

## TO BE OR NOT TO BE... EFFEMINATE

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**Abstract:** *Along history, masculinity has been something to be shown and proved. As Michael Kimmel (1996: 331) expresses <<every arena becomes a masculine testing ground>> and everything not being masculine was to be obscured and silence. The main groups labelled as non-masculine were (and still are) women and homosexuals. Thanks to the waves of the Women Movement demanding equality inside a sexist society, the first attempts by gay men trying to gain some voice into society appeared. Thus, homosexuality is not something to be hidden anymore and, the homophobic discourse created by men is counteracted by a new discourse: the camp discourse.*

**Keywords:** camp, discourse, effeminate, feminization, gay, homosexual, homophobia, masculinity.

**Resumen:** *Durante toda la historia, la masculinidad ha sido algo que necesitaba ser mostrado y probado. Como establece Michael Kimmel (1996: 331), (la traducción es mía) <<toda situación se convierte en un terreno en el que se pone a prueba la masculinidad>> y todo aquello que no era masculino tenía que ser ocultado y silenciado. Los principales grupos etiquetados como no masculinos fueron (y aún son) mujeres y homosexuales. Fue gracias a las primeras oleadas del Movimiento Feminista demandando igualdad en una sociedad sexista que aparecieron los primeros intentos por parte de hombres gays para ganar voz dentro de la sociedad. Así, la homosexualidad ya no es algo que deba ser escondido y, el discurso homofóbico creado por los hombre es contrarrestado por un nuevo discurso: el discurso 'camp'.*

**Palabras clave:** camp, discurso, afeminado, afeminamiento, gay, homosexual, homofobia, masculinidad.

### 1. Constructing a new discourse: constructing a new self

At the beginning the only option was the closet. Homosexuality was such a disgusting issue to be treated, such a condemnable sin, such an unmanly option that the best place for it was hidden in silence: the existence of homosexuality per se did not matter but its visibility. In order to avoid the homophobic consequences of being discovered as a homosexual, gay men and lesbians women began to develop certain codes that allowed them to recognize those who were like them. Among other things, specific kinds of words, rings, or even clothes at the back's pocket could be signals denoting homosexuality, and the way of speaking and acting were not something different. Gay people were conceived by society as men deprived of masculinity imitating the female character but as Kimmel states (1996: 99):

*Such flagrant flouting of traditional masculinity came less from some internal drive to express innate effeminacy; gay effeminacy was more a behavioral strategy to signal other homosexual men.*

What it is being looked for is the creation of a gay community based on a gay culture trying to create an image of homosexuality from the shelter of homosexuality itself; what it is being looked for is a homosexual identity.

There have been three models offered by the homosexual community as a response to the homophobic discourse, and two of them are still in force nowadays. The first (and old-fashioned) model, the 'decadentist' one, accepted the exclusion from society imposed as an act of rebellion; the 'homophilic' model fought the scientific discourse which condemned homosexuality as a mental illness trying to integrate the homosexual within society claiming the 'normality' of homosexuality. The last model, the 'camp' model, is related to acting effeminate

and, as Mira (2004: 26) establishes, can be defined in the following way (the translation and highlighting are mine):

The camp issue opposed itself to science, to the truth, to sincerity and reason, it relates itself with *irony, sense of humor, frivolity, excess, linguistic play, acting like in a theatre and a kind of hedonism*. In particular heterosexism is questioned as well as the ideologies that are associated with *gender roles*.

The camp discourse proposes that homosexual men to adopt a way of speaking and acting similar to that traditionally associated with women, and this is the point of depart of the following section: To be or not to be effeminate.

## 2. To be or not to be effeminate

One of the characteristics of the Spanish language is the use of different endings to mark the distinction between masculine and feminine words. The phenomenon that will be analyzed in this section of the paper is the use of feminine words to speak about masculine or entities, trying to relate it to the actual homosexual model: the camp model.

The first thing that should be pointed out is for whom the feminine ending is used? The results offered in Table II show that more than half of the people interviewed use the feminine to relate to gay men while they rarely use it to refer to heterosexual men. This gives the impression that this specific discourse is basically used by gay men to refer to other gay men, thus being something only dealing with the homosexual community.

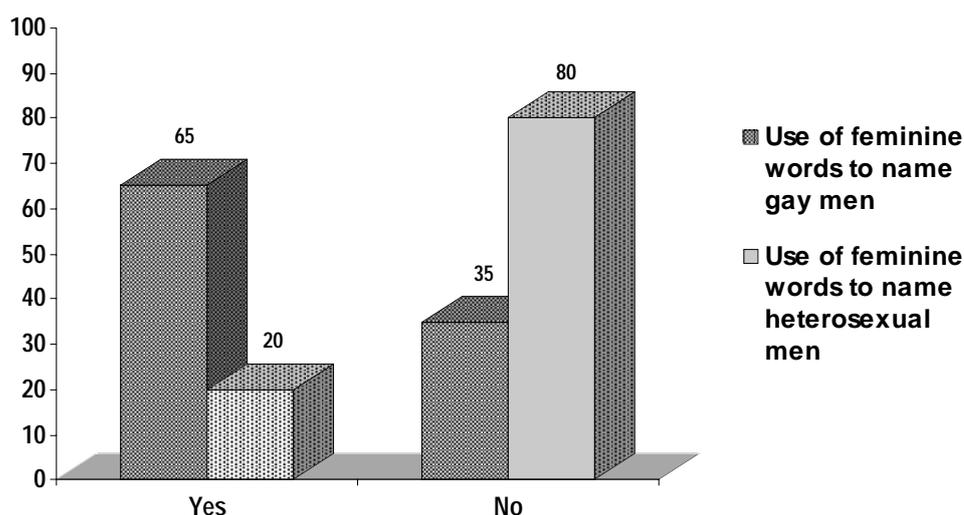


Table II: The use of feminine words to name gay and heterosexual men.

Another important point is the fact of where and with whom this discourse is used. Mira (2004:151) states that (the translation is mine):

Effemination is spoken about as something that 'slips by', that can result uncontrollable, that betrays the homosexual to the heterosexual glance and that, definitely, represents the 'queer' that each homosexual has inside. Again this is a homophobic statement.

This assertion is corroborated by Tables III and IV, which show how the use of feminine words, far from being an uncontrollable fact, is something quite well-defined and reserved to specific people and situations.

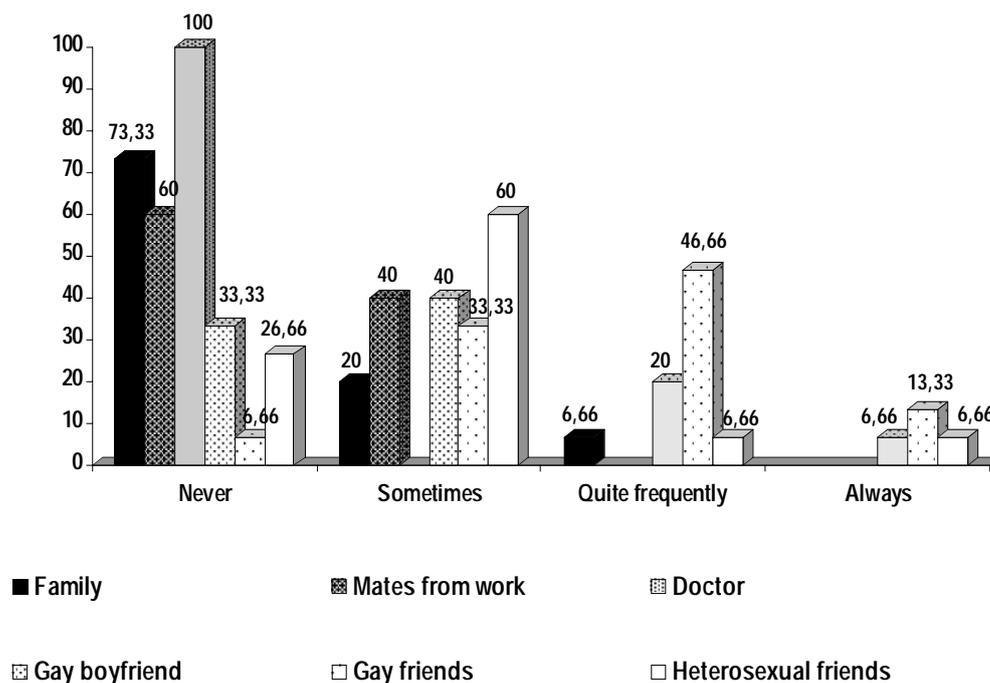


Table III: The people with whom feminine words are used.

Table III shows that feminine words are used mainly with people that are inside a friendly and confident field such as friends (never mind if they are homosexual or heterosexual), gay boyfriends, and so on. Consequently it can be regarded as a mean to strengthen bonds among friends.

In Table IV, it can be seen that the use of the feminine emerges in relaxed contexts such as a gay bar, a disco, sometimes a hairdresser, etc. It does not mean that it does not appear in other contexts; it could, but the statistics reveal that this would be fairly improbable.

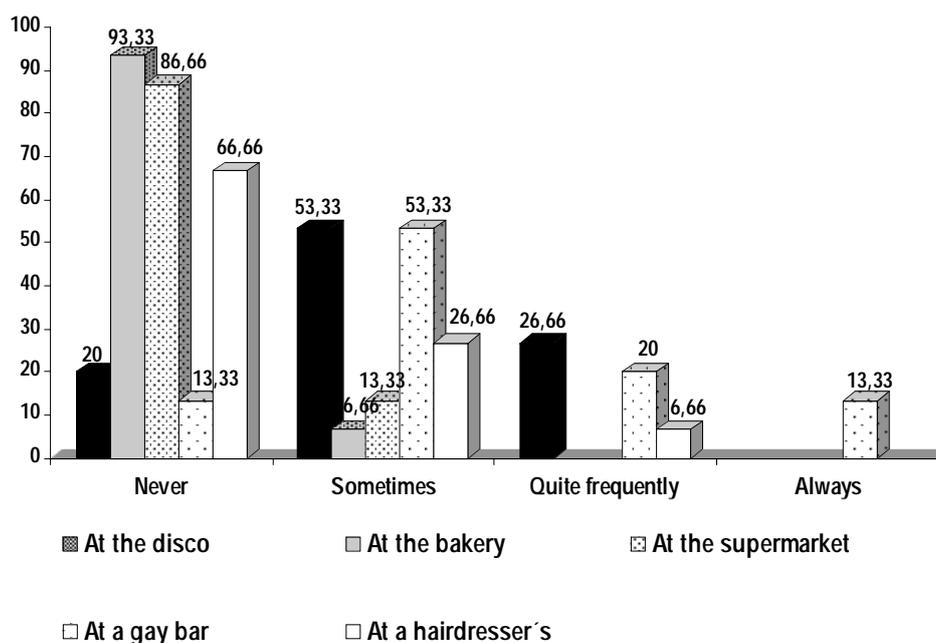


Table IV: The places where feminine words are used.

In 1999 Mendicutti spoke in the magazine 'Zero' about male characters appearing in Almodovar's films. Mira (2004: 536), quoting Mendicutti, stated the following about male characters (the translation is mine):

...homosexuals or not (...)that control the art of changing the grammatical genre to have some fun, to attack, to defend themselves, to provoke, or to lessen one's woes when speaking.

As a result it could be established that a) effemination is an art in the way that it can be perfected and used at will (as was stated before) and b) there are clear reasons for using it.

Table V shows how this discourse is rarely used when having an argument or insulting people (the former being more unusual than the latter) but it is more frequently used in order to joke or being ironical. These results can be paired off with the ones obtained in Tables III and IV showing that this discourse was used in a friendly setting; it is logical to think that in these kinds of settings the main actions taking place will be those dealing with fun and relaxation.

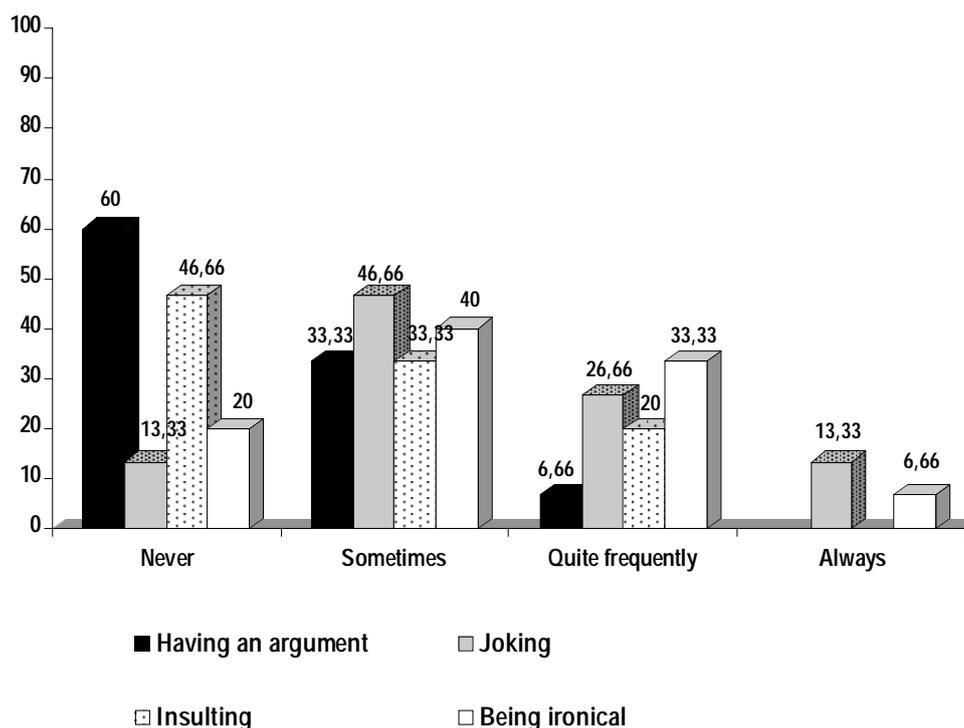


Table V: Uses of feminine words.

Also significant are the words used to refer to other men: among the most commonly used when addressing gay men are words such as 'reina' (queen), 'Mary', 'puta' (whore), 'divina' (divine), 'moderna' (modern), 'guapa' (beautiful), 'bonita' (pretty), etc. All of them (or at least the greatest part) can be identified as connoting positive things, which again can be related to the fact of joking. A different thing occurs in the use of feminine words referring to heterosexual men; here, these terms tend to acquire negative connotations. Thus words such as 'reprimida' (repressed), 'hetera' or 'heteromary', 'homófoba' (homophobic), 'puta' (whore), etc., reveal the non-acceptance of homosexuality. Consequently, it could be stated that possibly that minor percentage shown in Table V, dealing with the few times in which feminine words are used to insult, has to do with the use of these words to relate to heterosexual men as a kind of defensive strategy.

Regarding the fact that feminization is used at will, Table VI offers the data which reveals that almost 100 per cent of the persons interviewed were conscious of the use of feminine words. The important thing is the reaction that homosexual men have when encountering these words: less than one half admit not feeling offended either by using them nor by listening to other gay man saying them; about one-third accepted that they feel 'offended' at times and one-fourth confessed feeling really offended by this kind of language.

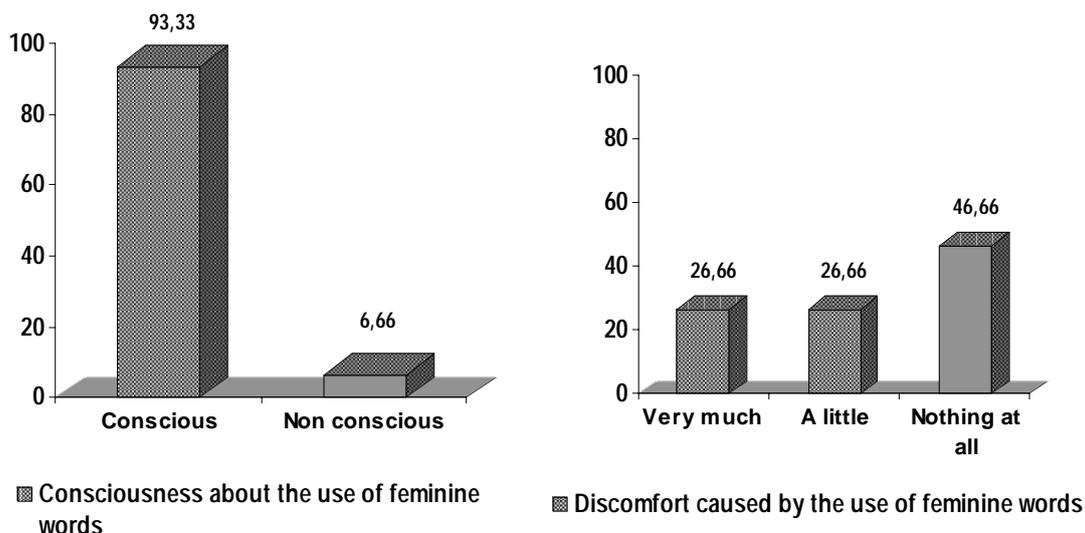


Table VI: The consciousness when using feminine words and the reactions provoked.

The cause for this rejection could be found on the grounds of the camp model: although it emerges as a counteracting discourse against the homophobic one. It is born out of the homophobic prejudice establishing that any gay man ‘must’ be effeminate. As Mira (2004: 392) poses it (the translation is mine):

Given that every single logic of expression of homosexuality is in fact a set of strategies against homophobia, it is unavoidable that the discourse of homophobia is the one that settles, in great part, those strategies (...) motives and negative conception of homosexuality can be appreciated in the gay model as well as in the camp model.

This rejection of feminization, not only at a discourse level but also at a behavioral one, is appreciated when speaking about the gay boyfriend, in contrast to what happens when speaking about any other gay man. Looking at the results obtained in Table VII, it can be stated that the majority of gay men refuse to use feminine words to refer to their gay boyfriends. Among the words used to address the gay boyfriend, the preferred ones are: 1<sup>st</sup>) the proper name, 2<sup>nd</sup>) ‘nene’ (boy), 3<sup>rd</sup>) ‘cari’ (dear), and 4<sup>th</sup>) ‘amor’ (love), the latter being used only in clear intimate situations. Even when having an argument with the boyfriend, the great part of the people interviewed confessed that they never use feminine words either to name the gay boyfriend nor to name themselves, the only exception being the use of these words when referring to other people whom they are going to insult. This rejection of feminization is thus because, as Mira (2004: 383) points out (the translation is mine):

Homosexuality loves another man because it loves masculinity. Thus there is nothing inside the homosexual that compulsory leads him towards effeminacy, sometimes adopted under pressure as a defensive mechanism.

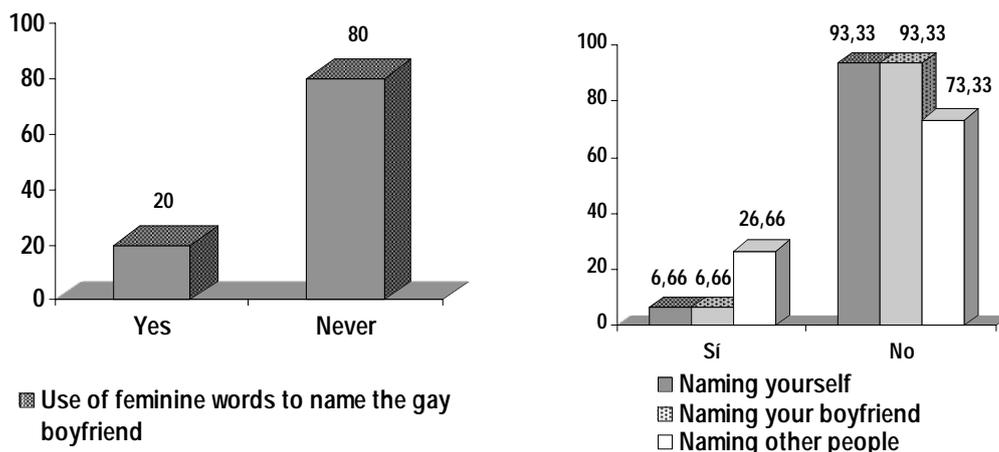


Table VII: The use of feminine words to refer to the gay boyfriend and the use of them when arguing with him.

All this can explain why more than half of the people interviewed do not feel this way of speaking (that is, the use of feminine words to name masculine entities) to be a trait inside the gay community, as can be seen in Table VIII.

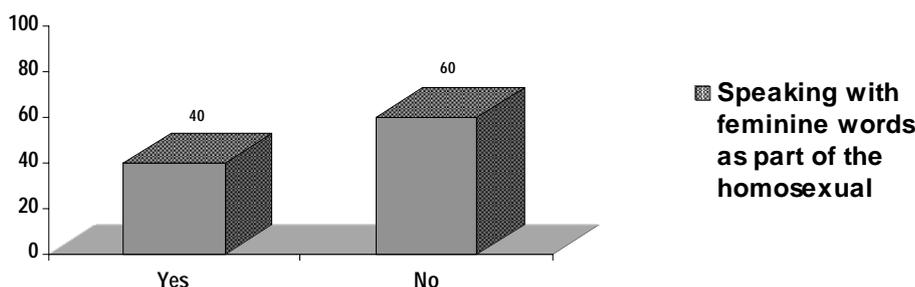


Table VIII: About considering the use of feminine words as part of the gay identity.

### 3. Conclusion

As has been explained, this discourse has specific participants, specific contexts, and specific functions; the most important of them being visibility: inside a heterosexist world if somebody does not show any trait of being homosexual, s/he are immediately assumed to be heterosexual. Thus, the use of feminine words to refer to masculine entities is seen as a way of counteracting homophobic discourse, but it is just that, 'a way' of doing it, 'a way' that can be chosen or not, thus creating the feeling that this trait is part of the gay community (as it is useful to strengthen bonds between its members, creating a kind of complicity). It is not, however, an inherent trait of the gay identity.

### 4. Appendix

#### Questionnaire about the use of feminine words to design masculine entities

1- ¿Usas palabras femeninas para designar a hombres heterosexuales?

Sí No

2- ¿Usas palabras femeninas para designar a hombres gays?

Sí No



