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Business, Not Politics: Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, Transgender People and the Consumer Sphere

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Business, Not Politics: Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, Transgender People and the Consumer Sphere

Abstract

In mainstream and gay media gay consumers are becoming big business. Within the last year, *Queer as Folk*, Showtime's serialized version of gay life, showed bad boy Brian helping a homophobic businessman turn a failing product around by marketing to gay consumers; Miller Lite brought us a television commercial showing two handsome gay men; Procter & Gamble placed ads in gay and lesbian publications; and Showtime and MTV announced they were developing the first, partly ad-supported, gay cable channel. This growing media and marketing attention to lesbians and gays has been consistently framed by marketers as a matter of "business, not politics": as a spokesperson from Naya said in 1993, "This is not a political decision to go after the gay niche. It was a business decision." Yet to see these developments as a spontaneous blossoming of the gay market in an age of corporate liberalism effaces the efforts of largely gay- and lesbian-identified marketers to research, package, and sell gay consumers to national corporations since the early 1970s. This paper investigates how marketers have actively produced the gay market, and how this process in turn circulates a narrow version of gay visibility. What assumptions do marketers hold about gay and lesbian consumers? What negative stereotypes must marketers counteract, and what positive ones do they put in their place? How do marketers define their roles not just as businesspeople, but as experts, educators, and progressives? In what ways do marketers privilege business over politics, and how does this shape the gay market? In response to the Miller spokeswoman quoted above, marketing to gays and lesbians does get a great deal more complicated than merely selling a product to consumers.

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"Business, Not Politics: Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, Transgender People and the Consumer Sphere,"
Commissioned Paper for the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), 2002.

“Business, not politics”

Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, Transgender People and
the Consumer Sphere

By Katherine Sender

GLAAD Center
for the Study of
Media & Society

Van M. Cagle,
Project Coordinator



**“Business, not Politics”:
Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, Transgender People and the Consumer Sphere**

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**“Business, not Politics”:
Gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people and the consumer sphere**

We market to gays and lesbians for business reasons because we want to sell our product to consumers. It doesn't get more complicated than that.

Miller beer spokeswoman¹

In mainstream and gay media gay consumers are becoming big business. Within the last year, *Queer as Folk*, Showtime's serialized version of gay life, showed bad boy Brian helping a homophobic businessman turn a failing product around by marketing to gay consumers; Miller Lite brought us a television commercial showing two handsome gay men; Procter & Gamble placed ads in gay and lesbian publications; and Showtime and MTV announced they were developing the first, partly ad-supported, gay cable channel. This growing media and marketing attention to lesbians and gays has been consistently framed by marketers as a matter of “business, not politics”: as a spokesperson from Naya said in 1993, “This is not a political decision to go after the gay niche. It was a business decision.”² Yet to see these developments as a spontaneous blossoming of the gay market in an age of corporate liberalism effaces the efforts of largely gay- and lesbian-identified marketers to research, package, and sell gay consumers to national corporations since the early 1970s.³ This paper investigates how marketers have actively produced the gay market, and how this process in turn circulates a narrow version of gay visibility. What assumptions do marketers hold about gay and lesbian consumers? What negative stereotypes must marketers counteract, and what positive ones do they put in their place? How do marketers define their roles not just as businesspeople, but as experts, educators, and progressives? In what ways do marketers privilege business over politics, and how does this

shape the gay market? In response to the Miller spokeswoman quoted above, marketing to gays and lesbians does get a great deal more complicated than merely selling a product to consumers.

The stakes involved in gay marketing are clearly high, as demonstrated by the intensity of debate about the value of GLBT visibility. Those who welcome gay and lesbian themes in advertising applaud appeals to queer consumers as validating their existence: as one public relations professional I interviewed said,

I hate to admit it, but if AT&T perceives that it's okay for me to be a gay man, then hey, everybody must. Which isn't true, but there's this sense, "Wow! There must be more acceptance out there than I thought, and that's a good thing."⁴

Other interviewees argued that positive images of gays and lesbians necessarily have beneficial effects for GLBTs in the broader culture, and expressed optimism about this increasing visibility for the general acceptance of gay and lesbian people. Such excitement reflects the belief that as gay and lesbian people are more present in all walks of life, and especially in media images, in political life, and as celebrities, this demonstrates that "we are everywhere" and normalizes gayness for a hitherto fearful and ignorant heterosexual population. (The ongoing invisibility of bisexuals and the comic or pitiable presence of transgender people does not extend the optimistic "we are everywhere" ethos beyond gender-normative gays and lesbians, however.)

Gay marketing has also had material benefits for some GLBT employees, media and non-profit groups. Marketing attention to gay consumers (more, perhaps, than gay-themed images in general market campaigns) has had a positive effect on corporate policies: as companies want to openly court the gay market they are prompted to enact non-discrimination and domestic partnership policies, if these are not already in place.⁵ Appeals to the gay market also provide vital funds to gay media, events, and non-profit groups in need of sponsorship. Marketing thus

supports efforts to circulate images of gay and lesbian life within gay culture itself, and to help fund GLBT organizations. Even those companies that have been reluctant to advertise in gay and lesbian media have sponsored civil rights groups, and others, like Absolut vodka that has offered long-term support to the GLAAD Media Awards, complement their advertising in gay media with event sponsorship.

The gain offered by the circulation of marketing revenues and increasingly public images of gays and lesbians has not been without unease—sometimes outright condemnation—from GLBT critics, however. Egregiously gay-stereotyped images and normalized homophobia in ads provoke the most vociferous criticism, particularly those ads appearing in the mainstream, such as TJ Maxx’s 1996 commercial that showed a very effeminate male fashion designer, or a 1987 Nut ‘N Honey ad that condoned aggression towards a cook who is misheard calling his cowboys “honey.” Continuing negative stereotyping prompts critics to argue that while at least some GLBTs want more visibility, they also need to control the kinds of visibility they get.

Yet even more “positive” images have prompted criticism for offering an ultimately counterproductive version of gay visibility. Gay images in ads tend to represent gays and lesbians as wealthy: as Gluckman and Reed remind us, “the real contours of the multicultural, class-stratified gay populations are languishing in the closet, while images of white, upper middle class lesbians and gay men become increasingly conspicuous.”⁶ Some marketers, wanting to boost interest in gay consumers, have exacerbated this problem by circulating inflated market research figures that suggest gay men, especially, are more wealthy than the general population. They have done so despite increasingly accurate data that suggest that gays and lesbians are not actually more affluent, on average, than the population as a whole.⁷

While most advertising makes its target market look more affluent than it really is, this strategy has a number of worrying consequences specific to gay rights causes. Inflated figures have been used by reactionary lobbyists to justify campaigning against gay employment rights, since gays appear to be an already-privileged group. The “Concerned Women For America” asks:

Are homosexuals economically, educationally or culturally disadvantaged? Any homosexual claims to that effect seem clearly bogus in light of emerging marketing studies that show homosexuals to be enormously advantaged relative to the general population—and astronomically advantaged when compared to the truly disadvantaged minorities.⁸

This conservative group pits the “real” claims of “truly disadvantaged minorities” (who are, apparently, people of color and implicitly straight) against the “bogus” claims of an already privileged, affluent, white, highly educated, homosexual elite, a phantom constituency circulated by gay marketers, among others.

Gay “positive” images also require the removal of political activism and an open sexuality from gay visibility. Positive images obscure those politically and sexually challenging aspects of GLBT life by offering containable images, usually showing gays as “just like you,” i.e. like the heterosexual mainstream. As one critic put it,

Far too often, gay access to cultural visibility seems predicated on an acceptance of two possible modes of representation: the exotic but ultimately unthreatening “other” (the cuddly cross-dresser), or gays as really straights after all, the “aren’t we all just human beings” position that reduces cultural specificity to a bland sameness that ends up assuming and asserting the desirability of the mainstream.... What kind of life can be lived when it is made “acceptable” by the refusal of its difference, its specificity?⁹

The “just like you” argument erases the conditions of GLBT lives: the pleasures of queer sexuality, the challenges of sexual politics, and the daily presence of homophobia. This “just like you” image also has a mainstreaming effect on gay publications and national politics: advertising from national corporations in gay media necessitated a reduction in political and sexual content in gay- and lesbian-targeted media;¹⁰ and groups such as the Human Rights Campaign increasingly focus on only the most respectable issues, such as gay marriage and military service, in part to avoid alienating sponsors.¹¹

Finally, the increased presence of more “positive” images of gays and lesbians has raised concern from some critics that this lures GLBT people into a false sense of progress: since gays and lesbians (if not bisexuals or transgender people) see themselves “everywhere,” the assumption is they must be more accepted. Yet the most rapid period of expansion of gay marketing—and of lesbian and gay visibility more generally—has been accompanied by few legislative improvements in the status of gay men and lesbians: Clinton’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy has led to a *rise* in discharges of gay and lesbian personnel from the military; anti-sodomy laws still exist in 16 states, as well as in the military; and there is still no federal protection for GLBT employees.

In response, then, to those who optimistically look upon the appearance of gay- and lesbian-themed advertising and increased attention to gay and lesbian consumers as beneficial to queer visibility, skeptics question the kinds of visibility this attention offers, and challenge the assumption that consumer visibility of any kind has significant benefits for gay civil rights. Yet neither the pro- nor the anti-gay market view adequately addresses the complexities of producing gay ads in a context that both demands that advertising shows life not “as it is but as it should be—life and lives worth emulating,”¹² and that accommodates the long history of GLBT

invisibility and homophobic representations. All advertising distorts reality, presenting only the most desirable images and offering material for aspiration. However, in the case of gay and lesbian images, marketers are saddled with the additional burden of absorbing and deflecting what are considered by many to be negative stereotypes of gays and lesbians: gay men as sissies, flamboyant flammers, or menacing, hypersexual and/or pedophilic predators; lesbians as man-hating feminists, bulldykes, or feminine fantasies of heterosexual men's porn. Both to distance themselves from these earlier images and to produce a still recognizably gay image of consumption, marketers have had to take the universal demands on advertising to produce a desirable ideal consumer and rework this through the specific structural and representational conditions of gay visibility.

All marketing is framed as “business, not politics,” not just gay and lesbian marketing (although this refrain is far less often explicitly articulated in relation to other market niches). Yet the claim that any marketing is a matter of “business, not politics” disavows the extent to which all marketing has political effects including, for example, the cumulative impact of advertising on the economy (both in generating ad revenues and in stimulating consumption), the circulation of an ethos of consumption, and the affirmation of ideologies about gender, class, race, and other identities. Yet, as with the question of stereotyping, the particular ways gay marketing is political is shaped by a history of gay invisibility and homophobia; the claim that gay marketing is “business, not politics” has specific applications to the circulation of gay and lesbian images. As struggles over the meaning of gay visibility suggest, gay critics (as well as consumers and marketers themselves) are well aware of the political context in which gay media images appear, and of the potential impact they may have.

This study complements and extends existing work on gay marketing and visibility, including Alexandra Chasin's *Selling Out*, Suzanna Danuta Walters' *All the Rage*, and Larry Gross's *Up from Invisibility*.¹³ Together, these authors lay out the context and some of the stakes for gay visibility within commercial media. My research is methodologically informed by cultural production ethnographies such as Gay Tuchman's study of the news industries, Lisa Henderson's analysis of *Storyline*, a call-in radio program based on a reading group format and using women's literature, and Laura Grindstaff's talk show research. Each offers a nuanced approach to the processes, routines, and place of professionalism in media production. Interestingly, however, given the pervasiveness of advertising, the production of marketing has not been the subject of much field-based research: most studies of marketing look only at advertising texts.¹⁴ Yet the processes of constructing texts cannot be read from the texts themselves, but reflect far more complex negotiations and compromises, as I show below. My study thus supplements a paucity of production-centered research on advertising and marketing.

This research is theoretically underpinned by the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, whose work illuminates many complex mechanisms that articulate consumer culture and identity.¹⁵ Most valuable here is his analysis of tastes and their relationship to cultural capital. By taste, Bourdieu refers to both the culinary and the aesthetic—we have preferences for particular foods, for example, as well as for opera, say, over easy listening music. While we tend to think of tastes as personal and idiosyncratic, Bourdieu shows that they are in fact structured by social position, especially class and gender. As such, tastes reflect a person's standing within various cultural hierarchies and, in turn, reaffirm that standing. Bourdieu also argues that resources are distributed not only according to economic means, but also according to educational, social, and cultural capital—the latter referring to such things as language and

diction, manners, and tastes. Cultural capital is a symbolic currency that affords privileges to those in possession of valued types of capital: knowledge about high culture, for example. Each form of capital operates in a semi-independent relationship; while a person of high economic capital is more likely to have access to social and cultural resources, this is not necessarily the case. In her study of rave subcultures in London, Sarah Thornton extends Bourdieu's concept to talk about *subcultural* capital: there is no absolute hierarchy of taste and capital, but different subcultural groups value particular knowledge and resources. Following Thornton's lead, I have extended Bourdieu along two trajectories: first, not only class and gender but also sexuality is relevant in the cultivation of taste and the distribution of subcultural capital, allowing us to talk about a specifically *gay* subcultural capital; second, in addition to education and the family, popular culture and media also have a role in taste formation and the cultivation of subcultural capital.

Using a production-centered approach and a consideration of the relationship between consumption, cultural hierarchies, and identity, I offer the first detailed historical overview of the construction of the gay market. I look at how this market was actively produced, rather than "discovered," through advertising images, gay and lesbian media, marketing and popular press articles, market research, corporate sponsorship, and other marketing activities. I assess the marketing efforts of magazine publishers, advertising agents, journalists, public relations consultants, corporate marketers and others. I investigate how gay marketers reflect upon their work; and how marketers pitch both products and gay and lesbian consumers to other marketers, to clients, to the marketing trade press, to heterosexual audiences, and to GLBT consumers themselves.

This paper is divided into six sections. Below, I outline the methods by which I gathered and analyzed my data. I then present an historical overview of the development of the gay market, on one hand, and the subsequent appearance of gay themes in mainstream ads, on the other. I investigate the image of the ideal gay consumer, and the limits of the consumer sphere on the scope of gay visibility. I consider the roles and aspirations of professionals involved in gay marketing and how marketers accommodate both supportive and hostile responses to gay-themed campaigns. To conclude, I outline how taste structures gay marketing visibility and how gay marketers' subcultural capital is deployed to produce this visibility. I return to the trope of gay marketing as "business, not politics" to argue that, despite this disclaimer, tracing a history of gay- and lesbian-themed ads reveals a complicated and sometimes contradictory relationship between the business of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender politics, and the politics of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender business.

Method

I used a combination of methods for this study. The largest group of data come from interviews I conducted with marketing and publishing professionals: between January 1998, and November 2001, I interviewed 39 professionals who work in gay marketing and media, including gay, lesbian, and bisexual magazine publishers, ad directors, marketers, sales representatives, and editors; advertising agency creatives and account executives; corporate marketers; public relations consultants; and journalists. I also attended four presentations on the gay market. With one exception (a journalist for the gay press), I call these interviewees "marketers," insofar as each has been involved in producing the gay market in some way, whether that be producing ads portraying gays and lesbians, doing market research that purports

to describe the contours of that market, or writing about the gay market and thus bringing it to readers' imagination through the advertising and popular press.

22 interviewees were men, 16 were women, 1 was transgender. 26 were gay, lesbian, or bisexual-identified, 4 identified themselves as heterosexual, and 9 did not disclose their sexual identity. I acknowledge the complications of identifying interviewees as “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” or “heterosexual,” and that these terms can suggest an overly reductive, essential, or stable sexual identity. For my purposes, however, these identifications proved valuable in making claims about the investments of marketers in their gay-specific work. Only one interviewee identified himself to me as a person of color.

I examined ads and consumer-related content from gay, lesbian, bisexual, HIV positive, pornography, and other magazines since 1967, as well as from local gay papers.¹⁶ I repeatedly reviewed ads and content on three gay-targeted Internet sites,¹⁷ as well as on Commercialcloset.org, an archive of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and “gay vague” ads. I collected more than 100 articles on gay marketing that appeared in the advertising and marketing trade press since 1972, as well as articles on the gay market from newspapers and weekly magazines.¹⁸ I supplemented these with other corporate documents such as press kits, market research reports, and marketing proposals.

Using multiple methods to access the production of the gay market offers rich data for this study. The interview material afforded me an in-depth look into the processes and techniques of gay marketing, offering access to some of the decision-making routines that help to explain why gay- and lesbian-themed ads and marketing look the way they do. Supplementing these data with other spoken and documentary data allowed me to triangulate between sources, verifying facts where possible and putting personal recollections within a broader historical

context. Combined, these data offer many access points to gay marketing practices, including how gay and lesbian appeals are produced in a variety of venues; how gay marketers reflect upon their work; and how marketers pitch both products and gay and lesbian consumers to other marketers, to clients, to the marketing trade press, and to GLBT consumers themselves.

Marching to market: The growing presence of GLBT images in advertising

It has been observed that “markets are shaped, not discovered”:¹⁹ marketers do not simply begin to offer images of and sell products to pre-existing niche groups, but shape the contours of those groups in order to present a credible, desirable, and viable target market. The development of the gay market, reflected in the appearance of gay and lesbian images in mainstream media, is only one such process of niche-formation that dominated marketing in the twentieth century: before gays became subjects of marketers’ attention, youth, women, African-Americans and other groups had already been courted as coherent target markets.²⁰ Below, I outline by decade the development of the gay market from the 1960s, a period marked by almost complete invisibility, to the present, where images of lesbians and gays are common in lesbian and gay media, and occasionally appear in general market print and television ads. By looking at a decade-by-decade history, I show how marketers have responded to earlier stereotypes of gay men and lesbians in their efforts to produce an attractive gay market. From the early 1970s through the beginning of the twenty-first century, we can see the development of the ideal gay consumer from invisible or reviled to an increasingly courted figure.

1. Before Stonewall

Prior to the Stonewall riots of June 1969, gays and lesbians were largely invisible in mainstream media, openly gay-owned businesses serving gay and lesbian clientele were rare, and

the idea of a “gay market” was embryonic at most. Gay and lesbian politically inflected publications tended to be non-commercial, funded by sponsoring groups such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis. These commonly had few, if any, ads and were published in the small, scholarly journal format. Gay men’s homoerotic and “physique” publications tended to achieve larger circulations and a few of these contained at least somewhat openly gay, erotic ads.²¹

Inaugurated in 1967, the Los Angeles *Advocate* was the first openly gay newspaper to actively court national advertisers. In the newspaper’s first year, publisher Dick Michaels commissioned the Walker Struman research firm to conduct the first market research of gay readers and soon after hired an independent auditing firm to verify circulation figures, a bold step for a gay newspaper at that time.²² After selling only \$24 of advertising space in the first issue, by the end of its first year this would grow to more than \$200 per issue.²³ Yet despite Michaels’ hopes of creating a national gay newspaper with corporate advertising, it would be a number of years before the *Advocate* would achieve this aim.²⁴

Through the 1950s and 1960s few, if any, ads appeared in the mainstream media that openly showed gay men or lesbians. There are a couple of “gay window” or “gay vague” examples, however, where advertisers subtly coded ads with gay subcultural cues that were probably opaque to heterosexual readers.²⁵ A 1958 Smirnoff ad appearing in *Esquire* magazine showed two men in close proximity, and declared “mixed or straight, it leaves you breathless.”²⁶ Whether this ad read as gay to gay or straight audiences in the 1950s, history does not relate.

Even if openly gay images in advertising were scarce or nonexistent through the 1960s, a range of cultural and advertising trends that marked the latter half of this decade as one of nonconformity, defiance, and self-chosen identity set the stage for the earliest attempts to

imagine a gay market. The development of African-American, youth, and other consumer markets shows that by the 1960s marketers were already familiar with tailoring campaigns to specific media and audiences, and with attributing distinguishing characteristics to a group for the purposes of segmentation. From its earlier emphasis on conformism, safety and popularity, advertising messages began to encourage rebellion, individualism, and authenticity.²⁷ Added to the context of relative sexual liberalism and cultural individualism, the Stonewall riots of 1969 and the subsequent rapid organization, activism, and visibility of gay and lesbian people created an environment where gay people could be perceived as a community with similar aims and a shared purpose, if not identity.²⁸ The post-Stonewall gay liberation movement brought GLBT people, and especially gay men, into public view and focused much more on visibility than on accommodation as a goal.

2. The 1970s

The energy that inspired and was then fuelled by the Stonewall riots and gay rights activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s precipitated a number of civil rights gains, such as the removal of homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association's manual of mental disorders.²⁹ These gains, in turn, were reflected in the greater visibility of gays and lesbians in both news and entertainment programming. Trade press articles about a potential gay market began to appear in 1972, even though national marketers remained apprehensive about associating their products with gay consumers who, for their part, seemed less than interested in petitioning for marketers' attention. As one journalist surmised,

Unlike those larger segments of the population that can cite discriminatory practices [in advertising] because of race, color, gender or creed, the gay movement's leaders appear to be less concerned with advertising and more concerned with winning legal sanctions

for their activities and raising the consciousness of the media. Perhaps at some later date, they will turn their attention to advertising; perhaps advertising will turn its attention to them first.³⁰

When publishers and advertisers did begin to turn their attention to gay consumers in the mid-1970s, the gay market was imagined almost universally as fashionable, “young, educated, and affluent” men. *Blueboy*’s publisher, Donald Embinder, bragged in *Advertising Age* that “now you can reach America’s most affluent minority... The male homosexual.”³¹ Yet some gay commentators expressed fear that “we would see a lot of ‘silly queens’ dancing around in ads directed to a homosexual consumer.”³²

The circulation of a desirable image of the gay male consumer was greatly attributable to the efforts of the *Advocate*’s publisher, David Goodstein. In 1974 he transformed it into a lifestyle magazine, reducing sexual content and distancing editorials from the more militant factions of the gay civil rights movement. Despite these efforts, however, national advertisers remained wary of placing ads in an explicitly gay publication. As one trade journalist wrote in 1975, “Women’s lib? Black Power? Not even those two movements come close to striking the same kind of apprehension that is found among advertisers confronted by the word GAY.”³³ In the second half of the decade, however, mainstream marketers became more interested in reaching readers of the gay press; ads for alcohol, entertainment, hi-fi equipment, financial services, personal care items, clothing, car rental, and other products and services began to appear in the *Advocate*. National advertising in the local gay press was also facilitated by the formation of Rivendell Marketing in 1979, a media sales company that places ads in local gay publications across the country. Increased coverage in the trade and popular press continued to characterize gay male consumers as highly educated, gainfully employed, trendsetting, loyal, and

free of the financial burdens of wives, children, and mortgages.³⁴ In contrast, lesbians were ignored as consumers by both journalists and national advertisers.

While advertisers began to place ads in gay media, mainstream venues for advertising to gay consumers were limited: in the early 1970s, the *New York Times*, the *New York Daily News*, and *Esquire* magazine refused ads that mentioned “gay” or “homosexual.”³⁵ Some magazines, such as the arts and entertainment magazine *After Dark*, were seen as “subtextually gay” by many readers and included ads for records, theater, films and books that covertly appealed to gay men.³⁶ There were few, if any, openly gay appeals in ads in mainstream media, although there is an early example of the “*Gasp! It’s a man!*” trope of cross-dressing ads in a 1974 pantyhose commercial that slowly pans along a fabulous pair of legs, ultimately revealing that they belong to athlete Joe Namath. His voice-over reassures us, “Now, I don’t wear pantyhose, but if Beautymist can make *my* legs look good, imagine what they’ll do for yours.” The emphatic kiss between Namath and a woman at the end of the commercial restores viewers’ confidence in his heterosexuality.

Despite national corporations’ reluctance to make openly gay appeals in mainstream venues, the second half of the 1970s saw increasing gay visibility in mainstream media and a rapid expansion of marketing to gay people in the gay press. Images of gays on television, including coverage of Anita Bryant’s 1977 Dade County anti-gay campaign and the 1979 gay and lesbian rally in Washington, DC, alerted marketers to a sizable community of potential consumers. Further, gay-identified professionals in both gay and mainstream media worked behind the scenes to increase the visibility of gays, including in advertising.³⁷

3. The 1980s

The early 1980s saw a continuation of corporate interest in reaching gay consumers in gay media, including the first openly gay ads by a national company: famous (and famously gay) men were featured in a series of Boodles Gin ads that appeared in gay publications. The trade press emphasized gay men's apparent preoccupation with conspicuous consumption to signal that they were "finally ... in the 'in' group [and] no longer the outsider [they] were in high school."³⁸ Peter Frisch, then publisher of the *Advocate*, listed a gay man's

must-haves: "A convertible. A sports car, a foreign sports car. Believe me, that imported sports car shows up in our demographics. It's incredible. Some fabulous wardrobe. You take umpteen vacations and weekend trips a year. You have a second home."³⁹

The image of the affluent homosexual did not circulate without some concern by gay commentators, however. In the same article, sociologist and activist Laud Humphries commented, "I can imagine a lot of people reading about the gay market and saying 'we should give them their rights? We're starving. They're buying a Mercedes.'"⁴⁰

Despite this attractive image of gay consumers, advertisers remained nervous about making openly gay appeals in mainstream media in the early 1980s. They had two primary anxieties: being branded a "gay product" might alienate their heterosexual consumers, and advertising to gays might court what was then a "new phenomenon," Moral Majority boycotts.⁴¹ Advertisers responded by continuing to produce gay window advertising; ads for Paco Rabanne, Calvin Klein, Marlboro, and others displayed the male body for the admiration of both women and gay men.⁴²

The cultivation of the gay market would prove short-lived, however: the AIDS epidemic put gay-themed appeals back in the "deep freeze."⁴³ 1984 to 1989 was marked by the rapid

withdrawal of many advertisers from gay media once they realized the extent of the crisis; only Absolut vodka remained a consistent advertiser in the gay press through the 1980s, winning legendary loyalty from gay consumers. This withdrawal was reflected in press coverage: in the mid- to late-1980s the advertising and marketing trade press stopped covering the gay market altogether, but there was a late-decade reference to gay window advertising in the *Advocate*, “A Gay Look at Advertising.”⁴⁴ While marketers responded to the AIDS epidemic with a near-total moratorium on open appeals to gay consumers, this article suggests that advertisers nevertheless still made implicit, gay window appeals to the gay market. Ads in gay media for HIV services began to appear in 1987, promoting public health, safe sex, and testing; only later did viatical and pharmaceutical companies begin to advertise there.

The AIDS epidemic was also reflected in mainstream ads. During the mid- to late-1980s GLBT images barely appeared in general market advertising, and the oblique references we do have we might wish had remained unmade. 1984 saw the appearance of Dunkin’ Donuts’ Fred the Baker in typically unconvincing drag, attempting to find out the competitions’ secrets. In 1987, an ad for Nut N’ Honey showed a series of vignettes in which the cereal’s name is misheard as the affectionate-sounding, “Nothing, honey.” In the final scene, a group of cowboys draw their guns on a male cook who uses this phrase, and thus the ad appears to sanction a violently homophobic response to an affectionate statement from one man to another. While homophobia has, of course, been by no means limited to the 1980s, it strikes me as significant that at the height of hostility towards gay men with AIDS and, by extension, towards the gay community, this ad suggests that physical threats are an acceptable response to the possibility of same sex affection, let alone gay sex.

With these few exceptions, gay images in ads dropped out of sight in the mid- and late-1980s, in dramatic contrast to the massive increase in gay and lesbian organizational visibility and AIDS activism. Beyond the marketing sphere, media representations of the AIDS epidemic raised a new kind of “visibility,” that of the sexually promiscuous, diseased gay man, an image from which most advertisers fled. The first wave of advertising to gays in the early 1980s was curtailed, yet by 1990 interest revived in the gay market, leading to a rapid expansion in attention to gay consumers and their profitability.

4. The 1990s

The 1990s were distinguished by a renewed interest in the gay market from both the trade press and advertisers themselves, an interest that increased exponentially through the decade. The AIDS crisis and associated activism had brought gay people to the attention of marketers, and the economic recession at the beginning of the decade sent marketers in search of new groups of apparently affluent consumers. As *New York Times* ad columnist Stuart Elliott wrote,

“For a lot of people, the main concern right now is surviving in a tough economic climate,” said Doug Alligood, vice president of special markets at BBDO New York. “When that happens people get liberal in a hurry.” So if consumer product companies “find a market that’s educated, affluent and can be reached through targeted media ... there’s no reason to be concerned about politics.”⁴⁵

In response to this burgeoning interest, gay-owned and other market research firms and magazines collected data on (some) gay and lesbian consumers’ incomes and spending patterns, and gay-identified professionals established advertising agencies, PR firms, and consultancies to assist national corporations in making gay-specific appeals.

Greater numbers of national advertisers bought space in existing national and local gay publications: advertising in gay media rose throughout the 1990s to a record \$120.4 million in 1999, a 20.2% rise from the previous year.⁴⁶ This led, in turn, to a growth in revenues for those publications and an expansion of gay publishing, especially of glossy magazines: *Outweek*, *Deneuve* (now *Curve*), *Girlfriends*, *Hero*, *Genre*, *XY*, *Square Peg*, *10 percent*, *Out*, *Anything That Moves*, *Victory!*, *Alternative Family*, *AIDS Digest*, *POZ*, *POZ en Español*, and others debuted since 1989, each serving the diverse interests of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and HIV positive communities, as well as gay and lesbian youth, entrepreneurs and parents. Most of these appeared without sex ads or, in the case of *Outweek*, dropped them in early issues. Advertisers and publishers continued to claim that sex ads created an inhospitable environment for national goods and services, with phone sex advertisers receiving the lion's share of publishers' and advertisers' opprobrium. Publishers and marketers began to include lesbians in their purview: a *Fortune* article on gay professionals included interviews with women, the *Advocate* included "lesbian" in their header, and *Deneuve/Curve* and *On Our Backs* offered marketers access to lesbian consumers, even if these magazines found it hard to get national ads.

One interviewee commented that it remained a challenge in the early 1990s to get advertisers to buy space in gay publications because of persistent fears of becoming known as "the gay shoe" and of right wing backlash.⁴⁷ Yet joining the familiar alcohol and entertainment companies, new advertisers to the gay market included Bugle Boy, Benetton and Gap apparel; skin care products; the Columbia CD music club; the Netherlands Board of Tourism; and Philip Morris, the gay market's first tobacco advertiser in 1992. Many of these ads were generic ones placed in gay media; as the marketplace became increasingly crowded with companies advertising similar products, some advertisers began to develop gay-specific ads to distinguish

themselves from their competition and to signal a “deeper commitment” to gay and lesbian consumers. Common strategies included showing same sex couples together, featuring famously gay or lesbian celebrities such as kd lang, using pink triangles or rainbows, or punning with words significant to the GLBT community such as “out,” “pride,” or “closet.”

The growth in interest in gay consumers among a diverse range of national corporations led to further increases in revenue for gay and lesbian publications and more coverage in the trade and popular press. Gay publications’ sales representatives found it much easier to get appointments with marketers and media buyers than before: Joe Landry, publisher of the *Advocate* and now also of *Out* magazine, commented,

When I first started selling at the *Advocate*, I had a very hard time getting appointments with people to pitch advertising, and you know, three years later I could get an appointment with anyone. And I remember going on my first appointments, and I was the first homosexual they’d ever seen—the shock on people’s faces was amazing!⁴⁸

Indeed, relationships strengthened between corporate America and gay and lesbian publications. Some magazines worked with advertisers on special marketing projects that blended marketing with editorial, known as “advertorials,” deploying the marketing and gay expertise of magazine staff to help these clients show their commitment to the gay community. *Out* and a long-standing advertiser, Seagram, collaborated on a cocktail and entertainment guide, “Out to Party” (July 1998),⁴⁹ and also produced a twelve-page advertorial with Levi’s for their Dockers brand, which blended advertising with sponsorship of gay youth and education organizations in a stylish fashion spread (November 1998).

The 1990s also saw the debut of a few openly gay and some suggestively homoerotic appeals in direct marketing and mainstream media. In 1994, Prime Access agency produced a

multi-racial, openly gay direct marketing campaign for AT&T, making this the first Fortune 15 company to openly address gay and lesbian consumers. The campaign received a great deal of attention, both from the national and international press and from the anti-gay religious right, which began a boycott against AT&T. Print ads appeared in general market magazines for Calvin Klein, Banana Republic, Versace, and Abercrombie & Fitch by ad executive Sam Shahid and photographer Bruce Weber, both of whom are openly gay. By mid-decade gay men also began to appear in television commercials. A 1994 IKEA spot showed two men buying a table as a symbol of their ongoing commitment: while this only aired in markets where the company had stores, news of the commercial spread by word-of-mouth among GLBT consumers, winning the company much support. These commercials appeared for only a matter of weeks, however, before a bomb threat to a store led the company to withdraw it from circulation. While the commercial was deemed a “positive” representation by most gay and gay-friendly critics, more controversial were Calvin Klein’s “Tattoo” and “Brandon” commercials that showed young men undressing for an older male photographer (whom we never see) and answering sexually suggestive questions. These ads won widespread criticism, including from then President Clinton, and were subsequently withdrawn.

It was more common to show gay men than lesbians in marketing images: despite a peak in interest in “lipstick lesbians” in 1993, marketers paid little attention to lesbians as a consumer market in the early- to mid-1990s. A spokesman for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, cautioned “marketers who think there is only one way to reach gays: ... It’s very different trying to reach gay men in West Hollywood than, say, lesbians in Columbus, Ohio.”⁵⁰ Specific references to lesbians in articles began to appear more often, however, for example in the *Advertising Age* special feature on marketing to gays and lesbians: “Economics holds back

lesbian ad market.”⁵¹ These articles attempted to account for the time lag in marketing to lesbians, suggesting that marketers’ beliefs about anti-consumerist politics, lower average annual incomes, and lower visibility compared with gay men made lesbians, according to *Deneuve* publisher Frances Stevens, “the invisible of the invisible.”⁵² The rise in attention to lipstick lesbians and more openly lesbian celebrities heightened marketing attention, but lesbians remained “on the fringe of the gay marketing movement.”⁵³

While advertisers remained unsure of lesbians as a profitable market, mainstream ads offered occasional lesbian representations. Shahid and Weber produced “Backseat” for Banana Republic, a print ad showing three women in a playful embrace in a convertible, and Calvin Klein’s sexually ambiguous cK1 ads included openly lesbian model Jenny Shimizu. Only two lesbian-themed television commercials aired in the 1990s: in 1996, Deutsch, the agency that also produced the gay IKEA ad, debuted a commercial for Mystic Beverages, “Liz.” This showed a cute young woman who 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. According to the ad’s creative director, Liz Gumbiner, this was not intended to appeal specifically to gay and lesbian consumers but was part of their overall strategy, signaled by the tagline “Show Your Colors,” that emphasized individualism and the unusual.⁵⁴ Indeed, many ad executives were anxious to deflect claims that they explicitly appealed to gay consumers in mainstream media by arguing that their ads merely functioned within a broader campaign to suggest individualism or “diversity.” Interestingly, though, when such appeals were made they usually represented white gay people, suggesting that as gay representations have become a little less controversial, these complement or replace representations of people of color to signal “diversity” in campaigns.

While the Mystic commercial used a lesbian couple to market a mainstream product to general market audiences, a year later Olivia Cruises produced the first openly lesbian commercial directed to lesbian audiences for a lesbian product offered by a lesbian-owned business. “Ship” shows two glamorous women enjoying the delights of a cruise, the weather, and each other’s company. The ad was produced to take advantage of the large lesbian audience expected for the coming out episode of *Ellen* in April, 1997. However, ABC declined to run the ad, feeling that its lesbian subject matter was “best dealt with in programming,”⁵⁵ which left Olivia to negotiate with affiliates in individual markets. When the ad did air, it only appeared in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Miami, and Winston-Salem, N.C.; each affiliate aired a version that edited out most of the intimacy between the women.

The Mystic and Olivia commercials offered arguably more “authentic” representations of lesbians than the more familiar “girl-girl” images that have been a staple of “image” print ads for products such as apparel, perfume, and liquor.⁵⁶ Throughout the 1990s, Gucci, Versace, Prada, and others showed suggestively homoerotic contact between very thin, very feminine, women models. An account executive for Disaronno Amaretto suggested that their ad showing two women in a romantic embrace was designed to make their product seem “younger, hipper: we needed to move away from where it was to a much fresher, more contemporary look.”⁵⁷ This executive declined to comment upon whether the ad was supposed to appeal to lesbians; she emphasized instead that the campaign as a whole was designed “to make women or men feel glamorous, desirable, the center of attention.” Lesbian, gay, and bisexual audiences have criticized ads that show titillating but uncommitted images of girl-girl intimacy for serving straight audiences, especially men:⁵⁸ tellingly, the lesbian-themed Disaronno print ad appeared both in *Girlfriends* and in *Playboy*.

Gay window commercials showing both male and female “couples” also appeared in the 1990s, suggesting national advertisers’ greater willingness to play with gay sensibilities and the subcultural knowledge of its audience. Quaker Oats brought us two men in a kitchen bickering over whether Toasted Oatmeal cereal was really oats, and Volkswagen showed two young, hip men driving aimlessly around a neighborhood and picking up an abandoned, chic (but ultimately smelly) armchair. Building on Rosie O’Donnell’s (then) ambiguous closetness and the lesbian fandom of *Laverne and Shirley*, K-Mart showed O’Donnell and Penny Marshall ogling a tennis bracelet. Playing with the tagline, “K-Mart: who knew?” the script went on to maximize the ambiguity of their relationship and sexual history.

While lesbian- and gay-themed ads tended to be more “positive” in the 1990s, they also tended to emphasize the most gender-normative images of lesbians and gay men.⁵⁹ 1990s mainstream ads also continued to use transgender images as a source of gender pressure. An ad from Time Warner showed twin boys fantasizing about which superhero they want to become: when one has run through the gender-normative options of Superman and Batman and alights upon Wonder Woman, the other twin shames him.

Ads for local and national political causes increasingly appeared throughout the 1990s, both pro- and anti-gay rights. Commercials for GLAAD, the Human Rights Campaign (which, along with the Olivia ad, ABC also refused for the coming out episode of *Ellen*), the Campaign for Military Service, and other groups argued for gay civil rights at a national and local level. Ads also appeared in print and on television that vouched for the success of becoming “ex-gay” and that argued against gay marriage. A commercial from the Hawaii chapter of Save Traditional Marriage showed a young boy reading from the pro-gay children’s book *Daddy’s Roommate*, in

which the child character's father weds his male partner, and suggested that confusion is wrought upon kids at the prospect of marriage by same-sex lovers.

During the 1990s, ads also began to appear showing images of people with AIDS.⁶⁰ Bennetton notoriously pushed the boundaries of public taste with their "David Kirby 'a pieta'" print ad showing the dying AIDS activist with his family. As protease inhibitors and combination therapies came on the market, images of people with AIDS shifted from that of the emaciated AIDS "victim" that dominated the news to representations of increasingly robust-looking people living, exercising, and loving with AIDS. Sean Strub, publisher of *POZ* magazine, traced the trajectory of images in HIV-related ads through the 1990s:

The first ones invariably would have somebody alone, very thoughtful with a long face and looking at the moon and walking alone along the beach and clearly contemplating life and death issues.... So then, the next wave were ads where they were saying [cheerful tone]: "Joe, who has HIV..." You know, a white man and he would be looking, if not cheerful, somewhat more alive than the guy walking along the beach. And then the wave after that was bringing some diversity into those ads, showing situations where there's a relationship, either a couple or a family situation or whatever, and there's gender or racial diversity and so on.... But then it went from there to body builders and people climbing mountains and ridiculous extreme stuff like advertising does.⁶¹

The transformation of the public image of people with AIDS led to the first national commercial showing an HIV positive person advertising a product that was not AIDS related: Ric Muñoz, an openly gay, HIV positive athlete, appeared in a Nike ad in 1995.

The 1990s thus stand as a watershed for images of gay, lesbian, and HIV positive people both in gay and lesbian and in mainstream media. The GLBT community's response to the AIDS

epidemic brought advertisers' attention to gays and lesbians as never before, and offered an infrastructure, including organizations looking for sponsorship and offering direct mail information, that marketers could tap into to reach gay and lesbian consumers. As advertisers explored this potential and as the national media landscape became somewhat more tolerant of openly gay and lesbian images, advertisers used these images to appeal to queers and straights alike.

Yet the familiar stereotypes of gay men as pedophiles (Crunch Fitness and Diesel), as flamers (TJ Maxx), and as sissies (Sprite) continued, and transgenderism remained a source of humor or approbation.

5. 2000 and beyond

The early years of the new decade built upon the increasing presence of gay and lesbian people in mainstream advertising and other media, and upon the growing interest in gay and lesbian consumers from national corporations. This provided more revenue for gay media, facilitating a growth in the number of gay publications and websites which, in turn, led to increased competition for readers and advertisers. As gay and lesbian publishing became more profitable, media companies began to merge into larger conglomerations that were then faced with the challenge of a faltering economy in late 2001.

In 2000 and 2001 gay print media continued to be dominated by ads for apparel, alcohol, cigarettes, entertainment and music, travel, financial services, and HIV-related pharmaceuticals. The growing interest in the gay market encouraged advertisers to make more gay-specific appeals: Absolut had won long-term loyalty with gay and lesbian vodka drinkers by consistently using their general-market print ads in gay media, but had only rarely made gay, or gay window versions (for example, "Absolut Haring" in 1995). The company made a bold statement with its

“Absolut GLAAD” ad in 2001, adapting its 1970s-style lava lamp to show the GLAAD logo rising in blobs. (Absolut has contributed to GLAAD since 1989 and is the primary corporate sponsor of the annual GLAAD Media Awards.) Absolut’s marketing director commented that “We have hundreds and hundreds of ads, but it’s the first time we’ve customized an ad to fit one of our not-for-profit partners.”⁶² Stuart Elliott, advertising columnist for the *New York Times*, observed that this ad is a version of “cause-related marketing, which seeks potential customers by supporting causes they themselves support.”⁶³ Since alcoholic beverages is one of the most crowded categories in gay market advertising, “Absolut GLAAD” may signal anxiety from parent company Seagram that it is losing market share amongst gay and lesbian drinkers. The company reminded consumers of its commitment to the gay community not just through placing generic ads in gay media, nor producing merely gay-themed ads, but by showing its involvement in a non-profit organization committed to monitoring gay representations.

The early decade also saw the entry of a new group of products into the gay market: packaged goods. Crest’s “Whitestrips,” Procter and Gamble’s teeth-whitening product, appeared in *Out* magazine in the summer of 2001. *Out* and *Advocate* publisher Joe Landry saw this as a breakthrough in the hitherto reluctant packaged goods market: to get an ad from Procter & Gamble “opens the door to more packaged goods.”⁶⁴ Also new on the market were a number of automobile manufacturers: in 2001 Jaguar, Volkswagen, and Volvo joined Saab (since 1994), Saturn (in 1995, then since 1999), and Subaru (since 1997) in gay publications. Subaru has distinguished itself by aligning its product with the “civic-mindedness of the gay and lesbian community,” creating gay-punning print ads such as: “It’s not a choice. It’s the way we’re built.”⁶⁵

Subaru has also drawn upon their pro-gay campaign in mainstream media. In their TV commercial “What do we know?” Martina Navratilova, dumped by mainstream advertisers when she came out as a lesbian, joins two other female athletes who demonstrate the virtues of the Subaru Forester. The ad tells “what they know” about the vehicle’s control, handling, and performance, and Navratilova delivers the punch line: “What do we know? We’re just girls.” Subaru is one of the few companies to openly and consistently court lesbian consumers, a strategy based on their independent research that found their product to be very popular with lesbians.

A more explicit lesbian reference came in a commercial from John Hancock, the insurance company, which featured a lesbian couple adopting a baby. The company had to change the spot after its initial airing to downplay that it shows a lesbian couple, and to announce the arrival of the flight—and thus the baby—from Cambodia, not China, since China banned adoption by openly gay couples in 1998. This ad was part of a larger campaign that demonstrated how John Hancock could help with the diverse experiences of Americans; using a now familiar strategy, a spokesperson distanced the company from their lesbian and gay customers by claiming they were “not so much targeting a specific audience” but making a more general appeal to “diversity” by showing a gay couple.⁶⁶

Mainstream ads that show gay men or a suggestive male intimacy have tended to pursue two themes: the discomfort of men in intimate moments, and the mistaken identity motif. Heineken’s “Male bonding incident” showed two men drinking beer and watching TV; as one passes the other a Heineken, the scene goes to slow-motion and we hear the song “Magic Moments.” The men then recoil from each other and continue to watch TV, uncomfortably. A newer, and increasingly common theme involves heterosexual women cruising men who turn out

to be gay: Miller Lite's "Switcheroo" showed two women sending a handsome man at the other end of the bar a beer, only to watch as his boyfriend shows up. The ad concludes, "Well, at least he's not married." With this ad Miller could get the best of all worlds: in testing, gay men appreciated the ad because it represents them; heterosexual women enjoyed it because it shows them as sexually assertive; and heterosexual men found it amusing and unthreatening because it suggests that when women *are* sexually assertive, that is, attempt to usurp straight men's conventional role, they mess up. Yet the product avoided the risk of becoming known as "the gay beer" since it's the women who order Miller Lite, not the gay men. Nevertheless, Stuart Elliott saw this commercial as

really a watershed because in this country it's been that beer companies were perfectly willing to do stuff targeted to the [gay] market as long as it never got out, never sees the light of day in the general market. So that was like a real change. And it's driven by the fact that they think their target market for [beer] thinks it's perfectly okay. Or it's cool, or whatever.⁶⁷

While mainstream audiences may be beginning to think that gay male couples are "okay" or "cool," the same cannot be said for transgender images. Those rare appearances of transgender people in general market ads continued to exploit the "mistaken identity" joke; a print ad for TheStreet.com warned: "Mail-order bride, transsexual, internet stock. It never hurts to do a little research before bringing one home." This ad repeated the assumption that deception (and a later, nasty revelation) is at the center of transgender identity, and that readers would necessarily rather avoid the shock of finding out that their one-night stand (like their bride or their stock) is other than advertised.

The early part of this decade also saw a growth in gay-themed ads that appeared both in gay and lesbian and in mainstream vehicles. Skyy vodka's print ad "The Proposal" showed two very feminine-looking women, one of whom offers the other a diamond ring in a vodka martini. This ad appeared in *Paper* and *Interview*, general-market magazines (though both of which, anecdotally, have large gay readerships), as well as in *Out*. Showtime ran an estimated \$10 million print, internet, event, and direct mail campaign for its new show *Queer as Folk*: this was the most extensive campaign by a mainstream company in mainstream and gay media that showed a gay-themed campaign for a gay-themed product aimed at gay and lesbian as well as heterosexual audiences.⁶⁸

Most significant, perhaps, were print ads for the Gay Financial Network (gfn.com) online financial service for gays and lesbians that appeared in mainstream and gay- and lesbian-specific contexts. Like the Olivia Cruise company, gfn.com advertised a gay-specific product offered by a gay-owned company to gay consumers through mainstream media. Walter Schubert, president and CEO, wanted to reach gay and lesbian consumers who do not read gay media.⁶⁹ An older reader responded to gfn.com with a letter of gratitude:

Never in my life did I think I'd see the day when a gay company would advertise in the mainstream, or be accepted in the mainstream, much less a financial company, and much less a gay financial company advertising in a paper like the *Wall Street Journal*. I began to cry when I saw this. I never knew your site existed, because I don't read gay publications, and for the first time as a gay man in the financial field I felt proud; your ad made me realize how far we've come. That is the power of advertising.⁷⁰

Yet despite much critical acclaim from gay and straight media and letters from grateful consumers (plus a few hostile ones), consumer response to the campaign was disappointing.

Another significant event in the early 2000s involved HIV pharmaceutical advertising which, while not targeting gays exclusively, has been a solid advertiser in gay media. In 2001 these pharmaceutical ads came under attack for offering too “desirable” images of people supposedly taking HIV medications. Research by the San Francisco Public Health Department claimed that men who had seen the ads were less likely to practice safe sex; the Department assumed a causal relationship between these respondents’ lower vigilance about safe sex and the 50% increase in new HIV infection rates in 2000.⁷¹ San Francisco considered a ban on billboard ads showing hyperathletic images of HIV positive people, and the US Food and Drug Administration ordered Merck and others to withdraw ads “featuring robust young men heaving javelins, riding bikes and crewing on sailboats.”⁷² This example offers an interesting dilemma in the struggle for “positive images”: showing HIV positive people glowing with health could ultimately have a negative effect on safe sex practices, since the ads may suggest that being HIV positive is not a life-threatening condition, nor even a particularly debilitating one.⁷³

The increased investment in gay and lesbian consumers, representations, and media in the early 2000s was reflected in a diversification of products and companies advertising to gay consumers. This, in turn, demanded that mainstream and gay-owned companies distinguish their product in an increasingly crowded marketing environment by making their appeals to gay consumers known, in part by representing gay men and lesbians. It also led to a consolidation of gay and lesbian print and internet media: the *Advocate*’s parent company, Liberation Publications, bought *Out* magazine in February, 2000; America Online bought a 12% share of the gay website portal, PlanetOut; PlanetOut negotiated a merger with Liberation Publications (a deal that was dropped as a result of the dotcom crash); and PlanetOut and gay.com merged.⁷⁴ Yet the rapid growth in advertising revenues flowing into gay media in the mid-to-late 1990s was

slowed by the overall decline in advertising budgets in the tight economic climate of late 2001. Publisher Joe Landry commented that while it used to be that publishers needed to encourage advertisers to enter gay media, now advertisers were quite willing to advertise to gays and lesbians, but slashed budgets meant that gay media were among the first vehicles to be dropped.⁷⁵ Publishing giants, such as Conde Nast, can put great pressure on advertisers to honor contracts because they control large numbers of publications and thus access to readers; the size of gay publications' circulations mean that they have far less clout in negotiating contracts.

While it is hard to predict the course or effects of the economic climate on gay marketing and images of gay people in advertising, the marketers I interviewed were optimistic about an ongoing diversification of products advertised to gay consumers, particularly in the packaged goods and automobile categories.⁷⁶ Stuart Elliott mentioned that the economic downturn might have a positive effect on gay marketing, since it was a similar economic climate in the early 1990s that sent mainstream marketers in search of gay consumers: “[marketing] people said ‘Oh God, nobody’s spending money—oh wait! Those people are spending money, maybe we should advertise to them!’”⁷⁷ In the hard times brought on by economic instability, the doctrine of “business, not politics” may be particularly persuasive: demands for new consumers overshadow trickier questions of if and how to market to—and offer images of—gays and lesbians.

The formation of the gay market in the past 30 years reflects an increasing tendency throughout the twentieth century to segment potential consumers into niche markets; recognizable patterns of market formation had been established long before marketers began to target gays and lesbians. With the African-American market, for example, we see similar trends to those with the gay market: Black entrepreneurs and marketers recognized the need to overcome negative stereotyping in advertising, expressed optimism about the impact of positive

images in marketing on civil rights, educated white-owned corporations about African-American consumers, and were hired by advertising agencies for their subcultural expertise in knowing how to appeal to the African-American market. When marketers became interested in gay consumers they were therefore already familiar with the processes required to cultivate niche markets, and many large companies already had personnel in their marketing departments skilled in appealing to niche markets. However, the conditions within which the gay market was produced and the challenges of cultivating an ideal gay consumer within a context of homophobic mainstream images meant that specific pressures were brought to bear on this ideal image, at some cost to the general visibility of gay people. In the following section I look at how the marketing demands of representing the “gay community” construct an extremely narrow view of that community, a view that has not only business but political consequences.

A place at the table: The gay and lesbian market and its orphans

The history of niche market formation shows that markets are not merely natural groups that emerge from the gloom, ready-packaged for sale to corporate advertisers and media producers. Instead, marketing professionals actively work to produce markets desirable enough to warrant corporate attention. As one commentator put it, marketers “have segmented markets, rather than merely responding to a market segment that already existed. There was no such thing as the Pepsi Generation until Pepsi created it.”⁷⁸ Thus marketers actively constructed the gay market and an accompanying image of the “typical” or ideal gay consumer that has been represented in gay-themed ads. This process, however, is not an innocent one but, like all marketing, utilizes only those most desirable elements of a social group around which to crystallize a consumer identity. In the context of stereotypes of gay men as sissies and

pedophiles, and lesbians as ugly anti-consumers, how have marketers shaped a desirable gay market? Which stereotypes have they promoted, and what have they repressed? Which elements of the gay community are represented in gay marketing images, and which groups are orphaned? In this section I compare the image of the ideal gay consumer with those elements of the GLBT community that must be banished from the public face of gayness in order to construct the “gay market.”

Michael Wilke, former *Advertising Age* journalist and creator of commercialcloset.org, described the dominant image of the gay market as “still extremely neutered of any sexuality, it’s very wholesome in its imagery, very white, very male, very affluent, for the most part; there has not been a great diversity in [advertisers’] approach to showing [gay] people.”⁷⁹ This image reflects the earliest gay-oriented market research that was based on unrepresentative readership surveys by the *Advocate*. That research set in motion a series of studies that collected responses from readers of gay- and lesbian-specific media and from gay mailing lists, both of which are typically skewed towards a more affluent and educated population. The results of these studies then become circulated as “facts about the gay community” rather than just the results of survey samples. The affluence of the gay market is then interpreted and reproduced through a range of other social assumptions about gay consumers, such as the perception that gay people are “DINKs” (Double Income, No Kids). According to Kurt DeMars, advertising director at *Out*, gay men are “not putting Junior through college, we’re not buying the wife shoes, and supporting the household, in most cases.... Even though we’ve got more income than the average US adult, that income also goes further.”⁸⁰ Marketers frequently extrapolated from their assumptions about gay affluence and education to imagine gay consumers in narrow and elevated class terms. For example Patrick O’Sullivan, advertising account supervisor for a brewing company, claimed that

the average 21 to 29 year old gay male beer drinker is a lot different in his mental make-up than the 21 to 29 year old blue-collar beer drinker. This is a much more sensitive, much more well-educated, much more savvy, more intellectual person, so your advertising is going to reflect that. It's more high—it looks more like liquor ads than it does like beer. Because beer is usually—across the board, and this is generalizing—the beer ads are probably more like a sitcom than a PBS show.⁸¹

The beer company targets either sitcom-watching blue-collar drinkers or PBS-watching, affluent, educated, gay drinkers, but cannot imagine that consumers may be both blue-collar and gay—and PBS watchers, for that matter. Sullivan's comment reveals that the common perception of the gay market as affluent has a class-based taste component as well: gay consumers are not only wealthy, but appealing to them requires an acknowledgement of their elevated tastes (PBS, not sitcoms) that their gay subcultural capital affords. As *Out*'s former editor in chief James Collard bragged: “Gay men have the taste level and the money to buy Prada, but also to buy Dockers, Gap and Nautica.”⁸²

Closely related to the myth of gay consumers as affluent and tasteful is their long-standing reputation as trendsetting. Former Spare Parts partner Stephanie Blackwood commented that some alcohol advertisers had been successful at “creating a sense of ‘you’ve got to drink [Absolut] to be a trendsetter’: ...it’s one of the things we do, we set trends.”⁸³ If marketers can appeal to gay men’s taste and garner their support, the more conservative heterosexual mainstream will follow.

A further factor assumed to enhance the “quality” of the gay market is the perceived loyalty of gay consumers. “Loyalty is huge in this marketplace: ... if they believe that you stand by them, then they are there for you, I mean, look at Subaru—it’s just an incredible loyalty that

gays and lesbians have for Subaru.”⁸⁴ The gay.com media kit quotes research that found that “88% of gay people surveyed confirmed that they go out of their way to buy brands that support the gay and lesbian community.”

The circulation of this ideal image of the gay consumer as affluent, educated, freespending, trendsetting, and loyal encourages national corporations to approach gays and lesbians in at least three ways. First, corporations may simply be more aware of gay people as a potential market. Second, they may find the image of the ideal gay consumer more palatable than the more familiar, homophobic stereotypes, and thus feel advertising to gays carries less of a risk of negative associations than earlier. Third, advertisers may believe that the loyalty and trendsetting powers of the gay market make up for its small size. Yet this construction of the gay market necessitates that those members of the gay community who don’t “fit” be banished; women, people of color, transgender people, sexually and politically active people are largely orphaned by this marketing process. As one journalist commented in 1982, lesbians “are discounted so completely, when it comes to consumer power, that most people who talk about the ‘gay market’ make the implicit assumption that it is a male market.”⁸⁵ This assumption continues even into the early 2000s, for a number of reasons: women still earn less on average than men, so lesbian households have less disposable income than do heterosexual or gay male households; lesbians are more likely to have children than gay men, cutting into the disposable income they do have;⁸⁶ lesbians are hard to reach as a market, since they are less likely to subscribe to gay and lesbian magazines, attend advertiser-sponsored gay and lesbian events, or surf the internet than are gay men;⁸⁷ and advertisers often assume lesbians to be feminists, and lesbian feminism has a reputation for being anti-consumerist, anti-fashion, and generally hostile to marketing. Despite the rise in interest in lipstick lesbians in the mid 1990s, marketers have

been largely unwilling or unable to incorporate a desirable, “authentically” lesbian consumer into their appeals. Finally, there are few openly lesbian marketing professionals, meaning that there is a dearth of women prepared to champion the cause of—or lend their expertise to—lesbian-themed and -targeted marketing campaigns. As a result, corporate advertising directed to lesbian consumers is rare, and lesbian publications struggle to find companies willing to invest in advertising to lesbian readers.

Women are notably scarce in advertisers’ view of the gay market; similarly, people of color are also much less often appealed to or represented in gay-themed ads than are white people. While a few ads in recent years show more diverse images, such as gay.com’s “community” ad that shows Latino, Black, Asian, and white women and men, these remain the exception and are largely confined to print media. Since gay and lesbian people of color are a small segment of an already small market, advertisers may believe they are not worth the investment of resources necessary to appeal directly to them. This relative lack of racial diversity may also reflect the low numbers of people of color in advertising agencies overall, and gay and lesbian marketers of color may be less likely than their white peers to be open about their sexuality.⁸⁸ As a result, gay and lesbian people of color are thus less available to persuade clients to represent racial diversity in their gay-themed campaigns. Yet the low frequency of people of color in ads also suggests that most gay marketers can imagine a gay market or African-American, Asian-American or Latino markets, but find it hard to see overlaps between these: in life one may be both gay or lesbian and a person of color, but rarely in ads.

There are two notable exceptions to this: first, HIV pharmaceutical advertising has represented the most racially diverse ads in gay publications. (How the recent FDA ban on drug

ads showing hyperhealthy images of HIV positive people will effect the diversity of images in these ads remains to be seen.) Second, Prime Access agency, run by Howard Buford who is African-American and openly gay, actively works to produce racially diverse images and Spanish language ads for the gay and lesbian market, and also produces ads for non-gay related products for the African-American and Latino/a markets. Buford said,

One of our missions was not to let that image of the gay market, of young, athletic, wealthy, white boys, be the image of the gay market when people think of it in their minds. Both in the [gay] community and outside the community. So if you look at our advertising, none of it allows you to think that.⁸⁹

Buford thus saw it as his social responsibility to produce a racially diverse gay visibility through his marketing images.

With the exception of Buford, few of my interviewees addressed the fact that there is racial diversity *within* the gay and lesbian market; on the contrary, some discussed (white) gayness itself as standing for “diversity.” In our discussion of his role as creative director of the gay-themed IKEA television commercial, I asked Patrick O’Neil whether he had considered casting an interracial gay couple. He explained,

we could have maybe [cast a man of color], but I think if we had done that, that maybe would have lessened the impact of the whole idea of a gay couple. It would have been more about a Black and a white guy, or something. I think: keep the minority pure! [laughs] If that makes any sense at all.⁹⁰

For O'Neil, maintaining the "impact" of a gay-themed ad required the somewhat chilling strategy of "keep[ing] the minority pure," ostensibly to avoid anti-"politically correct" backlash or token casting. While his laughter and remark about whether his statement "makes any sense" suggest that O'Neil is aware of a contradiction between exploring sexual diversity while narrowing racial diversity, the routines of marketing leave little space for an exploration of this contradiction, at least in most campaigns that actually reach the consuming public. Thus keeping the "minority pure" suggest conflict between different axes of "diversity," where gayness either stands in for or eclipses other non-dominant identifications.

If marketing routines mitigate against recognizing complex intersections between sexual and racial identities, they also demarcate artificially clear boundaries between "gay (and lesbian)" and "heterosexual" consumers. Bisexuals are almost completely ignored, considered to be either a distinct, separate market uninterested in gay-themed ads but too small to warrant much attention, or part of a larger gay market and positively disposed towards gay-themed appeals. When I asked Stuart Elliott whether he thought there was such a thing as a "bisexual market" he responded:

Oh Jeez! No! I think that's slicing the baloney a little too thin at this point. I think it's going to take a long time for that, like the transgender market.... I think that's probably a little too narrowly focused even in this era of specialized media.⁹¹

Howard Buford also pointed out that it is very hard to represent bisexuality in print, compared with, for example, a time-based medium such as television.⁹² While bisexual and transgender people are even less visible as a potential market than gays and lesbians, transvestism and transsexuality are frequent jokes in advertising images that commonly serve to reinstate

normative gender boundaries. For example, in a television commercial for Clothesline, a women's apparel company, a gorgeous, sexy "woman" strips to reveal a man's chest and flexing biceps, accompanied by the tagline "if Clothesline can make Paul look this good, imagine what we can do for *real* women." In contrast, when gay and lesbian images appear in ads, marketers work hard to ensure their gender conformity: no sissy boys or butch dykes here, except as the butt of the homophobic joke.

The invisibility and stigma still experienced by many GLBT people means that collecting representative data is notoriously hard.⁹³ Even if people are willing to come out to market researchers as gay, unless they are readers of gay magazines, donors to gay causes, Internet users or otherwise on gay mailing lists they are difficult to find and thus to survey. These challenges skew the figures supposed to represent GLBTs as a community, since data from these limited samples are then applied to the general gay population. As Sean Strub commented:

When somebody does a readers' survey, well that's not describing the gay and lesbian community overall, it's describing those readers. But very often in the press reports that's misconstrued—"Out magazine says the average gay household has 3 CD players" or whatever. Well, no, it's not what *Out* magazine is saying, they are saying that this is their readership, and their readership varies from *Genre's*, or *Gay Community News's*, or the *New York Blade's*.⁹⁴

Indeed, the recent Syracuse University & OpusComm Group study, the "2001 Gay/Lesbian Consumer Online Census," cashed in on the publicity surrounding the 2000 US Census. Calling market research a "census" is likely to give the impression that the study collected data from the

whole gay and lesbian population (as if that were ever possible), rather than from a small, unrepresentative sample.

Yet one consequence of the difficulty of collecting gay and lesbian demographic data is that people of modest income and poorer people are ignored as part of the gay market. They are also absent from gay images in marketing, as they tend to be in mainstream ads. The stereotype of the ideal gay consumer as affluent, educated, and childless contrasts with more representative studies of gay, lesbian, and bisexual consumers that have showed, according to economics professor Lee Badgett:

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people do not earn more than heterosexual people; gay, lesbian, and bisexual people do not live in more affluent households than heterosexual people; [and] two studies show that gay men earn less than similarly qualified heterosexual men. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are found throughout the spectrum of income distribution: some are poor, a few are rich, and most are somewhere in the middle, along with most heterosexual people.⁹⁵

Badgett reports that the “Double Income, No Kids” stereotype of gay male affluence reflects gender inequalities in income, not higher than average incomes of individual gay men.⁹⁶

The image of the ideal gay consumer, fuelled by folklore and unreliable market research data, singles out only the population most interesting to marketers and reproduces this group as “the gay market” and, by extension, “the gay community.” Omitted from this profile is the diversity of GLBT identifications, lives, and communities, where women, people of color, poorer and working class people, transgender and bisexual people remain largely invisible in advertising

both within gay media and in the mainstream. What remains is only a fraction of the GLBT community, whose large disposable income is augmented by elevated tastes and a class-specific gay subcultural capital.

If only affluent, and largely white, gay men are considered ideal gay consumers in part through the tastes that their economic and subcultural capital affords, taste also structures the way gay sexuality becomes contained in gay advertising and marketing images. Thus the marketing environment limits not only the demographics of the ideal gay consumer but also the boundaries of his acceptable behavior.⁹⁷ The history of gay marketing reveals that gay media has become increasingly “desleazified,”⁹⁸ and the ideal gay consumer’s sexuality has become quite discreet, in part to distance the market from the long-standing stereotype of gay men as sex-obsessed. With the exception of Megan Ishler at *On Our Backs*, all gay and lesbian national magazine publishers I spoke to maintained that they refuse “sex ads.” Michael Kaminer, *Out’s* original director of public relations, related that the publishers’ decision to refuse sex ads was “a gamble, but it’s a simple fact of life you’re not going to attract major advertisers with [sex ads] in your magazine.... The ads are lucrative, but there’s no way you are going to get the big names.”⁹⁹ What a sex ad is, however, turned out to be slippery: publishers refused 900-number phone sex lines and escort services, while accepting “tasteful” ads for sex stores such as Good Vibrations. Magazine publishers seemed especially concerned to distance their publications from expressly commercial sexual trade between strangers, while sometimes advertising products that facilitate private, domestic sexual play. With a few exceptions, such as Bruce Weber’s images of sexually suggestive male intimacy in Abercrombie & Fitch ads (ads that tend to be only suggestively gay and could also be read as heterosexual “buddy” narratives), most representations in mainstream and gay media advertising are thoroughly desexed. The rule of

thumb appears to be that some degree of sexiness is permissible if the product itself is not sex-related, such as beverages or clothes, but sex-specific products such as KY Lotion lubricant must be more “tasteful” or, specifically, sexually discreet.

Gay marketing thus offers an even narrower range of possible representations than does general marketing. Of course, all advertising distorts the populations it represents to offer aspirational images, “life and lives worth emulating.”¹⁰⁰ Gay marketing offers gay and lesbian people a version of life that is comfortable, elegant, and free of the daily presence of homophobia, a fantasy world which may seem particularly appealing and to which less privileged gays and lesbians may aspire. The male, affluent, educated, tasteful, white, and sexually discreet ideal gay consumer has become the public face of gayness, how we as gay and lesbian people may begin to imagine ourselves and how we are imagined by the heterosexual mainstream. While we would be naïve to expect advertising to accurately portray any group, the ways that gays and lesbians are represented in advertising are particular to the cultural context of homophobia and GLBT invisibility, reflecting both that context and the attempts of gay- and lesbian-identified marketer to compensate for it.

Gay and lesbian marketers: Experts, educators, progressives, professionals

Marketers involved in representing and appealing to gay and lesbian people have come under much criticism for offering such a limited view of GLBT communities. Such criticism tends to assume that heterosexual marketers impose this narrow view from “above,” duping and seducing hitherto nonconsuming, otherwise politically active, gay and lesbian people. A few commentators acknowledge that gay and lesbian people themselves are involved in gay marketing efforts, but can only imagine their role as the servants of major corporations. In this

view, gay, lesbian, and bisexual marketers' subcultural knowledge of GLBT subcultures and mores has merely been exploited as a means to get under the skin of gay and lesbian consumers, or, worse still, used to appeal to heterosexuals using gay images. Yet the assumption that marketers interested in gay consumers are either heterosexual and exploitive, or GLBT-identified and exploited, is complicated by the descriptions marketers offered of their work. Some of the gay- and lesbian-identified marketers I interviewed discussed straddling a sometimes uncomfortable boundary between business and politics, positioning themselves as experts on gay matters whose role it is to educate heterosexual corporate America and, by doing so, effect some progressivist political change. In their roles as experts, educators, progressives, and professionals, however, gay marketers were always aware of the limits the business context placed upon their political efforts.

1. Experts

Interviewees repeatedly asserted that effective marketing to gay consumers required special expertise, an expertise based on the subcultural capital that being gay- or lesbian-identified affords, and that professional training alone cannot offer. Gay marketing consultant Dan Baker recalled that in the early to mid-1990s, especially, gay agencies and freelancers were in demand because large corporations “didn’t know—and their advertising agencies didn’t know—anything about the gay market, and ... they wanted to deal with people they felt could tell them something that they didn’t know.”¹⁰¹ More recently, some general-market agencies have utilized the skills and subcultural knowledge of openly gay agency personnel on gay-themed ads, and this has become an increasing trend as more employees come out at work.

Bob Witeck recounted that he had been contracted by an international airline because his PR firm employed openly gay public relations specialists who were integrated into gay and ACT

UP communities, and who had previous experience dealing with gay public relations issues. As a result, his staff offered gay-specific expertise not developed in the airline's general-service PR firm. He worked with this client's advertising agency personnel (whom he assumed to be heterosexual) to develop a gay-themed campaign:

We brainstormed with them on some ideas that they were eager to talk about, and the thing we were puzzled by [was that] they didn't know about basic things about imagery in the gay community—what was appropriate, what was inappropriate imagery, or what are appropriate messages and what's inappropriate. There are certain things you can say that talk about being special or unique that can connote being ghettoized, and some that can talk about it in a way that is refreshing and appropriate. And they would come up with some [ideas] that were not quite right at all, and some that could have been downright offensive.¹⁰²

Witeck's gay subcultural capital afforded him the nuanced perception of appeals that allowed for an adjudication between those that were and weren't "appropriate," a perception that heterosexual marketers were considered less likely to possess.

Gay marketers were also expected to reflect and sell the elevated and gay-specific cultural capital that distinguish gay consumers (men, at least) from the mainstream. Caitlin Hume, former sales representative at *Out*, said that some prospective advertisers saw gay male sales representatives as the embodiment of their desired target audience: "a trendy, stylish, jet-set guy saying 'talk to me, I'll listen'—I think that's an incredible strength that [gay male sales reps] have."¹⁰³

The heterosexual-identified marketers I interviewed discussed this gay-specific expertise, acknowledging that not being part of a gay subculture meant that they were not as attuned to its codes. Patrick Sullivan, agency account supervisor for a brewing company, explained:

I am not gay, so I have had to put aside my own stereotypical perceptions and really go out to a lot of gay bars and try to learn about this marketplace, and there's no way a straight person can market to gays and lesbians without getting out there and—you know, you can't do it from a desk.¹⁰⁴

Thus if marketers were not themselves gay, they needed to acquire knowledge about gay culture and concerns in order to make successful appeals.

In some cases, this knowledge-acquisition process was seen as actually helping a campaign. Walter Schubert described his agency creatives' development of gay-themed gfn.com ads in general market media:

They went out to get a sense of what it is like for a gay person in the world of finance. Several of the designers, the creative minds there, posed as gay people in live settings and were really surprised to see the responses they got. They didn't know that life was indeed like that for gay people.... It was shocking. Whereas to me, or to most gay people, it's not a shocking thing to walk into a branch office of a bank and for people to give you an odd look if you are with your partner. For a straight person to play a gay role in a bank, it's quite shocking to get a strange look, so that was electrifying for them.¹⁰⁵

Schubert felt that this electrifying, shocking realization of the mundane homophobia of the banking world stimulated the creatives to produce a distinctive campaign.

In general, however, gay-identified marketers doubted how effectively heterosexual marketers could ever acquire the subtlety of gay subcultural capital to produce effective

advertising to gays. Part of this skepticism may have arisen from gay-identified marketers' need to protect the niche their professional expertise offers, since their gay subcultural capital is their best commodity, guaranteeing their ongoing employment as the only ones who "really know" the gay market.

2. Educators

Gay- and lesbian-identified marketers described taking this subcultural expertise and using it to educate heterosexual personnel in both large corporations and in advertising agencies. Stephanie Blackwood, a marketing and public relations consultant who specializes in gay issues, explained her role in educating businesses about gay consumers and, conversely, gay consumers about what she perceived as increasingly progressive corporate policies:

We are in the business of providing consultation on the gay and lesbian market, marketing, and communication to corporations that are interested not only in enhanced business transactions with the market, but with increasing their understanding and communications... And trying to do that in both directions, helping the market understand what corporate America's all about.¹⁰⁶

Blackwood here describes a gay-inflected version of the classic model of public relations, the role of which is to oil the cogs between large national companies and their potential consumers.¹⁰⁷

Some marketers also saw their role as educators of advertising agency personnel about the value of gay marketing. Caitlin Hume, sales representative at *Out*, described her frustration about what she thought was a

lack of understanding about what a powerful market [gays represent], then you get them over that bump and you suddenly realize that it pays to advertise to gays, and then they're

scared to go and talk to their clients about it. Quite often because they don't know how to. We've got to educate them on that till they get there, and then you've got to say "Go and tell the client."¹⁰⁸

Hume's comment suggests the powerful role agency staff have as intermediaries between, on one hand, publishers and other gay marketers who attempt to sell the gay market and, on the other, corporations that may or may not be interested in these consumers.

With both heterosexual-owned companies and their agencies, my interviewees discussed their educational roles not only in pragmatic terms—advertising to gay consumers makes business sense—but also in terms of educating heterosexual America about the virtues of gay people. As such, they positioned themselves as ambassadors for gay communities, uniquely placed to enlighten the views of what they frequently cast as ignorant and/or hostile corporate America. As such, their role was as political progressives, pushing back narrow-minded beliefs about gays and lesbians and shedding light on their value as consumers.

3. Progressives

Marketers talked about their work as contributing to what they perceived to be a cultural movement towards better lives for lesbians and gay men. Some interviewees, such as Deutsch's executive vice president Andrew Beaver, framed their personal politics within an explicitly assimilationist position, welcoming the integration of gay and lesbian people and subcultures into the mainstream. At the other end of the scale, a few interviewees articulated much more critical views of advertising and the place of gay marketing within gay and lesbian politics. Far more common was a generally optimistic perspective that associated increased gay visibility with validation, where advertisers' recognition of gay consumers was taken as evidence of political or social recognition of gay people.

Interviewees generally played down the potential of advertising for social *change* in favor of the less disruptive concept of social *responsibility*. As Buford stated,

Advertising is not about social change, it's about marketing. And we don't lose sight of that. But we also can't lose sight of the fact that right now we're at a stage when people are forming their opinions and impressions and defining things they had no definition for before, and we do have a role in that, we do have a responsibility in that.¹⁰⁹

The responsibility Buford and others alluded to included taking care to resist reproducing hypersexualized images of gay men, and to represent the GLBT community as racially diverse. Liz Gumbiner also suggested that while hoping for social *change* through advertising naively disregarded the industry's generally conservative climate, it was possible to aim for some social *good*: for example, she saw her Mystic commercial as having some affirmative and educative effects. Thus some advertisers suggested that while they were working within narrow constraints placed upon them from the outside (by clients, media, and audiences), they could still aim for a progressive outcome from individual campaigns.

4. Professionals

Gay-identified marketers worked not only within the narrow constraints placed upon them by corporate culture, but also within the constraints posed by being openly gay within a climate of homophobia. The still contested status of homosexuality in the United States means that gay marketers must work hard to constitute their work and professional identities as “respectable.” My interviewees’ roles as educators with specialized expertise, tastes, lifestyles, and political orientations suggest some of the strategies by which they constituted themselves as “normal ... people with ambition,” in opposition to the pervasive stereotypes of gay “people in bars,” “silly queens” and “dykes on bikes showing their breasts.”¹¹⁰ Their distancing themselves

from the more controversial elements of the GLBT community took place, however, through constructing a professional identity that was as much class-based as it was rooted in sexual identity. Gay- and lesbian-identified marketers were happy to talk about the impact their sexual identities had on their work, as well as gender (especially women interviewees) and, occasionally, race (especially Howard Buford). What was more difficult to broach was the impact their professional and class identities had on their work. In 10 follow-up interviews, eight marketers currently identified as “professional,” “upper middle class,” or “bourgeois,” one identified as “educated working class” and Patrick Califia-Rice, long time writer for the gay and lesbian press (as Pat Califia), identified himself as “Class X,” that is, with much educational capital but limited economic capital. Five of these ten described their family backgrounds as working class; the remainder said their upbringing was middle or upper middle class. Their sexual minority status was clearly part of many interviewees’ identity construction; in contrast, they found it hard to discuss what impact their class position had on their expertise and how this fed into their work. This omission is particularly striking given that the gay market is constructed as so narrowly class-specific.

Many marketers’ generally progressive agenda was framed within larger personal and professional demands to embody the most “acceptable” versions of gayness, a version that has become reproduced in the marketing materials they produce. This respectability enabled them to perform the progressive functions of experts and educators. Yet while they constructed their professional identities as politically progressive, they also identified as businesspeople, a position which, with few exceptions, emphasized the most accommodationist aspects of GLBT culture. In some senses, gay, lesbian, and bisexual marketers’ professionally-framed progressivism was reassuring, since it suggests that they brought to their work a political

orientation that may influence how heterosexual colleagues and clients think about marketing strategies. Yet a progressive political position that simply equates visibility with validation and social equality is problematic, since it suggests that the rightful place of civil rights struggle is within the free market economy and its popular manifestations, including advertising, advertiser-supported publishing, and public relations. As Don Slater writes, in the late twentieth century “consumer culture is the privileged medium for negotiating identity and status within a post-traditional society.”¹¹¹ When we look at the woeful stagnation of civil rights legislation during the most active period of gay marketing, we must put marketers’ optimism about the positive effects of their work in a larger context and remember that consumer visibility guarantees nothing in terms of legal improvements in the lives of GLBT people.

Audience responses to gay images in advertising

The limited images and behaviors that gay marketing offers prompts inquiry into how and why gay marketing works, and for whom.¹¹² Whether or not gay and lesbian audiences may identify with images in ads, they are nevertheless believed to welcome such images. Joe Landry explained,

You have a socially repressed consumer segment that’s now identifiable and marketable. An ad from a corporation is seen as an affirmation that the company is interested in [gay] business. The consumer feels good about supporting companies that support their publications—there’s an emotional connection to the product.¹¹³

Scholar Nicola Field argues that no matter how frustrated gay and lesbian people might be with such a limited view of GLBT life, they are even more frustrated by the slow pace of social change and might look to corporations for some ameliorative (if short term) measures:

Whilst most gay people have no illusions about the aim of any commercial enterprise—gay or straight or just making money—the frustration, anger and sense of political vacuum means that sometimes business appears to be the only way to develop, the only way of attaining bargaining power.¹¹⁴

Yet investing in business structures to enact changes that need to occur in social and governmental institutions risks deflecting political energies from goals that may seem harder to attain but would, in the long run, be more valuable.

Thus GLBT audiences may experience some relief, if not gratitude, at seeing at least some version of their lives in gay-themed advertising. Yet such relief does not guarantee success: marketers appealing to or representing gays and lesbians must walk a narrow line between two poles: GLBT people critical of homophobic, shallow, or co-opting ads; and anti-gay groups hostile to any public manifestations of gayness, let alone normalized or affirming ones. Gay-themed ads thus carry a double burden of “success,” for successful appeals must meet both business and political goals: they must produce an increase in consumer interest, on the one hand, and win the approval of GLBT communities—and avoid punitive anti-gay backlash—on the other. In the arena of consumer feedback, then, we see another place where the tidy distinction between business and politics breaks down.

Measuring responses to advertising is notoriously unreliable: as department store magnate John Wanamaker famously lamented, “I know that half my advertising expenditure is wasted; the problem is, I don’t know which half.”¹¹⁵ Figuring out which gay- or lesbian-themed campaigns have been “successful” is an uncertain science at best. Some gay-themed campaigns have a “natural” environment in which consumer response may be assessed: for example,

gauging the impact of advertising liquor, beer, and other beverages to gay consumers is possible by tracking consumption in bars, assuming that gay bar-goers are reliably gay or lesbian. Web-based advertising offers a means to measure click-through rates, but research suggests that consumer response to banner ads overall is very low—less than one percent¹¹⁶—making it hard to measure the effectiveness of gay-themed appeals. Walter Schubert informed me that responses to gfn.com’s banner advertising was more successful than to their print ads in mainstream media, but was still disappointing.¹¹⁷ Some ads attempt to track consumer response by using coupons or unique telephone numbers that can be used to trace the publication in which the ad originally appeared; however, one marketer of sexual lubricant found that gay men were far less likely to redeem coupons than other consumers, making this method unreliable in assessing the efficacy of their ads in gay media.

The challenge of accurately tracking marketing appeals to gays may account for the privileged role that consumer letters and emails play in marketers’ appraisals of their campaigns. Jim Consolantis, senior partner at Ogilvy and Mather, described the effusive response to their IBM print ad that showed a gay male couple under the tag line “we’re not your typical mom and pop operation.” At a presentation on gay marketing hosted by *Out* and the *New York Times*, Consolantis read an email from a grateful consumer:

Rarely have I seen a non-entertainment or recreational product company be so adventuresome, lighthearted, and functional in the marketing of such a big company. [The ad] signaled a new beginning where the real gay consumers that own a business and share their lives together could be the centerpiece for such a wonderful campaign.... Please know that it will be your server’s hardware and software that will run our

operation too. Our loyalty to IBM is turning it from blue to a rainbow of colors and new customers.¹¹⁸

Indeed, the response to this ad was so overwhelming that the director of advertising at IBM hoped to “hit that emotional core that we did in ‘Mom & Pop’ with all of our advertising.”

In addition to consumer letters, marketers also looked towards gay activist organizations for confirmation of the validity of their campaigns. Gay-themed advertising can garner much publicity through the circulation of press releases, such as via the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation’s (GLAAD’s) email and printed mailings. Most often this publicity encourages readers to respond directly to companies attempting to advertise in “positive” ways to gay and lesbian consumers. Further, GLAAD’s annual Media Awards for advertising were seen as a seal of approval from the gay community.¹¹⁹ Recalling positive feedback to their Mystic Beverages campaign, Deutsch’s Liz Gumbiner told me “last year we won the GLAAD Media Award for the advertising category, which was really, really special—that meant a lot.”¹²⁰ Bob Witeck related that one of his public relations clients had benefited from such awards, including one from the AIDS Action Council: “getting awards in the last couple of years, we’re very aware of the opportunities that gives [the airline] for visibility.”¹²¹ Both, then, for advertiser affirmation and for the benefits of increased publicity, gay-related media awards were seen as signs of an ad’s success.

Trade and popular press attention was acknowledged by marketers as another form of recognition; Patrick O’Neil claimed that because of news coverage of the gay-themed IKEA commercial, the company got “\$10 million of free publicity, at least.”¹²² Other interviewees, however, lamented a gratuitous exploitation of gay themes solely to get press attention. Commenting on a Virgin Cola television commercial featuring a gay wedding, Stuart Elliott

observed, “a lot of times [advertisers] put a gay theme in an ad because they know it’ll be controversial, and they know it won’t be accepted and then they get a lot of publicity and can say ‘oh, our ad was turned down [by a television station or cable channel].’ ”¹²³

If endorsements by gay consumers, activist groups, and journalists offer encouragement to marketers, pressure is also brought to bear on companies through the gay marketplace, and particularly through marketers’ recognition of the threat of gay boycotts. Perhaps the most famous—and long-running—gay consumer activism began in the late 1970s, when San Francisco supervisor Harvey Milk spearheaded a boycott of Coors beer in response to unethical employment practices and the Coors family’s support of anti-gay causes.¹²⁴ Despite revised company policies, a non-discrimination clause, domestic partnership benefits for gay employees, and an advertising campaign in gay media, the brewing company still suffers from remaining suspicion among gay consumers.¹²⁵

Other marketers related that the threat of gay boycotts could be turned into marketing “opportunities.” Two interviewees explained how instances of an airline’s mistreatment of passengers who may have been HIV positive led to ACT UP actions and a proposed boycott, but this was allayed by skillful public relations and sponsorship efforts. As the airline developed training videos under advice from AIDS advocacy groups, sponsored AIDS and gay causes, and generated public relations materials emphasizing that the company valued their customers whatever their medical status or sexual identity, AIDS and gay groups began to approach the company, seeing it as *more* invested in gay people and people with AIDS than were other airlines. Out of this grew the first Fortune 500 company’s sales force specializing in marketing to, sponsorship of, and group deals for gay and lesbian travelers. The threat of gay boycotts,

then, suggests both the power of gay consumers and the means by which the negative publicity such a threat produces may be rerouted to a “marketing and sales opportunity.”¹²⁶

In addition to watchful GLBT consumers and groups, audiences of gay marketing include groups hostile to gay visibility: people expressing homophobia towards gay marketing; heterosexual consumers articulating anxieties about consuming a “gay” product; and, most significantly, action from a relatively well-organized religious right wing. When marketers represent gay consumers, they must necessarily consider the backlash that such attention might provoke. Perhaps the most well-reported recent campaign was an unsuccessful boycott of the Disney company by Southern Baptists upset with the annual “Gay Day” at Disney World, the extension of health insurance benefits to gay employees’ partners, and (Disney-owned) ABC’s support of the very public coming out of Ellen DeGeneres and her character on *Ellen*.¹²⁷ Yet some companies are more vulnerable to right wing backlash and negative feedback than others: an anti-gay boycott of AT&T after their gay- and lesbian-themed direct mail campaign of 1994 reduced their market share and effectively suppressed further attempts by the phone company to openly court the gay market; IKEA’s gay television commercial prompted “fag-lover” graffiti on subway ads and a bomb threat to a store, truncating the ad run; and one of Mystic Beverages’ southern distributors ended his contract with the company in response to their lesbian-themed commercial, discouraging similar approaches in the future. Account supervisor Patrick Sullivan reported that his brewery client carefully coded and placed ads to draw as little attention as possible from their primary consumers—presumed to be heterosexual “blue collar beer drinkers”—to avoid becoming known as “the beer of the queers.”¹²⁸

Other corporations are more resistant to negative publicity and the threatened withdrawal of conservative consumers. Stephanie Blackwood emphasized that companies carefully balance

the potentially damaging impact of a campaign against the relative gains of attracting gay consumers:

Back in the 1980s ... the then president of Levi's said "okay we've got this threatened boycott [by the religious right]: tell me what the numbers are on the purchase of Levi's by the gay market." And the response was 60-some percent buy the Levi brand. And the next question was "well what's the market share on the religious right" and the response was: "we think they wear Lee's."¹²⁹

Levis thus felt confident that any religious right backlash would have little impact on their overall sales.

Indeed, some companies may factor in the *positive* publicity anti-gay backlash can produce. As one airline began sponsoring the Human Rights Campaign, GLAAD, and other gay advocacy groups, a coalition of anti-gay groups bought ad space in large urban newspapers calling for a national boycott. PR consultant Bob Witeck related that his firm

sent a letter to the [sponsored] organizations and just told them what was going on, and said "if you want to write us a supportive letter or communicate back with the company your appreciation, here's how to do it." Somebody transformed our letter into an Internet petition, which you've probably seen.... Probably way over a 100,000 people had contact with [the airline], more than you could ever respond to. Amazing... Nuns, priests, heads of companies, all these wonderful people who had written in, it's amazing.¹³⁰

In this case, bad publicity garnered a huge positive response that outweighed any reduction in revenue from anti-gay consumers, organized or otherwise.

The presence of real, responding audiences within gay marketers' purview helps to shape and contain the forms, venues, and images of gay marketing. The pressures on marketers are multiple and overlapping: gay consumers are unpredictable, hard to measure, and not wholly grateful; anti-gay boycotts are more or less effective. It is in response to these groups and their respective benefits and threats that marketers employing gay and lesbian themes must carefully construct and place their ads. In order to produce ads that are successful in terms of business, marketers—and especially those with gay expertise—navigate a complex political terrain.

Gay and lesbian images in advertising: The business and politics of visibility

This paper offers an overview of how the gay market has been produced over the past 30 years, both practically, through the gay media, trade press, market research, and so on, and symbolically, where stereotypes of gays and, to a lesser extent, lesbians have been transformed from homophobic caricatures to much more “positive” images. By focusing on the development of the gay market there is a tendency to exaggerate the presence of sexual minorities in advertising and to forget that gay and lesbian characters appear in only a tiny proportion of all ads. Many gay images appear only in selected media, in limited geographical markets, and for a short time, whether for reasons of economy or from anxieties about anti-gay backlash. Further, it would be a mistake to unconditionally welcome appearances of gays and lesbians in ads: the ongoing, homophobic jokes of the hypermasculine man who is “misrecognized” as gay, and unsympathetic portrayals of the sissy we could certainly live without, and groups such as GLAAD must continue to work against these. But even the more “positive” images—the respectable gay male couple, the irreproachable gay serviceman, the gender-conformist fem

couple—may also have limiting effects by perpetuating a narrow idea of what gay people are “really like.”

Two prevailing themes run through the formation of the gay market and subsequent gay-themed ads: the “business, not politics” refrain, and the cultivation of a narrow image of the gay male consumer as affluent, educated, trendsetting, tasteful, and increasingly sexually discreet. To conclude, I wish, first, to deconstruct the apparent separation of business from politics in gay marketing and, second, to link the “business, not politics” refrain with gay visibility, a visibility that is constructed through taste and gay subcultural capital.

Throughout this research it has struck me how often marketers invoke claims of “business, not politics.” Why are national corporations so adamant that courting the gay market is a business, not a political, decision? It may be a case of being able to have your cake and eat it too: while garnering much support from GLBT consumers, advertisers can at the same time reassure shareholders that it is really their profits they have in mind, and can aim to quell anti-gay backlash by denying their support of their GLBT consumer base. As one journalist summarized, appealing to sensible business decisions can

insulate [companies] against any flamboyant rhetoric from the religious right that [they are] “pandering to the homosexual community.” By pleading economic necessity, the company tacitly rules out of court all arguments based on morality claims that they are supporting deviance.¹³¹

Asserting that gay and lesbian consumers are “just another target group” plays down the stigma associated with gay sexuality; these are just shoppers, stripped of any unique and uncomfortably sexual (or political) practices. In the same vein, distancing an ad campaign from actual GLBT consumers by claiming that they are not appealing to this group but are signaling “diversity”

minimizes the risk that a product becomes known as “the gay shoe.” But the “business, not politics” refrain also comes from a larger context of the relationship between each in the national imagination: politics produces bad business decisions. Yet such a belief perpetuates the ideology that business isn’t somehow always political; business decisions, strategies, investments and disinvestments have political consequences at every level, from corporate contributions to national political campaigns to a decision to hire someone on welfare.

While the “business, not politics” refrain seems ubiquitous, there are a few examples of companies that do not make this distinction; that, in contrast, make a point of signaling their political investments. Perhaps the best example of this is Levi’s advertorial for the Dockers brand in *Out* magazine in November 1998. The company demonstrated its commitment to gay and lesbian youth through donations to the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), the Hetrick-Martin Institute, and other youth-oriented organizations. It also chose not just gay and lesbian celebrities but activists among its ten gay and lesbian “heroes.” Such “cause-related” appeals may come as a welcome relief in a superficially depoliticized marketing terrain, yet some commentators find this more a cynical incorporation of politics into business than a reciprocal exchange between business and political benefits. Even if this is the case, however, more expressly political marketing efforts may nevertheless still have value, in terms of affirming the ongoing need for GLBT activism, for supporting GLBT causes and groups, and for representing a (somewhat) more diverse image of gayness in advertising.

Yet even where companies would prefer that their gay marketing appears purely motivated by profits, the “business, not politics” distinction is untenable: while homosexuality remains politically and socially contested, any visibility that marketing affords cannot help but both rest upon and reproduce a view of GLBT people as in part politically constituted. The

“business, not politics” refrain suggests that it is possible to separate out the experience of GLBT lives from their political circumstances, that gays are just another identity or lifestyle group, like golfers. Yet the very organization of the gay market arose in part from being able to see gay people as a visible social group, largely through political agitation.¹³² For example, the 1993 gay and lesbian March on Washington brought gay people into public view: not coincidentally, the trade and popular press produced a flurry of articles on the gay market in the months leading up to the march.¹³³ Some writers made explicit links between a political presence and a target market: as Horovitz observes,

Two months from now, when nearly 1 million gays, lesbians and their supporters are expected to come to Washington in a massive march of unity, many participants might be surprised by who else will be joining them in force. Marketers.¹³⁴

Thus the visibility that marketing offers complements an already-existing political visibility, it does not produce it.

Thus it is particularly in the area of visibility that the “business, not politics” distinction breaks down. The national corporate interest in gay and lesbian consumers that facilitates gay visibility is heralded by many as encouraging more tolerance among the general population. Yet the business demands of gay marketing frame the politics of gay visibility, limiting who and what can be represented. One result is that so-called “positive images” may have negative effects in terms of how the gay community as a (fictitious) whole is imagined, both by GLBT people and by the heterosexual mainstream. Good business sense prompts marketers to emphasize only the most affluent elements of GLBT communities, yet this strategy has been used by anti-gay groups in ways counterproductive to GLBT civil rights.

Gay visibility is not only produced through a narrow view of GLBT communities, but through the tastes and gay subcultural capital fostered by the more privileged members of those communities. As Bourdieu outlines, taste is not arbitrary or idiosyncratic but is structured through access to different kinds of cultural, economic, and other capital. The overview offered above of the cultivation of the gay market and gay images in advertising shows that gay visibility is structured through taste, in two intersecting ways. First is through the construction of the ideal gay consumer as an affluent, tasteful, trendsetting gay man. This figure emerged in part from early market research based on very limited samples, yet also capitalizes on positive stereotypes: in place of the stereotype of the “silly queen,” a wealthy, cultivated, discerning gay man offered the best possible image to sell to nervous advertisers as a potential market. It also, not insignificantly, conformed to the image that more conservative factions of the gay liberation movement put forward as most assimilable into the heterosexual mainstream.

Second, we can extend Bourdieu’s discussion of taste beyond food and aesthetics to consider how sexual decorum, or “tastefulness,” also functions to produce cultural hierarchies. The “desleazification” of gay and lesbian commercial media and advertising distances gay marketing from the stereotype of gay men as hypersexual, a stereotype that threatens not only the moral but also the class respectability of the gay market. In gay marketing, then, taste functions both aesthetically—gay subcultural capital as displaying an elevated tastefulness that sets trends—and in terms of a discreet sexuality to produce a class-specific, ideal gay consumer. This leaves us with the irony that what makes the market distinct—its sexuality—is effaced, and into the resulting vacuum is poured other means to mark the gay niche as distinct: what replaces the ideal gay consumer’s sexual specificity is his professional class, gay subcultural tastes and lifestyle.

What we find, then, is that gay marketing is a matter of business *and* politics, and is sometimes too the business *of* politics. Yet the politics of gay and lesbian marketing visibility is far from clear: it has some good effects and some troubling ones. I do not concur with the most apocalyptic predictions from some GLBT critics about the effects of gay marketing, nor do I see those occasional images of gays and lesbians in marketing as the seachange that others optimistically forecast. Gay marketing images are often fun, sometimes interesting, occasionally gratifying, and the significance of corporate investment in underwriting gay and lesbian media and civil rights campaigning is not to be underestimated. But it is inherently frustrating to put our faith in the consumer sphere as our route to acceptance: for all its pleasures, to look towards the increasingly desperate attempts of corporate America to court gays and lesbians in order to protect and increase profits is to put our faith in a fickle creature. There may be political gains in marketing images, there are certainly political losses there too. We must remember to look outside the consumer sphere for real changes in the lives of GLBT people, even while we may take a breath of relief as corporate America casts its gargantuan gaze upon our unruly collectivity. Clearly, the distinction between “business and politics” is a bogus one: marketing images of and to GLBT people must necessarily be both. Yet gay marketing requires that GLBT politics be desexualized, and that, when it appears at all, GLBT sexuality is depoliticized. Ultimately, we must reinstate the importance of our sexuality in our sexual identifications, to turn from the question of whether gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender images in the consumer sphere are a matter of “business or politics” to ask if GLBT politics are a matter of “business or pleasure.” To which we must respond: “Both.”

ENDNOTES

¹ Riccardo A. Davis, "Marketers Game for Gay Events," *Advertising Age*, May 30 1994, S1.

² Martha T. Moore, "Courting the Gay Market," *USA Today*, April 23 1993, 1B.

³ While marketers and journalists use the term "the gay market" as an all-encompassing one, it is in fact carefully delineated in practice. Marketers' interest and investment are mainly focused on affluent gay men; there is some attention to lesbians, but mostly marketers hope that lesbians will interpret ads to gay men as appealing to them as well. Marketers occasionally acknowledge bisexuals and transgender people in their consideration of the gay market but most, like one interviewee, consider this "slicing the baloney a little too thin," i.e. believe these groups are too small to warrant marketing attention. To reflect the predominant focus on gay men, and to remain consistent with marketers' terminology, I refer to "the gay market" throughout this paper.

⁴ Dan Baker, interview, September 17, 1998. For details of data collection see method section, below.

⁵ Grant Lukenbill, *Untold Millions: Positioning Your Business for the Gay and Lesbian Consumer Revolution* (New York: Harper Business, 1995).

⁶ Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed, "The Gay Marketing Moment: Leaving Diversity in the Dust," *Dollars and Sense*, November/December 1993, 17.

⁷ M.V. Lee Badgett, "Income Inflation: The Myth of Affluence among Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Americans," (New York/Amherst MA: The Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the Institute for Gay and Lesbian Strategic Studies, 1998).

⁸ Quoted in Fred Fejes and Ron Lennon, "Defining the Lesbian/Gay Community? Market Research and the Lesbian/Gay Press," *Journal of Homosexuality* 39, no. 1 (2000): 28.

⁹ Suzanna Danuta Walters, *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) 15-16.

¹⁰ Katherine Sender, "Gay Readers, Consumers, and a Dominant Gay Habitus: Twenty-Five Years of the 'Advocate' Magazine," *Journal of Communication* 51, no. 1 (2001).

¹¹ Alexandra Chasin, *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

¹² Larry Gross, *Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) 233.

¹³ Chasin, *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market*.
Gross, *Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America*.
Walters, *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America*.

¹⁴ Notable exceptions are ethnographic studies by Karen Shapiro ("The Construction of Television Commercials: Four Cases of Interorganizational Problem Solving" [PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 1981]) and Don Slater ("Corridors of Power," in *The Politics of Field Research: Sociology Beyond Enlightenment*, ed. J.F. Gubrium and D. Silverman [Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989]).

¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

¹⁶ *The Advocate* (since 1967), *Alternative Family* (August/September, 1998), *Anything that Moves* (Fall, 1998), *Bad Attitude* (since 1997), *Black Sheets* (issue 16, 2000), *Blueboy* (December, 1999), *Clique* (March, 2000), *Deneuve*, later *Curve* (some since 1991, every issue

since September, 1998), *Girlfriends* (since September, 1998), *Drummer* (issue 211, 1998), *Hustler* (December, 1999), *Lesbian News* (May, 1998), *Men* (April 2001), *Metrosource* (Summer, 1998), *On Our Backs* (since its relaunch in June, 1998), *Out* (some issues since 1992, every issue since February, 1997), *Penthouse* (November, 1999), *Philadelphia Gay News* (June 16-22, 2000), *Playboy* (December, 1999), *Playgirl* (November, 1999), *POZ* (September and October, 1998), and *Q San Francisco* (November, 1998).

¹⁷ Gay.com; the gay financial site, gfn.com; and PlanetOut.

¹⁸ Articles from major United States publications were analyzed for this project. These came from the marketing and advertising trade press, such as *Advertising Age*, *Adweek*, *Print*, and *Catalog Age*; from newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Boston Globe*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Sun-Tribune* and from magazines such as *Rolling Stone*, *Newsweek*, and the *New Yorker*.

¹⁹ Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets and Class at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Verso, 1996) 91.

²⁰ Richard S. Tedlow, *New and Improved: The Story of Mass Marketing in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

Joseph Turow, *Breaking up America: Advertisers and the New Media World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

²¹ Tom Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

²² Edward M. Alwood, *Straight News: Gays, Lesbians and the News Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

Lukenbill, *Untold Millions: Positioning Your Business for the Gay and Lesbian Consumer Revolution*.

²³ Rodger Streitmatter, *Unspeakable: The Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Press in America* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995).

²⁴ Sender, "Gay Readers, Consumers, and a Dominant Gay Habitus: Twenty-Five Years of the 'Advocate' Magazine."

²⁵ A recent example of gay window advertising is the Volkswagen "da-da-da" ad that showed two young men driving aimlessly around a neighborhood: gay people tend to read these characters as a gay male couple, while heterosexual viewers are more likely to see them as roommates. See Michael Bronski, *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984);

Danae Clark, "Commodity Lesbianism," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Katherine Sender, "Selling Sexual Subjectivities: Audiences Respond to Gay Window Advertising," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 16, no. 2 (1999).

²⁶ For this and many other examples I am indebted to Michael Wilke and his excellent archive of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered ads: commercialcloset.org.

²⁷ Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

²⁸ John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

²⁹ Alwood, *Straight News: Gays, Lesbians and the News Media*.

³⁰ Lorraine Baltera, "No Gay Market yet, Admen, Gays Agree," *Advertising Age*, August 28 1972, 3.

³¹ Philip H. Dougherty, "Homosexual Magazines in Bids," *New York Times*, July 13 1976, 20.

³² Baltera, "No Gay Market yet, Admen, Gays Agree," 199.

³³ Lorraine Baltera, "Market Still in Closet over Gays as 'Them and Us' Attitude Lingers," *Advertising Age*, July 7 1975, 2.

³⁴ Business Week, "Gays: A Major Force in the Marketplace," September 3 1979.

³⁵ Alwood, *Straight News: Gays, Lesbians and the News Media*.

³⁶ Stuart Elliott, interview, November 18, 1998.

³⁷ Alwood, *Straight News: Gays, Lesbians and the News Media*.

Sender, "Gay Readers, Consumers, and a Dominant Gay Habitus: Twenty-Five Years of the 'Advocate' Magazine."

³⁸ Karen Stabiner, "Tapping the Homosexual Market," *New York Times Magazine*, May 2 1982, 74.

³⁹ Ibid. 36.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 85.

⁴¹ Ibid. 81.

⁴² Bronski, *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility*.

⁴³ Stuart Elliott, advertising columnist for the *New York Times*, interview, November 18, 1998.

⁴⁴ Jim Merrett, "A Gay Look at Advertising," *Advocate*, December 5 1988.

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- ⁴⁵ Stuart Elliott, "A Market That's Educated, Affluent and Homosexual," *New York Times*, September 23 1992, D27.
- ⁴⁶ Adam Pertman, "Ads Target Big Dollars, Not Big Change," *Boston Globe*, February 4 2001.
- ⁴⁷ Don Tuthill, publisher, *Q San Francisco* and *Passport*, phone interview, October 21, 1998.
- ⁴⁸ Joe Landry, phone interview, January 5, 1999.
- ⁴⁹ Stuart Elliott, "Imaginative Supplements Help a Pair of Magazines Build Relationships with Marketers," *New York Times*, June 26 1998.
- ⁵⁰ Bruce Horovitz, "Alternative Approach: Finding New Ways to Appeal to Gays, Lesbians," *Los Angeles Times*, February 23 1993, B7.
- ⁵¹ Bradley Johnson, "Economics Holds Back the Lesbian Ad Market," *Advertising Age*, January 18 1993.
- ⁵² Ibid. 34.
- ⁵³ Michael Wilke, "Gay Print Media Ad Revenue up 36%," *Advertising Age*, October 6 1997, 10.
- ⁵⁴ Liz Gumbiner, interview, September 7, 1998.
- ⁵⁵ Quoted on "Ship," 1997, Commercialcloset.org.
- ⁵⁶ Doris-Louise Haineault and Jean-Yves Roy, *Unconscious for Sale: Advertising, Psychoanalysis, and the Public* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
- ⁵⁷ Rachel Fox, phone interview, February 18, 1999. The campaign included one television ad that aired only in Canada and at least three print ads, two showing a man and a woman in an embrace, and the third showing two women.

58 Sender, "Selling Sexual Subjectivities: Audiences Respond to Gay Window Advertising."

59 Alexandra Chasin, "Selling Out: The Gay/Lesbian Market and the Construction of Gender," *Sojourner*, June 1997.

60 By including a discussion of HIV positive people and people with AIDS in advertising I do not want to suggest that all people who appear in these ads are supposed to be read as gay. Yet since AIDS disproportionately affects the gay male community, and many HIV pharmaceutical ads appear in gay media, there is at least an implication that some of the people shown are intended to be read as gay.

61 Sean Strub, interview, October 28, 1998.

62 Stuart Elliott, "Absolut Customizes a Campaign to Salute the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation," *New York Times*, February 22 2001, C6.

63 Ibid.

64 Joe Landry, phone interview, October 18, 2001.

65 Cliff Rothman, "A Welcome Mat for Gay Customers," *New York Times* 2001, F1.

66 Theresa Howard, "John Hancock Ads Reflect Real Life. Firm Reaches out to Diverse USA," *USA Today*, December 11 2000, 6B.

67 Stuart Elliott, interview, August 23, 2001.

68 Stuart Elliott, "The Showtime Network Prepares a \$10 Million Campaign Blitz for Its "Queer as Folk" Series," *New York Times*, November 28 2000.

69 Walter Schubert, phone interview, August 24, 2001.

70 Read by Jeffrey Newman, former gfn. com president and COO, at a Times Talk, *Boys in the Bandwidth*, February 29, 2000.

⁷¹ John Ritter, "Ads Linked to Rise in Rate of HIV Infections. City Considers Ban on Drug Billboards," *USA Today*, April 6 2001.

⁷² Jayson Blair, "Healthy Skepticism and the Marketing of AIDS," *New York Times*, August 5 2001, D14.

⁷³ Howard Buford, whose agency Prime Access produced one of the withdrawn ads, questioned the reliability of the data upon which this policy decision was made (interview, November 14, 2001).

⁷⁴ Reed Abelson, "Out Magazine Acquired by Key Rival," *New York Times*, February 21 2000.

Elinor Abreu, *Gay Portals Come Out* (Industry Standard, 2000 [cited February 18 2000]); available from www.thestandard.com.

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Carrie Kirby, "Gay Media Call Off Merger," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 9 2001.

Alex Kuczynski, "Merger to Link Gay Print and Internet Outlets," *New York Times*, March 23 2000.

⁷⁵ Joe Landry, phone interview, October 18, 2001.

⁷⁶ Joe Landry, phone interview, October 18, 2001.

⁷⁷ Stuart Elliott, phone interview, August 23, 2001.

⁷⁸ Tedlow, *New and Improved: The Story of Mass Marketing in America* 371-72.

⁷⁹ Michael Wilke, interview, January 19, 1998.

⁸⁰ DeMars, interview, April 1, 1999.

⁸¹ Patrick Sullivan, account supervisor, phone interview, February 17, 1999.

⁸² Stan Williams, "Securing the Out Post," *DNR*, April 24 1998, 3.

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- 83 Stephanie Blackwood, interview, January 19, 1998.
- 84 Patrick Sullivan, phone interview, February 17, 1999.
- 85 Stabiner, "Tapping the Homosexual Market," 74.
- 86 Badgett, "Income Inflation: The Myth of Affluence among Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Americans."
- 87 *Curve's* circulation in 1998 was 70,000, *Girlfriends'* was 30,000; 27% of the *Advocate's* 103,000 circulation is women, 16% of *Out's* 110,000 circulation is women. Only 25% of gay.com members are women, and women spend less time online than do men (Karla Solheim, "The Battle of the Queer Dot-Coms," *Girlfriends*, March 2000).
- 88 Annette Friskopp and Sharon Silverstein, *Straight Jobs, Gay Lives: Gay and Lesbian Professionals, the Harvard Business School, and the American Workplace* (New York: Scribner, 1995).
- 89 Howard Buford, interview, February 13, 1998.
- 90 Patrick O'Neil, interview, November 18, 1998.
- 91 Stuart Elliott, interview, November 18, 1998.
- 92 Howard Buford, phone conversation, May 1, 2002.
- 93 M. V. Lee Badgett, "Beyond Biased Samples: Challenging the Myths on the Economic Status of Lesbians and Gay Men," in *Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life*, ed. Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed (New York: Routledge, 1997).
- Badgett, "Income Inflation: The Myth of Affluence among Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Americans."
- Clark, "Commodity Lesbianism."
- Gluckman and Reed, "The Gay Marketing Moment: Leaving Diversity in the Dust."

Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed, *Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁹⁴ Sean Strub, interview, October 28, 1998.

⁹⁵ Badgett, "Income Inflation: The Myth of Affluence among Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Americans," 4.

⁹⁶ Since women earn on average only 74% of male incomes, this is reflected in surveys of gay household incomes: gay male and straight couples earn about the same, whereas lesbian couples earn 18 to 20% less. Badgett also found that many lesbian couples have children under 18 years old living in their household (31% of lesbians, compared with 37% of heterosexual women) while gay men are significantly less likely than heterosexual men to have children (23% of gay men compared with 33% of heterosexual men). She concludes that the DINK stereotype applies only to some gay men who live in domestic partnerships.

⁹⁷ Katherine Sender, "Sex Sells? Sex, Taste, and Class in Commercial Gay and Lesbian Media," *GLQ*, (forthcoming).

⁹⁸ N.R. Kleinfeld, "Homosexual Periodicals Are Proliferating," *New York Times*, August 1 1978, D4.

⁹⁹ Cyndee Miller, "Mainstream Marketers Decide Time Is Right to Target Gays," *Marketing News*, July 20 1992, 15.

¹⁰⁰ Gross, *Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* 233.

¹⁰¹ Dan Baker, former publisher and editor in chief of *Quotient*, interview, September 17, 1998.

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- ¹⁰² Bob Witeck, Partner, Witeck-Combs public relations company, phone interview, November 22, 1998.
- ¹⁰³ Caitlin Hume, interview February 2, 1999.
- ¹⁰⁴ Patrick Sullivan, phone interview, February 17, 1999.
- ¹⁰⁵ Walter Schubert, phone interview, August 24, 2001.
- ¹⁰⁶ Stephanie Blackwood, interview, January 19, 1998.
- ¹⁰⁷ Scott M. Cutlip, *The Unseen Power: Public Relations, a History* (Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994).
- Stuart Ewen, *PR! A Social History of Spin* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).
- ¹⁰⁸ Caitlin Hume, interview February 2, 1999.
- ¹⁰⁹ Howard Buford, interview, February 13, 1998.
- ¹¹⁰ Thomas A. Stewart, "Gay in Corporate America," *Fortune*, December 12 1991, 46; Baltera, "No Gay Market yet, Admen, Gays Agree," 199; and David Mulryan, interview.
- ¹¹¹ Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1997) 29.
- ¹¹² Since my emphasis in this study was on producers of gay marketing, not consumers, this brief discussion of its reception is through the perceptions of marketers themselves; a thorough study of how GLBT consumers respond to gay marketing has yet to be undertaken.
- ¹¹³ Joe Landry, presentation to the Boston Ad Club, January 20, 1999.
- ¹¹⁴ Nicola Field, "Over the Rainbow: Money, Class and Homophobia," in *The Material Queer: A Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Donald Morton (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 348.
- ¹¹⁵ Joseph Straubhaar and Robert LaRose, *Media Now: Communications Media in the Information Age*, 3rd ed. (Wadsworth, 2002).

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- 116 Ibid.
- 117 Walter Schubert, phone interview, August 24, 2001.
- 118 Jim Consolantis, presentation to a New York Times Talk, April 8, 1999.
- 119 Previous winners of GLAAD Media Awards include Dockers, and Kenneth Cole; other nominees have included American Express Small Business Services and Dolce & Gabbana.
- 120 Liz Gumbiner, interview, September 7, 1998. GLAAD has its own complicated relationship with sponsors, however: a GLAAD employee I spoke to lamented the overwhelming presence of the Absolut name on all Media Awards publicity and at the events themselves.
- 121 Bob Witeck, phone interview, November 22, 1998.
- 122 Patrick O'Neil, interview, November 18, 1998.
- 123 Stuart Elliott, interview, November 18, 1998.
- 124 Niles Merton, "The Coors Boycott: Biting the Silver Bullet," *Advocate*, June 5 1990.
- 125 Chris Bull, "Out of the Brewing Storm," *Advocate*, November 6 2001. The recent announcement that Coors Brewing Company will sponsor GLAAD led to some criticism within the gay press.
- 126 Bob Witeck, phone interview, November 22, 1998.
- 127 John Dart, "Southern Baptists to Target Disney," *Los Angeles Times*, June 14 1997.
- 128 Patrick Sullivan, phone interview, February 17, 1998.
- 129 Stephanie Blackwood, presentation to New York Times Talk, April 8, 1999.
- 130 Bob Witeck, phone interview, November 22, 1998.
- 131 Paul Varnell, "Enjoy Being a Market," *Southern Voice*, April 11 1996.

¹³² Lisa Peñaloza, "We're Here, We're Queer, and We're Going Shopping! A Critical Perspective on the Accommodation of Gays and Lesbians in the Marketplace," *Journal of Homosexuality* 31, no. 1/2 (1996).

¹³³ Jane Applegate, "From Videos to Greeting Cards, Gay Clout Abounds," *Washington Post*, May 3 1993.

Horovitz, "Alternative Approach: Finding New Ways to Appeal to Gays, Lesbians,"

Moore, "Courting the Gay Market,"

Kara Swisher, "Targeting the Gay Market," *Washington Post*, April 25 1993.

¹³⁴ Horovitz, "Alternative Approach: Finding New Ways to Appeal to Gays, Lesbians," D1.