

Packaged, Labelled and Ready To Go

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What is it that we come to be defined by? How is it that we are labelled for classification? For the gay community, classification has historically been intrinsically linked to our existence in society; gay men and women have often been grouped, not only by their sexual preference but by their appearance, their politics and their attitudes. Are these labels useful? For some, yes, it is fair to acknowledge that generalised classifications can prove important to self definition. However, should there come a time when to be dominated by these labels is unnecessary and will we as gay men and women enjoy greater equality by evolving these labels?

All minority groups are easily classified, prejudiced because of these classifications and thus bound by social labels that can be hard to escape. However, as my muse I shall look specifically at how labels attached to gay men and women can be potentially damaging. I shall not, however, travel the path of the abolition of gay related labels, I do however believe that for the gay community it is necessary to revolutionise how we define ourselves and certain labels are important in this definition.

The first port of call really should be how we as gay men and women utilise these labels. In the case of feminism, why is to be female seen as demeaning? Childbirth does not weaken the female sex, surely it strengthens it and differentiates between masculine gender roles? I do not discredit the importance of feminism and as much as I am an advocate of equality for all, believe that in the same way gay has become a potentially crippling label, so too has feminism, which through caricature has been given a negative image.

Perhaps though it is the gay man who cripples himself in touting his gayness? In identifying with the gay label we all pledge, in a way, our allegiance to a set of codes given to us by wider society. However, being labelled gay is no different than being labelled straight; it is simply in how that label is used that the difference lies. For example, a gay man may feel he has been overlooked for a job due to his sexuality, where the employer has favoured a straight candidate instead. However, personal prejudice aside and the fact that sexuality based discrimination is illegal in the UK, is this the case? Perhaps his straight competition was better for the job on individual merit and previous experience?

What I hope to illustrate here is that the gay label really does not define us in any way other than our sexual preference. Society may have in the past convinced us that by being gay we were less qualified for certain job roles, however, great work has been done to abolish this prejudice. The greatest revolution in attitudes must therefore come from the gay community itself. We should recognise that our sexuality has little bearing on anything other than our choice of partner.

It would be naïve of me to ignore that prejudice exists and that discrimination is still a problem in the workplace. Yet if we do not adapt the gay label then these prejudices can only be strengthened. Greater impetus should be placed on individual merit in all walks of life if we are going to break the shackles that bind us as gay men and women.

There is great debate currently amongst the LGBT community on the introduction of a new "Queer" label. I shall place my own neck on the line to suggest that this is an obscenely bad idea, purely because of the negativity surrounding such a label. Far more abusive to me than being called "Gay" would be to be called "Queer" and for this reason I would always reject the association. Furthermore, this latest label does little to the progress of greater equality; it adds nothing to the existing definitions and in my opinion shall only confuse wider society. Yes, lately there has been great debate on how "Gay" has become widely used to mean bad, or rubbish, yet "Queer" does little to solve this problem.

The debate around the "Queer" label, interestingly is one coming from within the LGBT community, many universities are using it more and more and therefore the blame for any misuse of its meaning can be placed nowhere but on our own shoulders. I am not suggesting that a new label should be discarded, nor am I suggesting that we need to overhaul how we define and classify ourselves. However, what I do suggest is that we cease using our sexuality as an easy excuse for any difficulty faced.

Perhaps my opinion is one of privilege? I beg to differ, I have been discriminated against I am sure, yet never for my sexuality. This is not because I have been lucky, it is because my sexuality is only one part that makes me whole. Yes, across the world there are gay men and women still needing social liberation, it is still illegal to be gay in Middle Eastern

countries; yet, these are countries for which time will hopefully assist in their evolution towards a more liberalised society. If I am privileged, it is the same privilege I share with each of you as a member of a Western society, a privilege paid for by generations before us, a privilege for which I am eternally grateful.

Let us think to the future and to repaying this debt owed to our liberators. Let us redefine how important the gay label is, let us use it as a positive label bearing significance to part of our individuality. Be proud of being labelled as gay but see it as part of your character, let it not dominate nor subtract from all that you have to offer. It is with this outlook that perhaps we can move forwards and achieve the greatest equality one of the equality of the individual.