

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Rationale

The term “Metrosexual” has both economic and social implications for the establishment of men’s identities. It was derived as a blend of “metropolitan” with both “heterosexual” and “homosexual”, leaving it gender ambiguous. The meaning of the term has changed as it was used in various contexts, some of which include and some of which exclude homosexuals. Mark Simpson, an English journalist, first coined the term “metrosexual” in the feature article “Here Come the Mirror Men: Why the Future is Metrosexual” published in *The Independent* on 15 November 1994. Simpson used the term to describe metropolitan single young men who were fashion-conscious and had purchasing power and urban lifestyles. He wrote, “The metrosexual man, the single young man with a high disposable income, living or working in the city (because that’s where all the best shops are), is perhaps the most promising consumer market of the decade” (Simpson, par 5).

Later, the term became widespread when he wrote his article “Meet the Metrosexual”, published on the *Salon* website in July 2003. In this article, he used David Beckham, an internationally well known English soccer star and Brad Pitt, a Hollywood actor, as examples of “metrosexuals”. The important characteristics were that they were straight and fashionable. He described a metrosexual as “well dressed, narcissistic, and obsessed with butts. But don’t call him gay.” However, the same article left the question of sexual preference somewhat unanswered as Simpson wrote that the definition of metrosexuals “might be officially gay, straight or bisexual, but this is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference” (par 7). Simpson also emphasized that straight men nowadays wanted to be more concerned with fashion and lifestyle. However, as these areas have historically been part of a stereotypical gay culture, they do not want to be

mistaken as gay. The original meaning of the term coined by Simpson aimed to define and describe a lifestyle shared by both male heterosexuals and male homosexuals. However, in some uses of the term, the meaning was narrowed down to refer to only straight men. For example, in *The Metrosexual Guide to Style: A Handbook for the Modern Man* by Michel Flocker, the author described how to be metrosexual through tips including wine and cocktail selection, grooming, dressing etc. All examples were set in heterosexual contexts. This narrowed meaning has also been adopted in worldwide marketing.

Although the term “metrosexual” in Western mass media has been repeatedly constructed on the binary opposition of straight and gay men, the construction of the term has encouraged the visibility of gay men in popular discourses. An example of the stereotype of fashionable gay men that heterosexual men want to emulate can be seen in popular discourses such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, an American reality TV series which deconstructs heterosexual masculine norms. *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* stars a team of five gay men called the “Fab 5” who are experts in fashion, style, personal grooming, interior design and culture. The storyline of the series focuses on how the Fab 5 can makeover the fashion and lifestyle of a straight man to improve his appearance and environment, reflecting the sensibilities of metrosexuals. Furthermore, it can be noticed that the consumer culture does not only empower gay men to be visible in heterosexual-dominant discourse, but also bridges the gap between gay and straight men surrounding the term “fashion”. In “The Economics of Gay Reality Television: the Visualisation of Sexual Difference in Contemporary Consumer Culture”, Marjo Kolehmainen and Katariina Makinen affirm that gay men use consumption as a means to blend into society by being portrayed as experts in “various consumer choices” and “practices of self-management” such as grooming. Therefore, the portrayal of gay men in reality shows as consumer guides is more as a “privileged minority” than as “victims of discrimination” (238). However, the authors argue that gay men in makeover reality shows do not shop for themselves but for heterosexual males and females, allowing the straight people to maintain their gender identity despite consuming fashionable products and services.

In Thailand, the implication of the term “metrosexual” has varied in mass media, ranging from a gender ambiguity aimed at establishing a potentially lucrative niche

market to a synonym for closeted gay men in popular discourse. According to the *Matichon* e-library, the term “metrosexual” first appeared in the feature article “‘p^hû: ‘tɕ^ha:j ‘p^han ‘mâj ‘me: ‘t^hro: ‘sɛk ‘tɕ^hûn” (ผู้ชายพันธุ์ใหม่ เมโทรเซ็กซวล), which literally means “a new breed of men, metrosexual”, published in *Thansetthakij*, Thai Business Newspaper in April 2004. The article mentioned men’s cosmetics as a new market segmentation for a group of men called metrosexuals who were straight and not homosexual. Some business articles included gay men in the implication of the term but most news and feature articles used the term to refer to a niche market without distinguishing gender identities. However, some articles attempted to reassure readers that the word “metrosexual” was used only for straight men by defining the term with offensive words or slang in order to exclude gay men. For example, “‘mâj ‘tɕ^hâj ‘p^hû: ‘tɕ^ha:j ‘t^hi: ‘mi: ‘k^hwa:m ‘bì:aŋ ‘be:n ‘t^ha:ŋ ‘p^hê:t” (ไม่ใช่ผู้ชายที่มีความเบี่ยงเบนทางเพศ), which literally means he is not a man who is sexually deviated; “‘mâj ‘tɕ^hâj ‘tút ‘kat^hə:j” (ไม่ใช่ตุ๊ด กะเทย), which literally means he is not a faggot or a *kathoey* (lady boy) or “‘tɕ^ha:j ‘t^hé: ‘mâj ‘mi: ‘?ɛ:p ‘tɕɔt” (ชายแท้ไม่มีแอบจิด) which literally means he is a real man and not closeted. The term became widespread in 2006 when it was used in 24 feature articles and news. In 2013, it was less used and appears in only 3 feature articles and news reports. In the business sector, the term “metrosexual” has referred to both gay men and straights as a niche market and was sometimes used as a synonym for the gay men’s market. For example, Krung Thai Card PCL targeted the metrosexual market with hopes to be a pioneer in this market segment. According to the article “‘tɕw` ‘l’uuk ‘bàt ‘p^hû: ‘tɕ^ha:j ‘wǎ:n ‘k^he: ‘t^hi: ‘si:” (เจาะลึกบัตรผู้ชายหวาน “เคทีซี”), which literally means the insight of KTC card for sweet men, by Atthasit Meuanmat published in *Positioning Magazine*. Theerapoj Chokeanantang, an executive assistant in the credit card business sector clarified, that the target group of the KTC-*I am* credit card was based on lifestyle not sexual preference. The author of this article criticized Thai marketers for not daring to specify “gay market”, but using the term “metrosexual” instead. In contrast to this interview, a TV advertisement for KTC card-*I am* in 2007 became the talk of the town because the gender ambiguity of a male presenter left it unclear as to whether he was a straight or gay man.

In popular discourse, the term “metrosexual” was first successfully introduced in mass media through the album title of a Thai pop rock singer, Pankorn Boonyajinda known as Dang (stylishly written as Dunk). His look on the cover of his 2005 album “Metro-Sexual” and in his subsequent music video had changed from his previous masculine appearance to a more feminine style. On the album cover, he posed with long blonde hair and a stylish outfit, and he wore a corset in other photographs for the album promotion. He adopted a feminine look through his hair styles and clothes in his later albums and music videos. Moreover, the music video from his first single of this album portrayed broken-hearted stories from various couples, including a couple of young gay men. The media criticized him for his gender ambiguity as well as his music video. In 2006, the film “ก่ฉ่ 't๕a 'ni: 'kàp '?: '?:p”, (แก๊งชะนีกับอีแอบ), which literally means ‘a group of chicks and a closet faggot’ uses offensive queer slang terms for women and closeted gay men, or *Metrosexual* used as its English title was released in the mainstream. It featured a story about a group of women in their 30s, starring five well-known female hosts of popular daytime talk shows, who tried to find out whether a man who wanted to marry their best friend was gay or not. The storyline played with the stereotype of gay men; such as good grooming, being an only child or having divorced parents. Yongyoot Thongkontoon, the director of the film, mentioned in the feature article “Return to Gender” by Jason Gagliardi, “metrosexuality has become a handy notion for closeted gays to hide behind” (par 14).

With the different implications of the term “metrosexual” in the Western and Thai context, it is important to understand the notions of sex, gender, and sexuality in Western and Thai societies.

In Western societies, gender is divided into two categories as a “binary division”. According to *Gender and Sexuality*, Chris Beasley wrote, “Gender in the modern West usually refers to two distinct and separate categories of human beings (division into men and women) as well as to the division of social practices into two fields.” This leads to different social associations by which men are associated with public life and women are associated with domestic life even though they occupy both spaces (11). A binary division establishes a hierarchy in which “one is typically cast as

positive and the other negative” (11). Positive masculine and negative feminine categories can be found in language usage. For example, the word “bachelor” may have positive implications whereas the word “spinster” has more negative connotations (12). The relation of the two categories exists as the opposite of each other as stated in, “To be a man is to be not-woman and vice versa” (12). In *Feminism is Queer: The Intimate Connection between Queer and Feminist Theory*, Mimi Marinucci states that two categories can be described as “hegemonic binary” by which “one of these two presumed natural kinds includes people who are anatomically male and characteristically masculine with a dominant sexuality that is oriented toward others who are anatomically female and characteristically feminine with a submissive sexuality that is, in turn, oriented toward those who are anatomically male and characteristically masculine”. Another opposite categorization is explained as “people who are anatomically female and characteristically feminine with a submissive sexuality that is oriented toward others who are anatomically male and characteristically masculine with a dominant sexuality that is, in turn, oriented toward those who are anatomically female and characteristically feminine” (76). Those people who differ from the mentioned characteristics will be regarded as “people in question” with “something wrong” (77).

In Thai society, it is believed that there are two sexes, two genders and one normative sexuality. According to *Thai Sex Talk: the Language of Sex and Sexuality in Thailand*, Sulaiporn Chonwilai and Pimpawun Boonmongkon state that Thai society categorizes human sexes as male ('pʰê:t 'tɕʰa:j) and female ('pʰê:t 'jɨŋ) defined by the person's genitalia and divides genders into man ('pʰû: 'tɕʰa:j) and woman ('pʰû: 'jɨŋ) also determined by their sex organs, in terms of biological sex. This means “a person born with female sex organs is expected to have a feminine gender identity and feminine characteristics, e.g. dress in a feminine way, have feminine manners, have a natural maternal instinct, be soft and weak, have a lower sex drive than men, and be the receptive/passive party in sex” (16). On the other hand, the authors state that “a person born with male sex organs is expected to have a masculine gender identity and characteristics, e.g. dress in a masculine way, be a strong and a natural leader, have a higher sex drive than women, and be the active party in sex” (17). However, a person

who does not express a gender corresponding to their physical characteristics is “stigmatized as abnormal” (17). As for sexuality, Thai normative sexuality consist of “a heterosexual orientation, sexual desire toward the opposite sex, and heterosexual sex for the purpose of procreation” (17).

Apart from the ideological system of two normative genders and one normative sexuality, Peter A. Jackson, a well known Australian researcher on Thai homosexuality, claims that the Thai gender system is based on three genders which are male, female and the transgender *kathoey*, which can be traced back to *The Law of the Three Seals*, the Ayutthaya period legal treatise. In his book *Dear Uncle Go: Male Homosexuality in Thailand*, Jackson cites Morris’s statement that the term *kathoey* is popularly understood as “a male who makes himself up as a woman.” The existence of *kathoey* in society is the representation of a Thai un-man as Jackson notes that “A *kathoey* is not a man in dress, speech or demeanour, he is subordinate to another man in sex, and he rejects the sanctioned expectation that all men other than Buddhist monks should marry and become a father” (224). In this sense, the *kathoey* is used as “a symbol of failure to achieve masculine status” to define Thai masculinity with the phrase “I am not a *kathoey*, therefore I am a ‘man’” (225). Chonwilai states that the term *katheoy* was used some forty to fifty years ago in various meanings which refer to a person “with both male and female sexual organs, or with indefinite sexual organs (i.e., intersex); whose behavior did not match their sexual organs, or rather a person whose behavior did not match the behavior society expected of a person with those type of sexual organs, (i.e. transgendered); who liked cross-dressing (i.e. a transvestite or cross-dresser); or who did not express himself or herself in cross-gender ways, but preferred a partner of the same sex (i.e. a homosexual person)” (111). With a variety of meanings, the meaning of *gay* and *kathoey* cannot be distinguished by many Thai people (111).

In the 1960s, the term “*gay*” was first used after Thai homosexuality had been related to the term *kathoey* for decades. Obviously, the term “*gay*” was borrowed from English to identify masculine identified homosexuals whose sexuality cannot be described using the Thai terms “*kathoey*” with its connotation of femininity. As for the usage of both terms among homosexuals themselves and in recent public discourse, the

term “gay” has been used for a masculine identified gay man whereas “*kathoey*” has been used for a man who would like to be a woman, who dresses and behaves like a woman. In addition, Jackson comments that the term “*gay*” has negative connotations in Thai public discourse as it is connected to crimes and male prostitution (235). As a result, Thai gay men avoid labeling themselves as “*gay*”. The position of Thai masculine-identified homosexual men can be described by Jackson’s statement that they “often undergo a process of “negotiation” due to uncertainty about whether they should be accepted because of their gender-normative status as “men”, or criticized or pitied because of their participation in sexual activities that have traditionally been seen as demasculinising” (187). In homoerotic relation, there are two options for male homosexuals, either “sacrificing masculinity and becoming a *kathoey*; or marginalizing erotic relations with males and preserving masculinity” (223). Conflict avoidance and face saving are prominent Thai values which make the Thai gay identity and lifestyles constructed to “minimize confrontations with family, friends, neighbors and work colleagues” (263). As for the stigmatization of femininity, Jackson cites Eric Allyn’s suggestion that “the emergence of masculine-identified gayness in Thailand parallels an increasing stigmatization of *kathoey*”, in which homosexual males who exist in “the traditional feminine model” are disregarded as the “old face of homosexuality in Thailand” (269). Further to this point, Jackson notes that “The Thai gay man defines himself positively with respect to the ‘man’, identifying with all the ‘man’s’ masculine attributes except his heterosexuality” whereas “he defines himself negatively with respect to the *kathoey*, rejecting all of the *kathoey*’s feminine attributes except his exclusive homosexuality” (274).

The implications of “metrosexual”, which are linguistically and visually constructed in the mass media, can reflect differences of social values and notions of sex, gender and sexuality in Western and Thai societies. The term should be studied in specific contexts to discover the economic and social factors influencing the semantic shift of the term rather than taking it for granted as only a borrowed term or imported culture.

1.2 Purposes of the Study

This study aims to find out how the implications of the term “metrosexual” have been visually and verbally constructed in the Thai mass media and what has caused the semantic and semiotic shift of the term. It is expected to understand how the construction of the term is related to homosexual identity and social status, and how definitions of “masculinity” and “femininity” in Thai culture lead to different implications in the Thai mass media when compared to the West.

1.3 Main Research Question

How has the meaning of the term “metrosexual” been visually and linguistically constructed in the Thai mass media and how does this relate to homosexual identity and Thai culture?

1.4 Sub Research Question

- 1.4.1 What is the relationship between “masculinity” and “femininity,” as defined in Thai culture, and how does this relate to the concept of “metrosexual”?
- 1.4.2 What is influencing the semantic and semiotic shift of the term “metrosexual”?
- 1.4.3 What are the differences between Western and Thai definitions of the term and what does this reveal about Thai culture?
- 1.4.4 How does the term “metrosexual” as used in media discourse reflect the social status of Thai gay men?

1.5 Education/Application Advantages

The results of this study are expected to shed light on how meaning making, through the relation of verbal and visual texts in mass media, reflects attitudes of people, social expectation and values towards sex, gender and sexuality in Thai and Western societies. In addition, this study aims to demonstrate how the semantic and semiotic shift of the term can be used to describe unequal power as hegemonic discourse in societies.