

Intergenerational Relationships: A Case Study of Stephen Fry and Elliott Spencer

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The conference was such an excellent learning experience for me as it gave me confidence in my work and assured me that my ideas and thoughts are valuable and important. From the moment I started researching for my conference paper I was tremendously interested in the topic, but very nervous of how the actual conference would end up. I have never been overly confident in my knowledge or my presentation skills. This conference allowed me to share my knowledge and interests with my peers and people I admire, with confidence. I was dreading the time allocated to questions, but it allowed me to share what I had found in my research and further develop my thoughts and argument, whilst being able to realise how much I actually knew on the topic. The conference was such a nice way to end the module, as a class we were so supportive of each other and the space of the conference made me realise how comforting an intellectual space could be. Overall, with the help of the conference for GI422, I have developed so many useful skills but most importantly I have learnt to be confident in my work.

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Actor and presenter Stephen Fry and comedian Elliott Spencer announced their engagement on 6 January 2015 amidst a flood of media interest. As I followed the coverage, I was struck by the media's constant reiteration of the couple's age difference. Rather than celebrating their engagement and later marriage, I was appalled to see how the British media demonised the couple due to their 30-year age gap. The mainstream British media focused on the way in which homosexuality, but more specifically intergenerational same-sex couples, are devalued compared to heterosexual couples. Despite the amount of coverage and the apparent praising of the couple, the underlying tones of much media attention reinforced the concept that adult, intergenerational relationships are 'unnatural' and 'wrong.' Throughout this paper I will use the term generational to refer to not just age but to social experiences which mark one group from another, for example, the AIDS epidemic or the Beatles era (Plummer, 2010). This article looks at the ways in which intergenerational relationships between gay men are represented through discourses on economics, age and homonormativity. I used a variety of media outlets, from the 'neutral' news outlets, to left and right wing associated media of the mainstream or 'heterosexual' news. All of which demonise and marginalise intergenerational relationships amongst gay men.

The case study of Stephen Fry and his recent marriage to Elliott Spencer on 17 January 2015 highlights the ways in which intergenerational relationships are portrayed as 'unnatural' through the mainstream media. Rubin (1993: 11-12) argues, that "the lowest of all on the hierarchical system of sexual value are those whose eroticism transgresses generational boundaries." In the coverage of Stephen Fry and Elliott Spencer's relationship the mainstream British media continuously used an economic framework to represent their

relationship. Intergenerational relationships are depicted as the older partner being financially well off and the younger partner desiring or needing financial assistance. This highlights the presumption that the older male has to 'keep' his young partner through material objects because the younger partner is sexually desirable and physically attractive. This can be seen through the case study of Stephen Fry and Elliott Spencer where the *Mirror* had the following headline: "Stephen Fry's fiancé Elliott Spencer living the high life as he tweets customised champagne gift: 'Mr. & Mr.'" (Pocklington, 2015). The language in this title emphasises the economic aspect of the couple's relationship. The concept of 'high life' implies extravagance and a life that would not be possible without Fry's financial prosperity. Fry is represented as spoiling his attractive fiancé in order to keep him invested and interested in their relationship. The article refers to Spencer as a 'toyboy', which again has negative connotations of a younger partner using his sex appeal for economic benefits from his older partner. In *Hello!* magazine (2015), the title was "Stephen Fry and Elliott Spencer kick off three month honeymoon", describing their "exotic" honeymoon in "Cuba and three or four other countries." The media portrays an imbalance of power, placing the power in the hands of the younger partner as he is portrayed as exploiting the older partner economically.

Aging is often seen as negative in Western society (Hajek and Giles, 2006), portrayed as a loss of power and weakening of the individual. Old age is seen as a disease with symptoms such as sagging, wrinkling, and greying "which are symbols of lack of control" (Jones and Pugh, 2005: 254). Due to Fry's age, he is depicted in this light, as hopeless, fearful of isolation and in need of 'saving,' portraying him as 'weak.' Fry has suffered from depression and bipolar disorder and attempted to commit suicide twice, according the *Guardian*, and Spencer has given him a new sense of life, bringing a 'smile' back to Fry (Halliday, 2015). This portrays Fry as emasculated and having little to no power in his older

age, requiring help from a youthful consort to return to life. This can be understood through the intergenerational relationship lens according to which older gay men are only permitted to be sexual beings without shame if a younger male initiates the sexual interest. Otherwise, the older man is seen as a sexual predator, who is unwelcome. The older partner is depicted as yearning for love whilst the younger is portrayed as exploiting wealth, being somewhat innocent yet reckless. Elliott Spencer is represented as uncontrollable and young through the article in the *Independent* with the headline, “Elliott Spencer crashes Stephen Fry’s Bentley fleeing reporters outside the actor’s home” (Selby, 2015). This reiterates the idea that because Spencer is young, he is irresponsible and needs to be controlled. Again this is represented in the *Telegraph* (2015) article with the headline, “Stephen Fry’s fiancé Elliott Spencer banned from driving for speeding at 101 mph.” This suggests that Spencer is young and out of control and reiterates social discourses on age and sexuality.

Another dimension informing the media discourse around Spencer and Fry’s relationship is how relationships between a young individual and an older individual are portrayed through the frame of incest. There is therefore a fear of cross-generational relationships due to Westernised societies seeing incest as a taboo. Due to the incest taboo intergenerational relationships cannot be seen as containing love. This representation of intergenerational relationships as incestuous can be seen in a *Mail Online* article about the couple in the following sentence: “Mr. Spencer’s father Robert, who at 57 is the same age as his new son-in-law...” (Ojomu, Smith, and Robinson, 2015). This link between Fry’s age and his father-in-law’s age alludes to the fact that Fry could be Spencer’s father and that this crosses the boundary of acceptable sexualities. In Western societies there is disapproval for desiring a ‘daddy,’ seen through the prism of the incest taboo, which leads to media demonising intergenerational relationships.

Through the discourses on homosexuality gay men are depicted as physically fit and sexually attractive. Therefore, if this is the ideal of a gay male, where does he fit in when he becomes older and begins to age (Hajek and Giles, 2006)? This links us back to the idea of older gay men as weak, sexually undesirable and connects the concepts of age and homosexuality together. As Hajek and Giles (2006: 706) state, “if the prevailing mindset in gay male culture equates being a gay man with being physically attractive, old gay men are considered ‘bad gays’”. Society represents this by questioning why an attractive young man would want to be with an old man who has these negative attributes and is seen as a ‘bad gay.’ This links us back to the assumption that economic prosperity is the driving force for these young men to date/marry and be with older men. Judith Stacey (2005) argues that gay men more frequently than others engage in erotic and emotional encounters across social boundaries of age. This reiterates society’s concerns over homosexuality as it deems that gay men not only engage in same sex encounters but cross age boundaries more than other individuals. This links us to the idea that only some gay men are seen as ‘acceptable’ and fit into Rubin’s (1993) hierarchical system of sexual value. Rubin states that gay men (and lesbians) have to be monogamous and in a long-term stable relationship to be considered near respectable. However, I would argue that there is more to it than that: the individuals have to be considered ‘normal’ in their environment and in the case of gay men, the norm is, attractive, young and white, and therefore there is a removal of the older gay male and ethnic minorities. Therefore, there is already a hierarchy within the gay community amongst ‘acceptable’ and ‘non-acceptable’ gay men. This applies to cross-generational relationships as both partners are not young and therefore they are already stigmatised as they do not fit this norm. Gay men are depicted in the media as almost respectable, but not as acceptable as

heterosexuality, and this hierarchy is also reproduced within the gay community itself where some gay men are deemed 'better gays' due to their status, race, and age.

Fry and Spencer have been represented in the media as adopting traditional heterosexual norms, including marriage and the desire to have children. This plays into the concept of homonormativity whereby LGBT individuals gain acceptance by mimicking the heterosexual ideal. On 17 January 2015 the *Guardian* announced that Fry and Spencer had taken their vows. Marriage can be understood as a heterosexual institution, which in the UK has been extended to same-sex relationships (Khomami, 2015). However, this can be seen as same-sex couples imitating the heterosexual ideal. Eleven days after the ceremony there was an announcement in the British media that Fry and Spencer are planning on having children, "“I want the patter of tiny feet”: Stephen Fry reveals that he would like to start a family with Elliott Spencer” was the headline of the *Mail Online* (Ojomu, Smith, and Robinson, 2015). Again this is reinforcing this idea of homonormativity: for a same-sex couple to be seen as acceptable they must embrace and participate in heterosexual institutions.

Moreover, participation in consumer culture has been identified as one way that LGBT individuals gain acceptance as valuable citizens with discourses about sexuality in Western contexts. Linking to this idea is constant reference and portrayal of Fry and Spencer engaging in consumer culture, with frequent mention of the holidays they are going on. In the *Mirror*, it stated that the couple had been on trips to New York and Europe (Pocklington, 2015). Also there are consistent indications to luxurious cars, the Bentley which I mentioned earlier, and also when Spencer was caught driving at 101 mph it was in a loaned Aston Martin worth £130,000, according to the *Guardian*. The ways the media have portrayed the couple is not as 'deviant' and 'not the norm,' but as more 'normal'/'acceptable'/'not so

different' by displaying how they partake in heteronormative ideals and consumer culture. This is evident in the Fry and Spencer case. However; they can only achieve this positive representation to an extent because of their age difference.

Heteronormativity and norms of gender, age and economic relationships exempt compliant subjects from the pressure to justify their relationships, identities and sexualities; however, because society deems Fry and Spencer's relationship as deviant there is a need for them to defend it or for the media to employ strategising that emphasises their 'not-so-differentness' from heteronormative, age and class matched ideals. Therefore, Spencer and Fry do not see their age difference as the defining point of their relationship, which can be seen through Spencer speaking out about the disapproval of their 30-year age gap, stating, "I don't care what people think. Stephen is the love of my life, the light of my life" (Hope and Watts, 2015). However, the British mainstream media choose to constantly focus on the age difference as the defining aspect of the relationship. Despite the continuous focus on the couple in the mainstream British media, there is little praise for the couple on their engagement and subsequent marriage. Instead the media choose to fixate on their age gap and homonormative aspects of their relationship. On the one hand, the media focus on these characteristics to highlight that same-sex couples are 'respectable.' on the other hand though, as soon as there is a deviation from the imagined gay 'norm,' the couple is demonised. This can be seen in the Fry and Spencer case where they are represented as sexually deviant due to their intergenerational relationship and depicted as 'less than' 'normal' same-sex couples and heterosexual couples. Intergenerational relationships are believed to be more common within the gay community, therefore the 'heterosexual news' ensures to highlight the ways in which same-sex couples practice 'unnatural' sex and demonises intergenerational same-sex relationships.

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