

How advertising shapes the image of gayness in America

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The past decade has seen a dramatic increase in the presence of gays in American advertising. The media has transformed the stigmatized stereotype of gays into a new, socially desirable image of stylish consumers with high-end taste. This marketing strategy affects the way gays understand themselves and influences the meaning of gayness for society in general, explains Wan-Hsiu Sunny Tsai, assistant professor of advertising at the University of Miami School of Communication, in a study recently published by the *Journal of Advertising*.

"The findings illuminate the influential role of [advertising](#) in informing and shaping personal identities and highlights the often ignored sociopolitical dimension of advertising, Tsai says. "In other words, when marketers argue that no matter who they target, 'it's just business,' their marketing messages actually have broader, cultural impacts on the minority community."

The researcher uses an interpretive approach to analyze television commercials made by mainstream advertisers. In the study, 25 gay and lesbian participants with different ethnic, age, and professional backgrounds observed 10-15 commercials that "exemplified dominant gay and lesbian portrayals." The participants discussed how the advertising representations were similar or different to how they viewed themselves and provided "vivid interpretations of the media representations."

According to the study, five specific strategies emerged within these

minority consumers to interpret the messages catered to them:

- [Gay men](#) accepted the perception of "higher disposable income of gay male households" and transformed material consumption into a definition of self-worth. "I was on many consumer panels because I fit the profile of gay men who have disposable income and travel a lot," one participant said.
- Participation in the mass market was equated to membership in mainstream society. "We got money. We contribute to the corporation. We contributed to big business. We got families. We are part of the mainstream now," a participant said.
- Targeted advertising was identified as an essential step in achieving social political inclusion. "Consumer rights and citizenship, civil rights are intricately connected in the United States [...]. And when we express our identity as a consumer, that reinforces and strengthens our identity as a citizen," a participant said.
- Perpetuating problematic depictions of gays as effeminate men or lesbians as "sexualized femme" was tolerated in the interests of social inclusion. "I was ambivalent when watching this commercial. It's playing up the stereotype. But for me, if you can see gay people on TV in Texas, it's positive," one participant said.
- Participants were willing to give up something of their subcultural identity for the sake of total acceptance in society. "When we are truly accepted in the society, we will just blend in [...] even that might mean sacrificing our uniqueness," a participant said.

The findings are published in an article titled "How Minority Consumers Use Targeted Advertising as Pathways to Self-Empowerment: Gay Men's and Lesbians' Reading of Out-of-the-Closet Advertising" *Journal*

of Advertising Vol. 40 No. 3 Fall 2011.

Currently, the researcher is working on a project about gay and lesbian consumers' political consumption to understand how they would respond to political appeals in advertising messages (e.g., companies advertising themselves as a gay-friendly work place, or a long-time sponsor of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender community).

Provided by University of Miami

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