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**Gay Advertising as Negotiations:
Representations of Homosexual, Bisexual and Transgender People in Mainstream
Commercials**

By

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This study concerns the representations of LGBT people in mass media. This paper first identifies the common advertising strategies targeted to the gay consumers: the gay window and out-of-closet advertising. Television commercials made by mainstream advertisers aired on network television are reviewed. Representations of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender (LGBT) people designed via these strategies are then analyzed to further demonstrate the making and reading of gay advertising as complex negotiations.

In the last decade, a variety of representations in mass media of lesbians and gay men have appeared, generating fervent debates within the community over the effects of certain gay images on the gay rights movement and gay people's self-identity. Whereas some studies about gay images in films and news have been done (Dyer 1984; Alwood 1996; Pasuris 2002), the topic of gay images in television commercials remains relatively new, and merits more research. Moreover, this study proposes to contribute to current understanding of queer representations in advertising by exploring the under-researched images of bisexual and transgender people.

This paper first identifies the common advertising strategies targeting the gay consumers. Representations of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender (LGBT) people designed via these strategies are then analyzed to further illuminate the type of gayness endorsed by mainstream marketers and mass media. This study focuses on the mainstream TV commercials that have the most significant impact on not only the mainstream perception of gays but also gay people's self identity, especially for those who live outside gay ghettos where gay publications are not always available.

Gay advertisements are defined in this paper as the ads *targeting gay consumers* by carrying implicit or explicit gay references—from vaguely implying same-sex bonding, to explicitly showing self-identified gay characters—and by depicting erotic desire and affection for/between members of the same sex.

The sample of gay-referenced television commercials for the North America market reviewed in this study is obtained from the online gay advertising archive of the CommercialCloset.com website, which belongs to the Commercial Closet Association, a non-

profit educational and journalism organization that aims to “lessen social discrimination of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community by encouraging corporations and ad agencies to improve LGBT portrayals in mainstream advertising” (Wilke, commercialcloset.com). The website collects over 1,000 gay-themed television commercials and print ads from around the world, with over 700 print and broadcast ads from the North American market. More importantly for this project, the ads are collected on the basis of explicit or implicit gay references that are identified, rated, and commented on by the Commercial Closet association staff.

THE RISE OF GAY IDENTITY AND THE GAY NICHE MARKET

When commenting on “institutional negotiations,” Gledhill (1988) writes, “the economics and ideologies of the free market produce a contradictory situation which lays capitalist production open to the necessity of negotiation” (p. 87). Scholars have already explored the relationship between modern capitalism and gay identity in the US. D’emilio (1983) indicates that economic development in capitalist America contributes to the modern gay identity, which took its shape after the individual achieved economic independence from heterosexual families. In his book *Sexual Citizenship* (1993), Evans also suggests that capitalism in the United States has made the formation of a gay identity and a gay community possible.

According to Chasin (2000), a booming and influential niche market of gay and lesbian consumers emerged in the United States in the 1990s, when the gay and lesbian political movement achieved an unprecedented level of visibility. Gay advertising, which began with a few adventurous companies, such as Absolut Vodka in 1979, is now a certifiable trend sponsored by many mainstream advertisers, including the conservative Cadillac (Halliday 2004), which has produced ads with ambiguous or explicit sexual innuendo portraying gay characters.

Simultaneously, throughout the 1990s, there was an explosion of discourses about the gay market circulated in the mainstream media, the gay press, advertising trade publications, and scholarly journals (Chasin 2000). In 1995, *American Demographics* featured an article announcing that the gay niche market was "Out of the Closet." In this article, the image of gays as "dream consumers" is well illustrated.

The gay and lesbian market is an untapped gold mine. Because gays are highly educated and usually have no dependents, they have high levels of disposable income. And because these consumers are disenfranchised from mainstream society, they are open to overtures from marketers. ("Out of the Closet," *American Demographics*, May 1995, 40-46)

Along with the booming gay market, gay media and gay-targeted advertising agencies are also proliferating. The *Advocate* has been joined by other gay-specific magazines. A gay-oriented TV channel was proposed by the MTV networks in 2002. All of these national gay media owe their very existence to advertising dollars from mainstream marketers.

Advertising, as a powerful force and strategy of modern capitalism, reflects and enhances the negotiations within the free market and between various social groups. The advertising industry as a media institution witnesses the conflicts and negotiations between profit demand and potentially contradictory social values and gay politics. More importantly, advertising as a negotiated discourse opens up possibilities for social minorities such as lesbians and gay men to gain and exercise (economic) power in the marketplace and in mass media, as "cultural forms are sites in which different subjectivities struggle to impose or challenge, to confirm, negotiate or displace, definitions and identities" (Gledhill 1988, p. 72).

GAY WINDOW ADVERTISING

When writing about queer representations in films, Dyer (1993) suggests certain formulaic gay plots such as childlessness, a man's interests in arts or domestic crafts, and a woman's interests in mechanics or sports. Gayness is often referenced by the characters' "deviant" gender performance. "We recognize these men are gay because we see aspects of them as in some sense feminine...the majority of gay stereotypes signify gay sexuality through signs that has gender connotations" (p. 31). Similarly, most ads that feature easily identifiable gay characters *but are not targeting gays* often portray gender-related stereotypes, such as sissy gay men and drag queens. For example, male homosexuality is usually implied in ads through heightened effeminacy or interests in domestic activities. In a 2002 Bud Light commercial, two gay men are identified through their dramatic and effeminate hand gestures, high-pitched voices, giggling, and comments on a cute little puppy: "Oh my gosh! That is the cutest little puppy! Oh you should dress him up, put him in some cute little outfit." The two gay characters are shown in scarlet tight tank-tops and wearing necklaces, in contrast to the rugged looking straight male character who is in loose shirt and pants and has a low and masculine voice.

In contrast, "gay window advertising" (Bronski 1984), which is the earliest and the most common strategy targeting gays, is carefully designed to avoid explicit gay references as well as gay stereotypes. It features "average" and straight-looking characters who can be read as buddies or roommates by straight audiences and as gay couples by gays. This advertising strategy tries to appeal to lesbian and gay consumers without offending, or even alerting, homophobic audiences. Kahn (1994) outlined several tactics used in print advertising to elicit possible gay readings, including portraying a single person instead of a heterosexual couple, showing no people in the visuals, and using androgynous images. In addition, through the use of in-group language, gestures, and symbols of gay sub-culture, an ad is able to appear "innocuous" to heterosexual

audiences and induce a gay reading from gay audiences at the same time. For television commercials, subtle touching and physical proximity with ambiguous same-sex groupings are common strategies to induce gay viewers to generate gay readings. Non-stereotypical gender behaviors, such as men discussing oatmeal cereals in a kitchen, and ambiguous same-sex bonding which can be read as friendship by straight audiences or a romantic relationship by gays, offer multiple positions of identifications.

Gay window advertising operates on the assumption that the social and cultural constitution of viewers, such as class, age, gender, personal history, and for gay window advertising particularly, sexuality, affects the reading and pleasure of a text (Gledhill 1988), especially regarding the gay viewers who might have been practicing resistant or counter-reading. Yet, it is important to note that viewing and reading as a social practice varies between individuals and historical periods. Even gay window advertising, which is designed to increase the possibility of gay readings by gay audiences, does not necessarily guarantee a preferred reading. This is especially true given the fact that the gay community is far from homogenous, but is highly diverse in terms of race, gender, age, class, religion, political agenda, and even stage of coming out.

A good example of gay window advertising is a 1997 Volkswagen commercial which features two hip young men who salvage a discarded chair and place it in the back of their vehicle as they drive around aimlessly. The characters could be read as roommates, or partners, especially considering the fact that it was first aired during the much publicized coming-out episode of *Ellen*, an expensive spot that charged advertisers twice the normal rate. In another example of gay window advertising, a Quaker Toasted Oatmeal commercial, two guys are shown

having breakfast and discussing oatmeal cereals in the kitchen, which is not the conventional arrangement in traditional advertising. The nature of their relationship is never specified through their interactions but “there are nuances in how they interact with each other that is uncommon among straight guys,” indicated by the staff of the Commercial Closet Association (commercialcloset.com).

Similarly, lesbian window advertising involves ambiguous relationships between the female characters. In a 1996 Kmart commercial that features Rosie O'Donnell, who had not come out at that time, another woman expresses amazement at the low price of a bracelet. "Kmart-- who knew?" "I knew," replies Rosie. "You never said anything," said the other woman, in a childlike manner. "What else are you not telling me?" "Tons of stuff," answers Rosie. "Like what?" "That thing." "LAST YEAR?" The dialogue between her and the other actress remains confusing to the audiences, which further tantalizes the viewers and invites them to question the nature of their relationship. Another example is a Zyrtec allergy medicine commercial, in which two average-looking women sit very close to each other as they address the camera and appear to be intimately involved. Their relationship is unclear and “they don't look enough alike to be siblings or family” ([Wilke commercialcloset.com](http://commercialcloset.com)).

Clark (1993) suggests increasing lesbian window advertising in print media, especially in fashion magazines, which is designed to elicit lesbian reading using “the high-style butch” image (p. 190) and models’ subtle butch/femme role playing. However, the “the high-style butch” image does not exist in mainstream TV commercials. The only butch-lesbian character in the commercials reviewed is the out lesbian tennis player, Martina Navratilova, in a 2000 Sabaru commercial which also includes many other female athletes. Furthermore, bisexuality, which is

often signified through one's sexual interests in both sexes, and transgenderism, which involves "deviant" gender identity, are overtly gay-related and thus not represented in the category of gay window advertising.

Scholars have suggested that some advertising meanings are deliberately opaque to induce higher involvement in the message (Willimanson 1978; Ritson and Elliot 1999). Ritson and Elliot (1999) indicate that consumers gain pleasure from decoding or making sense out of ads. Lannon (1985) observed that consumers expect advertising to provide aesthetic, emotional or intellectual rewards. In the case of gay window advertising, gay audiences enjoy the pleasures of recognizing secret queer codes and ambiguous scenarios inviting their imaginations. In contrast to most heterosexual audiences who may be unaware of an alternative reading, gay audiences are aware of the possibility of multiple meanings in the text, in addition to their "preferred" gay reading. As Hall (1980) suggests that consumers' interpretation of the media text is an intrinsically social process and audiences are active producers of perceived meaning, gay consumers are invited to actively and creatively "individualize" the advertising text in order to identify with it (Hirschman and Thompson 1997). Gay consumers thus are offered a media text that they can personalize relatively easily to fit their life experiences, personal history, and specific beliefs about their own range of identity possibilities (Hirshman and Thompson 1997). Thus, gay window advertising seduces gay audiences with negotiated pleasures and consequently acknowledges a gay audience.

Consumer researchers also propose to explore the influences of consumers' backgrounds, identity, and life themes on their meaning-making of the advertising texts (McCracken 1989; Mick and Buhl 1992; Scott 1994), with the realization that consumers often process

advertisements for meaning rather than information (McCracken 1987). Nonetheless, research suggests that there are patterns in meaning creation that may be structured by group membership (Scott 1994; Stern 1993). The subcultural interpretive framework can be one key lens through which consumers interact with media texts. The shared interpretations of the ambiguous gay window advertising among gay consumers, different from most straight audiences' reading, can suggest an explicit recognition of the existence of interpretive communities (Fish 1980) centered around advertising texts (Ritson and Elliot 1999). Gay audiences may form interpretive communities because of their cultural competencies of discerning queer codes and the tendencies of generating queer reading from practicing resistant or counter-reading of the perceived heterosexual media texts.

However, when commenting on the unique campy subculture for gay men, Dyer (2002) argues that "campy sensitivity is very much a product of our oppression" (p. 59) as gay men's campy sensitivity is a result of their experiences of passing as straight, of disguising, and of appearing to fit in. Similarly, gay window advertising that only secretly and ambiguously acknowledges and entertains gay audiences may become a glass closet, or the "closet of connotation" (Doty 1993). Lesbians and gay men are seen but not recognized by the mainstream society.

When Clark first published the article in the early 1990s, gay window advertising represented virtually the only appeal to the gay market in mainstream venues. Today, with the increasing visibility of lesbians and gay men in entertainment and mass media, such as popular shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, explicit references and even affirmative representations of lesbians and gay men appear more frequently, especially in certain product

categories such as entertainment, fashion and alcohol that tend to have more edgy and unconventional advertising.

OUT-OF-CLOSET ADVERTISING

Several adventurous advertisers choose a rather daring strategy to target their gay consumers explicitly in the hope of winning their loyalty. This out-of-closet advertising offers a clear position of identification for gay viewers by presenting out gay characters, showing affectionate displays between same-sex couples, and supporting issues in gay rights movements, such as gay marriage and gay adoption rights.

The 1994 IKEA commercial was the first time an advertiser frankly dealt with a gay relationship in the US. This ad features a white, upper-middle class gay male couple shopping for a dining room table together. The ad shows the gay male characters, who have been together for three years, commenting on their relationship and commitment to each other and ends by showing them having dinner on the new table in a nicely decorated apartment. It is probably the most acclaimed gay-explicit commercial for its positive presentation of gay people. This ad was part of a “diversity” campaign that dealt with various non-traditional families, such as gay households and single-parent families. It is important to note that the “diversity” appeal is a common way for advertisers to include gays in the message or advertising campaign, and is sometimes a strategy to dilute the tension resulting from targeting gays.

Most out-of-closet advertisements appeal to individualism for a daring image. In a 1996 non-alcohol beverage “Mistic” commercial, produced by the same agency that made the famous IKEA ad, a cute young white woman declares to the camera “Mom, Dad, if you are watching, I

want you to know I've finally found the person I want to spend the rest of my life with. Mom, Dad, this is Jenn." Jenn obligingly steps forward into the frame and smiles. The tagline "Show Your Colors" then appears at the end of the commercial. This brand has a relatively younger consumer demographic, and its ads emphasize individualism and unusual allusions to the controversial issue of homosexuality. Another example is the 1998 Virgin Cola ad which is the first commercial in the US that shows two men kissing. In this Virgin Cola commercial which only aired in New York, LA and San Francisco, two middle-aged white men, dressed in tuxedos are being married by a female priest. Not surprisingly, at least one station in each of those progressive cities declined to run the commercial (Wilke, commercialcloset.com). This commercial was a part of the "Say Something" campaign for the American rollout of Virgin Cola, a brand that also appeals to individualism and a daring image.

In the commercials explicitly targeting gays, no gay stereotypes such as sissy gay men are presented. Gays are not shown in peculiar settings, wearing flamboyant clothes or talking in a certain theatrical manner; gayness is treated like a norm in the ad story. Yet these ads also have been criticized for their blandness and lack of gay sensitivity, which can be commonly problematic issues for many social minorities, especially for a group sensitive to being portrayed as the stigmatized "Other."

It is crucial to note which group of gay people from the community is privileged to be presented in these ads—white, upper-middle class *males*, similar to the findings from previous studies concerning gay representations in print ads. The consequence of identity-based marketing has a tendency to focus on the prosperous white man as the representative homosexual since the social dominance of whiteness and maleness leaves the gay part of their identity as the most salient. Although the ads explicitly targeting gays can subvert stereotypes by portraying gays like

“normal” people, (i.e. the heterosexual mainstream), those “positive” gay images have also been criticized for offering a counterproductive version of gay visibility that perpetuates the “dream consumer” stereotype.

For instance, the stereotype of the ideal gay consumer as “white and middle-class” may hinder many gay people of color from affirming their gay identity since they can not identify with the gay image promoted in advertising, implicated as it is with racism in the mainstream society as well as gay community. In writing about black gay men, Icard (1986) believes that many blacks view homosexuality as a white phenomenon largely irrelevant to the interests of the black community, and thus black gay men are not acknowledged in their ethnic groups. The prevalent images of white gay men in advertising may serve to further enhance this bias.

The depictions of lesbians also demonstrate a skewed definition of gayness in advertising. Lesbians in mainstream television commercials are not referenced through cultural signs in the lesbian subculture, such as dress codes in Clark’s (2000) “high-style butch,” or non-normative gender role performance, but largely through sexual tensions between feminine looking women. In a 1996 Clothestime commercial set in the ladies’ room at a club, a sexy blonde woman steps in as another sexy woman is fixing her makeup in front of the mirror. In the background, there are sounds of a growling tiger, as the newcomer checks out the other woman, then says, “I like your dress.” She says “thanks” but then the newcomer emphasizes again in a clearly flirtatious tone, “No, I mean I *really* like your dress.” Scholars have argued that the sexualized “lipstick lesbians” (Richart et al 1999) objectifies lesbians in the same manner as that of straight women. The flirtatious lesbian erotica in advertising might have little to do with lesbianism per se and instead “mirror those of women engaged in lesbian sex in mainstream heterosexual

pornography” (Richart et al 1999, p. 124) as a common narrative device for heterosexual titillation.

In contrast to the visibility of gay men in advertising, lesbians in TV commercials are clearly underrepresented. Lesbian-referenced ads account for only about one fifth of the gay window TV commercials, and one fourth of the out-of-closet commercials. Danae Clark (1993) explains that because lesbians as a social group have not been economically powerful nor easily identifiable and accessible, they have not been attractive to advertisers. As scholars have argued, the story of gay niche market and gay advertising is largely about white, middle-class gay men, and so is the story of gay publications in which advertisers reach their gay consumers (Sender 2002). For example, the national gay publications, like *Advocate*, mainly appeal to gay male readers, and so do its advertisers. Until the late 1990s, most of the lesbian press had virtually no access or appeal to mainstream advertisers (Chasin 2000). While the readers of gay men-oriented publications are disproportionately white and affluent gay men, the readers of lesbian press are overwhelmingly feminists who have a history of anti-capitalist attitudes (Stein 1989).

In stark contrast to images of gay men and lesbians, bisexuality is almost a non-issue in advertising. Among about eighty TV commercials I reviewed, there are only two commercials dealing with bisexuality. In a 2001 Amstel Light ad, a charming blonde woman is sitting in the middle of her male and female friends at a table having a good time. Suddenly, the woman looks surprised as the camera pans below the table showing the man and the woman sitting on each side caressing her knee. The woman then smiles to both of them as she feels truly flattered by both of her suitors. The narrator then announces, "At Amstel Light, we believe in having the best of both worlds...especially when it comes to beer." Although this ad can be appreciated for its

straightforward and non-judgmental approach to bisexuality, it may appeal to straight men's fantasy of lesbians and bisexual women, and the ultimate goal of a ménage-a-trois.

The representation of another marginalized minority, transgender people, is even more rare and problematic. The only type of transgender/transsexual people presented in commercials is the male-to-female transgender person who is shown in an extremely sexy and feminine manner in order to serve up a surprising twist: "She is a He!" Advertising has been obsessed with the story of "duping" straight men with "false" or "unreal" women. Most transgender people in advertising are implied to be dangerous and deceitful, always wanting to trap innocent straight men. This stereotype of male-to-female transgender people as deceptive vamp, can be best illustrated in the Samuel Adams beer commercial. The ad begins with a close shot of a strikingly sexy woman with a handsome guy in a bedroom. She turns out to be a transsexual as she confesses to the handsome guy, but only after she hands him the beer. The guy shows grossed-out expression and says "I gotta go." But after he drinks his beer and exclaims "Wow! That tastes great!" he turns back to the transsexual woman and asks "What was I saying?" forgetting everything he just heard. Then, the woman says with a sexy smile, "You are about to nibble on my lip." He smiles and then jumps back onto her in the bed. The tag line of "Mighty Tasty" then appears on the screen, implying that this powerful beer can make you have your way, even if it is to trap a guy with amnesia. However, it is important to note that this ad is positively rated by the Commercial Closet Association staff because of "the twist on the 'expected' negative ending comes off as positive and accepting," and "the ad is shot sympathetically from her perspective" (Wilke, commercialcloset.com). The rating further suggests LGBT audiences' aspiration of social tolerance.

GAY ADVERTISING AS AN ASSIMILATIONIST DISCOURSE

Although most of the out-of-closet ads have been positively rated by the Commercial Closet Association for avoiding gay stereotypes, they also tend to emphasize the gender-normative images of lesbians and gay men. Literature on lesbian culture has acclaimed the butch image as a significant part of the unique lesbian culture (Munt 1998). However, the butch-lesbian remains invisible in TV commercials made by mainstream marketers. The exclusion of images of butch-lesbians suggests the non-confrontational appeal in TV commercials since butch-lesbians are perceived to be more aggressive and dangerous for their reversal of the traditional gender roles and taking on the implied more powerful position threatening patriarchy (Dyer 1983).

In the same vein, female-to-male transgender people are completely invisible in advertising. In comparison to butch-lesbians and female-to-male transgender people, sissy gay men appear less threatening since they take on the feminine style, and thus the less powerful gender position. The invisibility of butch-lesbians and female-to-male transgender people hence signifies the assimilationist appeal in advertising that avoids confrontations with mainstream values. The current practice of gay advertising and its skewed representations of white, upper-middle class, and/or “straight-looking” gay men are at the expense of those who are more distant from and threatening to the mainstream, such as the queer people of color, butch lesbians and transgender people.

The assimilationist appeal that emphasizes social tolerance or acceptance of gays can be illustrated in various beer commercials that are positively rated on commercialcloset.com for the harmonious relationships between the LGBT and the straight characters. LGBT people are shown accepted by the heterosexual mainstream with the aid of the products (beer). These ads

suggest that consumption can lead to social tolerance or acceptance, or otherwise, the straight characters will not accept their gayness. These ads indicate a fantasy for gay people to be accepted by the mainstream as well as to escape from everyday discrimination, as scholars have suggested that escapism is one of the most common motivations attributed to users of the mass media (McQuail et al 1972).

Gledhill (1988) argues, “capitalism cannot ignore the potential market represented by groups emerging into new public self-identity and its processes invariably turn alternative lifestyle and identities into commodities, through which they are subtly modified and thereby recuperated for the status quo” (p. 71). Advertising has been considered to be significant means of acculturation for outside groups. In Chasin’s (2000) review of advertising history, the assimilationist appeal is observed beginning with attempts to assimilate new immigrants into American mass consumption since the twentieth century. Advertising to gay men and lesbians carries messages about assimilation by giving promises that consumption is a route to political enfranchisement as well as social acceptance. Moreover, the gay niche market is frequently depicted in the marketing and gay rights discourse as a social group with assimilationist aspirations for legitimate American identity. The assimilationist advertising strategy may be appreciated by the stigmatized gay consumers, as several recent marketing research reports have indicated that gay consumers are fed up with gay stereotypes so that “lesbians and gay men are surprisingly settled and want to be portrayed as ‘no different than anybody else’” (Greenfield Online 1998).

The assimilationist gay advertising may empower gay consumers and at the same time reappropriate the status quo. Thus, it also generates concerns about its political consequences as well as gay aesthetics and sensitivity.

So many ads are so unsophisticated in gay magazines, advertisers so nervous, and the gay community's visual preferences in openly gay media so unclear that gay magazines are looking, well, so straight. (Kahn, "The Glass Closet" 1994, p. 22)

However, gay advertising not only functions to assimilate gay consumers into the mainstream, but it can also be consumed by gay consumers for communal ties.

THE SOCIAL USE OF GAY ADVERTISING FOR COMMUNAL TIES

The out-of-closet advertising can be empowering to many gay consumers as media icons often offer concrete affirmation that the meanings and ideals represented can be attained or at least approximated (Hirshman and Thompson 1997). Ritson and Elliot (1999) argue that by recognizing the nature of advertising text as socially contextualized and its role in negotiating social settings, the advertising medium will occupy a far more important place in the life work of some individuals, such as the hyper-social teenagers. This idea can also apply to the gay minorities who aspire to see social acceptance of gays in mass media.

Furthermore, advertising is often experienced and evaluated outside of the media context in which they are conventionally viewed. Theorists have suggested that advertising is not only consumed for utilitarian purposes or simply experienced in a text-viewer interaction, but it is often consumed independent of the product it sponsors (Willis 1990; Nava 1992), and used for social and communal ends, emphasizing the importance of the social interactions of the audiences (Alperstein 1990; Ritson and Elliot 1999). The intended function and meanings of advertising messages can change as they migrate from the textual context of their presentation to the context of social interactions. For example, gay positive commercials are also disseminated through word-of-mouth and email circulations among gay consumers.

Gay advertising may play a phatic role in “strengthening existing group structures and interpersonal relations” (Ritson and Elliot 1999, p. 265) through the gay consumers discussing and decoding gay window commercials in daily conversation and sharing the excitement of spotting an out-of-closet ad. Kates (2000) suggested that gay consumers’ behaviors organized around brands are acts that “create and maintain the ties that construct a gay community” (p. 504). Given the fact that advertising functions as a key source of brand information, conversation about gay positive and gay-bashing commercials to identify and confirm political allies and “brand enemies” in the marketplace can be common among gay consumers. Gay consumers’ interpretations and social use of gay advertising can contribute to communal bounds and an abstract concept of community, especially for the gay consumers who live outside of the gay ghettos in metropolitan areas.

CONCLUSION

Messages and images in mass media, including advertising, have important influences on people’s identity formation, as the mass media is one of the dominant cultural institutions that define one’s identity and the culture to which one belongs (Twitchell 1996; Fowles 1996). Advertising targeting LGBT people typically does so by including elements of gay identity and experience. With the increased visibility after decades of gay rights movement, representations of lesbians and gay men have been sites of negotiation that offer spaces to resist heterosexist domination. Through the analysis of LGBT images in mainstream TV commercials, we see the complicated interplay between agencies of the different power positions. On one hand, the dominant discourse tends to present queer people using stereotypes and thus positions them as the “Other” in contrast to the mainstream values. On the other hand, the gay advertising

discourse functions to assimilate gays into the mainstream by representing them as “average individuals.”

However, the representations of LGBT people in advertising are further implicated with racism, sexism, and class bias in the LGBT community. Power conflicts are demonstrated in the filtered gay images in advertising so that a certain group from the queer community—white, middle-class, gender-normative, and mostly male—is found to dominate the advertising space. Because these representations provide a mirroring function for LGBT people, they potentially have an effect upon gay subjectivity and agency, i.e., how gays and lesbians think of themselves and how they view marketing practices and consumption behaviors in relation to group interests (Penaloza 1996).

While research topic regarding the critical role of consumption of products in subcultural formation and boundary maintenance (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Thornton 1995; Kozinets 2001; Kates 2002) has been explored, the subcultural consumption of media texts has just been proposed. Kates (2002) advances the application of theoretical constructs of interpretive communities in consumer research as an alternative form of lifestyle market segmentation. Gay consumers’ reading of gay window advertising will provide explicit evidence of interpretive communities and further illuminate consumers’ active and individualized interpreting strategies to fit their life themes, personal history, and personal identities (Hirshman and Thompson 1997).

Consumer researchers have proposed a meaning-based approach to advertising (Mick and Buhl 1992), emphasizing the consumers’ perspective to address important factors, such as personal experience (Mick and Buhl 1992) and social group membership that motivate and shape actualized advertising meanings. Gay consumers’ reading of the malleable gay window advertising, in relation to their cultural capital of the queer subculture, strength of identification of the gay community, as well as other identity factors, such as gender, social class, and ethnicity,

will illuminate “the subjectivity of ad experiences within the boundaries of the ad’s sign structure and denotative content” (Mick and Buhl 1992, p. 317).

Additionally, scholars have indicated that advertising can be experienced outside the medium it is conventionally viewed (Alperstein 1990; Ritson and Elliot 1999) and consumed independent of the product marketed (Willis 1990; Nava 1992). Hence, future studies exploring gay consumers’ use of gay advertising texts for non-purchase based, socially oriented reasons will contribute to better understanding of “what consumers do with advertising” (O’Donohoe 1994). Theorists suggest that the mass media may satisfy needs relating to personal identity and relationships (O’Donohoe 1994) and more importantly, media have been cited as the most important contemporary factor in the socialization of gay men and lesbians (Hicks, 2002). Future research studying the social use of advertising within the context of interpersonal interaction is critical for understanding the role advertising plays in consumers’ lives. Specifically, gay consumers’ social use of advertising that carries gay references for fantasist-escapist needs (McQuail et al 1972), for communal ties, and as tokens in social exchanges (Willis 1990) will shed considerable light on this question.

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