



Advertising and Consumerism

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Does being glbtq-identified make you part of a consumer group? Can you express your sexual or gender identity through your choice of a phone service or beverage? What are the politics of the idea that you are what you buy, eat, drive, or wear? This discussion examines two related issues in relation to glbtq people and the market: advertising and consumerism.

Advertising

Advertisers have long directed their ads to particular people. For example, since the early days of modern mass advertising in the late nineteenth century, many ads have targeted women, who were early recognized as the primary purchasers of many products ranging from food to clothing.

It was not until a century later, however, during a period when advertisers also increasingly worked to segment the market based on other identity features such as race and ethnicity, that producers of goods and services began to seek out lesbian, gay, and bisexual consumers through advertising directed to them.

Advertisers have used several strategies to reach sexual minorities. They have advertised in gay and lesbian publications. As Dan Baker reports in "A History in Ads: The Growth of the Lesbian and Gay Market," Absolut Vodka led the way when it placed an ad in the *Advocate* in 1979.

Companies have also used direct mail campaigns. For example, in 1994 a mailing from AT&T, in a lavender envelope with a rainbow-colored phone cord, was directed to 70,000 people whose names were provided by Strubco, a company that specializes in brokering gay and lesbian mailing lists. The material inside included a letter about AT&T's lesbian- and gay-friendly policies and a brochure picturing people who were signalled to be gay by their groupings and the comments attributed to them. Although the characters did not actually say, "I'm gay," and the letter from AT&T was not addressed to "Dear Queer Phone User," the intended audience was obvious.

The letter, which also announced AT&T's forthcoming presence at the 1994 Gay Games IV and Cultural Festival, points to another form of advertising that is growing in popularity: sponsorship of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender events such as Pride marches. For example, the central site for speakers and entertainment at San Francisco Pride 2000 was called the "Bud Light/San Francisco *Chronicle* Main Stage."

In an important article about the politics of advertising called "Commodity Lesbianism," Danae Clark drew attention to another means to reach lesbian, gay, and bisexual consumers called "gay window advertising." The term refers to advertising in mainstream publications that is intended to appeal to lesbian and gay consumers without offending, or perhaps even alerting, conservative heterosexuals. For instance, an ad might show subtle touching or physical proximity in same-sex groupings that could be read in several ways. Or it might use models, clothes, accessories, or settings that are popular in queer contexts.

Significantly, appeals to people of minority sexual orientations, especially women, are often made through

cross-gender expression: women depicted in "men's" clothing or ads featuring androgynous or butch models, etc.

When Clark first published the article in the early 1990s, gay window advertising represented virtually the only appeal to the glbtq market in non-glbtq venues. Today, with sexual variation and gender bending increasingly considered chic in some circles, explicit references appear more frequently, especially for haute couture clothing lines. The 2000-2001 campaign for Donatella Versace, which features suggestively posed pairs of women in fetish clothes, is a good example.

The Effects of glbtq Targeted Advertising

Is all this attention from marketers good or bad? The question is much debated.

On the one hand, ads from large companies have provided needed funds to support events and publications that had previously depended on the support of a small number of queer-identified businesses and individuals. (This support, in turn, generates brand loyalty, as most observers agree.)

Ads can also provide the pleasure of seeing oneself mirrored in culture; and, in the case of gay window advertising, the pleasures of recognizing queer codes and enjoying scenarios chosen for queer appeal. In addition, the recognition that some lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people have disposable income has contributed to the growing availability of some queer-friendly products and services, in areas such as tourism.

Some people argue, too, that in a world where sexual minorities are often hidden from view, the visibility created by advertising that represents or targets them contributes productively to glbtq visibility in general. This visibility, in turn, contributes to the recognition of members of sexual minorities as political constituents, which is a prerequisite for having political influence and for laws that protect people based on sexual orientation and/or gender expression.

On the other hand, the positive effects of targeting of glbtq people as consumers have hardly enhanced the lives of all queer people, publications, and programs. Advertisers, not surprisingly, want to reach people who have the money to buy their products, and direct their resources accordingly. Besides, even advertisers willing to take the risk of associating themselves with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender consumers may well want to dissociate themselves from the more controversial among us and from certain political issues.

Publications that routinely criticize capitalism, manufacturing practices, and labor inequities are not usually attractive to big advertisers. Dependence on advertising may deter people from taking on such issues in other venues. Some people have noted, for instance, that Pride events seem less politically focused since they moved from community to corporate sponsorship.

Three other concerns have been raised about the politics of the queer market. One involves market research. The increase in queer-targeted marketing came partly after the publication of survey results by gay marketing groups such as Overlooked Opinions, which indicated that gays have more disposable income than most people. As researchers such as M.V. Lee Badgett have subsequently shown, however, these conclusions were based on faulty sampling, with a disproportionate number of affluent, white gay men responding to the surveys.

Nonetheless, these false numbers continue to be used by the religious right and other opponents of equal rights to stir up misplaced resentment for economic inequalities and to argue that gay people do not deserve civil rights protection because they have too much money to count as a disadvantaged group.

Another concern involves the use of diversity marketing by companies. For example, Rosemary Hennessy

argues in *Profit and Pleasure* that by publicizing queer-friendly products and work-place policies, such as domestic-partner benefits, corporations may deflect attention from their less progressive products and policies.

A third concern is that product advertising directed to sexual minorities, like all such advertising, promotes consumerism.

Consumerism

Most of us live in a consumer culture. That is, instead of working to produce food, clothing, or other products for our own use, we work to earn money to purchase them. The term "consumerism" refers, most basically, to the promotion of consumer culture as good--for the economy, for society, for the individual--and sometimes to the processes and practices of people who value consuming or who consume many products.

The term "consumerism" generally has negative connotations. For some critics, it suggests moral problems such as greed and gluttony and materialism. For others, it suggests political issues ranging from environmental pollution (resulting from the manufacture and disposal of products that are intended for frequent replacement) to social inequality (as some people amass spending money while others labor to produce products often under poor conditions).

Consumerism has also been seen as promoting a false sense of freedom. The freedom to choose among products, some argue, may be mistaken for freedom to choose the social and economic conditions in which we live.

Concerns about glbtq Consumerism

Regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities specifically, two interconnected concerns have received particular attention. First, when lgbtq people are seen primarily to express their identities through the purchase of certain clothes, CDs, beverages, and accessories or through the patronage of certain restaurants and vacation spots, where does that leave lgbtq people who do not have a lot of money to spend on a week in Provincetown or assorted rainbow gear?

The promotion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer identities as consumer identities may exclude, and render invisible, people who struggle economically, a process that disproportionately marginalizes lgbtq people who are of color and/or female, since institutional sexism and racism affect economic status.

Second, the emphasis on locating identity in consumer choice contributes to the popular idea that being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer is a "lifestyle." But do the primary issues regarding sexual and gender identities really concern style? Does individual or media attention to consumer habits divert attention from human-rights matters, or encourage people to confuse purchasing power with safety, dignity, and respect? Also, does the term "lifestyle" suggest identities that can be adopted and discarded like the latest fashion in clothing?

These are some of the issues raised by critics of consumerism among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people.

Conclusion

The last decades of the twentieth century witnessed the growth of the idea that there exists a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer market. Purveyors of products and services have worked to identify and court this market. Activists and cultural critics have studied the effects of these attempts. Lesbian, gay,

bisexual, transgender, and queer people, some more than others, have been able to enjoy increased visibility along with greater opportunities to participate in consumer culture. The social effects, both positive and negative, of advertising and consumerism in the communities of sexual minorities remain hotly debated.

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