

from Dines & Humez, 2003,  
Genderlect + Class in Media

31

## SELLING SEXUAL SUBJECTIVITIES

### *Audiences Respond to Gay Window Advertising*

◆ Katherine Sender

In their study of shifts in advertising trends throughout the twentieth century, Leiss, Kline, and Jhally (1990) argue that advertisements constitute a system of cultural production offering meaning to a consumer society which is otherwise symbolically, mythically, or spiritually impoverished. Within this context, advertisements serve a two-fold function, to provide role models with whom we can identify and through whom we can aspire to appropriate constructions of ourselves as social beings, and to guide us towards what the marketplace considers to be desirable kinds and quantities of purchasing in an increasingly commodified social environment. In terms of the first of these aims, advertising has consistently reflected prevailing views of appropriate gender relations and heterosexual norms, both endorsing "proper" femininity and masculinity (Goffman, 1979; Jhally, 1989) and yoking these to the heterosexual dyad. These notions of appropriate gender and sexual behavior then become tied to "correct" purchasing decisions. However, an increasing acknowledgement

---

NOTE: From *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, Vol. 16, pp. 172-196. Copyright by the National Communication Association, 1999. Reproduced by permission of the publisher.

by advertisers that lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men constitute a viable (i.e., profitable) market for the sale of goods and services has led to growing interest on the part of advertisers to court these populations (see the special reports in *Advertising Age*, January 18, 1993, and May 30, 1994, both titled "Marketing to Gays and Lesbians"). Advertising appeals can be made explicitly to lesbian, gay, and bisexual markets, as in the inclusion of a gay male couple in a 1994 Ikea television commercial, or implicitly, through the use of coded representations which can be interpreted as "gay" by bisexual, lesbian, and gay readers, a strategy known as "gay window advertising" (Bronski, 1984, p. 187).

I began this research with a series of questions about how audiences of differing sexual identifications understand representations of gender and sexual identification. Are lesbian, gay, or bisexual readings always and only available to lesbian, bisexual, and gay readers? How might we account for a relationship between cultural positions and texts if there *is* or, alternatively, *is not* a correspondence between sexual identification and readings? How might the concepts of polysemy and relevancy be useful in understanding audiences' interpretations of texts? Finally, what are the political implications of including consumers with non-dominant sexual identifications within the scope of the marketing gaze?

### ♦ *Gay Window Advertising: Opportunities and Erasures*

Explicit appeals using models coded as lesbian, gay, or bisexual remain rare in the mainstream press, although they do appear with increasing frequency in lesbian and gay publications, and not necessarily selling gay-specific products or services (Baker, 1997; Fejes & Lennon, 2000; Fejes & Petrich, 1993). *Advertising Age's* feature on

advertising to lesbians and gays emphasizes that this is a sensible *business* strategy; as a spokeswoman from the Miller Brewing Company said, "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" (Davis, 1994, p. S-1).

... While groups who identify with a non-dominant sexual subjectivity are gaining increasing interest from marketers, advertisers continue to be notoriously conservative, especially when it comes to potentially alienating a segment of their existing market. The result has been the phenomenon of gay window advertising, where images are coded with subtexts which are intended to be understood by lesbian, gay, and bisexual readers as "lesbian" and/or "gay" and/or "bisexual" texts, but which are assumed to remain innocuous to heterosexual readers. As Clark (1993) writes: "If heterosexual consumers do not notice these subtexts or subcultural codes, then advertisers are able to reach the homosexual market along with the heterosexual market without ever revealing their aim" (p. 188).

In her article for an advertising trade journal, *Print*, Kahn (1994) addresses gay window strategies employed to market to lesbian and gay audiences in both gay and straight-oriented media. She quotes Peter Fressola, Benetton's director of communications for North America, who says that "there's a joke in the gay community about 'gay-dar,'<sup>1</sup> ... and I'm gay, so I can talk about this. There's a sensibility ... that tips you off" (p. 24). Kahn goes on to outline some of the ways advertisers consciously appeal to lesbian, gay, and bisexual consumers, including using a single person instead of an opposite-sexed couple, showing "good-looking crowd scenes with no obvious different-sexed couples" (p. 24), having no people at all in an image, representing androgynous hands, showing rainbow flags and colors, AIDS awareness ribbons and pink triangles, and using lavender, pink, or purple type.

While explicit recognition of gay window marketing may be a relatively recent phenomenon, covert and semi-public representations of homosexuality are not new. . . . In his analysis of the construction of a "gay sensibility" and its relationship to the mainstream media, Bronski (1984) argues that coded homoerotic images of male models have been used in advertisements designed to appeal both to gay and to heterosexual audiences since at least as far back as the 1970s. While gay audiences recognize the codes as "gay" and can thus identify with these images, for heterosexual audiences "gay images imply distinction and non-conformity, granting straight consumers a longed-for placed outside of the humdrum mainstream" (p. 187).<sup>2</sup> Bronski claims that the hyper-masculine Marlboro man, at one end of the spectrum, and the effete, "European" Calvin Klein models on the other, both have a "unique sexual appeal, each with firm roots in the traditions of gay sensibility" (p. 186). Bronski is careful to note, however, that gay codings are appealing only insofar as they are veiled; ". . . blatant homosexuality does not have mass appeal, but the exotic implications of hidden homosexuality have huge sales potential" (p. 186). While Bronski's analysis of "gay sensibilities" is almost exclusively concerned with gay men, Haineault and Roy (1993) have similarly argued that lesbian images have been used to appeal to heterosexual women and men, through the titillating fantasy of lesbian sex (see also Clark, 1993).

Gluckman and Reed (1993) have argued that the inclusion of lesbians and gay men within marketing strategies is problematic, since through the hidden codes of gay window advertising the existence of lesbians and gays in all areas of society is erased. They argue that "the real contours of the multicultural, class stratified gay population are languishing in the closet, while images of white, upper-middle class lesbians and gay men become increasingly conspicuous" (p. 17).<sup>3</sup> Gay men in particular are represented as desirable models of

consumption. Bronski (1998), Fejes and Petrich (1993), and Schulman (1998) note that the limited, heterosexist, inclusion of gay men and lesbians in the mass media and advertising has a "mainstreaming effect" (Fejes & Petrich, p. 408), where only those most "acceptable" to the masses—the lipstick lesbians and suitably masculine gay men—appear as representatives of gay communities.

Gluckman and Reed (1993) also suggest that positive images of lesbians and gays in advertising may be only "a limited victory" (p. 17), since by increasing our visibility, the image of wealth and power in advertising can easily be appropriated by the political right wing as an argument that homosexuals are not disadvantaged and therefore do not need action on issues of civil rights and discrimination. Badgett (1997) and Fejes and Lennon (2000) argue that while market research data are highly suspect, they have "come to function as an objective, empirical description of lesbians and gay males" (Fejes & Lennon). These authors found that the data have been used by groups such as the "Concerned Women For America" and opponents of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (1994) to argue against affording gays and lesbians "special rights":

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. ("Concerned Women For America," quoted in Fejes & Lennon, 2000)

. . . Gay window advertising, as the most conservative edge of the move towards gay marketing, can thus be seen as something of a double-edge sword. While offering lesbian, gay, and bisexual people images of ourselves as "legitimate consumers," these images are both narrow, in terms of who is

“legitimate,” and cynical, in their representations solely of *consumer* legitimacy to the exclusion of the social and political conditions of gay, bisexual, and lesbian lives.

### ♦ *Advertising and Audiences: A Cultural Studies Approach*

Advertising research within the academic domain has hitherto tended to privilege the text as the place to investigate “meaning” in advertising, despite considerable attention paid to producers and audiences of other media forms. . . . Textual analysis is problematic for three reasons. First, this approach positions the scholar as particularly qualified to decode the (absolute, unequivocal, true) meaning of the text under analysis; by virtue of training, experience, or special insight, she or he can read what the advertisement “says.” Second, all text-based analyses of advertising messages make assumptions about how audiences respond to advertisements. Third, text-based research posits an “ideal” audience for advertising, an audience which tends, because it is hypothetical, to be homogenized both in its demographic make-up and in its interaction with ads.

As audience research within cultural studies has shown, the presumption of an inevitable relationship between text and audience in the creation of meaning and textual pleasures is problematic (see Fiske, 1987, 1988, 1989; Hall, 1980; Morley, 1980, 1986, 1992, 1993). One response to this has been the use of focus groups to supplement or replace textual analyses (see, e.g., Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Lewis, 1991; Morley, 1980; Press, 1991). . . .

Yet audience research itself is not without its own debates, in particular regarding the activity of the audience in the meaning-making process. . . .

Of particular relevance here is what readers might make of the intentional

multiplicity of meanings in gay window advertising texts. Gay window advertising potentially disrupts the notion of a single “preferred” or dominant reading posited initially by Hall (1980), since here an advertiser intentionally codes a single text with at least two “preferred readings”: one for bisexual, lesbian, and/or gay readers, and one for heterosexual readers. Gay window advertisements also challenge Fiske’s notion of polysemy in two ways. On one hand, Fiske (1987) suggests that polysemy is always already available to audiences as a necessary part of the reading process, since all texts are open to a potentially infinite number of resistive readings. On the other, Fiske (1989) also suggests that producers intentionally *code* texts with more than one meaning to attract as wide a range of audiences as possible. Gay window advertising challenges Fiske’s first use by suggesting that while audiences may resistively read texts in a number of different ways, they will be encouraged by the text’s codes towards a particular interpretation which depends in part upon each audience member’s sexual identification. Fiske’s second meaning of polysemy seems closer to gay window strategies. . . .

Cultural studies scholars have been somewhat tardy in engaging with questions of how different sexual identifications may influence the reading of texts—questions of class and, more recently, race and gender have tended to dominate research agenda. In addition to the absence of cultural studies audience research in the field of advertising in general, it is also the scarcity of work on sexual identification as a relevant cultural position which I wish to redress here.

### *Method* ♦

This research was based upon a focus group interview model of gathering data where groups were invited to discuss their interpretations of a number of magazine advertisements (see, e.g., Lunt & Livingstone, 1996;

Patton, 1990; Wimmer & Dominick, 1987).<sup>4</sup> . . .

I conducted five focus group interviews in March and April 1995, with between three and seven participants in each.<sup>5</sup> The participants were recruited through the Gay Lesbian and Bisexual Graduate Student Organization at the University of Massachusetts; were friends and colleagues of personal contacts; and/or were friends of undergraduates at the University of Massachusetts. . . .

Three groups were made up of mixed lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual participants (groups 1, 2 and 3); there was one lesbian, gay, and bisexual group (Group 4); and one heterosexual group (Group 5).<sup>6</sup> . . .

I selected nine advertisements for groups to discuss; these were chosen from a large number of possible examples in consultation with colleagues and supervisors. The advertisements were selected from recent issues of popular women's and men's magazines as well as other "interest" magazines such as sports and computer publications. I hoped to provide a spectrum of representations which reflected a range of gender and sexual representations; they were chosen not to represent an "objective" range of images, but rather to offer examples which would be productive for the focus groups to discuss. The ads were selected to suggest: a gay male subtext (Versace); a lesbian subtext (Dewar's); a more overt gay, lesbian, and bisexual text (cK one); two heavily coded heterosexual narratives (Brut Actif Blue and Jordache); a single woman (Tiffany) and single man (Zino); a same-sex group of women (Virginia Slims); and of men (Tommy Hilfiger).<sup>7</sup> . . .

### ♦ Advertising, Audiences, and Sexual Address

Because all the ads in this study were read in multiple ways by at least one group, questions regarding the extent of polysemy

available in these texts are concerned less with *whether* polysemy is possible in advertising texts, but rather with *why* some readings were made and not others, and why some texts were read as more "open" than others. . . . While it did appear that bisexual, gay, and lesbian participants were more likely to consider gay readings of the ads, this did not mean that all participants, or even all gay-, bisexual-, or lesbian-identified participants, inevitably read the texts as gay. A more complicated relationship prevailed among textual coding, the contexts of the ads, and the participants' identifications, making predictions of readings based upon sexual identification alone unreliable, if not arbitrary.

### Brut Force: ♦ Heterosexual Masculinity

Some texts appeared to be constructed in such a way as to actively discourage a range of readings, particularly readings which might transgress normative standards of gender and sexuality. Many groups commented that a Brut Actif Blue ad with images of a male kayaker and an embracing heterosexual couple had particularly insistent representations of gender roles, both in terms of the images (the muscular, "virile" man, the passive, waiting woman) and in terms of the words "the essence of man," which naturalized a relationship between activity, courage, strength, and heterosexuality within the domain of idealized masculinity. A lesbian, Liz, and a heterosexual woman, Ellen, had the following exchange:

Liz: [. . .] he's just so *manly*, you know, he's huge, in terms of his build, he's heterosexual, clearly, and you know, he's involved in these very virile activities—

Ellen: he's got this muscular build, he's got the power and the strength to go

stroking down this river [with his] arms raised—"I'm going down!"—and then you've got the lovely passive female who's just sitting there, waiting, and that's his reward at the end. . . . (Group 3)

The seeming transparency of the Brut ad may have been one reason that groups tended not to talk for long about its implied story. However, Group 5 produced three readings of this ad; the first of these corresponded to the preferred reading articulated by other groups, but the second and third were ironic readings, which appeared to resist the dominant narrative that active men inevitably "win" passive women. One participant suggested that the model carrying the kayak in the first panel and the model in the kayak are two different men, with amusing implications. Of the man in the first panel, Eva said:

Maybe he was supposed to be kayaking with his buddy here [second panel], in the kayak, [who] is alone and kayaking, and he [model in first panel] gets the girl, 'cause he didn't go kayaking! [laughter] (Group 5)

Thus the "active" man did not get the passive woman in this scenario, subverting the sexual inevitability of the implied gender equation.

This resistive reading, however, was not endorsed by the group as the ad's "true" meaning but rather one which allowed the group to disrupt what they apparently perceived as a stiflingly narrow narrative. In the case of this ad, as with others (such as a Jordache jeans ad), participants occasionally offered readings which appeared to subvert the implied narrative, but they were not able to articulate resistive readings which undermine the *heterosexual* insistence of these ads. In no group did participants play with the idea that, for example, the woman model in the Brut ad was keeping her brother company while his boyfriend was riding the rapids. This suggests that, despite

the appearance of a hyper-masculine man in the ad (that is, with a physique not dissimilar to the idealized gay man's body, Dyer, 1982), other codings in the text, such as the woman's leaning into the arms of her "boyfriend," strongly preferred a heterosexual narrative. Thus, at the level of gender representations in this ad, a couple of examples of resistive readings were made, but the possibilities of making specifically *gay* readings appeared to be more difficult.

### "What It Is to ♦ Be a Woman": *Heterosexual Femininity*

All the women in the ads in this study were perceived to be heterosexual by most of the participants most of the time: the participants seemed confident in reading "femininity" from the codings of the ads. For example, of the Tiffany ad (a head shot of a young woman wearing pearls), one participant said, "This is a woman who is feminine, very basic: what it is to be a woman" (Group 3). It was interesting to observe, however, how discussions of the femininity of the female models were constructed very differently than were discussions of the masculinity of the male models, differences which seemed to create difficulties for participants in making specifically lesbian attributions. Codings of masculinity tended to be addressed in conjunction with complementary representations of femininity: for example, in both the Brut ad and the Jordache ad (male and female embracing) the masculinity of the male models was affirmed by their relations with the female models. This contrasted with discussions of feminine codings, where the female models were compared with *each other*, not with the codings of masculinity. Comparing the ad for Tiffany with that for Jordache, James made the following statement: "I am struck by the differences between the two women" to which Liz responded, "The Jordache one

looks trumpy now!" (Group 3). Jordache's image of a strong woman is also perceived to be sexually delinquent, having an "animal passion" and lacking in "class" when compared to the timeless sophistication of the wealthy Tiffany woman.

An ongoing concern in feminist theory is with how gender difference must be consistently socially constructed and enacted. Butler (1990), for example, outlines various feminist approaches to sexual difference, most of which analyze gender as established through differentiation from the other, that is, that femininity is constricted through its difference from masculinity, and vice versa. We understand femininity on the basis of how not-like masculinity it is, and masculinity on the basis of how not-like femininity it is. However, the responses by the groups in this research suggest an alternative—and at this stage—tentative understanding of gender construction: that while sufficiently masculine men appear to require a clear difference from femininity in order to affirm their adequacy, images of women are compared *with each other* in order to assess the style and adequacy of their femininity. Because women are compared with each other using the linked attributions of class and sexual propriety, rather than being compared with men, it is the *quality* of their femininity ("animal passion" versus "class") and not their apparent *difference from men* which is central to the appraisal of the models' womanhood.

### ♦ *Gay Window Possibilities: Men*

In many advertising texts, the heterosexuality of the scenario is suggested by representing physical intimacy between male and female models. In contrast, images of single men, in particular, were often available for gay readings. Yet as Dyer (1982) has observed, images of men have to work against the feminizing tendencies of

"to-be-looked-at-ness" in order to construct a sufficiently masculine, sexual image. Dyer identifies a number of tropes commonly used to construct virile masculinity including a level or upward (rather than downcast) assertive gaze; the body as muscular, active, and taut (rather than passive); and the portrayal of men of color and "working class" coded men as hyper-masculine.

In this research, some readings of the ads as gay were possible because the image contravened at least some of the conventions Dyer identifies. The ad for Versace (a male model seated, with one leg over a chair arm), for example, was read as unambiguously gay by many group members. This ad portrays a single man wearing flamboyant apparel and appearing in opulent surroundings: here conventions most often associated with femininity in images of women are employed in the service of a gay coding. Indeed, the perceived effeminacy of the Versace model was seen as sufficient justification for one heterosexual man, Steve, to say, "This guy's a wanker, that's all I have to say—if Richard and I walked into that room . . . [Richard] would probably suggest kicking the shit out of that guy, just jump[ing] him" [Richard laughs] (Group 1). Two women discussed some of the conventions which they read as gay:

Ellen: It is very much a pose . . . if you look at some of the other ads where you see females draped and perched and slung over a couch or something, and they're not doing anything, they're not going anywhere, they are just there to be seen, to be watched passively.

Liz: I would think this was more geared towards gay men just because he is not set up like the typical, head-of-the-household, aggressive, straight man, as we were talking about before; he is more passive, and that is not something that is encouraged in an image like this one [for Brut]! [laughter] . . . (Group 3)

The Zino ad (a bare-chested man) was another example of the use of a single man to allow a gay reading. However, this ad emphasizes a muscular masculinity in order to allow both gay men's and heterosexual women's *desire*, as a response to the text, while not necessarily implying a *gay narrative*, as a property of the text. James, a gay man, said:

I think that anybody looking at this ad, and I don't think it matters your gender or even your sexual orientation, is supposed to think, "Oh, this man is extremely desirable,"—by association, if you use this fragrance, you will be as desirable as this Grecian statue here, so that it appeals to, I think it is directed at men without regard to their orientation. . . . (Group 3)

One participant, Karen, admitted, "I actually ripped this out and put it on my wall once, I confess!" (Group 5). The Zino ad was thus perceived to be open to both gay and heterosexual interpretations through the elicitation of desire and through the lack of gender specificity of a fantasized, "invisible" sexual partner. This suggests that polysemy, the availability within a text for more than one reading, does not necessarily require the construction of multiple narratives, but may also allow for multiple kinds of desire, a point I will return to below.

Coding of the Tommy Hilfiger ad (four males, standing side by side) presented a different kind of polysemic problem for many of the groups. This ad tended to be read as a heterosexual narrative by heterosexual women and as either a heterosexual or a gay narrative by heterosexual men, as well as lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men.<sup>8</sup> Karen, a heterosexual woman, said: "Any ad with men bunched together like this, and all kind of chummy, makes me think of private boys school, a movie like 'Dead Poets' Society' or something. . . . They all look like they went to prep school together" (Group 5).

Somewhat surprisingly, gay men tended to consider and then distrust or discard gay readings of this ad. Here, although only men are represented in the ad, they were perceived by the groups as more "masculine" than the Versace model. The more emphatic masculinity of the Tommy Hilfiger models produced some intense debate over whether these models were supposed to be read as college buddies, fraternity brothers, or gay men. While some groups insisted that the style of dress together with the implied upper-class status of the models suggested the college theme, others took the absence of women and wedding rings, the physical intimacy of the models, and the presence of the "one way, do not enter" sign as symbols of homoerotic male bonding. However, one gay man reported that "'one way, do not enter' is something that people say they are going to tattoo on their butt. . . ." (Group 1), that is, an extreme rejection of gay men's sexuality (perceived to be epitomized by anal sex) by hyper-heterosexually identified men.

In discussions of whether the Tommy Hilfiger ad represented fraternity brothers or gay men, the exclusively lesbian, gay, and bisexual group offered an interesting suggestion as to how to deal with this polarization:

Ina: These guys are walking that fine line, though, between gay boys and frat boys; you know, there's that fine line?

Jo: Once you get a few beers in the frat boys, they're hanging on to each other, just like the gay boys!

Nick: That wonderful concept of "drink til you're bi" [lots of laughter] . . . I've heard that applied to frat boys a lot, and like, men on athletic teams, and in high school: get a bunch of guys over, get some alcohol, they drink til they're bi, it's a wonderful time . . . (Group 4)



Thus, common knowledge suggests that the divide between acceptable fraternity culture and gay sexuality is not so wide, and is considerably narrowed by the disinhibitory (and pardonable) effects of drinking alcohol. Whereas the predominantly heterosexual groups tended to prefer a "buddy" reading which isolated gay sexuality in a separate sphere and prohibited any homoerotic possibilities in the Tommy Hilfiger image, such a comfortable distinction between frat boys and gay boys was eroded by participants in the predominantly lesbian, gay, and bisexual groups.

### ♦ *Lesbian Windows: Shutters and Blinds*

A Dewar's ad (two women, the text reading "Yeah, for some reason, 'What's your major?' just doesn't work anymore") was the only text I found in the popular magazines reviewed for this study which I thought suggested a lesbian window scenario.<sup>9</sup> However, this ad prompted only two lesbian readings from predominantly or exclusively lesbian, bisexual, and gay groups, and in both cases the groups' responses to a lesbian reading were ambivalent.<sup>10</sup> In Group 4, a lesbian participant, Mary, offered a gay reading of the Dewar's ad which was met with a mixture of both pleasure and suspicion, particularly by the lesbians in the group:

Mary: My initial take on this is that something's going on between [the two women]—that this is a pickup . . .

Ina: She's wearing a suit.

Mary: And [the blonde woman] has got this completely flirtatious look on her face.

Jo: That's funny, we didn't say anything about—it's always gay boys, but never can you say, "Oh, that's

appealing to lesbians, so dykes are really going to buy that."

Ina: But I don't even think that a pickup scene between these two women would be appealing to lesbians, I think they are appealing to straight men, because I think that any lesbian thing that would come into the mainstream is two very typically beautiful, thin women that men would find attractive, hooking up . . .

Ruth: So what do you think would be attractive to lesbians in advertising?

Mary: Well, firstly, I don't think people would advertise to lesbians, so . . .

Ruth: But even *Deneuve*, a lesbian magazine, all their models are very thin women, terribly fashionable, I mean it is so much like this kind of thing, only more naked. . . .

The apparent pleasure at recognizing what might be a lesbian text was immediately tempered by a consideration of the history of representations of women in general, and lesbians in particular. Thus the Dewar's ad could not be simply and pleasurably "recognized" as a lesbian text by the women in this group, without their simultaneously considering the implications of the appeal of this ad within a broader frame of representation.

Far more common readings of this ad by heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, and gay participants inserted an unseen male romantic or potentially romantic figure into the text, either as the speaker or the subject of the statement "for some reason 'What's your major?' just doesn't work anymore." This reading strategy suggests how difficult it can be to reject the normativity of heterosexuality. Despite the physical proximity of the women, the suggestion that they are sharing some "private joke," the relative absence of male models, and the representation of one model as short-haired and suited, a lesbian reading was not easily

made, even by lesbian participants who, I assume, would have the greatest investment in reading this ad as a lesbian text. This echoes Clark's (1993) assertion that the dominance of heterosexual representations means that "the 'straight' reading is never entirely erased or replaced" (p. 192), even for audiences who may be particularly motivated to "read gay," and suggests, further, that representations of women, in particular, are most difficult to read as gay.

The relative absence of lesbian readings can be understood, first, as a reflection of the relative lack of texts currently circulating in the mainstream which offer a lesbian reading, because lesbians are seen as a far less lucrative market than gay men (Johnson, 1993). Second, it may be easier to make gay attributions to male models because the stereotypes of gayness for men which can still be perceived as "attractive" are much easier to both code and read, while lesbians are stereotypically represented as far less attractive. In an *Advertising Age* special report on marketing to lesbians and gays, Johnson (1993) writes:

Marketers have gone after gay men because the stereotype is so attractive: affluent, brand-conscious, interested in fashion and style, creating trends which straight men will follow. That's the marketing antithesis of the stereotypical lesbian who supposedly wears a lumberjack shirt, sandals and no makeup. (p. 34)

Despite the increasingly available image of "lipstick lesbians," gay men's appeal for advertisers suggests that they have a cultural currency that lesbians are only slowly beginning to accrue. Furthermore, the fact that men are far more likely to be perceived as sexually assertive means they can also be perceived to be sexual *between each other* in texts, while readers of texts representing women are more likely to presume an active male romantic figure, even when none is portrayed. Finally, it may have been more difficult to read the ads as lesbian

because lesbian sexuality has historically been so much more submerged than either heterosexuality or male gayness.

## Notes ♦

1. "Gay-dar" is derived from "gay radar," which ironically acknowledges the increased skill with which lesbians, bisexuals, and gays recognize other gay people on the basis of sub-cultural cues.

2. It is interesting to observe that where Clark takes the position that gay codings are invisible to heterosexuals, Bronski suggests that gay coding adds extra appeal to an advertising image for heterosexual audiences.

3. Figures published in the *New York Times* (Presley Noble, 1994) show that the average income of lesbians is lower than that of heterosexual women (\$15,068 and \$18,341 per year, respectively) and that both groups of women earn less than gay men (\$26,321 per year), who, in turn, earn less than heterosexual men (\$28,312 per year).

4. I chose magazine advertisements largely because magazines tend to have narrowly targeted audiences and therefore tend also to contain advertisements directed to a particular demographic and psychographic group. However, the use of magazine advertisements does not imply that conclusions drawn from these data can be unproblematically applied to other forms of advertising.

5. There were 14 women and 9 men, aged between 22 and 40, with a mean age of 27. One participant had a high school diploma, 8 participants had some college education, and 14 had some post-graduate education. One participant identified as mixed hispanic and caucasian, one identified as mixed native american and caucasian, all other participants identified as caucasian. The focus groups did not, therefore, reflect the racial and educational diversity of either the United States as a whole or western Massachusetts in particular: as a result, no conclusions can be reached here about the complexities of race, class, and sexual identification within cultural positions and the relative impacts

of these identifications on reading possibilities. All names are pseudonyms.

6. All identifications were self-chosen. I acknowledge the complications of identifying oneself as "lesbian," "bisexual," "gay," or "heterosexual": specifically, that these positions can be overly reductive, essentialist, or lend a false impression of stability.

7. The ads used in the study were taken from the following sources: Tiffany and Co. pearls, *The New Yorker*, Dec. 19, 1995; Brut Actif Blue cologne, *Sports Illustrated*, Sept. 17, 1995; Jordache jeans, *Cosmopolitan*, November 1994; Dewar's whisky, *Wired*, December 1994; Zino cologne, *Esquire Gentleman*, Fall Fashion Special, 1994; Versace men's couture, *Esquire Gentleman*, Fall Fashion Special, 1994; Tommy Hilfiger menswear, *Esquire Gentleman*, Fall Fashion Special, 1994; cK one cologne, *Cosmopolitan*, November 1994; Virginia Slims cigarettes, *Cosmopolitan*, November 1994. Photocopies of the ads are available from the author.

8. This ad was one of the few ads for which participants speculated over its source, perhaps because of its ambiguous coding. One heterosexual man said, "This isn't *Esquire*, this might be *Details*, which would make a lot of sense [since] *Details* is pretty friggin' closet homosexual. . . ."

9. However, advertisers for Guess jeans and other products have since brought out nauseatingly titillating campaigns of images of nubile "lesbian chicks."

10. It is possible that some group members are aware of an ongoing gender and sexual ambiguity in Dewar's advertising campaigns, as well as in Calvin Klein's ads, discussed below. What is interesting is that even if the participants had this intertextual awareness, lesbian window readings were still relatively uncommon.

## ◆ References

- Badgett, M. V. L. (1997). Beyond biased samples: Challenging the myths on the economic status of lesbians and gay men. In A. Gluckman & B. Reed (Eds.), *Homo economics: Capitalism, community, and lesbian and gay life*. New York: Routledge, pp. 65-71.
- Baker, D. (1997). A history in ads: The growth of the gay and lesbian market. In A. Gluckman & B. Reed (Eds.), *Homo economics: Capitalism, community, and lesbian and gay life*. New York: Routledge, pp. 11-20.
- Bronski, M. (1984). *Culture clash: The making of gay sensibility*. Boston: South End.
- Bronski, M. (1998). *The Pleasure Principle: Sex, backlash, and the struggle for gay freedom*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Clark, D. (1993). Commodity lesbianism. In H. Abelove, M. A. Barale, & D. M. Halperin (Eds.), *The lesbian and gay studies reader*. New York: Routledge, pp. 186-201.
- Davis, R. (1994, May 30). Marketers game for gay events. *Advertising Age*, p. S-1.
- Dyer, R. (1982). Don't look now: The instability of the male pin-up. *Screen*, 23(3-4), 61-73.
- Fejes, F., & Lennon, R. (2000). Defining the lesbian/gay community? Market research and the lesbian/gay press. *The Journal of Homosexuality*, 39(1), 28-42.
- Fejes, F., & Petrich, K. (1993). Invisibility, homophobia and heterosexism: Lesbians, gays and the media. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 10, 396-422.
- Fiske, J. (1987). *Television culture*. London: Routledge.
- Fiske, J. (1988). Critical responses: Meaningful moments. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 5, 246-251.
- Fiske, J. (1989). *Understanding popular culture*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Gluckman, A., & Reed, B. (1993, November/December). The gay marketing moment: leaving diversity in the dust. *Dollars and Sense*, pp. 16-19, 34-35.
- Goffman, E. (1979). *Gender advertisements*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Haineault, D. L., & Roy, J. Y. (1993). *The unconscious for sale: Advertising, psychoanalysis and the public*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language*. London: Hutchinson, pp. 128-136.