

**When the Politics of Desire Meets the Economics of Skin:
The History and Phenomenon of a Filipino Gay Magazine**

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“Somebody once said that all we can ever love in this life is skin.”
— J. Neil C. Garcia

The Birth of *Valentino*

Before *Valentino* became visible in the market, the only magazine that somehow attracted gay readers was *Chika-Chika*, a showbiz-oriented magazine with a gay slant. Hence this became popular among Filipino gay men, specifically what we call the “parlor gays” or gays who work in beauty parlors, act very effeminately and sometimes even cross-dress.

Valentino was the brainchild of business tycoon Ignacio B. Gimenez or more popularly known as IBG in the business sector because of his brokerage firm, IBG Securities. IBG is not gay nor is he a gay advocate. He is just simply an entrepreneur. His first publishing venture was *Buy and Sell*, the free ads paper, which took five years to break-even (Catedral 2002). Even though it did not give him good immediate returns, he took pride in being the first one in Asia to produce such a publication and enjoyed the glory of being recognized as the innovative entrepreneur.

With the success of *Buy and Sell*, IBG threw parties from time to time exclusively for the press and media people to strengthen his public relations. It was in one of those parties—the Christmas Party of 1998—when he met showbiz reporter Jobert Sucaldito who was involved then with *Chika-Chika*. Both the writer and the entrepreneur enjoyed a nice conversation, particularly because Sucaldito was able to share with IBG the business success of *Chika-Chika*.

With the peso sign flashing in IBG’s eyes, he called for a management committee meeting quickly. Seeing the market demand and the absence of a product to an existing and available market, IBG thought that an unpretentious gay magazine would be a hit. He then

established Valentino Publishing and assigned his AVP Raymond J. Catedral (RJC) to take charge. Immediately after that, the editorial team was gathered and organized. The only thing missing was the name of the magazine. Many names were suggested such as *Papa*, *Hombre*, etc. but the name *Valentino* won the management's vote for three reasons: (1) It has a recall; (2) It alludes to the House of Valentino of Paris with stores worldwide and a local Valentino shoe line in the Philippines; and (3) It alludes to the ultimate legendary movie actor and "Latin Lover," Rudolph Valentino (Catedral 2002).

The team wanted to start 1999 with a bang so they released their "virgin" issue on 14 January 1999 with then aspiring actor Harold Pineda wearing very skimpy trunks on the cover. This marked the birth of the premier gay magazine in the Philippines. The magazine's manifesto or its mission-vision could be found in its first editorial: "We make no excuses. We hide behind no pretensions.

"*Valentino* is a gay magazine. It will contain pictures of men in suggestive poses. Some might call it pornography. It will contain letters from our gay readers depicting their gay lifestyle. Some people might call it pornography. It might contain stories about the homosexual lifestyle. Some might call it pornography.

"We call it the Freedom of Expression.

"[...] *Valentino* supports the gay right by offering the alternative sex a publication that caters to their lifestyle" (3).

True enough, IBG's foresight came true. After the sold-out success of *Valentino*'s first issue, Valentino Publishing saw a very viable market for its product and continued to release its second issue on 27 January 1999. With both having strong corporate backgrounds, IBG and RJC knew that the business they ventured into could be called or somehow classified as 'deviant,' and they addressed this concern through its second issue's editorial: "The corporate world refuses to believe the gay market is a viable segment.

“[...] The corporate world feels that being identified with the gay market is a “KISS OF DEATH”.

“Let them know the facts:

“1. Mc Kinsey and Johnson estimated that at least 10% of the population is gay.

“2. Gays in general have higher disposable incomes than the average heterosexual.

“[...] They will never get respect until they can prove that they can hurt the pockets of the corporate world” (3).

IBG and RJC surely knew their strategic corporate actions. Given also a very wide and extensive experience in advertising, RJC definitely knew how to write his editorial or shall I say his advertorial: “Do not support companies that believe you are invisible. Do not buy their products. Do not patronize their establishments. Do not even think about them.

“Every issue of VALENTINO will carry a page that will list down the companies that are friends of the gay cause. Please support their products. Please write to us if you know of companies that support the gay cause [...]” (3).

However, the wife of then incumbent editor Spice saw the profitability of such venture suddenly decided to put up another gay magazine by the name of *Male View*. But the management soon found out about this, and this conflict of interest led to the dismissal of the whole editorial team. Of course, they all went to *Male View*. (Catedral 2002).

It took about a month before Valentino was able to release its third issue. RJC had yet to hire a new editorial team to run the publication. Incidentally, the firm Graphic Arts (popularly known as GASI), which produced different song hits (periodical publications of song lyrics) closed down, hence leaving people unemployed. Good networks brought some good people from GASI to *Valentino*. So on 4 March 1999, the magazine was back in business and the biweekly magazine’s third issue found itself in the market again.

The Making of an Issue

Valentino operated with the fact that there was no other gay magazine that existed before it. So technically, it played as the leader in Philippine gay publishing. *Valentino* set the trend and the style of how a gay magazine should look or should be.

Since *Valentino* claimed to be an unpretentious magazine for gays, it also described itself to be a “masturbatory” magazine with a tongue-in-cheek approach. Hence the male characters are very important to the success of each issue.

For many portions of a magazine, especially fashion magazines and the like, there is a concept first before it looks for a model to match the concept. On the other hand, the entertainment magazines periodically feature celebrities and personalities who are considered “hot” and/or in the news, which is true for Philippine entertainment or showbiz magazines. With *Chicka-Chika* as precursor and perhaps influence, *Valentino* featured those who are considered “hot” or “fresh” in terms of physicality and sexual appeal. While it had no advertisers to satisfy compared to the entertainment magazines, *Valentino* had to make sure that it would definitely please its market’s craving for male bodies. Hence the decision as to who would be on the cover was very crucial.

Supposedly, the editor takes charge of this matter, but not for *Valentino*, the approval came from RJC himself. He said that one should know the market very well. He was banking on his advertising experience with regard to deciding who would make it to the cover or not. If he thought that the model was just passable, the model would just go to the inside pages. The cover model should not just be passable, but saleable since whoever went to the cover automatically went to the centerfold.

What was *Valentino*’s cardinal rule? The model must appear young but must appear to be of legal age. It did not matter if he was actually younger or older so long as the physical look appeared to be so. Another factor was hairiness: the model should not be so hairy. This

was how *Valentino* defined the neatness or cleanliness of its models. This criterion was included in *Valentino* only after *Gigolo*, a sister publication, was conceptualized and released in the market months later. Since they had to make a distinction between the two magazines, all the hairy men go to *Gigolo*, which catered more to the C and D markets that the management thought or assumed would like the more explicit or “*balahura*” pictures.

Another big factor in choosing a model was the “P-factor” or the size of the penis. Although no one from the editorial team actually looked at the model’s penis or asked the models to strip down to prove it, the models just had to make sure that when they wore their trunks or thongs, the penis should appear big. Hence the models had to make his penis a little erect first before the camera would do its job. In worst cases, if bulge couldn’t be achieved but the model is so saleable, the publication and the model would have to resort to artificial means by putting a hanky or tissue paper inside the trunks just to make the crotch appear bulky. The golden rule was that the bigger the bulge, the bigger the sales.

The economics of skin was also a factor here. The more skin revealed in the picture, the better the returns. However, one rule was also very clear: very minimal pubic hair should be seen (if there would be any) and no frontal nudity. The reason behind this was that by keeping the mystery of the model’s “manhood/maleness,” the next time the model would be featured, people would still buy the magazine to check out as to how far the model had gone and to find out if he had gone “all the way” or totally nude.

In the book *Legends: The World’s Sexiest Men* (1993) edited by John Patrick, he reveals this kind of strategic pattern done by several directors and editors to keep the viewers and readers crave for more skin. He explains: “For a male sex symbol to become a legend in his own time, everything he shows us must always look mysteriously new, so full of exciting possibilities that he always encourages us to linger, investigate, and, finally have our way with him in our dreams.

“[...] Yet they always elude our attempts to grasp them and keep them in their place, as if to tell us, with a twinkle in their eyes, ‘Hey, you’re never gonna see everything!’” (11).

This kind of teasing proved to be effective. The mystery factor of the model made *Valentino*’s regular readers write to the editor requesting for the model to go nude. *Valentino* would then publish another photo of the model wearing a skimpier thong or cut his photos where the pubic line starts. This would further whet the curiosity of the readers and heighten the mystery factor, thus augmenting sales.

So after the selection of the model had been finalized, it was time to think of a concept to describe or to match the model’s supposed “character.” This was the distinguishing mark of the magazine. *Valentino* always made sure that it would have a title attached to or associated with the model. Of course, it had to be a very catchy one, controversial or intriguing, and must definitely have a strong recall. Titles or concepts like “Mr. B.I.G.,” “Teacher’s Pet,” “The Graduate,” “The Hustler,” “Boy Next Door,” etc. were sure winners. However, these concepts were really just masks or facades to say that they were different from other magazines that also had male bodies as their products. They always used this so-called “concept” as an excuse to let models wear the skimpiest underwear available. So whenever the model asked *Valentino* why they should only be wearing underwear, the answer would definitely be “because it’s part of the concept!” This reasoning hid or at least tried to hide the real agenda behind the required sexy pictorial, i.e., to sell skin.

While it was true that they had no advertisements to support the paper, and that they had no advertisers to please, all the articles, not to mention the editorials, were geared towards attracting potential advertisers. This could be clearly discerned in the second editorial (page three) of *Valentino*. This was also the reason why *Valentino* could not afford to be so explicit or daring because no matter how big the sales of *Valentino* was or how wide

its readership was, no advertiser would want to be connected to or associated with a sexually-oriented magazine that is more than just sexy.

Of course, this would not apply to advertisers who were really selling sex-related products like condoms or sex toys. Although these advertisers already placed some ads in the magazine, the profit they were making from this was not really that big. But these advertisers loved placing ads (even if they're just small) since the magazine had a very high pass-on readership. Its circulation was 10,000, but the pass-on effect was multiplied by eight (meaning one magazine could be read by eight persons). Hence the magazine had an estimated readership of 80,000.

Since these advertisers were somewhat small and somehow underground, they could not place big ads nor allot big advertising budgets. While *Valentino* would like to get the big companies to support the magazine, *Valentino* was already doing very well in terms of profit with or without advertising support. The revenue from the magazine's sales was enough to enable it to continuously run. However, an entrepreneur is always insatiable, s/he will always ask for more.

The Spin-offs

The income statements of Valentino Publishing never reflected any loss. After a few months of *Valentino* success, three sister magazines were being set to be launched. *Gigolo* released its first issue on 5 May 1999. *Gigolo* could be considered the direct competitor of *Chika-Chika*. It provided readers with pictures and gossips about gorgeous men both in the local and international entertainment industry. It is somehow similar to *Valentino*—same in specifications (11" x 13") and quality of papers used (glossy cover, newsprint inside pages)—but it featured actor wannabes who were not considered fit for *Valentino* (e.g., hairy men).

Gigolo was also priced at PhP30, same as *Valentino*, and it was received well by the market. It was as successful as *Valentino* since it followed a similar format and “formula.”

Another sister magazine, *Ohm*, was released in June 1999. It was bigger in size at 15x17, bigger than any other existing local magazine in the market, published bimonthly, and only used copy (white) paper from cover to cover. This was intended to provide readers with bigger and clearer pictures. With the hope of getting advertisers for the publication, the company banked on the fact that the editor of the magazine was a creative director of an advertising agency. It was priced at a higher PhP75. Due to its “unusual” size, advertisers balked at placing ads. Advertisers had to produce another set of transparencies specifically sized just for *Ohm*—and they already had existing sets ready for distribution to and printing in different publications, which were of regular size—which meant additional expense. The objective of getting advertisers, in the end, was not met, and the publication had to fold up after three or four issues.

The last spin-off was called *Cover Boy* and was released in July 1999. It was published monthly, used copy paper for the inside pages with a glossy cover, and had an 8 ½” x 11 ½” format, smallest among all the Valentino Publishing magazines. It was so sized for the readers to easily hide it upon purchase since this magazine dared to show more skin. It was at first priced at PhP50. After its successful entry to the market, its price was raised to PhP75. For special issues (like the Holiday issue), the magazine was priced at PhP100. However, after about ten issues, *Cover Boy* also had to fold up because it had become “too daring” to be published, leaving only *Valentino* and *Gigolo* to thrive in the market.

The Desire and Pleasure of the Forbidden

The success of the Filipino gay magazine *Valentino* was a result of the long repression, suppression and non-acknowledgment of the existing gay market. When a product

came out aimed at this market segment, it thrived very well. The desire of the market was finally served. This was also proof that there is an existing gay market and there is such a thing as gay economy.

Catedral, the publication's AVP, said that "the existence of *Valentino* is a celebration of individual freedom, not of homosexuality." True, the publication of *Valentino* was a form of freedom from the bondage created by forbidding same-sex desires. *Valentino* was very clear about serving its market. In its fourth editorial on 15 March 1999, it stated: "Valentino is published with the homosexual market in mind [...]. Valentino tries to capture the gay world in its pages. The gay world is descriptive, graphic, and open [...]. How do you censor happiness?" (3).

It was good that somebody was starting to serve the gay market. *Valentino*'s success paved the way for others to create magazines of the same persuasion. *Valentino* was proud and happy about this fact. This could be perceived in its fifth editorial on 16 August 1999: "The critics said products identified with the homosexual segment would never make it in conservative Philippines. That the market is not ready yet. That the closet doors are not yet open.

"We disagreed. We launched *Valentino* with 'eyes wide shut.' The market accepted Valentino [...]. Other magazines followed suit. The competitors came. The market grew larger.

"We are pleased. Valentino has created the trail that others soon followed. We expect more to follow suit. This is the price of success [...]" (3).

True to its word, *Valentino* stuck to its editorial. Since the "gay world is descriptive, graphic, and open," it gave the market all these steamy pictures. By saying that the magazine was "published with the homosexual market in mind" but intending to attract "onanists" (specifically the gays), *Valentino* in a way relegated the gay market to the notion that the

group comprised mainly of sex addicts or ones deprived of sexual activity. It also reinforced the stereotype of gay men being in constant sexual pursuit of other men.

Valentino was successful in experimenting, and challenging the market. It offered something new. However, the other magazines offered something more, something *Valentino* could not do—depicting nudes. The publishers called it art; others called it pornography. American novelist D.H. Lawrence once said, “What is pornography to one man is the laughter of genius to another.” The market did not care. The publishers were happy. They knew that the more that something is forbidden, the more people would long for it.

Based on this, the magazine’s competitors such as *Expose* could be considered pornographic because it published pictures that depict lewd exhibitions of the genitals, etc. However, the definitions of art and pornography are relative. These magazines always used art as justification for presenting or publishing nude pictures. It is an unending battle. This issue would always remain as an unresolved debate. This is why Lacaba (2002) said that people would just always end up with a paradox, “that the crap must be allowed to exist if the art is to be preserved.”

Controlling the Forbidden Desire and Skin Pleasure

After publishing 42 fun-pun issues, *Valentino* finally saw its demise in November 2001. In its almost three years of existence, *Valentino* had somehow set the standard not really for an alternative magazine, but for a new form of print entertainment for the gay market.

When other magazines followed suit, *Valentino* then had to catch up with its competitors. They took their magazines a step higher than *Valentino*, meaning they were more daring, showing the private body parts of men, which *Valentino* never did. This was good in a way since they did not want to shock the consumers nor the community with a

sudden change or reformatting because the market was already used to the tongue-in-cheek style, and the magazine was able to stick to their mission-vision that is not to produce pornography. Of course this word is relative in accordance to who defines it and how it is defined. Another thing is that *Valentino* could never take that higher step since IBG had other business interests to protect. He was a risk-taker but he still had limitations.

The world of gay publishing went silent for a while. Then in late 2004, some newcomers entered the market and were dubbed as the gay glossies, namely, *L* and *Icon*. These new players should really have no problems in terms of displaying their wares or selling them because their products are packaged with a sealed plastic. The buyer could not open it unless s/he buys the magazine. The only problem that a distributor might encounter in the display of its wares would depend on how strict or lenient is the city mayor in regulating these media products.

The Rise and Fall of Gay Publishing

What made *Valentino* flourish was that no other gay magazine existed before it. It was something new. I believe that the gay market was ready for the magazine when it was introduced. In fact, the market was just waiting for it. According to RJC, *Valentino* died a natural death since other magazines took the risk to go beyond the legal aspects of publishing and created a new underground market and economy. In other words, the competitors sold more skin. Also, RJC said that *Valentino* eventually died because of market saturation. There were already too many gay magazines that were mushrooming on street corners, offering the same thing. Innovation lost its glory. Skin reached its saturation point. The market died.

The *Valentino* phenomenon of Valentino Publishing, Inc. just shows that regardless of gender, everybody has the right to access to these kinds of media products (whether considered hardcore porn or not), and has the right to produce one. Although Dyer (1992)

used pornography in his discussion of gender hierarchy through these media products, his ideas are very much applicable to the so-called soft-porn *Valentino* and its hardcore competitors. He argued that all these alternative print entertainment materials would always point to the subordination of women, whether the product (magazine) is targeted to the gay, lesbian, male, or female segment. He said: “The knowledge that gay porn (re)produces must be put together with the fact that gay men (like straight men but unlike women) do have this mode of public sexual expression available to them, however debased it may be. Like male homosexuality itself, gay porn is always in this very ambiguous relationship to male power and privilege, neither fully within it nor fully outside it. But that ambiguity is a contradiction that can be exploited. In so far as porn is part of the experiential education of the body, it has contributed to and legitimized the masculine model of gay sexuality, a model that always implies the subordination of women” (128-9).

If this is the case, it is a damn-if-you-do-damn-if-you-don't situation. If these so-called alternative products continue to exist it would continue to stress women's subordination. If these magazines stop circulating, the repression and the desire of the forbidden will continue to flourish with the absence of the right to access and freedom to enjoy such products. Are the people then left to choose as to which is the lesser evil?

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