued narrative that answers the research questions. This comprehensive approach ensures that the dissertation contributes valuable insights to the scholarly field while maintaining clarity, persuasiveness, and academic rigour.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

Prior to the commencement of this research, I applied for and was subsequently granted ethical clearance by the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Ethics Approval Number: HSSREC/00004402/2022). Upon receipt of the ethical clearance certificate, participant recruitment commenced, and I provided all participants with an information sheet explaining the study's nature and purpose. The information sheet was provided either via email (for participants who provided their email addresses) or verbally (for participants who were not comfortable with sharing their email addresses). Participation in this study was voluntary, and all participants were made aware of this as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any time during the research process at no disadvantage to them. This ensured that participants understood that they had the right to withdraw from the study if

they felt uncomfortable with continued participation or felt threatened, especially since the focus of the study was their sexual orientation, which may have been a hidden aspect of their lives they felt uncomfortable discussing. I received informed consent for the study from all participants before observing their social media profiles and conducting the one-on-one interviews.

Confidentiality and anonymity were addressed by assigning pseudonyms to all participants throughout the research, except for my record. This was important for the study because I may have recruited participants who were comfortable with participating despite being discreet about their sexual orientation to their families and others within their social networks. Assigning pseudonyms protected their identities from being linked to the study, thus protecting them from any backlash they may have experienced if others discovered that they were gay.

On the day of the interviews for each participant, I asked them if they were comfortable using their real names throughout the process or if they would choose a pseudonym for identification purposes.

Participants were given a choice to select the most suitable venue for the interview. A location was only chosen if an interview could be conducted safely in that context without risking 'outing' the participant to members of his household or social networks who were not aware of his sexual orientation. Participants were also given a choice of language with which they were most comfortable expressing themselves. After the interviews were conducted, participants had access to their transcripts to verify that they were transcribed and represented correctly. Lastly, the research data will be stored electronically for five years, after which it will be disposed of through suitable means.

4.6. Ensuring Trustworthiness

In this study, to ensure trustworthiness, I used five strategies: dependability, transferability, credibility, confirmability, and reflexivity.

4.6.1. Dependability

Enhancing the trustworthiness in qualitative research entails addressing its dependability, ensuring that the study would yield similar outcomes if replicated under the same conditions. While achieving dependability can be challenging in qualitative research, Shenton (2004, p. 71) contends that thorough reporting of study processes allows for potential replication, even

if it does not guarantee identical results. Thus, the research design may be considered a 'prototype model' (Shenton, 2004). Such in-depth coverage also allows the reader to assess the extent to which proper research practices have been followed. It enables readers of the research report to thoroughly understand the methods and their effectiveness. This includes outlining the research design and its strategic execution, detailing data collection procedures, and engaging in a reflective evaluation of the research process. This dissertation details my research design, recruitment strategies, procedures, and data generation methods. Furthermore, I also provide reflections that evaluate the effectiveness of the methods and the inquiry. For these reasons, under similar socio-political and cultural conditions, future studies could be conducted to understand the phenomenon of status consumption among marginalised people.

4.6.2. Transferability

Transferability in research involves considering the extent to which findings from one study can be applied to another context (Shenton, 2004; Bryman & Cramer, 2012). This is particularly difficult given that social constructionists argue that knowledge is interactive, co-constructed, and negotiated, as well as historical, situational, and changing, and thus difficult to duplicate (Koro-Ljungberg, 2010). However, for transferability to be possible, researchers must provide detailed documentation of study procedures and the conceptual framework used in their study. If there are sufficient similarities in contexts, then the findings of one study may be transferred to another context (Shenton, 2004). In this dissertation, I provided comprehensive details about the research methods and the study's data analysis. Therefore, there is a possibility that the findings of this study might be transferable to a context like Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal.

4.6.3. Credibility

In qualitative studies like the one analysed in this dissertation, ensuring credibility is crucial for establishing the trustworthiness of the research. Shenton (2004) emphasises the importance of credibility and reliability in qualitative research, given the variability in theoretical frameworks and contextual factors that often yield divergent results. To address this, maintaining uniformity in the data generation process across participants becomes essential to enable replication and ensure outcome consistency (Brink & Van Der Walt, 2006).

To achieve this, I employed a semi-structured interview schedule for all participants, ensuring consistency in the questions and information gathered. Additionally, I allocated a single

interviewer (myself) to conduct all interviews, fostering a safe environment for participants to express themselves freely. Treating all participants equally and respectfully throughout the research process further maintained uniformity and reliability. Conducting interviews in the language of the participants' choice also facilitated effective communication, ensuring that the data collected was accurate and representative of their experiences.

Credibility provides validation of the actual data about the phenomenon. Rallis and Rossman (2009) argue that if participants immediately recognise the explanation or interpretation made by the researcher about their experiences and find it accurate, the findings are credible. To improve the credibility of my research, I spent seven months observing participants' social media engagements about food consumption. I also engaged with them in their contexts to identify themes, patterns, and values and to develop trust. This prolonged engagement allowed for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study. According to Strauss and Corbin (1994), continued observation of the phenomenon under various natural situations is necessary to explore reality comprehensively. Before this, I debriefed participants about the research study, and a consent form with detailed descriptions and objectives of the research was provided, along with the interview guidelines and questions (see Appendix D).

By implementing these strategies, I ensured the credibility of my research, thereby enhancing its trustworthiness and providing valuable insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

4.6.4. Confirmability

Ensuring confirmability is crucial for establishing the trustworthiness of my research. Kakar et al. (2023) argue that confirmability is the degree of fairness of the findings, which consists of the purity of the original responses of the research participants and is free from any bias. This concept emphasises the importance of accurately representing the participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's interpretations or preferences. To achieve confirmability, I adopted several strategies throughout the research process. Lemon and Hayes (2020) suggest that triangulation is vital to enhance confirmability. Triangulation involves using multiple methods or sources of data to cross-check and validate findings, making it one of the most central strategies for strengthening trustworthiness. This approach enhances confirmability and improves credibility and transferability (Anney, 2014).

I employed various data collection methods in this study, including in-depth interviews and online participant observations over seven months. I took comprehensive notes about what I observed to gather a thorough understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. By collecting data from multiple sources, I ensured that any single perspective did not skew the findings and that they accurately represented the diverse views of the participants. Moreover, I adhered to the principle of maintaining the purity of the original responses of the research participants. As Loh (2013) confirms, some researchers equate confirmability with ensuring that the data consists of participant responses rather than the researcher's choices. To this end, I meticulously recorded, transcribed, and analysed the participants' responses, ensuring that my interpretations were grounded in their words and experiences.

Additionally, I documented the data analysis process in detail, providing a clear audit trail that allows others to trace the steps taken to arrive at the findings. This transparency further reinforces the confirmability of the research, as it demonstrates that the findings are based on the participants' input and not influenced by the researcher's biases.

In summary, by employing triangulation, using multiple data collection methods, and maintaining transparency in the data analysis process, I ensured the confirmability of my research. These strategies helped to present a fair and unbiased representation of the participants' perspectives, thereby strengthening the overall trustworthiness of the study.

4.6.5. Reflexivity

This study originated from my experiences as a Black gay man living in Pietermaritzburg. Over the years, I have observed the culinary preferences of my gay friends and other gay men from my networks and social media platforms who are also Black. My observations revealed that, as gay men, we preferred luxury food items and bought our groceries from top market outlets and farmers' markets. We considered these experiences unique and not easily accessible to those assumed to be of a lower social class. Based on this background, I recognised there was a need to address issues that had not been covered in the literature. As such, the purpose of this study was to better understand the factors that influenced the status consumption of food by Black gay men.

As a master's student, I worked with the organisation UThingo Network to recruit participants for my study. I also serve as the director of Uthingo Network. Given this dual relationship, I fully revealed my role to participants to ensure transparency and address potential ethical concerns. To reduce potential bias, I set clear boundaries between my role as a researcher and my leadership position within the organisation. Recruitment processes were designed to ensure voluntary participation in the study and reduce coercion. For example, participants were clearly informed that their decision to participate or withdraw from the study would not impact their relationship with UThingo Network or its programmes. This allowed participants to thoroughly discuss their experiences without fear of unwanted influence.

Power dynamics were carefully managed throughout the research process. I took a participatory approach, encouraging participants to view themselves as co-creators of knowledge rather than passive participants. During interviews, I fostered a space where participants felt empowered to speak authentically by fostering trust, practising active listening, and minimising hierarchical structures. I avoided imposing my viewpoints and instead prioritised their narratives. In addition, I implemented member checking, which allowed participants to review and approve their responses to ensure accuracy and ownership of their contributions.

Broader debates surrounding insider and outsider positionality are important in shaping the reflexive perspective adopted in this study. According to Bukamal (2022), an insider researcher is a member of the group or community being studied, whereas an outsider researcher does not share the same identities or experiences. As a Black gay man who has shared similar experiences with my participants, I brought a unique perspective on cultural and social circumstances to the study. Insider positionality, on the other hand, raises the possibility of making assumptions or overidentifying with participants (Bukamal, 2022), which could lead to biased conclusions. To address this, I used strategies such as keeping a research journal to document and critically examine my reflections, ensuring a balance of empathy and objectivity.

Outsider positionality, which emphasises neutrality and detachment, may lack the nuanced understanding of cultural and lived experiences required for contextualising data (Bukamal, 2022). I could navigate the complex interplay between both perspectives by acknowledging and embracing my insider status while adhering to rigorous methodological reflexivity. This duality is consistent with the work of scholars such as Merton (1972) and Narayan (1993), who advocate for a hybrid approach that values both the richness of insider perspectives and the critical distance of outsider viewpoints.

Qualitative analysis assists researchers in understanding the data without imposing preconceived notions about the phenomenon (Timulak & Elliott, 2019). This requires them to be reflexive of their biases throughout the research process. Cohen and Crabtree (2008) define reflexivity as systematic attention to the context of knowledge formation, particularly the researcher's impact, at every stage of the research process. As a researcher involved in the study, I needed to be aware of my biases and avoid imposing my understanding on the participants' experiences. I ensured this by being reflective.

I positioned myself in the study by being aware of my role in the research and not using my influence to encourage participants to express themselves freely and constructively. As a self-identified Black gay man with lived experiences of status consumption, I knew that when interviewing my participants, I needed to remain objective, putting aside my own opinions and reactions and listening from a researcher's perspective. I kept a research journal where I recorded my daily thoughts. I documented positive and negative entries and used them to reflect on and learn from my research experiences. Being reflective allowed me to focus on the following: first, the cultural, political, social, and ideological foundations of my point of view; second, the perspectives and voices of those I interviewed or observed; and third, the perspectives of those to whom I plan to present

4.7. Synthesis

This chapter presented the research design and methodology adopted in the study. The chapter detailed the recruitment, sampling, data generation, and analysis procedures. It discussed ethical considerations, underscoring the commitment to conducting the study with integrity and respect for participants' rights. Moreover, the chapter examined my methods of establishing trustworthiness in the study, including reflexivity. It acknowledged my position as a researcher and my efforts to minimise bias throughout the study.

The next chapter presents the findings from the study.

CHAPTER FIVE

FOOD AS IDENTITY: STATUS CONSUMPTION AND SOCIAL POSITIONING AMONG BLACK GAY MEN

5.1. Introduction

The previous chapter presented the research design and methodology used to address this question. The study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of Black gay men concerning their status consumption of food. This methodological approach captured the nuanced and subjective experiences of the participants. Data were collected using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten Black gay men in Pietermaritzburg. These interviews allowed the participants to reflect on their own experiences and provided rich, detailed data for analysis.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, which involved identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within codes. This method enabled me to pinpoint common themes and variations in the participants' experiences, particularly how they use food consumption to signal status and navigate their identities. The analysis is informed by the social identity and critical consciousness theories. Social Identity Theory is employed to understand how Black gay men in Pietermaritzburg use status consumption of food as a means of identity construction and negotiation within their social contexts. Critical Consciousness Theory is applied to explore the awareness and response to marginalisation and oppression faced by this demographic. The integration of these theories provides a robust framework for analysing the intersectional identities and social behaviours of Black gay men.

The study reported in this dissertation addressed the question: *How might an understanding of the status consumption of food among Black gay men inform community education initiatives aimed at addressing their marginalisation and discrimination in communities and institutions?*

This chapter presents data from online participant observations to answers two critical research questions:

1. How do Black gay men in a KwaZulu-Natal urban community understand and engage with the status consumption of food?
2. What factors motivate Black gay men's status consumption and food choices?

In this chapter, I draw the findings from the data generated through online participant observations over seven months (February to August 2023), to illustrate how food extends beyond mere sustenance to become a dynamic medium for constructing and communicating identity. This approach allowed me to explore the intricate connections between food consumption, identity expression, and digital engagement. By immersing myself in participants' virtual environments, I observed how food-related behaviours were shaped and performed online. This included examining their social media posts, comments, and interactions centred on food—such as photos of meals, restaurant check-ins, culinary reviews, and discussions about food trends and preferences. These digital spaces offered a lens into how participants negotiated social dynamics, engaged with cultural influences, and expressed status through food choices.

The findings are thematically organised to reveal key patterns and motivations underlying these behaviours. The chapter highlights how food consumption serves as a site of resistance to societal marginalisation while simultaneously offering opportunities for community-building and cultural affirmation. Ultimately, this exploration demonstrates how digital platforms become significant arenas for identity construction, where the intersection of food, race, sexuality, and place manifests in nuanced and meaningful ways.

5.2. Dining Preferences and Venue Choices

Participants demonstrated a distinct preference for dining in upscale restaurants and purchasing from gourmet markets. They chose these spaces for their association with luxury, exclusivity, and high status. For many participants, frequenting these venues was a deliberate strategy to align themselves with symbols of affluence and sophistication. One participant, Bongani, described his affinity for organic markets:

I shop at places like Karkloof Farmer's Market because it's not just about food; it's about being seen. These are places where people like me are respected, not judged.
(Bongani, 33, Observation)

This preference reflects a conscious effort to navigate societal hierarchies by positioning themselves within spaces perceived as prestigious.

5.2.1. Symbolic Consumption and Status Signalling

The preference for upscale restaurants and gourmet markets highlights the participants' engagement in symbolic consumption, where food choices and dining venues are not merely about sustenance but serve as markers of social status. These venues represent luxury, exclusivity, and affluence, aligning with the broader concept of status consumption, where individuals use material goods and experiences to signify their societal positioning.

Participants deliberately chose spaces associated with high status, suggesting a conscious strategy to align their identities with symbols of sophistication and affluence. This behaviour reflects the importance of visibility in reinforcing social hierarchies, particularly for marginalised groups like Black gay men, who may face societal pressure to assert their worth and challenge prevailing stereotypes.

5.2.2. Intersectionality and Marginalisation

Bongani's statement underscores how choosing dining venues goes beyond mere preference; it reflects a response to marginalisation. By choosing spaces where they feel "respected, not judged," participants navigate the intersection of race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. These venues offer a reprieve from environments where they might face discrimination, thus serving as safe spaces for self-expression and community validation.

This behaviour demonstrates how marginalised individuals strategically navigate societal hierarchies to construct affirming identities. For Black gay men, upscale dining venues provide both symbolic capital and a sense of belonging, allowing them to reclaim dignity and visibility in a heteronormative and racially stratified society.

5.2.3. Performative Aspect of Consumption

The preference for dining in such spaces also reveals a performative dimension of food consumption. By frequenting venues with high-status connotations, participants engage in acts of self-presentation. The emphasis on "being seen" reflects a desire to project an image of success and refinement, countering stereotypes often associated with Black gay men. This performativity is amplified by the social validation participants receive from their community and beyond.

5.2.4. Resistance and Subversion

At a deeper level, these dining behaviours can be interpreted as acts of resistance and subversion. By occupying spaces traditionally associated with privilege, participants challenge societal narratives that exclude them from such spaces. Their presence in these venues disrupts conventional associations of race, sexuality, and class with exclusivity, signalling a refusal to conform to societal expectations.

5.2.5. Implications for Identity Construction

The finding highlights the role of consumption in identity construction among marginalised groups. For these participants, dining preferences become a means to craft and assert a positive identity that aligns with aspirations of sophistication, cultural capital, and social acceptance. This process affirms their individual identities and contributes to broader narratives of inclusion and visibility for Black gay men within South African society.

The participants' dining preferences reflect a multifaceted phenomenon where consumption serves as a tool for identity affirmation, social navigation, and resistance. Their deliberate alignment with high-status spaces reveals the interplay between symbolic consumption and intersectional marginalisation, offering insights into how marginalised communities use everyday practices to challenge societal hierarchies and assert their visibility. This finding underscores the importance of acknowledging the sociocultural dimensions of consumption in understanding identity construction within marginalised groups.

5.3 Identity Portrayal through Food

5.3.1. Performative Consumption and Identity Signalling

The curation of culinary experiences on social media platforms highlights the performative nature of food consumption among participants. The deliberate effort to document and present meals, venues, and experiences in visually appealing ways indicates a strategic use of social media as a medium for identity signalling. These curated posts function as public declarations of the participants' alignment with modernity, sophistication, and taste, offering them a platform to assert their identity within and beyond their immediate social networks.

This behaviour reflects a broader trend where food consumption is transformed into a performative act that communicates values, aspirations, and belonging. For Black gay men,

this performativity carries additional weight as it is both a form of self-expression and a means of countering societal marginalisation.

5.3.2. Social Media as a Tool for Resistance

Participants' use of social media to share curated culinary experiences represents a form of resistance against stereotypes and societal narratives that often undermine their identities. By showcasing their refined tastes and modern lifestyles, participants subvert reductive stereotypes about Black gay men, asserting individuality and complexity. Jason said

“My food pictures are not just pictures. They're more than just pictures; they're a statement about who I am and what I stand for.” (Jason, 33, Observation).

Jason's emphasis on the intentionality behind his posts being more than just pictures but statements about who he is and what he stands for reflects a conscious effort to redefine how his identity is perceived. This suggests that social media acts as a site for agency, allowing marginalised individuals to shape their narratives and challenge dominant ideologies.

5.3.3. Intersection of Aesthetics and Social Capital

The visual curation of meals and experiences underscores the importance of aesthetics in building social capital. Participants use the visual language of social media, composition, lighting, and branding to project affluence and cultural capital. These posts serve as personal affirmations of self-worth and public validations of their inclusion in high-status social circles. In this context, posting visually appealing content goes beyond mere consumption; it is a means of accruing symbolic capital that enhances their social standing and reinforces their identities as culturally sophisticated individuals.

5.3.4. Navigating Marginalisation Through Visibility

By curating their culinary experiences on public platforms, participants navigate marginalisation by making themselves visible in spaces where they might otherwise be excluded. This visibility is a deliberate act of reclamation, signalling to both themselves and others that they belong in the modern, cosmopolitan spaces they depict. Social media, therefore, becomes a powerful tool for creating alternative spaces of recognition and belonging, enabling participants to assert their value in ways that might not be possible in offline settings.

5.3.5. Implications for Community and Identity

The collective use of social media for curating culinary experiences also fosters a sense of community among participants and their followers. These shared practices of posting and engaging with content contribute to a collective identity that values modernity, taste, and resistance against marginalisation. For Black gay men, these curated experiences not only affirm individual identities but also contribute to a broader narrative of inclusion and empowerment. The finding illustrates how food consumption and its curation on social media serve as multifaceted tools for identity construction, social alignment, and resistance among Black gay men. The participants' deliberate engagement with platforms like Instagram and Facebook underscores the performative nature of modern consumption, particularly for marginalised groups seeking to assert their place in society. By leveraging social media, participants reclaim their narratives, challenge stereotypes, and craft identities that are complex, visible and celebrated. This highlights the transformative potential of social media in reshaping identity dynamics within marginalised communities.

5.4 Curation of Culinary Experiences

Food consumption was often performative among participants, with social media playing a significant role in curating and disseminating their dining experiences. Participants used platforms such as Instagram and Facebook to document their meals, venues, and overall culinary experiences. These posts were not just personal records but public declarations of social alignment and identity.

For instance, several participants shared how they curated visually appealing posts to showcase their alignment with modern and sophisticated lifestyles. The act of posting was seen as a form of resistance against stereotypes about Black gay men and as an assertion of individuality and taste. Jason explained:

“I take time to make sure my posts look good because they’re more than just pictures; they’re a statement about who I am and what I stand for,” (Jason, 33, Observation).

5.4.1. Performative Consumption as Identity Construction

The participants' intentional curation of culinary experiences demonstrates how food consumption extends beyond nourishment to become a performative act tied to identity construction. By documenting and sharing their dining experiences on platforms like Instagram

and Facebook, participants engage in a form of symbolic communication that aligns their identities with modernity, sophistication, and exclusivity. These posts act as visual narratives, where food and venues symbolise their desired self-image and social positioning.

5.4.2. Social Media as a Space for Resistance and Affirmation

Participants' use of social media transforms it into a space for both resistance and affirmation. By posting visually appealing content, participants challenge stereotypes about Black gay men, particularly those rooted in marginalisation, lack of refinement, or exclusion from high-status spaces. Jason's comment, "They're more than just pictures; they're a statement about who I am and what I stand for," underscores this dual purpose. The curated posts resist reductive societal narratives while simultaneously asserting individuality and cultural capital.

5.4.3. Aesthetics and the Creation of Social Capital

The meticulous attention to visual aesthetics, such as composition, lighting, and branding, reveals the importance of creating social capital through digital platforms. By presenting meals and experiences in a refined and aspirational manner, participants use social media to project an image of affluence and cosmopolitanism. This deliberate curation reflects personal taste and signals alignment with broader social values associated with success and sophistication, enhancing their perceived social standing.

5.4.4. Visibility as Empowerment

For Black gay men, the act of curating and sharing culinary experiences is also a strategy for reclaiming visibility in a society where they often face erasure or misrepresentation. Social media becomes a tool for amplifying their voices and affirming their presence in spaces where they might otherwise be marginalised. This visibility disrupts traditional norms and reinforces their agency in defining their identities on their terms.

5.4.5. Community Building and Collective Identity

The act of sharing curated culinary experiences also fosters a sense of community among participants and their followers. By engaging with likes, comments, and shared narratives, these posts create a collective identity that values modernity, individuality, and resistance to marginalisation. The shared appreciation for these curated experiences strengthens bonds within the community and provides a platform for solidarity and mutual affirmation.

The finding highlights the transformative role of social media in reshaping consumption practices into acts of self-expression, resistance, and empowerment. For the participants, curating culinary experiences is more than a personal activity. It is a deliberate strategy to assert individuality, challenge stereotypes, and navigate societal hierarchies. These curated experiences underscore the intersection of consumption, identity, and digital visibility, offering a nuanced understanding of how marginalised groups use performative consumption to assert agency and redefine social narratives.

5.5 Food as Social Currency

Food also served as a form of social currency within peer groups. The choice of premium dishes or expensive beverages often signalled cultural and economic capital, shaping perceptions of an individual's social hierarchy within the group. Participants reported intentionally selecting high-value menu items during group dining to establish or reinforce their status. For example, opting for items like steak, sushi, or imported wines was interpreted as demonstrating sophistication and affluence.

“It’s not just about what you eat; it’s about how what you eat makes others see you,” noted Avela during a conversation with him. (Avela, 39, Observation).

5.5.1. Food as a Marker of Social Hierarchies

The finding illustrates how food consumption is a marker of social stratification within peer groups. By selecting premium dishes or beverages, participants use food to signal cultural and economic capital, which shapes their perceived social standing. This behaviour aligns with theories of status consumption, where the conspicuous display of wealth or sophistication through material goods reinforces hierarchical relationships and affirms one's position within a group. For these participants, food choices function as a visible expression of their identity and status, making dining experiences a stage for social competition and validation.

5.5.2. Performative Dining and Group Dynamics

Participants' intentional selection of high-value menu items underscores the performative aspect of group dining. Individuals actively demonstrate affluence and taste by opting for items like steak, sushi, or imported wines. Avela's remark, “It’s not just about what you eat; it’s about how what you eat makes others see you,” encapsulates this performativity, suggesting that food choices are as much about social signalling as they are about personal preference. This

performative consumption reinforces one's image as a sophisticated and cultured individual within their social circles.

5.5.3. Cultural and Economic Capital in Identity Construction

The participants' food choices reflect Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and economic capital (Huang, 2019). Premium dishes and beverages, often associated with elite or cosmopolitan lifestyles, are consumed for their intrinsic qualities and symbolic value. By engaging in such consumption, participants align themselves with markers of high status and distinguish themselves from others within and outside their peer groups. This strategy also reflects the intersection of identity and consumption, where food becomes a tool for asserting individuality and social belonging.

5.5.4. The Role of Social Pressure and Conformity

The finding also hints at the role of social pressure in shaping consumption patterns. In group settings, individuals may feel compelled to conform to shared expectations by choosing high-value items to avoid being perceived as lacking taste or sophistication. This dynamic creates a feedback loop where individuals' consumption behaviours are influenced by and reinforce group norms, further entrenching the role of food as a form of social currency.

5.5.5. Implications for Marginalised Groups

For Black gay men, the use of food as social currency represents a strategy to navigate intersectional marginalisation. By leveraging premium food choices to project affluence and sophistication, participants resist societal stereotypes that may portray them as economically or culturally disadvantaged. This resistance highlights the agency of marginalised groups in using consumption to assert their value and redefine their social narratives, both within their communities and broader society.

The finding reveals the multifaceted role of food as a form of social currency, emphasising its function as both a personal and collective tool for identity construction and status signalling. By using premium food choices to navigate social hierarchies and reinforce their positions within peer groups, participants illustrate how marginalised individuals strategically employ consumption to assert their cultural and economic capital. This behaviour underscores the intersection of food, identity, and power, offering insights into the social dynamics of consumption within marginalised communities.

5.6 Cultural Appropriation and Adaptation

Participants' food choices reflected a blending of traditional African cuisines with global culinary trends. Many described reimagining traditional dishes by incorporating international ingredients and techniques, striking a balance between cultural heritage and modernity. One participant, Mvelo, described hosting dinner parties where he reinterpreted traditional African meals:

“I love cooking. I’ll take something like amadumbe [traditional African yams] and serve it with a balsamic reduction. It’s still African, but it’s elevated.” (Mvelo, 35, Observation).

This adaptation of traditional cuisine was a way to assert both cultural pride and contemporary relevance, aligning their identities with cosmopolitan ideals while remaining rooted in heritage.

5.6.1. Blending Heritage with Modernity

The participants' food choices highlight a deliberate effort to merge traditional African cuisines with global culinary influences. This practice reflects their desire to preserve cultural heritage while engaging with modern, cosmopolitan ideals. Mvelo's example of elevating amadumbe with a balsamic reduction demonstrates how traditional dishes can be reinterpreted to resonate with contemporary tastes and aesthetics. This blending showcases participants' ability to innovate while maintaining a strong connection to their cultural roots.

5.6.2. Reinforcement of Cultural Pride

The reinterpretation of traditional dishes serves as an assertion of cultural pride. By modernising and presenting African cuisine in sophisticated ways, participants celebrate their heritage and counter-narratives that may undervalue or marginalise African culinary traditions. This act of culinary adaptation symbolises resilience and pride in their identities, asserting that traditional African food can hold its place in global culinary spaces.

5.6.3. Culinary Adaptation as Identity Construction

For Black gay men, adapting traditional dishes becomes a medium for constructing and expressing their identities. This practice allows them to navigate their intersectional realities, blending cultural, racial, and sexual identities into a cohesive narrative. The act of reimagining

food aligns with their cosmopolitan aspirations and communicates a nuanced and multifaceted identity rooted in tradition and open to global influences.

5.6.4. Resisting Cultural Erasure

By maintaining traditional elements in reinterpreted dishes, participants actively resist cultural erasure. Using African ingredients and culinary techniques ensures that their heritage remains visible and celebrated, even as they engage with international trends. This practice challenges the dominance of Western culinary norms, asserting the value and versatility of African cuisines in global contexts.

5.6.5. Cosmopolitanism and Social Positioning

Blending traditional and global culinary trends reflects the participants' alignment with cosmopolitan ideals. This approach positions them as culturally sophisticated individuals who can navigate and contribute to global cultural dialogues. Reinterpreted dishes become symbols of social positioning, demonstrating their ability to harmonise tradition and modernity in ways that reflect individual creativity and collective pride.

5.6.6. Implications for Social Perceptions

Reimagining traditional African dishes enhances the social perception of African cuisines as dynamic and versatile rather than static or outdated. By presenting traditional food in new and sophisticated ways, participants challenge stereotypes about African food being simplistic or unsophisticated. This culinary innovation contributes to broader efforts to reshape how African cultures are perceived globally.

The participants' blending of traditional African cuisines with global trends is both an act of cultural preservation and contemporary expression. By adapting traditional dishes, they assert cultural pride, construct multifaceted identities, and position themselves within global cosmopolitan discourses. This finding underscores the role of food as a powerful medium for navigating and reshaping cultural, social, and personal narratives in marginalised communities.

5.7. Gendered and Sexualised Food Choices

Perceptions of gender and sexuality often influenced food choices among participants. Selecting “classy” meals, such as salmon, sushi, or fine wine, was linked to qualities such as sophistication and refinement, which participants associated with their desired gay identities.

The use of food to project a particular identity highlights how consumption practices are deeply intertwined with participants' perceptions of their roles within their community and broader society. For instance, one participant, Mandla, remarked:

“I wouldn't order something messy like ribs on a date. It's all about showing class and control.” (Mandla, 29, Observation).

5.7.1. Food as a Tool for Identity Expression

The participants' food choices reflect their deliberate use of consumption to project desired identities, particularly those aligned with sophistication and refinement. By selecting “classy” meals such as salmon, sushi, or fine wine, participants reinforce cultural notions of elegance and control, which they associate with an idealised gay identity. This finding underscores how consumption practices are not merely about preferences but serve as tools for constructing and expressing nuanced social identities.

5.7.2. Gendered Perceptions and Performative Dining

Participants' avoidance of certain foods, such as “messy” meals like ribs, reveals the influence of gendered expectations in shaping dining behaviours. Foods that require controlled, delicate consumption are viewed as aligning with qualities often culturally associated with refinement and grace, while “messy” foods are linked to a lack of decorum. This performative aspect of dining highlights how participants navigate and challenge societal norms around gender and sexuality, using food to reinforce qualities they value in their identities.

Mandla's remark, “I wouldn't order something messy like ribs on a date. It's all about showing class and control,” exemplifies the intersection of consumption and performativity. The emphasis on control reflects a strategic effort to align their behaviour with societal ideals of sophistication, particularly in settings where their identity is on display, such as dates or group gatherings.

5.7.3. Intersection of Sexuality and Social Capital

For participants, food choices are not only expressions of gendered behaviour but also markers of sexual identity within both the LGBTQ+ community and broader society. “Classy” foods serve as symbols of taste and affluence, enabling participants to assert their individuality and position themselves as sophisticated and culturally aware. This aligns with broader patterns

where consumption practices within marginalised groups often function as resistance against stereotypes or mechanisms for claiming social capital.

5.7.4. Challenging Stereotypes Through Consumption

The emphasis on “classy” meals reflects participants’ efforts to challenge stereotypes that often portray Black gay men as lacking refinement or sophistication. Participants disrupt these narratives and assert a self-defined identity by consciously choosing foods associated with high cultural value. This behaviour also reclaims space within societal norms that often exclude or marginalise them, using food as a medium to demonstrate belonging and cultural capital.

5.7.5. Food and Power Dynamics in Relationships

Participants’ dining behaviours also reveal underlying power dynamics in social and romantic contexts. Mandla’s avoidance of messy meals on dates suggests a strategic effort to project control and composure, aligning with ideals of desirability and social power. This calculated performance reflects an understanding of how consumption choices influence perceptions of oneself in intimate and public interactions.

The finding highlights how food choices among Black gay men are deeply intertwined with perceptions of gender and sexuality. By deliberately selecting “classy” meals, participants use consumption to assert sophistication, challenge stereotypes, and align with desired identities. These choices reflect the performative and symbolic nature of dining, where food becomes a medium for navigating and reshaping societal perceptions of gender, sexuality, and cultural capital. This dynamic underscores the role of consumption in resisting marginalisation and crafting empowered self-representations.

5.8. Discussion

The findings reveal that food consumption behaviours among Black gay men in Pietermaritzburg serve as a complex interplay of social positioning, identity affirmation, and subtle resistance to marginalisation. Dining preferences, culinary curation, and the symbolic use of food as social capital underscore this community’s multifaceted nature of food consumption. Participants assert their identities, challenge stereotypes, and navigate societal hierarchies by actively choosing certain foods and dining spaces. These behaviours are not merely acts of consumption but deliberate expressions of self-definition and empowerment. This chapter highlights how food consumption transcends its nutritional purpose, emerging as

a powerful tool for fostering inclusivity, visibility, and recognition within marginalised communities.

These findings shed light on the complex relationship between food consumption, social status, and identity among Black gay men. The participants' dining preferences and their use of social media highlight both performative and resistance aspects of consumption, showcasing how food choices go beyond mere sustenance to become powerful tools for self-expression, visibility, and social navigation. Participants demonstrated a clear preference for upscale restaurants and gourmet food markets as spaces that symbolise luxury, exclusivity, and high status. These choices are not just about enjoying high-end food but serve as a form of symbolic consumption, which they deliberately use as a strategy to project an image of affluence and sophistication (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). Bongani's experience of shopping at an organic market where he feels "respected, not judged" reflects how these venues are chosen as safe spaces where Black gay men can assert their identities without facing societal discrimination. Such safe spaces, although not many, are important since most spaces in Southern African countries are not queer-affirming, putting queer individuals like Bongani at risk of being victims of anti-LGBTQ+ violence (Ngidi et al., 2020). This preference also speaks to the intersectionality of race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. For Black gay men, these venues provide both symbolic capital and a sense of belonging. Dining in such spaces can be seen as a response to marginalisation, offering an escape from environments where they may experience judgment or exclusion based on their race and sexual orientation. These results match those observed in earlier studies. For example, a Taiwanese study found that gay men protect their identity and oppose the homophobia and stigma they experience in society through consumption (Hsieh & Wu, 2011), while Allen (1998) also argued that the gay subculture of consumption can be viewed as an attempt by gay men 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.

Curating culinary experiences on social media adds another layer to this performative consumption. Platforms like Instagram and Facebook allow participants to craft and project an image of themselves that aligns with modernity, sophistication, and taste. The curation of meals and dining experiences, captured in visually appealing ways, becomes a strategic effort to align with higher social circles and assert identity within both personal and broader public spheres.

For Black gay men, this is not only a form of self-expression but also a direct challenge to societal stereotypes that often marginalise their experiences.

Jason's comments about his posts being "more than just pictures" emphasise the intentionality behind this performative consumption. It's not just about documenting meals but signalling identity and challenging negative perceptions. Through visual aesthetics, such as lighting, composition, and branding, participants are showcasing their taste and signalling social capital—the cultural value they wish to associate with themselves. These curated posts amplify their social standing and emphasise their alignment with sophistication and success. These findings are consistent with those of Zhu et al. (2019), who found that food serves as a medium for expressing emotions, culture, and social identity. Sharing food photos enhances the dining experience and contributes to a favourable brand perception. Furthermore, these findings corroborate research by Choi and Sung (2018), who suggested that platforms like Instagram allow users to shape and project their self-image, reflecting who they are, who they aspire to be, and how they want others to perceive them

Social media functions as a site for both resistance and affirmation. Participants actively reclaim visibility and empowerment by posting about refined tastes and modern lifestyles. It disrupts narratives that often exclude or misrepresent them, allowing participants to counter the reductive stereotypes that may persist about Black gay men. This platform becomes a space for agency, enabling participants to define their identities and push back against societal norms that aim to erase or marginalise them. These results match those observed by Aziz (2024) in his study of Rohingya activists in Australia, in which he reported that these activists used social media platforms such as Facebook to reclaim their identity narratives through visibility and resistance.

Through shared culinary experiences on social media, participants create a sense of community and solidarity. These curated experiences foster collective identity, strengthening bonds within the community and contributing to a broader narrative of empowerment. The interactions between posts—likes, comments, and shared narratives—build a network of support and mutual recognition. This collective identity challenges the marginalisation of Black gay men and promotes a sense of belonging that transcends physical spaces, creating an inclusive virtual community. There are similarities between the use of social media by Black gay men in this study and the transgender youth of colour from Singh's (2013) study, who described a significant use of social media ranging from Facebook and Myspace as

they to access support resources outside of their immediate contexts and to also closely “connect” with other transgender youth or served as models of inspiration for them. Ultimately, these findings underscore how food consumption and social media serve as multifaceted tools for identity construction among marginalised groups. By intentionally choosing venues that symbolise status and curating visually appealing food posts, participants are shaping their identities in ways that align with their aspirations of sophistication, success, and cultural capital. This process is about asserting visibility in spaces that have historically excluded them, challenging societal expectations, and using consumption practices as acts of resistance.

These behaviours also highlight how marginalised individuals use everyday practices to navigate societal hierarchies. Dining preferences, social media posts, and the aesthetics of food become part of a strategic effort to reclaim dignity, assert presence, and craft identities that reflect survival and empowerment. This comprehensive understanding of offline and online consumption demonstrates its transformative potential in reshaping the narratives of marginalised communities. These findings corroborate the findings of Zhao et al.’s (2008) study, which indicated that Facebook empowers users to construct and present their identities in ways that effectively circumvent physical “gating obstacles,” allowing them to cultivate their idealised selves that may be difficult to realise in offline settings. Zhao et al. (2008) further report that this digital self-presentation can significantly improve users’ confidence and increase their opportunities for meaningful connections in the offline world.

These findings highlight how food, far beyond its basic nutritional value, functions as a social currency, a performative tool, and a marker of identity. In the context of the Black gay men who participated in this study, food choices become a deliberate way of signalling economic and cultural capital within social hierarchies. The conscious selection of premium dishes, such as steak, sushi, or imported wines, allows individuals to assert their sophistication and affluence. This aligns with theories of status consumption, where consumption is less about personal enjoyment and more about establishing one’s position in the social landscape (Eastman et al., 1999; Goldsmith and Clark, 2011; Huang et al., 2024; Sestino, 2024). The performative nature of these food choices reinforces the identity participants wish to project, blending cultural pride with cosmopolitan ideals. At the same time, participants navigate societal pressures to conform, ensuring their choices align with expectations of taste and refinement to avoid being perceived as lacking cultural or economic capital.

Adapting traditional African dishes reflects the intersectionality of identity, where food becomes a tool for resisting cultural erasure while engaging with global trends. By blending heritage with modernity, participants reimagine their cultural narratives and assert pride in their traditions, positioning themselves as sophisticated and cosmopolitan. This process also allows for the redefinition of African cuisine as dynamic and versatile, challenging outdated stereotypes. Furthermore, the participants' food choices serve as a vehicle for challenging gendered and sexualised stereotypes, where certain foods are deliberately chosen to project control, grace, and refinement—qualities often associated with idealised gay identities. This performativity plays out in social and romantic settings, where food choices are not just about taste but about asserting power dynamics and social positioning. This also suggests that food plays a significant role in self-representation and the negotiation of identity within marginalised groups. By strategically selecting certain foods, participants navigate cultural pride and societal expectations, using food to conform to and challenge societal norms.

5.9. Synthesis

This chapter has demonstrated that food consumption among Black gay men in Pietermaritzburg extends beyond mere sustenance, operating as a crucial site of identity expression, social positioning, and resistance to marginalisation. Through online participant observations, the findings illustrate how food functions as a symbolic medium for navigating social hierarchies, affirming cultural pride, and asserting economic and social capital. The deliberate choices of dining venues, engagement with high-status food items, and the curation of culinary experiences on social media reflect participants' strategic negotiation of visibility and belonging. These practices not only serve as tools for self-affirmation but also challenge societal norms that often marginalise Black gay men. The findings further highlight the performative nature of consumption, where food serves as a marker of sophistication, affluence, and cosmopolitan identity. Whether through the selection of upscale dining spaces, the aesthetic presentation of meals on social media, or the reinterpretation of traditional African cuisine, participants use food as a means of constructing and communicating their identities. Importantly, these acts of consumption also function as resistance against exclusionary structures, enabling participants to reclaim spaces and assert their presence within cultural and economic landscapes that have historically rendered them invisible.

Building on these insights, the next two chapters shift focus from online participant observations to in-depth interviews, providing a deeper understanding of the motivations, lived experiences, and personal narratives behind these consumption practices. Chapter Six presents data from interviews to explore how Black gay men in a KwaZulu-Natal urban community understand and engage with the status consumption of food. Chapter Seven examines the factors that motivate their status consumption and food choices, offering a nuanced perspective on the intersection of identity, culture, and consumption within this demographic.

CHAPTER SIX

SAVOURING IDENTITY: FOOD, RESISTANCE, AND VISIBILITY AMONG BLACK GAY MEN IN PIETERMARITZBURG

6.1. Introduction

The previous chapter examined food consumption as a performative and symbolic practice, highlighting how Black gay men in Pietermaritzburg use food to express identity, navigate social hierarchies, and resist exclusion. Through online participant observations, the findings illustrated the intersection of food, race, sexuality, and digital engagement, shedding light on how food functions as both a marker of status and a tool for empowerment.

Building on this foundation, this chapter presents the participants' insights in response to the first research question: *How do Black gay men in a KwaZulu-Natal urban community understand and engage with the status consumption of food and their participation therein?* Drawing on the transcripts of the audio recordings of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the ten Black gay men who participated in this study and the fieldnotes I generated from my online observations of their status consumption of food in various areas, the chapter captures the participants' perspectives of the phenomenon. It explores how they conceptualise and interact with status-driven food consumption. Using thematic analysis, I identify key patterns that reveal the complexities of food consumption as both a personal and collective practice. The themes illustrate how Black gay men engage with status consumption as a means of self-expression, cultural affirmation, and social mobility while also navigating broader societal structures that shape their experiences. The participants' narratives provide critical reflections on the meanings they attach to food, the social contexts that shape their consumption behaviours, and how food functions as a site for identity negotiation and social belonging. Ultimately, this chapter underscores the multifaceted nature of food consumption within this demographic, highlighting its implications for identity formation, social justice, and negotiating power and visibility in everyday life.

6.2. “I am Better than them”: Food in the (re)Construction of Exalted Gay Identities

Black gay men exist at the intersection of multiple stigmatised identities encompassing race, sexual orientation, economic status, etc., compared to their white peers (Fields et al., 2016;

Hunter, 2010). The findings in this study affirm the conceptual framework developed in chapter two (see Figure 2.1) by highlighting how Black gay men in Pietermaritzburg navigate multiple intersecting identities, facing compounded discrimination based on race, sexuality, and economic status. Marvin and Bongani's experiences reflect the intersectionality of these identities. They find themselves experiencing a dilemma of being alienated from community institutions such as the family, the church, and culture because of their sexual orientation and not being integrated into predominantly White urban gay community institutions because they are Black (Green, 2007). To counter this marginalisation, Marvin and Bongani chose assimilation to whiteness as their coping mechanism, which includes dining at predominantly white restaurants and engaging with cuisine regarded as 'white' to fit in and gain social acceptance.

My favourite restaurant is KEG in Montrose because it is dominated by White people. For me, being able to eat from this restaurant tells White people that I am not poor or uncivilised like the rest of the Black people from where I live. It also tells the homophobes from my community that I am better than them and the rest of the gay people I know because I dine with White people who are not homophobic. (Marvin, 36, IDI).

Marvin's statement reflects a complex intersection of identity, social dynamics, and perceived status in the context of foodscapes. As a Black gay man, Marvin expresses a desire to distinguish himself from the negative stereotypes associated with his racial and sexual identities. Opting for Keg as his restaurant of choice signals an aspiration to assert an elevated socioeconomic status within his community. This behaviour is consistent with Kuvlesky's (1971) findings that suggest that people from marginalised communities, such as Black gay men, do maintain high-level frames of aspirational reference, indicating their desire for upward social mobility. However, one cannot ignore that Marvin equates whiteness with high social standards and prestige. In his attempt to attain acceptance and validation from White people, Marvin also reinforces existing socioeconomic hierarchies and perpetuates notions of White supremacy over the Black race. Even though this behaviour affords Marvin a sense of perceived recognition and respect, it reinforces social inequalities. Moreover, Marvin's inclination towards associating homosexuality with White or Western ideology further complicates the narrative. By aligning his dining preferences with predominantly White spaces, Marvin reinforces the problematic belief among some Africans that homosexuality is a Western

ideology, which underscores the need to understand identities and social dynamics that are external to the confines of racial and cultural stereotypes.

Eating exotic foods is often associated with perceived social status and cultural capital. Kollnig (2018) reports that the Bolivian middle class possesses valuable social and cultural capital, which they reflect in their exotic food practices despite not having the highest economic capital. Similarly, Kirch (2015) highlights the consumption of ‘luxury’ foods in Hawaii, which were associated with social prestige. Jurafsky (2016) further emphasises the link between food culture, social class, and linguistic markers of status in food culture. These studies collectively suggest that exotic foods can signal individuals’ social status and cultural capital. It is important to challenge and dismantle such narratives and foster inclusivity and equity for all people, regardless of race, sexuality, or cultural background. Bongani, another participant in the study, described his participation in online status consumption of food:

I do not like sushi. Instead, let me just say that I do not eat it, but I remember how I had to post pictures pretending to be eating sushi just to prove to my Instagram followers that I also eat exotic food that is mainly enjoyed by white people. I received messages in my inbox from people who told me how they envied me and how they aspired to live like a white man as I do... Some of the people who said these things were once my bullies, but now it seems like they respect me because of the food I eat. (Bongani, 33, IDI).

Bongani’s narrative supports findings in the existing literature and highlights the social pressures some people conform to to be accepted and validated. In his narrative, Bongani expresses his dislike for sushi but also feels compelled to portray himself as someone who enjoys it for social media approval. This suggests a tension between his preference and societal expectations, particularly in consuming exotic foods associated with white culture and prestige. This pressure to conform to societal and social media standards stems from his desire for acceptance by his online and offline communities. Through posting pictures of his experience eating sushi, Bongani mentions that he attracts messages from his followers expressing admiration and envy. The envy from his social media followers feeds into his perceived social status and cultural capital he associates with eating exotic food, which he believes is typically enjoyed by white people. This behaviour is rewarded with newfound respect and admiration from those who bullied him, illustrating the power dynamics in social interactions and the influence of food-related symbolism on perceptions of status and identity. Bongani’s food

consumption affords him a higher social status and prestige than those who used to bully him, rendering them powerless without any social capital to maintain their position as bullies. Evans and Smokowski (2016) wrote about how the lack of social capital experienced by victims maintains victims in their current role and prevents them from gaining social status. Had Bongani remained socially beneath his bullies, his lack of social capital would have maintained his status as a victim of bullying.

Even though some participants reported accessibility to predominantly white restaurants, for participants like Max, such access was limited by their economic barriers. Max is socioeconomically disadvantaged, and as a result, he perceives all predominantly white restaurants as higher priced and exclusive to the more affluent clientele. As such, engaging in the status consumption of food in affluent and predominately white restaurants reflects socioeconomic privilege, which further reinforces race and class disparities. For example, Max observed:

I am unemployed and rely on my partner for money and dining experiences. He is white and is accustomed to predominantly white restaurants. Whenever we go out to these restaurants, I take content for my social media accounts to show my homophobic relatives and some of my gay friends that I am better than all of them. I know they cannot afford these restaurants; hence, I brag through my pictures, which makes me feel good. It is like I am avenging them for taking me for granted. (Max, 28, IDI).

Max's statement highlights the multiple ways in which gay men navigate and negotiate their identities, relationships, and social standing within broader systems of privilege and oppression. He describes being unemployed and depending on his White partner for financial support as his social capital, which he uses to gain prestige and respect from his friends and relatives. It also makes him feel subordinated and powerless in the relationship. This situation exposes the economic disparities that exist in queer relationships, where one partner may hold more economic privilege than the other and perpetuate power imbalances (Henderson, 2008). These power imbalances are often influenced by societal norms such as heteronormativity (Henderson, 2012). Max's dependency on his partner for money and dining experiences suggests a power imbalance that may impact the dynamics of his relationship. Since he is a Black gay man, he may also face additional challenges in navigating these dynamics since he exists at the intersection of race, sexuality, and gender, which renders him subordinate when compared to his white peers (Gresham, 2009).

Furthermore, Max's reference to a predominantly White restaurant aligns with the concept of White queer geographies, which refer to spaces and communities within urban areas predominantly inhabited by White queer individuals. These spaces are often associated with higher levels of affluence and privilege, reflecting broader patterns of gentrification and economic segregation within urban environments in post-apartheid South Africa. One would expect South African societies to be more integrated, but this is not the case. Despite the end of apartheid, racial segregation persists in South African communities, particularly in low-income neighbourhoods such as the one Max lives in (Muyeba & Seekings, 2011). This is further aggravated by the legacy of apartheid policies, which enforced the separation of races and denied rights to Black communities in areas designated for whites only (Akinsanya & Ajayi, 2016). These dynamics also exist within the gay community, where racial tensions exist between Black gay men and white gay men. For example, in 2012, Jo'burg pride organisers brawled with Black lesbian protesters who were demanding that the pride march procession stop and observe a moment of silence for Black lesbian and transgender women who died as a result of anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes. The pride organisers were caught on camera violently pushing the protestors and shouting, "Go back to the location" (McLean, 2012; Schutte, 2012), suggesting that the pride event was exclusive to middle-class people, predominantly White, who lived in suburbia.

Max also highlights the importance of his social media representation, reporting that he uses the various platforms to document his dining experiences at these predominantly white restaurants and that this documenting serves multiple purposes. It allows him to showcase his lifestyle and status to both his homophobic relatives and gay friends while suggesting a desire to assert superiority and challenge stereotypes associated with his economic background. It also highlights a typology of a better gay. On the other hand, it also serves as a form of self-validation and empowerment, allowing him to reclaim his agency and assert his worth in the face of adversity. Furthermore, Bongani's motivation for posting content on social media also reflects a desire for revenge against both his homophobic relatives and gay friends who may have taken him for granted in the past. By showcasing his experiences at upscale restaurants, Bongani seeks to assert his superiority and avenge himself for the homophobic discrimination he experienced.

This finding supports previous research on status consumption, which reports that in a social hierarchy, those in the lower social class may counter their feelings of being subordinated through the consumption of luxury items such as branded clothing and food, in the case of Max

(Madinga, 2016). Similarly, Ratele (2012) argues that people from different backgrounds, such as age and race, believe that branded items, such as clothing and food, in Max's case, can afford a person some level of prestige and positive self-esteem in society.

However, Marvin expresses a preference for exclusive spaces like Garlington in Hilton over popular venues like Fire and Vine:

I do not like Fire and Vine. It has become basic and popular amongst the gays. I prefer exclusive spaces like Garlington in Hilton, where you primarily dine with rich white people. The girlies cannot afford it because you would first need a car to get there. Most do not have cars, and requesting an Uber from there is difficult (Marvin, 36, IDI).

This finding suggests that Marvin desires a more upscale and elitist dining experience where he can socialise with individuals with similar socioeconomic backgrounds. This choice of venue reflects a desire for status and exclusivity within the gay community. Marvin also highlights the socioeconomic barriers that prevent many of their peers, referred to as "the girlies," from accessing exclusive spaces like Garlington. The mention of needing a car to get there underscores the privilege associated with car ownership and accessibility to transportation. Additionally, the difficulty of requesting e-hailing services such as Uber and Bolt from remote locations further reinforces the exclusivity of the venue and the challenges faced by those without access to private transportation. Literature suggests that gay men like Marvin tend to have a high need for uniqueness in their consumption habits (Dib & Johnson, 2019; Rink, 2019) and that their status consumption of luxury products and services is a way to differentiate themselves from others (Belk, 1998). By demonstrating their uniqueness from others, gay men like Marvin also reflect their freedom to express themselves without limitations (Ruvio, 2008).

Marvin also speaks about dining with "rich white people" at Garlington, which points to the racial and socioeconomic dynamics at play within the gay community. The preference for predominantly white spaces reflects broader patterns of racial segregation, internalised racism among gay men, and privilege within society. It also highlights how race intersects with class and social status to shape access to exclusive spaces and opportunities. Marvin's preference for exclusive venues like Garlington can be interpreted as a form of status symbolism and social differentiation within the gay girlies typology. By distancing himself from popular venues and

socialising in more elite circles, Marvin seeks to assert his status and belonging within the community while reinforcing social hierarchies and exclusivity.

Overall, embodying and assimilating to whiteness through the status consumption of food in white-dominated restaurants reflects broader dynamics of power, privilege, and identity within society (Loewen, 2013), highlighting how food can be both a site of cultural expression and a mechanism of social stratification (Loewen, 2013). In addition to this assimilation to whiteness, some participants shared how they engaged in the status consumption of food to counter the femmephobia they experienced in society. The prejudice against feminine gay men is part of a larger cultural bias against people and behaviours that are associated with femininity. Avela's experience highlights that in sociocultural settings, feminine men are vulnerable to being ridiculed, rejected, and bullied for how they express themselves (Bhana & Mayeza, 2019; Buijs et al., 2011). He shared the following experience:

When there is a family ceremony where they slaughter a cow, I do not assemble in the kraal with all the men to eat. I find these men toxic because they always talk badly about women, and in some cases, they are homophobic towards me. There was a time they called me derogatory names like stabane for refusing to eat from the same tray with them because some of them had dirty hands. I now buy takeaway that I eat when I attend such gatherings to show them that I can afford better food than them...and to also show them that I have more money than most of them do. (Avela, 39, IDI).

Avela's consumption aims to counter the discrimination he experiences from men in traditional or cultural settings and can be viewed as an attempt to render Black heterosexual masculinities that could be regarded as socioeconomically disadvantaged as subordinate when compared to his Black middle-class gay masculinity. This aligns with Grundy's (2012) findings that report that high-achieving Black men tend to engage in class conflicts with other Black men whom they consider subordinate. In the case of Avela, the dynamics are unique in that it is a gay man who assumes a hegemonic position over what other people consider hegemonic masculinity in the context of heterosexual identities. As an upwardly mobile Black man, even though he is gay, he views himself as superior and more powerful compared to the low-income Black men he refers to. Avela's socioeconomic position shows us how, within the subordinated Black masculinities, some Black men, based on their higher socioeconomic status, think about other groups of Black men who do not have the social capital to be regarded as prestigious. This

finding matches those observed earlier by Veblen (2005), who argued that people with a higher social class 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 et al., 2010; Rink, 2019). As a marginalised group that often faces discrimination, gay men like Avela also seek social status as it affords them privileged access to resources and influence in society and fuels their self-esteem (Fournier, 2009; Lange et al., 2019). Similarly, Mvelo narrates how his status consumption of food affords him prestige and challenges traditional notions of masculinity, particularly in provider roles. He asserts that:

I know most of them envy my life. Some even tell me how they wish they were monied like gay people so they could spoil their girlfriends with dates to the restaurants I go to. This makes me happy because it shows that they are below me even though they may not say it themselves... even though they do not approve of my sexuality, they respect that I have more money than they do. (Mvelo, 35, IDI).

This scenario underscores a significant shift in societal dynamics, particularly in terms of gender roles and perceptions within the LGBTQ+ community. Here, the traditional notion of the heterosexual man as the primary provider in a relationship is contrasted with a homosexual man, Mvelo, who is financially independent and able to provide for himself. This contrast brings to light the evolving landscape of relationships and the fluidity of gender roles.

As a gay man who is self-sufficient, Mvelo stands out in a society where heterosexual men may struggle to meet the expectations of being providers for their girlfriends. This juxtaposition not only challenges traditional gender norms but also highlights the intersections of sexuality, gender, and economic status. Interestingly, Mvelo's ability to provide for himself not only earns him admiration from heterosexual men but also serves as a form of protection against homophobic attacks. In a society where masculinity and financial prowess are often intertwined, Mvelo thought wealth and independence would shield him from being targeted by individuals who may harbour homophobic attitudes. Overall, these findings affirm Ratele's (2013) work in challenging traditional notions of masculinities in the context of the provider role and Puspitasari's (2014) research, which explores and notes that not all men will be deemed masculine. Mvelo's narrative indicates that he considers the heterosexual men he refers to as less masculine because they cannot afford to provide fine dining experiences for their girlfriends.

In the participants' community, the intersectionality of race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status shapes the cultural context within which these gay men make their food choices. As Halkitis (2019) and Hart (2020) have highlighted, the challenges experienced by Black gay men, including the effects of racism and homophobia, often lead to feelings of marginalisation and isolation and motivate gay men to find ways to address them. Further, as reported by Unsain (2020) in a study on the intersections of food preferences, masculinities, and in-group belonging among gay men in Brazil, negative stereotypes shape their food choices and eating practices (Bowleg, 2013). In Pietermaritzburg, cultural norms and traditions, both within Black communities and LGBTQ+ subcultures, influence preferences for specific cuisines, cooking techniques, and dining practices. These cultural influences intersect with individual identities and experiences to shape the culinary landscape of Black gay men. Overall, in line with the available literature (Puoane et al., 2006), the intersection of race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status significantly influences the food consumption patterns and choices of these Black gay men, shaping not only what they eat but also how they experience and navigate culinary spaces. As Mandla observes:

Can you believe some of them have never been to a fancy restaurant? All they know is KFC and their local shisanyama, but they have the nerve to be homophobic. I always make sure that they see my check-ins at restaurants as a reminder that we are not in the same league. I may be gay, but I have more money than them.
(Mandla, 29, IDI).

Overall, these findings reveal how assimilation to whiteness through the status consumption of food in predominantly white restaurants serves as a mechanism to counter homophobia. Participants shared narratives of using dining experiences as a tool for social validation, demonstrating economic status, and challenging societal prejudices against both their racial and sexual identities. However, this assimilation is not without its contradictions, as it reinforces existing race and class disparities while also reflecting broader dynamics of power and privilege. Moreover, some participants highlighted the additional challenge of countering femmephobia through their food consumption choices, illustrating the intersectionality of race, class, and sexuality in shaping their lived experiences. Through these narratives, it becomes evident that food consumption not only serves as a site of cultural expression but also mirrors and perpetuates societal inequalities while offering protection against homophobia.

6.3. “I am also Classy”: Food, Identity, and Geographies of Exclusivity

Tied to the embodiment and assimilation to whiteness, the participants in this study also reflected on how their socioeconomic status influenced their status consumption of food. Firstly, as scholars have noted, one’s socioeconomic status determines one’s food consumption resources, including the status consumption of food (Hildebrand et al., 2013). According to the participants, those with a higher socioeconomic status have a more significant disposable income, enabling them to afford upscale dining experiences. In contrast, those with a lower socioeconomic status may experience economic barriers that limit their access to such restaurants (Delaney & McCarthy, 2011). For example, the participants in this study selected restaurants that distinguished them from members of their gay in-group and the general population. In the context of their in-group membership, dining at certain restaurants signals upward social mobility or uniqueness. By accessing upscale establishments, the Black gay men in this study mentioned that they sought to assert their prestige and sophistication within the gay in-group. This behaviour also functions as a mechanism to distance themselves from the gay subculture and norms to prove that the gay community is not homogenous. Max declares:

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. (Max, 28, IDI).

Max acknowledges the importance of dining at upscale establishments like Fire & Vine to create an impression of classiness. At the same time, he recognised that not all gay people from his community, including him, can afford to dine in such places. As a remedy, he opts for a more affordable option like Elephant & Co., which allows him to maintain an image of sophistication without the high price tag he would have paid had he gone to Fire & Vine, reflecting how financial status intersects with perceptions of social class within the gay community.

Understanding the symbolic value of certain dining establishments, Max sees Fire & Vine as representing an elite, upscale dining experience. At the same time, Elephant & Co. offers a more accessible yet aesthetically pleasing option. Choosing where to dine allows individuals

like Max to signal that they belong to a particular social group and reinforces their status. Max's statement reveals an internal hierarchy within the gay community based on economic status and lifestyle choices. He acknowledges the existence of gays who cannot afford upscale dining experiences and suggests that he may look down on them while those who frequent Fire & Vine look down on him. This attitude reflects how social hierarchies can lead to exclusion and judgement within marginalised communities. Thus, Max's decision on where to dine is not solely based on personal preference but also on the desire to construct an acceptable image or identity. By dining at Elephant & Co., he can align himself with a particular social class and distance himself from those perceived as lower in the hierarchy.

His perspective highlights the intersectionality of identity factors such as sexuality, class, and privilege because, while facing discrimination as a gay man, his ability to access specific spaces and maintain a particular lifestyle sets him apart from others within the community. Overall, Max's statement offers a glimpse into the complex interplay of identity, social status, and community dynamics within the gay community, shedding light on how individuals navigate and negotiate their place.

Mandla provides a different narrative that expresses his frustration at witnessing the transformation of restaurants they once enjoyed into what they perceive as "basic spots" due to the increased patronage from the gay community. This frustration suggests a feeling of cultural appropriation and a sense of loss regarding the original identity of these establishments as they adapt to cater to a different demographic. He lamented:

I hate that whenever I post a restaurant on Instagram, all the gays start frequenting it., and they have a tendency to turn classy restaurants into basic spots where they even throw parties. I find this embarrassing; hence, I have resorted to dining far from their usual spots, and I have also stopped checking in because I hate typical restaurants.
(Mandla, 29, IDI).

Mandla's observation highlights the significant influence of social media platforms like Instagram on consumer behaviour and trends because posting about a restaurant can attract specific social groups, such as the gay community he refers to, shaping the clientele and atmosphere of these establishments. His use of terms like "classy" and "basic" reflects more profound perceptions of class and taste within society. At the same time, his perceived decline in the quality of these restaurants, or exclusivity, as he sees it, contributes to his embarrassment regarding the transformation of these restaurants.

Mandla's decision to dine far from the usual spots frequented by the gay community he belongs to and to avoid checking in on social media indicates a desire to distance himself from this group, maintaining a sense of exclusivity and distinction. His avoidance strategy highlights social segregation and boundary maintenance within certain social circles. Further, it reproduces apartheid's discourses of excessive spaces that are only open to a specific sub-group of people. In this case, it is not just about white people, but it is about Black gay men against fellow Black gay men. By avoiding places frequented by the gay community and seeking alternative dining experiences, Mandla aims to differentiate himself from the gay men he regards as subordinate and uphold his perceived sense of taste, sophistication, and prestige. Overall, these findings highlight the impact of social groups on shaping cultural trends and the challenges of maintaining exclusivity and identity in an interconnected and socially mediated world.

Similarly, engaging with these restaurants is also a deliberate effort to distinguish themselves from the broader communities they live in. Particularly the marginalised and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities they come from. Through their engagement with food consumption practices associated with affluence, the participants also sought to challenge prejudices and stereotypes held by the general community about their social status and taste. Their curation of restaurants is a form of cultural capital that allows them to navigate and negotiate their social identities in social spaces. This is how Jason and Sphe detail their experiences with curating social images that afford them prestige and social status:

The people from my community, who are primarily homophobic, cannot afford to eat the food that I eat or go to the restaurants I go to. Although I also go to the restaurants they go to, I never post content from those restaurants because they do not fit my social media image...these restaurants are the likes of KFC and McDonald's. I only go there to buy takeaway and go home. I only post pictures from fancy restaurants because I have a social media image that is more affluent than the homophobes from my community. I want them to know that as gay as I am, I have more class than they do. (Jason, 33, IDI).

I sometimes eat from fast food outlets like McDonald's and KFC. However, I will never post such pics on my Instagram and Facebook. I only post them on WhatsApp because WhatsApp statuses do not last long, and I control the audience. Instagram and

Facebook are reserved for my fine dining experiences because that is where everyone from my community engages with my content. (Sphe, 25, IDI).

Jason draws attention to the socioeconomic difference that exists within his community, noting that individuals who harbour homophobic sentiments often lack the financial means to dine at the same establishments he frequents. This observation hints at a potential link between economic status and attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals, suggesting that those facing financial hardships may also be more inclined toward conservative or anti-LGBTQ+ discriminatory views, as demonstrated by McGarrity (2014). McGarrity (2014) highlights that being gay and underprivileged creates distinct experiences where underprivileged gay individuals are more likely to live in environments that are less accepting of LGBTQ+ identities and expressions, encounter stricter expectations for conforming to traditional gender roles, and experience greater isolation from the mainstream LGBTQ+ community. Consequently, this difference in economic status prompts Jason to selectively curate his social media presence, predominantly showcasing experiences from “fancy restaurants” while omitting content from fast-food outlets like KFC and McDonald’s. This conscious exclusion of such experiences on platforms like Instagram is driven by a desire to uphold an image of affluence and sophistication, distinct from the perceived financial limitations of his community members.

Similarly, Sphe’s narrative reveals a deliberate effort to balance a public image and community engagement through strategic content sharing on social media platforms. Despite occasionally dining at fast-food outlets, he refrains from documenting these experiences on Instagram and Facebook, reserving such platforms to portray fine dining experiences deemed more congruent with his desired public image. Instead, he posts his fast food encounters on WhatsApp statuses, where he controls who his content is visible to, ensuring limited exposure to a select audience. His decision to prioritise dining content on Instagram and Facebook suggests a desire to engage with his community in a manner aligned with notions of sophistication and luxury, potentially seeking admiration or respect from the community members. Gysman (2023) corroborates these findings in her research on the interactions of the Black South African middle class with social media digitised cultures. Her study reveals that 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.

Collectively, Jason and Sphe’s narratives underscore how individuals navigate identity and social hierarchy within their communities through online self-presentation. The conscious

curation of social media content reflects a desire to distance oneself from perceived socioeconomic constraints while asserting superiority or class status. Moreover, these behaviours underscore the influential role of social media in shaping and reinforcing perceptions of identity and community dynamics within contemporary society.

As discussed above, urban spaces and geographies also shape access to food. However, the relationship between urban geographies and food access is multifaceted. Alkon (2020) and Satler (2005) highlight the role of food in the gentrification of public spaces where upscale restaurants and food franchises play a significant role. Furthermore, Scott et al. (2020) suggest that perceptions about food access differ since individuals have different food experiences. The participants in this study reported that living in urban spaces means a wider variety of dining experiences that include upscale restaurants associated with the status consumption of food. Marvin and Avela share the following insights:

Fire and Vine used to be exclusive when it opened, but it has now turned into a typical joint. It is no longer exclusive because you can now find all kinds of gays there. I cannot even remember the last time I went there because I do not relate to the crowd that is always there. (Marvin, 36, IDI).

I love Fire and Vine because it is exclusive and fancy. The interior is beautiful, and when I post pictures of the restaurant, I always get comments about how fancy the place is. Some people even mention how they wish they could also dine there... They think it is expensive, and I will never tell them the truth because I want them to see me as exclusive. (Avela, 39, IDI).

Further, Siphon prefers dining at Keg, primarily due to its location in a suburb inaccessible by public transport and its clientele predominantly comprising White and middle-class Black individuals. By opting for a particular establishment, Ben intentionally sets himself apart from other members of the LGBTQ+ community who frequent more accessible venues such as those in town or the mall. His choice of Keg reflects a deliberate alignment with a specific demographic and underscores his desire to differentiate himself based on social and racial factors. Similarly, Siya prefers dining at restaurants in Howick and the Midlands, citing their lack of accessibility (to lower socioeconomic classes) and exclusivity as crucial factors influencing his choice. This preference suggests a desire for dining experiences that are not easily accessible to the general public, thus reinforcing a sense of exclusivity and

sophistication. Siya's inclination towards venues catering to a select clientele contributes to his perceived social status and refinement, highlighting his preference for environments that reflect exclusivity.

Avela admires Fire and Vine's exclusivity and elegance, citing its beautiful interior and the admiration it garners on social media platforms. He strategically cultivates an image of exclusivity by selectively sharing content highlighting the restaurant's upscale ambience while withholding information about its accessibility and affordability. Avela's approach underscores the role of social media in shaping perceptions of social status and constructing a desired identity through carefully curated online personas. In contrast, Tim expresses disappointment over the loss of exclusivity at Fire and Vine, attributing this decline to increased diverse patrons, including individuals from different backgrounds within the gay community. His reluctance to continue the restaurant stems from a perceived disconnect with the evolving clientele. Marvin's perspective underscores the significance of social identity and belonging in shaping dining preference and emphasises the impact of changing demographics on the perceived exclusivity of a dining establishment.

Furthermore, accessibility to food spaces is not only determined by physical proximity alone (Horner & Wood, 2014). Calise et al. (2018) highlight safety, walkability, and social cohesion in influencing access to food, while Wood and Horner (2016) underscore the importance of socioeconomic status and transportation. Some of the gay men who participated in this study experienced social barriers such as discomfort and perceived racial profiling, which they say deterred them from engaging in status consumption of food like their peers. Similarly, cultural food practices and preferences also influenced their food consumption choices, shaping how they interact with urban food spaces. Mandla and Max's approaches illustrate:

I do not usually post when eating traditional food, but if I go to a fancy restaurant where they sell it, I buy it and post content on Instagram...I post it because posting from a fancy restaurant tells my followers that I paid more than they usually pay for the dish in a restaurant downtown. (Mandla, 29, IDI).

I find it difficult to dine at some restaurants without my partner... He is White, and it becomes easy to go to certain restaurants when he is around...I went to Pepere Cafe alone on two occasions, and no one rushed to welcome me and show me where to

sit...However, I always get special treatment when I go there with him. I always get this service from Black waiters, and one of them is gay. (Max, 28, IDI).

Mandla demonstrates a strategic approach to his social media presence, particularly when sharing content related to traditional food. He consciously refrains from posting about traditional cuisine unless it originates from a high-end restaurant. By doing so, he aims to convey to his followers that he has paid a premium price for the dish, thus cultivating an image of affluence and sophistication. This deliberate behaviour reflects his desire to leverage the perceived exclusivity of fancy dining establishments to enhance his social status on platforms like Instagram, where presentation and image play significant roles in shaping perceptions. Moreover, Max sheds light on the complexities of interpersonal interactions and racial dynamics within dining spaces. He recounts challenges when dining alone at certain restaurants, particularly regarding receiving adequate service. The observation that he receives special treatment when accompanied by his White partner compared to dining alone underscores the influence of racial dynamics and relational contexts on the quality of service and overall dining experience. This disparity highlights how individuals are perceived and treated differently based on factors such as race and companionship, revealing underlying inequities within social interactions. (Gysman, 2023)

Overall, these narratives offer insights into the interplay of accessibility, exclusivity, social status, and identity in shaping individuals' preferences for dining experiences. They underscore the significance of restaurant choice as a means of self-expression and social differentiation within the gay community while also reflecting broader societal dynamics related to class, race, and belonging. The narratives underscore how individuals navigate and negotiate their dining experiences within the wider context of societal dynamics, including race, identity, and privilege issues. Through these observations, we understand the nuanced dynamics within dining spaces and the various factors that shape individuals' perceptions and behaviours within these contexts.

6.4. “I can Create an Impression of Classy”: Food, Sexuality, and Forged Gay Identities

Contrary to popular belief, the gay community is not homogenous. Instead, it is a community with a diverse population with varying identities, experiences, and perspectives. Consequently, like most communities in South Africa and elsewhere, it also experiences intra-group conflicts for various reasons, including differences in ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, gender

identities and expressions, and other ideologies (Lewis, 2012; Subhi et al., 2017; Cravens, 2020; Jarrett, 2006). For example, Black gay men may experience racism from their White counterparts. Those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged may be looked down upon by those considered to be middle class. Therefore, gay men create different subcultures based on their similarities and exist in polarised spaces. In their interviews, Max, Siya, and Marvin reflected on their socio-economic status and its impact on their social status in the gay community:

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, 28, IDI).

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. (Siya, 20, IDI).

As a student, I struggle to penetrate some spaces because I do not have the money or branded fashion to be accepted. Since I cannot fight for acceptance within such spaces, I have curated my image of the affluent. I go to restaurants that are cheap, but people assume they are expensive. I do not even tell them how cheap these places are because I want them to believe that I am above them...for example, my fellow gay students think I have money just because I eat at V&V. However, they do not know that I can get a three-course meal for R300 there. I will never share this secret until I find another cheap restaurant. This way, I get to be respected for being affluent...the gays who have money look down on me, while I also look down on those who are beneath me. (Marvin, 26, IDI).

In examining the status consumption of food within the gay community, these narratives offer an understanding of the intersectionality between socioeconomic status and identity and the complex dynamics of social acceptance and hierarchy. First, Max's story illuminates the challenges faced by unemployed individuals within the gay community, where societal

pressure to conform to specific standards of wealth and material possessions can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and loneliness. Max's inability to afford expensive gadgets and designer clothes highlights the influence of financial privilege on social acceptance and inclusion, underscoring the pervasive nature of status consumption within the community. Second, Marvin's narrative delves into the intricacies of navigating social acceptance through strategic image curation. Despite financial limitations that prevent him from dining at upscale establishments, Marvin employs alternative methods to project an aura of affluence, such as frequenting more affordable yet aesthetically pleasing restaurants. However, his engagement in hierarchical thinking, manifested in his disdain for those who cannot afford even lower-priced options, reflects the internal stratification and competitive dynamics present within the gay community. Third, Siya's pragmatic approach to navigating social spaces as a financially constrained student further illustrates the complexities of status consumption within the gay community.

By strategically frequenting affordable restaurants that give off an impression of expense, Siya seeks to cultivate an image of affluence and gain acceptance within the community. However, his reluctance to reveal the true affordability of these establishments underscores the delicate balance between authenticity and perceived social status, as well as the perpetuation of misconceptions about financial privilege. These narratives provide valuable insights into individuals' diverse experiences and coping strategies within a non-homogeneous gay community. They underscore the multifaceted nature of identity construction and social dynamics, highlighting the intersectionality of socioeconomic status, employment status, and education level in shaping perceptions of social acceptance and inclusion. Additionally, they shed light on the internal hierarchies and competitive dynamics within the community, underscoring the complexities of status consumption and its influence on individuals' perceptions and behaviours within social spaces.

6.5. Discussion and Synthesis

This chapter presents the Black gay men's status consumption of food, focusing on the strategies they use to navigate social hierarchies and construct and perform their identities. Utilising a conceptual framework that integrates intersectionality, cultural and religious contexts, status consumption, and the socio-historical landscape, the findings illuminate the

complex interplay of systemic forces and personal agency shaping their lives. At the core of the analysis is the principle of intersectionality, which acknowledges the interconnected nature of various social identities. The Black gay men in this study face compounded discrimination based on race, sexuality, and economic status. The participants' actions, such as Marvin's preference for dining at predominantly White restaurants and Bongani's social media posts about eating exotic foods, underscore their attempts to gain social acceptance and mitigate marginalisation. These behaviours highlight the dual marginalisation they experience within both their racial and LGBTQ+ communities, complicating their social positioning as they seek validation and acceptance in environments where they are often marginalised.

The cultural and religious contexts in which these men operate significantly influence their experiences. Participants describe their cultural community as heterosexist, homophobic, and femmophobic, creating a hostile environment that compels them to navigate the tension between their cultural identity and sexual identity. Marvin and Bongani's actions reflect their efforts to reconcile these tensions. By engaging in status consumption that aligns with White cultural norms, they strive to gain social acceptance and reduce the stigma associated with their sexual orientation within their cultural communities. This cultural backdrop underscores the importance of understanding the specific dynamics that shape attitudes toward homosexuality in these communities to develop interventions that resonate with the realities of Black gay men.

Status consumption emerges as a critical strategy employed by Black gay men to assert their identities and navigate social hierarchies. The chapter provides vivid examples of how participants use food as a status symbol to signal social status and sophistication. Marvin's choice of dining at White-dominated restaurants and Bongani's curated online presence about eating sushi illustrate forms of conspicuous consumption aimed at enhancing their social standing. This behaviour aligns with Thorstein Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption, where visible consumption is used to signify social prestige. For Black gay men, this consumption is not merely about material goods. It is intricately linked to identity and self-expression, helping them navigate their marginalised status and seek recognition in a society that often marginalises them.

The socio-historical landscape of South Africa, marked by the legacy of apartheid and ongoing struggles for equality, plays a pivotal role in shaping the experiences of Black gay men. Despite significant legal advancements in LGBTQ+ rights, many Black gay men continue to face barriers to social acceptance and equality due to persistent racial and economic inequalities.

Marvin's and Bongani's actions can be seen as adaptive strategies within this socio-historical context, where visible status markers mediate social mobility and acceptance. Their engagement in status consumption through food reflects broader societal dynamics, illustrating how historical and socio-political factors influence their behaviours and perceptions. Integrating these elements, the chapter's findings illustrate the complex interplay of systemic forces and personal agency in shaping the experiences of Black gay men in South Africa. Marvin and Bongani's behaviours exemplify how intersectionality, cultural and religious contexts, status consumption, and the socio-historical landscape influence their lives. Their actions highlight the nuanced ways in which Black gay men navigate social hierarchies, seek acceptance, and assert their identities in a context of compounded marginalisation. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing culturally relevant and effective interventions that address the specific challenges faced by Black gay men in South Africa. This holistic approach advocates for contextual sensitivity and empirical focus in research, grounding discussions in real-life experiences to inform policy interventions that are inclusive and equitable for all.

The next chapter presents findings that address the second research question in the study: *What factors motivate Black gay men's status consumption and food choices therein?*

CHAPTER SEVEN

EDIBLE STATUS: EXPLORING MOTIVATIONS FOR BLACK GAY MEN'S FOOD CHOICES IN AN URBAN KWAZULU-NATAL COMMUNITY

7.1. Introduction

The previous chapter examined how Black gay men in a KwaZulu-Natal urban community understand and engage with the status consumption of food. The participants' narratives highlight how food serves as more than mere sustenance. Rather, for this group, food operates as a tool for identity construction, social positioning, and resistance against marginalisation. Building on these insights, this chapter illustrates how Black gay men in this setting navigate their identities and social realities through food consumption, using it as a mechanism to assert visibility, negotiate belonging, and challenge dominant narratives about race, sexuality, and class. Specifically, focusing on the motivations behind the participants' consumption practices, the chapter responds to the second research question: *What factors motivate Black gay men's status consumption and food choices?* The chapter highlights the intricate ways in which food choices are influenced by broader societal expectations, cultural norms, and personal aspirations. To do so, I analysed the transcripts of the in-depth interviews with the ten men who participated in the study to identify the key motivational factors that shape their engagement with status consumption of food. The analysis yielded themes such as: pursuing social status, accumulating social capital, the influence of the gay subculture and intra-group dynamics, and the desire for uniqueness. The section below discusses the themes, shedding light on the complexities of food status consumption among these participants.

7.2. Dining in Opulence: Using Food to Display Prestige and Social Class

Available literature suggests that in a social hierarchy, those who are subordinated often feel threatened, and to some extent, they become victims of bullying in social interactions (Henry, 2009; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). People who feel subordinated, like the Black gay men who participated in this study, use status-reinforcing strategies to cope with their social subordination to improve their social standing and elevate their prestige (Redhead, 2018; Ivanic, 2015; Nunes et al., 2009), including the status consumption of food. Some of the men

who participated in this study, for example, stated that although food has nutritional benefits, their primary motivation for preferring certain restaurants and dishes was the status these experiences signal to other people, especially those from their communities who are homophobic. For example, referring to his dining experience at some of the finest restaurants in Pietermaritzburg, Max said the following:

Sometimes, I would go to Essence Café and order their cheapest pasta or a burger without posting my dish. However, I make sure that I check in [on social media] and post pictures of the interior to show people that I also go to these places, and I am telling you, they respect me because, in their minds, I can afford everything on the menu. (Max, 28, IDI).

For Max, checking in at fancy restaurants like Essence Café and posting pictures of its interior conveys a message about his ability to access and enjoy spaces associated with prestige. It also creates a perception that he belongs to an elite class that frequents such spaces even though he may not necessarily afford to dine at these restaurants because of his financial limitations. However, he does not care about his affordability more than he is concerned about the image he is portraying to those who follow him on social media platforms—especially his community members who subject him to homophobic speech. Furthermore, by sharing pictures of the interior, he gets to control the narrative about himself as an affluent gay man and align himself with the status associated with frequenting restaurants like Essence Café. This finding is consistent with Han et al. (2010) and Rink (2019), who also found that people who belong to or identify with subordinated and marginalised social groups consume luxury products and services to imitate and associate themselves with the affluent class.

Jason recalls how, when growing up, he was inundated with perceptions and stereotypes suggesting that all gay men were wealthy and prestigious.

I grew up hearing people say that gay men are rich. My mother also told me to work hard at school so I could be wealthy and respected. She used to tell me that people would respect me if I were rich. She would say, “Even if they may say bad things about you for being gay, at the end of the day, they will also tell people that you are also rich. People respect you when you are rich.” This is what motivates me to consume gourmet food because it is not everyone who can afford it. (Jason, 33, IDI).

Jason's upbringing reflects a common stereotype, assuming that gay men are wealthy. Although this stereotype is not universally true since gay men are not homogenous, it continues to influence perceptions about gay men within the gay community and society at large. People always view the consumption of luxury commodities by gay men as a subculture without understanding that this subculture is a behaviour utilised to command respect and protect their identity from the threat of being discriminated against, as reported by Haslop et al. (1998). Jason's mom's emphasis on the importance of wealth is similar to many parents' aspirations for their children. However, her specific focus on wealth to gain social respect and prestige reflects her awareness of the prejudice faced by gay men in society. Her support was aimed at encouraging her son and empowering him with the social capital he needed to counter any potential anti-gay discrimination he might experience. Consequently, Jason navigates these stereotypes and expectations by consciously curating his food experiences to align with this aspirational ideal of affluence and wealth. He aims to earn the acceptance and respect of his community members, whom he believes would have been homophobic towards him had he not been affluent.

This behaviour is in line with Kates's (2002) findings, which suggest that gay people use products and services, such as food experiences in the case of Jason, to camouflage and reinforce their identities. By consuming the gourmet food he refers to, Jason engages in a pleasurable food experience and asserts his social status and prestige. Furthermore, his foodways are influenced not only by his preferences but also by societal expectations and existing gay stereotypes. In contrast, Mvelo highlights the importance of keeping up appearances to attain social status. He narrates his experience with eating sushi:

Let me just say that I do not eat it (sushi), but I remember how I had to post pictures pretending to be eating sushi just to prove to my Instagram followers that I also eat exotic food. (Mvelo, 35, IDI).

Studies such as those conducted by Kirch (2015), Stobart (2011), and Roden (2011) have highlighted the connection between exotic food and social status. Eating exotic food like spices, wine, tea, and coffee is linked to social status and prestige across various cultures (Stobart, 2011; Roden, 2011). For example, Mvelo's statement suggests that his community also has an assumption that consuming food like sushi, which is considered exotic, is a sign of sophistication, and therefore, Mvelo feels pressured to conform to this assumption to maintain an affluent social status and set himself apart from his homophobic community members whom

he perceives as having limited culinary experiences. This is because exotic foods are often expensive and difficult to acquire. The fact that he does not like sushi but feels compelled to share photos pretending to be eating it highlights the performative aspect of social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, where some status-conscious people like Mvelo may feel compelled to present themselves in specific ways to maintain or enhance their social status. Gysman (2023) validates this experience by revealing that South Africans employ social media narratives surrounding food, taste, and food knowledge to construct empowering self-perceptions. However, Mvelo's experience also raises questions about the pressure gay men like Mvelo face to construct and present versions of themselves that may not fully align with their true identities to gain not only acceptance and validation from society but also protection from anti-gay discrimination. Siphso succinctly captures the essence of social media's role in status signalling:

If I do not post about the food I eat or the restaurants I go to, no one will know that I ate it or went to the restaurant. Social media is important for me because it helps me show people what I can afford. (Siphso, 21, IDI).

This statement underscores the importance of visibility in social status construction (Hall & Jones, 2013). For Siphso, consuming high-end food and visiting prestigious restaurants is incomplete without the subsequent validation from his social media audience. The need to showcase such experiences online reflects a broader societal trend where social media is a public stage for the display of personal achievements and lifestyle choices (Dutta & Saini, 2020). The intersection of race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status places Black gay men like Siphso in a unique position. In a society where both racial and sexual identities can marginalise individuals, the ability to display financial success and social mobility becomes a crucial strategy for countering stereotypes and asserting one's worth. Through his posts, Siphso is not merely sharing moments of his life but actively constructing a narrative of affluence and success, challenging the marginalising forces that seek to diminish his identity. Sphe illustrates the tactical aspect of social media use:

Sometimes I do not receive the number of likes or views I want. So, I delete the post and post it the next day so that people can see it when they are not busy. Especially if I post on a Saturday night when people are out clubbing. (Sphe, 25, IDI).

This behaviour highlights the calculated nature of social media engagement among Black gay men. Sphe's approach to posting underscores a keen awareness of his audience's behaviour and the optimal times for garnering attention and validation. Pursuing likes and views is more than a quest for digital affirmation; it reflects how social media metrics are internalised as indicators of social capital (Tuten, 2023). For Sphe, the visibility and engagement his posts receive are tangible markers of his social standing. The act of reposting to achieve higher engagement indicates a deeper need for recognition and validation, emphasising the performative aspect of social media use. This performance is a strategic effort to curate an image that aligns with societal expectations of success and desirability, further complicating the navigation of intersectional identities.

Jason adds another layer to this analysis by linking material possessions with respect and social differentiation:

When I post, I also display my gadgets to show my followers that I have an iPhone and a car. I do this so they can respect me because some can only afford to eat at these restaurants, but they use public transport when they leave. This shows them that I am different. That I am unique. (Jason, 33, IDI).

Jason's narrative reveals how material symbols of wealth, such as smartphones and cars, are used to assert social superiority and uniqueness within his community (Memushi, 2013). The juxtaposition of dining experiences with the display of expensive gadgets highlights a broader practice of status consumption. For Jason, possessing and displaying high-value items serves as a means to distinguish himself from his peers and gain their respect. This behaviour is deeply rooted in the need to navigate and assert one's identity within the intersecting realms of race, sexuality, and class. By showcasing his financial success and material wealth, Jason seeks to elevate his social status and challenge the marginalising narratives imposed on Black gay men.

The narratives of Siphon, Sphe, and Jason collectively illustrate the complex interplay between social media, status consumption, and identity formation among Black gay men. Their strategic use of social media to signal wealth and status responds to the broader societal forces that seek to marginalise them. By curating and performing their identities online, these individuals navigate their intersectional challenges, using visibility and material displays as tools for social mobility and acceptance.

This analysis underscores the importance of understanding social media not merely as a platform for communication but as a critical space for identity negotiation and status assertion. For Black gay men in South Africa, social media becomes a battleground for recognition and respect, where the visibility of affluence and success serves as a counter-narrative to the marginalisation they experience in their daily lives.

The strategic use of social media for status consumption among Black gay men in South Africa reveals the intricate ways in which these individuals navigate their identities and social hierarchies. Through the narratives of Sipho, Sphe, and Jason, this chapter has highlighted the performative and tactical aspects of social media engagement, emphasising the role of visibility and material displays in asserting social status and challenging marginalisation. As these men curate their online personas, they engage in a continuous process of identity negotiation, seeking validation and recognition in a society that often marginalises them. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for developing culturally relevant interventions that address the unique challenges faced by Black gay men in the digital age.

7.3. Feasting for Influence: When Food Becomes Social Capital

Social capital is the cornerstone of every society and comprises the essential connections that bind individuals and groups (Lin, 2001). Within the context of gay men and heterosexual community members, social capital manifests in various forms, including supportive networks, strong relationships, and access to resources. Bongani narrates how his food experiences are the social capital that affords him respect and protection from his colleagues:

When I started working, most of my colleagues were homophobic, especially the men. But things have changed now because they come to me for advice about the best restaurants to take their girlfriends on dates. They say I am sophisticated, and they respect me. We once had a workshop with colleagues from other offices, and there was a guy who made homophobic remarks...guess who protected me? The colleagues who were once homophobic. (Bongani, 33, IDI).

Bongani's experience highlights a change in the anti-gay attitudes of his colleagues over time. From his narrative, it is evident that his workplace environment was characterised by homophobia, especially from his male colleagues, which resulted in a hostile atmosphere for him as a member of the gay community. However, due to his food experiences, he has gained respect from his colleagues, who seek his advice on restaurants to dine with their girlfriends.

Not only do they seek his advice, but they have also become supportive allies who protect him from homophobic colleagues. Their change in how they treat him indicates a demonstration of allyship within his workplace, which was once hostile and homophobic for him.

Posting photos of the food I eat and the restaurants I go to has made people believe that I am wealthy because the narrative has changed from some of them being homophobic to them asking me for money in my inbox. Can you imagine that one guy once asked me for money so he could also take his girlfriend to a fancy restaurant? It all started as if he was flirting with me, and then, one day, he dropped the bomb. (Marvin, 36, IDI).

In contrast, Marvin's experience presents a fascinating insight into how a gay man's showcasing of cuisine and dining experiences on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram influences perceptions of affluence and social capital among peers despite them being initially homophobic. However, through consistently sharing images of fancy dining experiences, Marvin managed to create a transformational narrative and image of affluence and elegance for himself, and those around him believed and came to regard him as aspired to like him. Consequently, he received requests for money from community members, especially men, to fund similar dining experiences for their girlfriends. These requests suggest that Marvin's social media presence positions him as a symbol of prestige and affluence to such an extent that others feel comfortable asking him to fund them to emulate his affluent lifestyle.

The mention of one individual initially flirting before soliciting money underscores the complexity of the social dynamics. It suggests that the perception of wealth and status associated with Marvin's status consumption may have altered interpersonal relationships, potentially blurring the lines between genuine connection and opportunistic behaviour. Overall, Marvin's experience highlights the power of status consumption, particularly in the context of food experiences, as a means for gay men to navigate and challenge homophobia in society. It also highlights how the presentation of food consumption practices can influence perceptions of wealth, status, and social capital that reshape interpersonal relations and challenge anti-gay stereotypes.

7.4. Navigating Culinary Cliques, Intra-Group Dynamics, and the Gay Sub-Culture of Status Consumption of Food

Subcultures emerge as resistance against mainstream societal norms and meaning systems such as class, race, gender, or marginalised identities in society. They serve as alternative meaning systems that accommodate people excluded by the mainstream (Hebdige, 2013; Plummer, 1975; Rubington & Weinberg, 2015). The gay subculture of consumption is a multifaceted phenomenon that is rooted in the marginalisation of gay people and the development of gay social spaces as avenues of identity expression, solidarity, and resistance against anti-gay discrimination (Eichert, 2021; Haslop et al., 1998). Often, some gay men engage or conform to this subculture without necessarily understanding its origins or what it means.

Sometimes, I have money to dine at an affluent restaurant, but I do not go because I do not have an acceptable cell phone or a BMW like the gay people who go to these restaurants. When they get to these restaurants, they dress like they are attending a fashion show and then flaunt their car keys and latest smartphones... it is a gay thing. It is all over Instagram. (Siya, 20, IDI).

Siya's narrative highlights a segment of gay men who have the financial means to dine at upscale restaurants. As a result of their socioeconomic status, they inform what a gay subculture of food consumption should look like. Furthermore, this story also draws attention to social status and its influence on dining preferences. Siya, for example, mentions not having an acceptable cell phone and a BMW, which suggests that there are acceptable markers of status within this subculture, and those who do not own these may struggle to be recognised as belonging to this in-group.

Furthermore, the fact that gay men who dine at these restaurants tend to dress extravagantly and display their luxurious possessions suggests that dining out is more than a food experience but also about performing their social status and prestige. This performance is amplified by posing for and/or posting photos of these dining experiences on social media platforms while strategically positioning the luxury possessions for people to see. The use of these social media platforms highlights the role of Instagram and Facebook in perpetuating status consumption behaviours within the gay community. It serves as a form of social comparison and seeks validation from peers within the subculture. These gay men have cultivated a unique expression

of their subculture that fosters visibility and social recognition through publicly portraying their tastes, distinctive identities, and socially determined values as a group (Gysman, 2023).

Max's experience hints at the exclusionary dynamics within the gay subculture of consumption based on one's socioeconomic status and access to luxury goods. He declares:

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, 28, IDI).

Individuals like Max who do not meet the set standards within the subculture, often feel excluded and inadequate. As a consequence, they may experience loneliness because they have no sense of belonging. After all, the subculture they expect to find a sense of solidarity, acceptance, and belonging in rejects them based on their socioeconomic status. Pachankis et al. (2019) also report that the high rates of poor mental health among gay men result not so much from being marginalised outside the gay community but mainly from experiencing marginalisation from fellow gay men.

Overall, the findings in this section highlight how the status consumption of food intersects with social identity and community dynamics among the gay subculture and also underscore the importance of understanding the complexities of consumption behaviours beyond economic transactions, taking into account social, cultural, and identity-related factors.

7.5. Savouring Uniqueness and Individuality in the Status Consumption of Food

People have varying needs for uniqueness, which, in turn, influence their consumption habits. Literature suggests that gay men tend to have a high need for uniqueness and reflect it by differentiating themselves from others through consuming luxurious products and services (Belk, 1998; Dib & Johnson, 2019; Rink, 2019). In the context of food consumption, Black gay men, a marginalised social group, may engage with dining experiences that allow them to express their individuality, such as opting for restaurants with exotic cuisine, a unique ambience, or an exclusive affluent clientele. This food consumption behaviour reinforces gay men's perceived uniqueness and prestige.

Firstly, when I go to a place I want to sit in, the table must be well presented. A table with a white tablecloth, silver cutlery, and fancy plates. Those kinds of unique settings. (Mandla, 29, IDI).

The emphasis on how the table is set, including white tablecloths and silverware, reflects a desire for an upscale and sophisticated dining experience that is considered exclusive compared to a typical franchise restaurant in South Africa. Although these restaurant characteristics may enhance an establishment's aesthetic appeal, they also signify luxury and class, which are considered unique. They also signal one's cultural and social capital, emphasising their unique preferences. As Avela reports, "*The restaurants I go to set me apart from others because they are expensive and not easy to get to with public transport.*" Choosing expensive and hard-to-access restaurants in the status consumption of food indicates that these men seek exclusivity. They opt for restaurants perceived to be exclusive and prestigious to differentiate themselves from others within the gay subculture and the general community to elevate their social status. This preference for unique dining experiences extends beyond the cuisine and includes a restaurant's interior design and ambience, suggesting that people seek establishments that offer a distinctive atmosphere that enhances their overall dining experience and allows them to feel unique compared to those who cannot access such spaces. Furthermore, as Jason attests, avoiding typical restaurants frequented by everyone underscores Jason's desire to avoid mainstream restaurants:

I always prefer unique dining experiences. If it is not the food that is unique, then the restaurant or interior must be unique. There is no fun in going to typical restaurants that everyone goes to. (Jason, 33, IDI).

Jason seeks alternative restaurants that offer unconventional and unique establishments that align with his need for uniqueness and set him apart from those who cannot access these restaurants. Through these dining experiences, he can express his personal taste and social identity, which he perceives as sophisticated and exclusive in society.

Overall, these findings suggest that the need for uniqueness has a significant influence on the status consumption of food by Black gay men. By seeking unique food experiences, these men can satisfy their culinary desires while fulfilling their desires to attain social status and construct unique and sophisticated identities.

7.6. Synthesis

This chapter presented findings that address the second research question in the study: *What factors motivate Black gay men's status consumption and food choices therein?* The findings presented in this chapter shed light on the multi-layered motivations behind Black gay men's status consumption of food in Pietermaritzburg. Drawing from insights from interviews with the ten participants, several key factors emerge as influential drivers of their dining preferences and consumption behaviours. Firstly, the desire for social status is a prominent motivator, with food consumption symbolising social class. Participants strategically navigate social hierarchies and anti-gay discrimination by engaging in status-enhancing strategies such as dining at upscale restaurants and sharing images of their dining experiences on social media platforms. Secondly, social capital plays a crucial role in shaping food choices, as participants leverage their culinary knowledge and experiences to gain respect and support from colleagues and community members. Participants challenge stereotypes and foster allyship within their social networks through food practices. Additionally, the gay subculture of consumption exerts a significant influence on dining preferences and behaviours, with participants navigating intra-group conflicts and exclusionary dynamics based on socioeconomic status and access to luxury goods.

Finally, the need for uniqueness emerges as a driving force behind status consumption, as participants seek out unique dining experiences that allow them to express their individuality and social identity. By engaging in status consumption of food, Black gay men navigate complex social dynamics, challenge stereotypes, and assert their identities within their communities and society at large. These findings underscore the importance of understanding the intersectionality of identity, social status, and consumption behaviours in shaping individuals' experiences and interactions within diverse cultural contexts.

The next chapter discusses the findings and concludes the dissertation.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BLACK GAY MEN'S STATUS CONSUMPTION OF FOOD IN A KWAZULU-NATAL URBAN COMMUNITY: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

8.1. Introduction

As argued throughout this dissertation, the status consumption of food among Black gay men is a complex phenomenon deeply intertwined with societal dynamics of discrimination, identity formation, and cultural expression. Despite legal achievements towards equality, homophobia persists in South Africa, perpetuating the marginalisation of gay men within society. As discussed in chapter one and throughout this dissertation, scholars have noted that marginalised social groups engage in behaviours, including consumption habits, to affirm and enhance their identities (Campbell, 1997; Hogg & Reid, 2006; Nzuzi, 2012) and Gay men, in particular, tend to utilise status consumption as a means of resistance against homophobia and societal stigma (Dib & Johnson, 2019; Fifita et al., 2020). Status consumption, as theorised by Veblen, refers to acquiring goods and services as signifiers of social class and prestige (Veblen, 2005). While extensively studied across various disciplines, the intersectionality of race, sexuality, and gender in motivating status consumption among gay men, particularly in the global south, remains largely unexplored. Previous research has predominantly focused on white gay men in the global north. This dissertation focuses on the experiences of Black gay men in South Africa.

The rationale for this study stems from my lived experiences as a Black, middle-class gay man as well as my observations within the Black gay community. I noted distinct consumption patterns among my peers. Thus, through this study, I aim to understand how food consumption is a form of identity construction and status assertion among Black gay men. By amplifying the voices and experiences of this marginalised social group, this study sought to fill existing knowledge gaps and contribute to broader societal discussions surrounding identity and consumption dynamics. To meet these objectives, the following two research questions guided data generation in this study:

1. *How do Black gay men in a KwaZulu-Natal urban community understand and engage with the status consumption of food?*
2. *What factors motivate Black gay men's status consumption and food choices?*

The study endeavoured to deepen academic understanding and shed light on the complexities of status consumption within South Africa's diverse cultural landscape by addressing these research questions using a qualitative approach, including methods such as individual interviews and online participant observation. Ultimately, the study aimed to provide insights into the lived experiences of Black gay men and their navigation of societal norms, discrimination, and identity affirmation through food consumption behaviours.

As discussed in Chapter Two, status consumption, defined as the consumption of goods and services to signal social standing and prestige, is examined within the context of food consumption among Black gay men. The literature review began by exploring the theoretical underpinnings of status consumption, tracing its origins to Thorstein Veblen's seminal work in 1899 and highlighting its evolution to encompass a broader spectrum of society, including those with lower socioeconomic status (Veblen, 2005). The intersectionality of Black gay identities was then explored, emphasising the interplay between race, sexuality, and gender within socio-historical contexts. Black gay individuals navigate intersecting systems of oppression, including racism and homophobia, which manifest in various forms of discrimination, hate speech, and anti-gay violence. However, despite these challenges, Black gay communities demonstrate resilience and resistance, creating spaces of belonging and affirmation for themselves.

The review further examined the motivational drivers behind status consumption among gay men, emphasising their need for social status, uniqueness, the influence of the gay subculture, success and pride, targeted marketing strategies, and the impact of celebrity endorsements. Additionally, the study contextualised consumption within the backdrop of homophobia in South Africa, highlighting the enduring challenges faced by LGBT individuals despite legal protections. In my literature review I identified a notable gap in the literature concerning the status consumption of food among gay men, particularly within the context of Black gay men. The review underscored the need for further qualitative research to explore the nuanced experiences and perspectives of gay men regarding their food consumption practices.

8.2. Methodological Reflections

This study adopted a critical paradigm to investigate the status consumption of food by Black gay men. This paradigm is rooted in empowerment, equality, and democracy. It aims to address

social and power inequalities experienced by disadvantaged and oppressed groups, such as Black gay men, by centring their voices and experiences (Cohen et al., 2011; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). Informed by the critical paradigm, the methodological approach I employed in this study was qualitative, aiming to explore the lived experiences of Black gay men regarding their food consumption habits within their community. A qualitative methodology allows an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives and realities (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Data generation spanned seven months and involved a combination of online participant observation and in-depth one-on-one interviews. Online observations on platforms like Facebook and Instagram provided insights into participants' virtual interactions and behaviours related to food consumption, exploring how identity expression and food practices intersect online. In-depth interviews, conducted through a semi-structured approach, allowed participants to share personal experiences freely, fostering open dialogue and exploration of nuanced issues, including the intersectionality of race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status.

By immersing myself in both online and offline settings, as the researcher, I aimed to comprehensively capture the complexities of status consumption among Black gay men. This comprehensive approach enriched the research process, yielding insights into how individuals navigate discrimination and construct their identities through food consumption practices. Overall, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the social dynamics shaping the experiences of Black gay men in South Africa.

8.3. Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the status consumption of food among Black gay men, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research findings. First, the study primarily used qualitative methods, specifically online observation and in-depth interviews. While qualitative approaches offer rich insights into participants' experiences, incorporating quantitative methods could provide a more comprehensive understanding of consumption patterns and behaviours. While online observations provided valuable insights into participants' virtual interactions and behaviours related to food consumption, they also had limitations. The online environment may not fully reflect individuals' offline experiences and behaviours, potentially overlooking essential aspects of their lived realities.

8.4. Reflections on the Findings

The exploration of the status consumption of food among Black gay men in the Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal area unveils an intersection of identity, socioeconomic status, and cultural dynamics, revealing a complex interplay of factors that influence their dining preferences and consumption behaviours.

8.4.1. Patterns of Status Consumption among Black Gay Men

Several key patterns and trends emerge through the participants' narratives, shedding light on the complexities of navigating societal expectations, assimilation to whiteness, and the intersectionality of race, class, and sexuality, as insights gathered from interviews with participants highlight several key factors as influential drivers of their food choices and experiences.

8.4.1.1. Assimilation to Whiteness and Status Symbolism.

The desire for acceptance and validation within both the Black and LGBTQ+ communities propels some participants towards a form of assimilation to whiteness through their consumption practices. The participants' preference for dining at predominantly white restaurants like KEG in Montrose is emblematic of this phenomenon. Engaging in such dining experiences, they sought to distance themselves from negative stereotypes associated with his racial and sexual identities while simultaneously signalling his socioeconomic status and sophistication within his community. However, this behaviour also reinforces existing socioeconomic hierarchies and perpetuates notions of white supremacy, underscoring the complexities of identity negotiation and societal pressures.

Similarly, this narrative illustrates the social pressures and expectations faced by Black gay men in conforming to perceived standards of cultural capital and social status. Despite their unfamiliarity with and dislike of certain foods, such as sushi, some felt compelled to portray an image of enjoying exotic foods associated with white culture to garner admiration and envy from their social media followers. These narratives underscore the power dynamics in social interactions and the influence of food-related symbolism on perceptions of status and identity.

8.4.1.2. Socioeconomic Disparities and Power Dynamics.

The findings in this study also reflect the economic disparities within queer relationships and the power imbalances that may result. As a socioeconomically disadvantaged Black gay man

reliant on his white partner for financial support, one's dependence underscores broader societal norms and inequalities influenced by race, sexuality, and economic status. Engagement in the status consumption of food at predominantly white restaurants serves as both a form of empowerment and a means of asserting superiority over those who may have previously marginalised them. Black gay men's preference for exclusive dining spaces reflects a desire for social differentiation and exclusivity within the gay community. It also reinforces social hierarchies by distancing himself from popular venues and social circles while asserting his status and belonging within the community.

8.4.1.3. Intersectionality and Cultural Expression.

The participants' narratives in this study underscore the intersectionality of race, class, and sexuality in shaping their experiences of status consumption of food. The preference for white-dominated spaces and exotic cuisines reflects not only a desire for social acceptance but also the complexities of navigating multiple marginalisations within broader societal contexts. Additionally, the participants' engagement in status consumption of food serves as a means of countering femmephobia and challenging cultural biases against femininity within society. By embracing culinary practices associated with whiteness and social prestige, some participants seek to assert their agency and challenge stereotypes while navigating the intricacies of their intersecting identities.

8.4.1.4. Asserting Prestige and Hegemonic Masculinity.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) helps explain how Black gay men use consumption practices to assert prestige and challenge traditional notions of masculinity. By choosing upscale dining experiences, these individuals create and reinforce a high-status identity that positions them as superior within their social communities. This behaviour reflects their desire to align with socially valued groups and symbols, enhancing their social status. The practice of showcasing luxury consumption serves as a way for Black gay men to differentiate themselves from outgroups, particularly heterosexual men whom they perceive as less affluent or socially inferior. By emphasising their ability to afford high-status experiences, they reinforce their social position and create a sense of distinction from those perceived as belonging to lower-status groups. Social Identity Theory also addresses how individuals navigate and reconfigure traditional gender roles (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Black gay men's engagement in upscale consumption can be seen as a way to challenge traditional notions of masculinity, which often prioritise economic success and social dominance in heterosexual

contexts. By embracing and displaying affluence, these men assert an alternative form of masculinity that aligns with their identity and social aspirations.

According to Critical Consciousness Theory (Freire, 1970), the assertion of prestige through consumption practices represents a form of resistance against systemic inequalities and traditional norms. By opting for luxurious experiences and showcasing their financial capabilities, Black gay men challenge societal norms that may marginalise or undervalue their identities. This behaviour reflects a critical consciousness of redefining social hierarchies and resisting marginalisation. The ability to afford and display high-status consumption serves as a means of empowerment. Black gay men use these practices to assert their agency and challenge the traditional notions of masculinity that are often associated with heterosexual norms. This strategic assertion helps them navigate and disrupt existing power dynamics and social inequalities. Critical Consciousness Theory (Freire, 1970) emphasises the role of personal and collective agency in challenging established social structures. By engaging in upscale consumption, Black gay men reframe traditional masculinity, which often excludes or marginalises non-heteronormative expressions. This reframing is a personal empowerment strategy and a broader challenge to normative masculinity and socioeconomic hierarchies.

The emphasis on luxury and prestige highlights the critical consciousness of economic disparities. By positioning themselves as superior through consumption, Black gay men address and challenge perceived inequalities within their communities, asserting their social status in the face of broader economic and social challenges. Social Identity Theory explains how Black gay men use upscale consumption to assert prestige and differentiate themselves from others, particularly heterosexual men, thus reinforcing their status within their communities and challenging traditional notions of masculinity. Critical Consciousness Theory provides insight into how these consumption practices serve as a form of resistance against systemic inequalities and traditional gender norms. Together, these theories illuminate how Black gay men navigate and reshape social hierarchies, assert their agency, and challenge prevailing societal expectations through their consumption practices.

8.4.1.5. Navigating Identity and Community Dynamics to Challenge Stereotypes.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains how Black gay men use strategic behaviours, such as curating social media personas and selecting specific dining venues, to manage their social identities. By presenting themselves in ways that align with desirable social categories (e.g., affluence and sophistication), they negotiate their place within the LGBTQ+

community and broader society (Galliher et al., 2017). These behaviours help them achieve validation and maintain a positive self-concept within these social contexts. The participants' choices in social media and dining reflect efforts to enhance their status within their ingroup (the LGBTQ+ community) and distinguish themselves from outgroups. By aligning with higher-status behaviours and environments, they seek to reinforce their position within their social circles and elevate their perceived status.

Black gay men's choice to dine at upscale restaurants and engage in status consumption acts as a form of social signalling aimed at counteracting negative stereotypes and prejudices associated with their identities. According to Social Identity Theory (Tafjel & Turner, 1979), these choices help participants communicate their social worth and reinforce their positive self-image by aligning with high-status symbols and behaviours. By publicly displaying their participation in high-status activities, Black gay men seek validation from their peers and society at large. This behaviour reflects the desire to conform to and be recognised by valued social categories, thus managing their identity and securing a favourable position within the social hierarchy.

Critical Consciousness Theory (Freire, 1970) highlights how individuals navigate and challenge systemic inequalities. Black gay men actively curate their social media personas and dining choices as a form of resistance against marginalisation. By aligning with high-status symbols and practices, they assert their agency and work to transform perceptions of their identities. Engaging in status-driven food consumption serves as a means of empowerment and self-assertion. This strategic behaviour reflects a conscious effort to challenge and overcome societal prejudices and economic constraints and to redefine their place within both the gay community and broader society.

Through their food choices and social signalling, Black gay men challenge the negative stereotypes associated with their identities. Critical Consciousness Theory emphasises how such actions are part of a broader struggle to confront and change systemic biases. By publicly engaging in high-status consumption, they work to dismantle perceptions of inferiority and assert their worth. Pursuing upscale dining and high-status behaviours reflects a critical consciousness of resisting marginalisation and affirming a positive identity. This behaviour not only seeks validation within their community but also represents a resistance to the prejudices and structural barriers they face.

Social Identity Theory explains how Black gay men navigate their social identities and seek validation through strategic behaviours like curating social media personas and choosing high-status dining venues. Critical Consciousness Theory provides insight into how these actions serve as a form of resistance against marginalisation and systemic inequalities, empowering individuals to challenge stereotypes and assert their social worth. Together, these theories illuminate the complex ways Black gay men manage their identities and navigate community dynamics within the broader context of societal prejudice and economic disparity.

8.4.1.7. Race, Sexuality, and Socioeconomic Status in Food Consumption Patterns.

The intersection of race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status significantly influences the food consumption patterns of Black gay men. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) offers a framework for understanding how these intersecting identities shape behaviours and attitudes. This theory posits that individuals categorise themselves and others into social groups, which influence their actions. For Black gay men, their social identity is deeply intertwined with race, sexuality, and economic status. These intersecting identities inform their food choices as they navigate social categories, striving to align with group norms or enhance their status within these spaces. Food choices serve as a form of social signalling and identity management. For instance, dining at upscale restaurants can symbolise affluence and sophistication, aligning with higher social status and distinguishing oneself from lower-status groups (Cruwys et al., 2015; Stajcic, 2013).

For Black gay men, engaging in such practices reflects their efforts to meet the expectations of their community or broader society while projecting an image of affluence. This identity management strategy not only enhances their perceived social status within the LGBTQ+ community but also helps them navigate the complex dynamics of belonging within multiple intersecting identities. Critical Consciousness Theory (Freire, 1970) deepens this understanding by addressing how social inequalities and power structures impact these consumption practices. The intersection of race, sexuality, and economic status creates a context of systemic marginalisation (Bedolla, 2007), influencing Black gay men to use food consumption as a means of empowerment and social mobility. Choosing high-status dining venues can be interpreted as resistance against inequality and a way to assert their value despite economic limitations. This practice challenges stereotypes tied to their intersecting identities, subverting cultural norms that devalue them and reshaping perceptions both within and beyond their communities (Cronin et al., 2014; Godfrey & Burson, 2018).

By positioning themselves within high-status spaces, Black gay men assert agency and challenge societal norms that confine them to lower economic and social strata. This behaviour reflects a critical awareness of systemic barriers and a conscious effort to resist marginalisation through strategic consumption choices. Their food practices thus serve not only as a reflection of identity but also as tools of resistance and self-empowerment. Socioeconomic constraints further shape how Black gay men navigate social spaces, particularly within the gay community, where affluence often correlates with social respect and acceptance. Social Identity Theory explains how individuals use symbolic consumption to signal social standing and negotiate their position in hierarchical structures (Nzuza, 2018). Despite financial limitations, Black gay men strategically curate their image by occasionally frequenting high-status venues, using these experiences to project an appearance of affluence and sophistication. This behaviour helps manage their social identity and align them with symbols of privilege, thus enhancing their status within the community.

Critical Consciousness Theory complements this by highlighting how these strategic actions serve as a form of resistance against socioeconomic marginalisation. Engaging in status-driven consumption becomes a tool to challenge systemic inequalities and assert social worth. By consciously positioning themselves in high-status spaces, Black gay men navigate financial constraints while challenging the limitations imposed by their economic realities. This strategic image curation reflects an acute awareness of how social dynamics operate and the importance of symbolic acts in asserting agency and seeking empowerment.

The Intersectionality of race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status profoundly impacts Identity construction and social dynamics within the gay community. Social Identity Theory explains how Black gay men, often grappling with unemployment and economic hardship, use strategic actions to mitigate feelings of inadequacy and marginalisation. By aligning themselves with high-status symbols, such as upscale dining, they seek to counteract the stigma associated with lower socioeconomic status and bolster their standing within the community. These practices reflect a deliberate effort to navigate hierarchical social structures and gain validation.

Critical Consciousness Theory underscores the role of critical awareness in this process. Black gay men recognise how systemic inequities shape their experiences and respond by engaging in pragmatic strategies, such as image curation, to resist marginalisation. Their actions reflect a conscious effort to reshape their social identity and navigate societal and community dynamics strategically (Seider et al., 2020). This awareness allows them to assert their worth

and challenge the societal norms that devalue their intersecting identities. Together, Social Identity Theory and Critical Consciousness Theory offer a comprehensive understanding of how the intersectionality of race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status shapes food consumption patterns and social interactions among Black gay men. Social Identity Theory elucidates how these individuals use consumption practices to signal status and navigate complex social hierarchies, while Critical Consciousness Theory highlights their strategic resistance to systemic inequalities. These theories illustrate the interplay of identity, culture, and economic constraints, revealing how Black gay men assert agency, manage social dynamics, and challenge marginalisation through their everyday choices.

8.4.1.8. Spatial and Geographical Influences.

Social Identity theory (1979) offers a valuable framework for understanding how Black gay men in Pietermaritzburg navigate spatial and geographical influences related to food consumption. According to this theory, individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups, and they engage in behaviours that enhance their group's status and personal identity (Abrams & Hogg, 2001). Black gay men who participated in this study seek out dining experiences in affluent neighbourhoods and exclusive venues as a way to assert their membership in a higher-status social group. By frequenting prestigious locations, they align themselves with social categories perceived as more sophisticated or privileged, thereby enhancing their social identity within the LGBTQ+ and broader social communities. The choice of upscale dining venues can also serve to distinguish oneself from perceived outgroups, including those within their own marginalised communities who may not have access to such spaces. This behaviour reinforces ingroup cohesion by creating a sense of exclusivity and social hierarchy based on economic and cultural capital.

This behaviour also aligns with status signalling, where individuals use certain behaviours, such as dining in high-end restaurants, to signal their status and reinforce their identity within their social groups (Dib & Johnson, 2019). This signalling helps manage the perceptions others have of them and reinforces their position within the social hierarchy. By strategically navigating urban spaces, Black gay men construct and project an identity that aligns with societal expectations of affluence and sophistication, contributing to their overall social self-concept. On the other hand, critical consciousness theory (1970) emphasises the importance of understanding and challenging social inequalities and power structures (Watts et al., 2011). This theory provides insights into how Black gay men navigate food spaces as part of a broader

struggle for recognition and empowerment within marginalisation. From a critical consciousness perspective, the pursuit of dining experiences in prestigious venues can be seen as an act of empowerment and resistance against systemic inequalities. By asserting their presence in spaces typically reserved for more privileged groups, Black gay men challenge the social norms that often marginalise them and work to redefine their place within the social hierarchy. Furthermore, engaging in status consumption can also be viewed as a form of resistance against the stereotypes and limitations imposed by society. It reflects a conscious effort to leverage spatial capital to assert agency and challenge the systemic barriers that restrict their social mobility.

Critical consciousness highlights the intersectionality of race, sexuality, and class in shaping individuals' experiences (Watts et al., 2011). The choice of dining spaces reflects an awareness of these intersections and a strategic response to them. By occupying prestigious spaces, Black gay men navigate the complexities of their intersecting identities and challenge the marginalisation they face. The engagement in high-status food spaces also represents an attempt to challenge cultural norms that devalue their identities. It reflects an effort to confront and subvert the power dynamics that dictate which social spaces are accessible to them. Critical consciousness theory also addresses the economic constraints that shape access to these spaces. Despite limited financial resources for some Black gay men, the strategic curation of an affluent image through dining choices reflects a conscious effort to signal social status and navigate the power dynamics of their community. This behaviour highlights the tension between economic realities and the desire for social recognition.

The spatial and geographical influences on food consumption among Black gay men in Pietermaritzburg can be understood through the lenses of social identity theory and critical consciousness theory. Social Identity Theory explains how dining choices signal and enhance social status within and outside their communities. At the same time, Critical Consciousness Theory provides insight into how these choices reflect a broader struggle for empowerment and resistance against systemic inequalities. Together, these theories reveal the complex interplay of identity, power, and social dynamics in shaping the experiences of marginalised individuals within urban spaces.

8.4.1.9. Intra-Group Conflicts and Polarised Spaces.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) helps explain how differences influence intra-group conflicts within the gay community in ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic status. Despite being part of a marginalised group, Black gay men may face discrimination from within the gay community itself. Existing social hierarchies and ingroup-outgroup dynamics shape this internal marginalisation. In response to discrimination or marginalisation, Black gay men may use their food consumption choices to navigate and negotiate their social identities. Opting for high-status dining experiences can serve as a way to enhance their perceived social status and affluence within a community where they might otherwise be marginalised. This behaviour reflects their strategic use of consumption practices to bolster their identity and status in a complex social landscape. Within the gay community, social interactions are often influenced by internal hierarchies based on race and socioeconomic status (Fukayama & Ferguson, 2000). Black gay men may strategically select dining venues and social settings that reflect and assert their affluence, thereby negotiating their position within these hierarchies. This process involves managing group boundaries and asserting a higher status to counteract experiences of marginalisation.

Critical Consciousness Theory (Freire, 1970) provides insight into how Black gay men respond to intra-group discrimination within the gay community. They exercise their agency and resistance against marginalisation by consuming high-status food. This behaviour is a form of empowerment, allowing them to counteract internal biases and assert their worth despite experiencing discrimination from within the community. The strategic use of consumption practices to enhance prestige and affluence reflects a critical consciousness of the need to navigate and challenge internal community dynamics. Black gay men use these practices as a means to confront and disrupt social inequities and prejudices within the gay community, aiming to reshape their social interactions and position themselves more favourably. In response to intra-group conflicts and marginalisation, Black gay men may use their food consumption choices to assert their social status and influence within the community. This behaviour highlights their critical awareness of social hierarchies and the role of consumption in navigating and altering their position within these hierarchies. By choosing high-status dining experiences, they seek to redefine their social standing and counteract the negative effects of intra-group discrimination.

Social Identity Theory explains how intra-group conflicts based on ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic status influence Black gay men's food consumption choices and social interactions. These individuals strategically use consumption practices to negotiate their social identity and assert their prestige within the community. Critical consciousness theory provides insight into how these practices serve as a form of resistance against internal discrimination and marginalisation. By using high-status consumption to challenge and reframe social dynamics, Black gay men assert their agency and work to transform their position within the gay community. Together, these theories highlight the complex interplay of social identity, intra-group conflict, and critical consciousness in shaping the experiences and behaviours of Black gay men within the gay community.

8.4.1.10. Internal Hierarchies and Competitive Dynamics.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) helps explain how internal hierarchies and competitive dynamics within the gay community shape individuals' social positioning and interactions. The study highlights how participants navigate these hierarchies based on perceived social status and economic privilege. Individuals with higher economic standing may experience less marginalisation and greater acceptance, while those perceived as economically inferior face exclusion and disdain (Loury, 2000). This dynamic underscores how status consumption—such as frequenting high-status venues—serves as a tool for social positioning within the community hierarchy. Participants strategically use consumption practices to assert their status and differentiate themselves from perceived lower-status individuals. This behaviour aligns with Social Identity Theory, where individuals seek to enhance their social identity by aligning with valued groups and symbols, thereby improving their standing within the community (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Critical Consciousness Theory (Freire, 1970) provides insight into how internal hierarchies and competitive dynamics reflect broader societal inequities. The study reveals how participants' feelings of marginalisation due to their employment status and economic position are intertwined with their critical awareness of social hierarchies. Those who perceive themselves as economically disadvantaged might engage in strategic status consumption to challenge and resist their marginalisation. By projecting an image of affluence, they seek to counteract the negative impact of their lower economic status and assert their worth within the community. This behaviour highlights their critical consciousness of social status's role in their acceptance and social mobility.

In summary, Social Identity Theory illustrates how internal hierarchies influence individuals' social positioning within the gay community. Critical Consciousness Theory explains how status consumption serves as a form of resistance against marginalisation and a means of asserting social worth. Together, these theories illuminate the complexities of intra-group dynamics and the strategic use of consumption to navigate social hierarchies and enhance social acceptance.

8.4.1.11. Perpetuation of Misconceptions and Inequality.

This study revealed how Black gay men use the status consumption of food to navigate and negotiate their social identities within the gay community through complex interactions of socioeconomic status, race, and sexuality. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides a framework for understanding these dynamics. Black gay men's efforts to project an image of affluence, despite financial limitations, illustrate their strategic use of symbolic consumption to manage social perceptions and align with higher-status groups within the community. Their reluctance to disclose the affordability of certain dining venues reflects a strategic choice to maintain an image of exclusivity and high social status, thus influencing how others perceive them and how they position themselves within the community hierarchy. This behaviour aligns with Social Identity Theory, which posits that individuals seek to enhance their social identity by associating with high-status symbols and groups (Stets & Burke, 2000). By curating an image of affluence, Black gay men attempt to counteract negative stereotypes and gain social validation, thereby negotiating their place within a competitive community. Their dining choices and the image they project serve to mitigate feelings of inadequacy and marginalisation related to their socioeconomic status, reflecting the complexities of identity construction in a stratified social environment.

Critical Consciousness Theory (Freire, 1970) adds depth to this analysis by highlighting the essential role of awareness in these dynamics. Black gay men's strategic consumption practices and the perpetuation of financial misconceptions reflect a critical consciousness of the societal structures and community norms that influence their social positioning. Their navigation of community hierarchies and image projection represents an awareness of how socioeconomic disparities and internal hierarchies affect social acceptance. This behaviour illustrates a form of resistance against marginalisation by using consumption practices to assert agency and challenge existing inequalities.

The findings from this study emphasise the intersectionality of race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status in shaping food consumption patterns and community dynamics. The narratives reveal how these factors interplay to influence social acceptance and reinforce or challenge existing hierarchies. The perpetuation of misconceptions about financial privilege underscores the need for a deeper understanding of the complexities of identity within marginalised communities. This integrated perspective highlights the importance of addressing systemic inequalities and promoting inclusivity within the gay community, acknowledging how socioeconomic status intersects with identity construction and social dynamics.

8.4.2. Factors Influencing Status Consumption of Food

Social Identity Theory reveals how the desire for social status and prestige drives consumption behaviours among Black gay men (Cox & Gallois, 1996). Participants in this study strategically use their dining experiences to signal their social standing, particularly in environments where they face homophobic attitudes. By frequenting upscale restaurants and showcasing these experiences on platforms like Instagram and Facebook, they assert their affiliation with an affluent class. This behaviour aligns with Social Identity Theory, which posits that individuals enhance their self-concept by associating with high-status groups and symbols (van der Scott, 2023). Sharing these experiences challenges prevailing stereotypes and garners respect from peers, thereby negotiating and elevating their social status within the community. Critical Consciousness Theory adds depth to understanding these dynamics by emphasising how awareness of societal structures influences consumption practices (Ettlinger, 2004). The participants' strategic use of culinary experiences to navigate and challenge homophobic attitudes reflects a critical consciousness of their social positioning. By leveraging the social capital which they gained through knowledge and access to exclusive dining experiences, the participants foster supportive relationships and gain acceptance within their networks. This use of social capital not only challenges intra-group conflicts but also fosters solidarity and allyship within the community.

The gay subculture's influence on dining preferences further illustrates these theories. Participants' food choices and behaviours are shaped by pressures to conform to established norms within the gay community, revealing how socioeconomic status and access to luxury goods impact social acceptance. The need for uniqueness and individuality drives participants to seek distinctive dining experiences, reflecting their desire for sophistication and exclusivity.

This behaviour underscores the role of social identity in consumption, as individuals use unique dining experiences to differentiate themselves and assert their social identity. Overall, these findings highlight the intricate interplay of identity, social status, and cultural perceptions in shaping consumption behaviours among Black gay men. Integrating Social Identity Theory and Critical Consciousness Theory provides valuable insights into how these factors influence consumption practices and underscores the importance of a comprehensive approach to studying consumption within marginalised cultural contexts.

8.4. Contributions and Implications of the Study

This study provides a significant and nuanced contribution to the existing body of literature on status consumption, with a specific focus on the lived experiences of Black gay men in the community of Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal. It addresses notable gaps in research by exploring the status consumption of food while demonstrating how race, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and cultural dynamics collectively shape consumption practices in ways that remain underexplored in existing scholarship.

First, this study advances our understanding of status consumption by uncovering the ways in which Black gay men navigate and negotiate their identities through food consumption. While existing literature on status consumption frequently examines class and economic hierarchies, this study adds the dimension of sexual orientation and racial identity, highlighting how status consumption functions as a mechanism for survival and identity negotiation. In particular, the study contributes to work on cultural capital and whiteness (Bourdieu, 2018; hooks, 2014) by illustrating how Black gay men's assimilation to perceived markers of "sophistication" and "status" often aligns with whiteness as a dominant cultural narrative. This perpetuates existing socioeconomic inequalities and reinforces white supremacy, even as it affords individuals validation and social capital within their communities.

Second, the findings build upon socioeconomic inequality and queer relationships literature (Duguay, 2017; Heaphy, 2011) by exposing how power dynamics and class disparities within queer communities influence status-driven consumption. This study demonstrates how status consumption functions as a tool for empowerment and an instrument for asserting superiority against systemic marginalisation, racism, heteronormativity, and classism, all of which reshape queer individuals' experiences of identity and power.

Third, this study contributes to theories of cultural expression and resistance by showing how food consumption practices serve as a site of identity negotiation and subtle resistance against societal norms. Unlike much of the literature that positions status consumption purely as conformity to dominant ideologies, this research highlights the dual role of these practices. These practices, while reinforcing existing hierarchies, also allow Black gay men to push back against stereotypes and redefine their cultural identities. These findings extend recent works on consumption as a form of resistance and cultural performance in marginalised communities (Mayo, 2000; Bell & Valentine, 2013), emphasising the specific intersectional challenges faced by Black gay men.

While previous studies on status consumption have focused mainly on heterosexual or cisgender populations, and existing work on queer consumption has often overlooked the racial and class dynamics within queer communities, this research provides a critical intervention by centring Black gay men in a South African context. It illustrates the necessity of adapting global theories of consumption to accommodate the distinct socio-cultural and economic realities in non-Western contexts. Furthermore, the study's focus on food consumption, as opposed to more commonly studied commodities such as fashion or technology, opens new avenues for exploring the relationship between consumption, identity, and power in everyday life.

The findings hold important implications for several stakeholders. First, for marketers, this study emphasises the need for intersectional marketing approaches that consider the racial, sexual, and economic identities of Black gay men. Unlike traditional campaigns that may inadvertently perpetuate exclusionary standards, inclusive marketing can resonate with these communities and challenge the hegemony of whiteness in status consumption narratives. Second, for policymakers, the study underscores the importance of addressing systemic socioeconomic disparities and promoting economic empowerment through targeted interventions. Policies that reduce barriers to financial resources and create inclusive social spaces can empower Black gay men to assert their identities without relying on status consumption as a coping mechanism. Third, for community organisations, the research provides actionable insights for designing programs that address the intersectional challenges faced by Black gay men. Beyond simply addressing material needs, these initiatives should foster identity affirmation and resilience against discrimination while promoting solidarity within and across marginalised communities. Fourth, for educational and advocacy initiatives, the study highlights the need to promote awareness of how intersecting oppression influences

consumption patterns and social behaviours. Such education can help dismantle harmful stereotypes about Black gay men while fostering a more inclusive and empathetic understanding of their experiences.

Finally, this study contributes to the literature that uses social identity theory and critical consciousness theory by illustrating their application in consumer behaviour, particularly in non-Western African contexts where race, class, and sexuality identities intersect in unique ways. It challenges scholars to rethink status consumption not merely as an economic act but as a deeply embedded cultural and identity-driven practice shaped by historical and systemic inequities. Thus, the research offers a critical framework for future studies seeking to explore the complexities of identity negotiation and cultural performance in marginalised communities. In sum, this study not only advances existing scholarship on status consumption but also provides practical and theoretical tools for fostering inclusivity and empowerment within marginalised communities, with a particular focus on Black gay men in South Africa.

8.5. Addressing Challenges Faced by Black Gay Men Through Community Education

The findings from this study shed light on the intricate challenges faced by Black gay men, shaped by the intersectionality of their race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. These challenges highlight the critical need for community education initiatives that address systemic inequalities and promote a more in-depth understanding of Black gay men's interconnected identities. These programmes can better meet the unique needs of this community and effect meaningful change by incorporating culturally relevant and context-specific approaches. Community education initiatives should focus on raising awareness about the dangers of consumerist culture, which disproportionately affects Black gay men. In his seminal work, *Masculine Domination*, Pierre Bourdieu argues that targeted marketing exploits cultural preferences, leading to financial strain and perpetuating systemic inequalities. Black gay men who negotiate their identities through status-based consumption face increased financial vulnerability and potential mental health issues. As a result, educational programs must include critical discussions about consumerist culture, providing people with tools to navigate its pitfalls. Workshops on financial literacy, budgeting, and critical media analysis can help Black gay men avoid exploitative consumer practices and achieve economic stability.

Economic disparities are a significant challenge for Black gay men, made worse by systemic racism, homophobia, and targeted capitalist strategies. Community education initiatives can

transform lives by providing resources and training that promote economic empowerment. Financial literacy workshops, entrepreneurship training, and career development support are all examples of tailored programs that can help bridge economic gaps. These initiatives should be designed with a nuanced understanding of the specific barriers that Black gay men face, allowing them to achieve long-term economic independence while also developing resilience to systemic inequities.

Educational programs must actively challenge the dual oppression of racism and homophobia in communities. Creating safe spaces for Black gay men to share their personal experiences is critical for fostering dialogue and understanding. A broader community education strategy should include allyship training, anti-discrimination workshops, and initiatives highlighting Black gay men's intersectional experiences. These efforts can help to foster empathy, reduce prejudice, and promote inclusivity in local and broader societal contexts.

Given the psychological toll of navigating intersecting oppressions, community education initiatives should focus on developing resilience among Black gay men. This includes creating support networks, mentorship programs, and peer-to-peer connections that offer emotional and practical support. Promoting mental health awareness is also important, as mental health issues are frequently overlooked due to stigma or a lack of access to culturally competent services. Collaboration with mental health professionals to provide accessible, affirming care has the potential to significantly improve community well-being and resilience.

This study's findings lay the groundwork for effective policy advocacy. LGBTQ+ organisations can use these findings to advocate for systemic changes that address the needs of Black gay men. Priority areas include advocating for inclusive healthcare policies, affordable housing initiatives, and equitable employment opportunities. To effectively address the root causes of systemic inequities, policy changes must take into account Black gay men's lived experiences. Homophobia has a significant impact on Black gay men's access to education, often leading to exclusion or marginalisation in academic settings. Community education initiatives should work to create more inclusive school environments by implementing anti-homophobia interventions and cultural competency training for educators. Creating inclusive curricula that reflect the diversity of student experiences can help Black gay students feel a sense of belonging and validation. These measures are critical to ensuring that Black gay men can fully participate in educational opportunities without fear of discrimination.

By addressing these interconnected issues, community education initiatives can make significant progress toward equity and inclusion for Black gay men. Culturally relevant, contextually informed programs that address economic disparities, mental health, consumerist culture, and systemic discrimination have the potential to empower individuals while also accelerating societal change. These initiatives, which involve collaboration among LGBTQ+ organisations, policymakers, and educators, can pave the way for a more inclusive and just society that affirms the identities and experiences of Black gay men.

8.6. Implications for Future Research

The findings from this study highlight several areas that warrant further exploration to deepen understanding of status consumption among Black gay men. First, longitudinal studies would allow researchers to examine changes in consumption patterns and behaviours over time, providing insights into the dynamic nature of status consumption among Black gay men. Second, comparative studies across different geographic regions and cultural contexts could illuminate variations in status consumption practices among Black gay men, highlighting the influence of sociocultural factors on consumption behaviours. Third, studies exploring the intersectionality of race, sexuality, and gender identity could offer nuanced insights into how gender identity influences status consumption practices among Black gay men, including differences between cisgender and transgender individuals. Fourth, investigating the agency and resistance strategies employed by Black gay men in navigating status consumption dynamics could deepen understanding of how individuals negotiate societal norms and stereotypes through consumption practices. Fifth, conducting digital ethnographies and expanding these to include a broader range of online platforms and interactions could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Black gay men engage with food consumption in virtual spaces. Sixth, integrating quantitative approaches, such as surveys or experimental studies, alongside qualitative methods could offer quantitative insights into consumption patterns, preferences, and motivations among Black gay men. Seventh, conducting policy and intervention research to address socioeconomic disparities and promote inclusivity within communities could inform the development of targeted policies and programmes to support economic empowerment and social justice. Finally, collaborative research involving interdisciplinary teams and community partnerships could facilitate a holistic understanding of status consumption among Black gay men, incorporating diverse perspectives and expertise. Addressing these areas for future research, scholars can continue to advance knowledge on

status consumption dynamics among Black gay men, contributing to broader discussions on identity, intersectionality, and consumption practices within the community.

8.7. Conclusion

I embarked on this study with experiences of witnessing how I and other Black gay men in my community navigated our foodscapes. Based on this experience, I wanted to understand the factors that motivated Black gay men's food experiences since this topic was less explored in the Global South. As I conclude this dissertation, I have come to realise that the status consumption of food among Black gay men in Pietermaritzburg reveals a multifaceted interplay of identity, socioeconomic status, and cultural dynamics. Through qualitative methodologies, this study unveiled several key patterns and trends, shedding light on the complexities of navigating societal expectations, assimilation to whiteness, and the intricate intersectionality of race, class, and sexuality within the gay community that experiences anti-gay discrimination in the background of a Constitution that provides legal protections for sexual minorities.

The findings highlight how Black gay men strategically negotiate their identities and social positions through food consumption practices, whether by seeking acceptance, asserting superiority, challenging stereotypes, or perpetuating existing inequalities. Moreover, the study underscores the internal hierarchies, competitive dynamics, and power imbalances present within the gay community, emphasising the need for a deeper understanding of identity and social dynamics within the gay community. These Black gay men's experiences highlight that South Africa remains homophobic and unsafe for gay men and call for interventions that will address these discriminations and foster communities that are safe, inclusive, and affirming of gay men.

The practical implications for marketers, policymakers, and community organisations highlighted in this study include developing targeted strategies to address socioeconomic disparities, promote inclusivity, and foster empowerment within Black gay communities. Furthermore, the study identifies areas for future research, such as longitudinal studies, comparative analyses, and investigations into gender identity's influence on consumption practices, to deepen understanding and inform policy and intervention efforts. By deepening understanding and informing policy and intervention efforts, research in this area contributes

to advancing knowledge on identity, intersectionality, and consumption practices within diverse cultural contexts. Moreover, it catalyses social inclusion, empowerment, and resilience within marginalised communities, ultimately fostering a more equitable and inclusive society. Overall, this study contributes valuable insights into the status consumption of food among Black gay men, enriching scholarly discourse on identity, intersectionality, and consumption dynamics within diverse cultural contexts.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A GATEKEEPER LETTER



24 October 2022

Mr Brian Sibeko
Student no: 218056487
School of Social Sciences
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Pietermaritzburg,
South Africa

GATEKEEPERS LETTER TO CONDUCT RESEARCH WITH LGBT PARTICIPANTS

Dear Brian

This letter serves to notify you that your request for the gatekeeper's permission to conduct your research with Uthingo Network's members for your study titled: **Understanding the status consumption of food among Black gay men in a KwaZulu-Natal community: Implications for community education** is granted.

We understand that you aim to engage Black gay men on their experiences of food consumption and how this is linked to their lived experiences as Black gay men in Pietermaritzburg. Therefore, we will work with you to provide access to our networks and communities. We are also committed to your proposed research's success and building a long-term collaboration with you.

Furthermore, considering the sensitivity of the content to be discussed, Uthingo Network would like to offer full support to the participants and the researcher, offering psychosocial support through the process of research and follow-up sessions after research has been conducted, should it be required. The main counsellor assigned to this project is Mfundo Ntombela, the Victim Support Officer in charge of homophobic hate crime monitoring and support. Should there be any queries, you may contact them at 033 342 6165. I appreciate your interest in working with Uthingo Network.

Yours Sincerely,



Tracey Sibisi

Programmes Manager

Email: advocacy@uthingonetwork.org.za

P.O. Box 100969, Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg, 3209
19 Connaught Road, Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, 3209
Tel: +27 33 342 6165, Fax: +27 86 508 2203
www.uthingonetwork.org.za – E-mail: info@uthingonetwork.org.za

The Uthingo Network is a registered Non-Profit organization which is tax exempt and has Section 18 A (1) status. All donations to the Network are tax deductible in terms of Section 18 A (1) at the Income Tax Act 1962, as amended.

APPENDIX B INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM

Understanding the status consumption of food among Black gay men in a KwaZulu-Natal community: Implications for Community Education

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00004402/2022

Dear Prospective Participant

My name is Brian Sibeko. I am a master's student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I am conducting qualitative research on understanding Black gay men's engagement in the status consumption of food in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal.

I would like to invite you to take part in my research study. This document is to help you to decide if you would like to participate or not. You should fully understand what is involved before you agree to participate in this study. If you have any questions that are not fully explained in this document, do not hesitate to ask me. You should not agree to participate unless you are completely satisfied with all the processes and procedures involved and possible risks. To participate in this study, you should be at least 18 years old, Black, and self-identify as a gay man.

What your participation involves

I am inviting you to participate in a one-on-one conversation with me. While I have some general questions, the discussion will be kept informal. I have a basic list of questions to guide our discussion, but we can talk about anything that comes to your mind.

I aim to learn what men like you think about things related to their food choices, experiences, and consumption. It is not a test, and there are no right or wrong answers. I just want your honest opinions. Some of the questions (about your sexual orientation) might be sensitive. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to.

Your rights as a participant in this study

Your participation is voluntary, and you are not being pressured or coerced to participate in this discussion. The decision to participate or not is entirely up to you, and no one will know of your participation.

If you do agree to participate, you may change your mind at any time and tell me that you do not want to continue. If you do this, there will be no penalties, and you will not be negatively affected in any way.

Duration, timing, and location

If you agree, we will require your participation for not more than 1½ hours. The interview will take place in whatever location you find convenient and when you are available.

Ethical approval of the study

Written ethical approval has been granted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC). A copy of this document will be available to you should you wish to review it.

Confidentiality

I respect your confidentiality. We won't use your real name but assign you a pseudonym. You will not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer; you can say as much or as little as you like. And anything you do say will be kept entirely private and confidential.

Because people in your household or community may see you with me, the researcher, during our conversation, I will also work with you to develop an acceptable explanation for my presence. This might be something like, "This researcher is talking with me as a part of a study on men's engagement with food consumption in Pietermaritzburg." "It is up to you what we say in these situations.

All identifying information about you will be kept on a password-protected computer database. This data will not be available to anyone who is not part of the study and will be kept confidential to the extent possible by law. The records from your participation may be reviewed by people responsible for ensuring that research is done correctly. This will be my supervisor and me, and we are required to keep your identity confidential.

I am also asking you to give me permission to audiorecord the discussion so that I can accurately record and transcribe what you think and say. Your answers will be stored electronically on a single dedicated hard drive in a locked file cabinet when not in use. These audio files will be used only for research purposes now or later in ways that will not reveal who you are.

I will not record your full name anywhere, and no one will be able to connect you to the answers you give. Your responses will be linked to a pseudonym (another name), and I will refer to you in this way in the data, any publication, report, or other research output.

Your data records will be kept for five years and, after that, will be destroyed. Paper records will be shredded and recycled. Documents stored on a computer hard drive will be erased using software applications designed to remove all data from the storage devices. I will physically destroy data stored on USB drives, tape recorders, and other storage devices.

Risks/discomforts

This study will involve a discussion of topics about your sexual orientation. Some of these topics may make you uncomfortable. I will do everything I can to create an environment where you feel comfortable sharing your thoughts. You do not need to answer any questions if you feel uncomfortable. You can also choose to end the interview or leave the interview any time you wish. You can also decide where the session takes place and where you do/do not feel comfortable being interviewed or answering specific questions. I will collect your phone number to schedule your interview and delete it after your interview is done.

Benefits

There are no immediate benefits to you from participating in this study. However, your participation will be helpful to us in understanding the challenges faced by gay men and potentially influence interventions that might better their lives by LGBTQ+ NGOs. You may request the research findings from me, and they will be shared with you upon completion of my master's studies.

Compensation

I will provide you with an incentive of R300 to cover your time, travel, and other costs.

Who to contact if you have any concerns

If you have concerns or questions about this study, you may contact me, the principal Investigator, at sibekobrianbongani@yahoo.com or my supervisor, Professor Relebohile Moletsane, at moletsaner@ukzn.ac.za/0312603023.

You can also contact the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee [HSSREC] at HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za/0312603587.

CONSENT

Verbal informed consent for participation (to be read by the researcher to the participant)

As outlined above, I hereby provide informed consent to participate in this study. I understand that I am participating freely and without being pressured or coerced in any way to do so. I also know that I can stop participating at any point if I do not want to continue and that this decision will not affect me negatively in any way. I understand that my participation will remain confidential.

APPENDIX C PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION GUIDE

Participant Pseudonym: _____

Observer: _____

Date and time of observation: _____

Observation steps:

1. Introduction of the research process
2. Signing of consent documents

Observe: How they engage with food spaces

1. What restaurant, grocery store, or food market are they at?
2. What are they buying?
3. What are they wearing?
4. Who are they with?
5. Who are they interacting with?
6. What did they order?
7. What type of food are they eating?
8. What type of beverage are they drinking?
9. How did they get to this place?
10. Are they posting pictures of this experience?

OBSERVATION LOG							
Date	Participant ID	Platform	Type of Post	Description	Engagement Metrics	Notable Comments or Hashtags	Observations and Notes

APPENDIX D IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE

Participant Pseudonym: _____

Interviewer: _____

Date and time of interview: _____

Location of interview: _____

Format of interview: Semi-structured

Interview steps:

3. Introduction of the research process
 4. Signing of consent documents
 5. Obtain permission for audio recording.
-

1. How old are you?
2. What is your highest level of education?
3. Are you employed? [Probe: What kind of job? Are they happy with their job?]
4. How do you describe your sexual orientation? [Probe: Why do you describe your sexuality in this way?]
5. Are you open about your sexual orientation? [If yes, move to question 6. If the answer is no, move to question 7.]
6. How do people in your community treat people who are openly gay?
7. Why are you not open about your sexuality?
8. Do you feel connected to your neighbourhood/community?
9. What does being a man mean to you? [Probe for contradictions with traditional understanding of manhood/Probe whether the participant feels that their definition of manhood fits into the traditional definitions of manhood and their feelings towards it.]
10. Who do you live with?
11. What is your relationship like with the people you live with?
12. Where did you grow up? [
13. What was your childhood like? [Probe: Did they ever experience stigma and discrimination for being gay?]
14. How does being gay influence your food choices?
15. Why is this the case?

16. What kind of restaurants do you frequent? Why these restaurants?
17. Do you frequent food markets? [Why?]
18. Do you think your choice of restaurants set you apart from other people? [Probe how it sets them apart from gay men and heterosexual people]
19. Which restaurant are you most likely to visit for breakfast?
20. Which restaurant are you most likely to visit for lunch?
21. Which restaurant are you most likely to visit for dinner?
22. Are there specific restaurants you will never go to? [Why?]
23. Where do you buy your groceries?
24. Do you drink alcohol? If yes, ask why. If no, ask why?
25. What is your alcoholic beverage of choice? [Ask why, if they consume alcohol.]
26. Do you drink coffee?
27. What kind of coffee?
28. What is your favourite coffee outlet?
29. Do you ever post food on social media platforms? [If yes, ask why. If no, ask why?]
30. How much do you normally spend when you dine out?
31. Would you post food from fast food outlets like KFC?
32. Do you think your food experiences afford you respect in society as a gay man?

APPENDIX E TURNITIN REPORT

Brian Sibeko

ORIGINALITY REPORT

8%	5%	0%	4%
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

1	Submitted to University of KwaZulu-Natal Student Paper	3%
2	researchspace.ukzn.ac.za Internet Source	3%
3	hdl.handle.net Internet Source	1%
4	core.ac.uk Internet Source	<1%

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Exclude bibliography On

Exclude matches < 100 words

APPENDIX F

LANGUAGE EDITORIAL CERTIFICATE



RESEARCH|WRITING

EDITORIAL CERTIFICATE

Date: 25 February 2025

Student: Brian Bongani Sibeko

Dissertation Title: Understanding the status consumption of food among black gay men in a KwaZulu-Natal urban community: implications for community education.

I, Ndumiso Daluxolo Ngidi (PhD), certify that I have provided professional language editing and proofreading services for the dissertation corresponding to the information detailed above, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MEd at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

The editing process included:

- Grammar, punctuation, and spelling corrections
- Sentence structure and clarity improvements
- Consistency in academic style and formatting
- Readability and coherence enhancements

I confirm that while I have made corrections and suggestions to improve language and clarity, the responsibility for the final content, including any changes made after my review, remains with the author.

Editor's Name: Ndumiso Daluxolo Ngidi

Date: 25 February 2025

Contact Information: ngidindu@gmail.com



Signature

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