

RESEARCH TITLE

Burning to Be Men? Conspicuous consumption as a performance of masculinity in the activities of *Izikhothane* in Tembisa

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ABSTRACT

Burning to Be Men? is a study that investigates the role of consumption in the performance, enactment, and pursuit of masculinities in the subculture of ukukhothana. The phenomenon of ukukhothana involves township youths who predominantly come from impoverished economic backgrounds who engage in conspicuous consumption. The fieldwork was conducted in Tembisa, the second largest township in Gauteng, in the East Rand. I worked with The Good Fellas, which is one of the longest running and most popular crews in the area of Phomolong. Studying the consumption patterns of people is a very complex undertaking. This is particularly the case in the South African context, given that consumption studies as a discipline have mostly been developed outside of Africa. Finding a single theory to study a peculiar South African subculture such as ukukhothana was a challenge. In order to get over this challenge, I relied on multiple theories. I used theories of consumption, subculture, masculinity, and evolutionary psychology. When all of these are combined, they provide a lens through which I could read the consumption behaviour of izikhothane. Being a closely-knit subculture, gaining access to The Good Fellas was not easy. However, the ethnographic method that involved prolonged observations made it possible to create rapport with the members of this crew and successfully collect the data. The data that I present in this study was gathered by attending the events that The Good Fellas attended as well as by conducting individual interviews with them. I analysed my findings through the use of Discourse Historical Analysis (DHA) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA). The analysis of the data reveals that The Good Fellas are indeed burning to be men both literally and figuratively. In the literal sense, the burning entailed the theatrical destruction of valuable items of clothing in order to get esteem from their peers, while the figurative burning speaks of their internal desire to attain and demonstrate masculine identity in line with perceived societal expectations of what it means to be a man. For the members of this crew, being a man is not a state of being but rather a state of doing. The Good Fellas subscribe to the belief that masculinity is earned through behaving in a certain manner, and conspicuous consumption is at the centre of this behaviour. However, conspicuous consumption is not an end in itself but rather a means to end. It serves as a vehicle to demonstrate their abilities as men to hustle, provide, and be responsible. Though ostentatious

destruction is part of the subculture, the findings suggest that it only occurs in the early stages of the group and disappears as the group evolves through age and its establishment as a popular crew. It is clear from the findings that consumption is evolutionary and plays a significant role in the communication of masculinities among The Good Fellas.

Keywords: poverty, marginality, social, subculture, youth, masculinity

The full thesis can be found at <http://hdl.handle.net/10210/454836>