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Abstract: This research is a critical analysis of a random sample of advertising business news articles published in The New York Times between 1970-2000. An institution greatly impacting the perception, definition and judgment of sexuality, The Times reveals multiple trends in advertiser avoidance and pursuit of sexual minorities as consumers of mainstream products. One trend, corporate avoidance, exemplifies how Times articles manifest inequality of

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Abstract

This research is a critical analysis of a random sample of advertising business news articles published in The New York Times between 1970-2000. An institution greatly impacting the perception, definition and judgment of sexuality, The Times reveals multiple trends in advertiser avoidance and pursuit of sexual minorities as consumers of mainstream products. One trend, corporate avoidance, exemplifies how Times articles manifest inequality of representation, visibility and interest in gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and trans-persons. Although GLBTs experienced increased business news coverage over time, gay men consistently received twice the coverage as lesbians, while bisexual and transpersons remained invisible. Both advertisers and The Times changed from stigmatizing and avoiding homosexuals to promoting the stereotype of gay affluence. However, although commodification of social identity worked to promote a “gay market niche,” it reflected a homogenized understanding of sexuality. Rather than provide social legitimation, visibility mirrored social cleavages based on race, class and gender characteristic of broader American society. Ultimately, alternative expressions to heterosexuality remained unconventional, spectacular and stereotyped.

Keywords: media, inequality, advertising, qualitative, culture, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender
Introduction:

This research is a critical, qualitative analysis of advertising news published by The New York Times, an institution that greatly impacts the perception, definition and judgment of sexuality. I aim to make visible normative belief systems The Times put forth in its historically and culturally contingent representation of gay, lesbian, bi and trans persons (GLBTs). Based on Gamson’s (1998) understanding of the media as “the critical gallery for discourse carried on in other forums, with success measured by whether a speech in the legislative forum, for example is featured prominently in The Times”, I argue The Times wields considerable “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1990), the power and authority to produce, shape and transmit knowledge, beliefs and consumptive practices. Additionally, I propose The Times possesses “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu, 1990), respect and prestige, that affects the presentation of social groups and issues. In short, this research exposes instances where the media, as a cultural agent, used its authority and power to shape public perception of homosexuality.

Theory & Literature Review:

Historically, changes in sex norms have accompanied institutional shifts in social control of particular groups. Control of resources and knowledge (Melucci, 1989) often affected homosexual (in)visibility. Trends in social thinking and research impacted the understanding, visibility and institutional representation of homosexuality. For example, degeneracy (Greenberg, 1988), psychopathology (American Psychiatric Association, 1987) and deviancy (Katz, 1983) theories characterized American thought into the Seventies, when the creation of research institutes and expanded research capabilities of corporations and governments shifted sex norm expertise from medical establishments to academic authorities (Connell,
However, the relationship among control, power and ownership of institutions becomes less visible as society shifts from modern to postmodern and increases in social complexity (Domhoff, 1996). Thus, before the feminist imperative to dismantle the institution can be achieved, it must be rendered visible (Lorber, 1994). By analyzing institutional representations of homosexuality, I facilitate examination of the interplay between representation and subjectivism (Acker, 1990) while simultaneously giving visibility to status inequality and cultural images of gender and sexuality created by organizational practices.

In exploring the social norms and images surrounding media representation of homosexuality, one must simultaneously explore the mechanisms of social control institutions exert on social groups. Citing Foucault, Melucci (1989) notes that in contemporary societies, the “system” increasingly exerts greater control over codes of behavior and pre-defines standards and criteria of normality (i.e. healthcare systems’ definitions of health/illness). Simultaneously, as society shifts from modern to postmodern eras, the symbiotic relationship between social control, power and ownership of institutions becomes less visible. The corresponding integration of institutions, and “boundary blurring”, inhibits demarcation and agency of thought and action becomes increasingly diffused and invisible.

In Foucaultian terms, social control can be understood as a “gaze” that remains ultimately tied to one's institutional location. To illustrate, we may use Lorber’s (1994) example of gender: "gender social arrangements are justified by religious and cultural productions and are backed by law, but the most powerful means of sustaining the moral hegemony of the dominant gender ideology is that the process is made invisible; any possible alternatives are virtually unthinkable." In other words, one's socially and institutionally bound location within society controls
how gender is perceived. When perception is empirically justified, its power becomes
hegemonic and perceptions get translated into social facts. In this study, I analyze the
“gaze” of the media via the perception of GLBTs it converts into "news". By
analysing news articles as cultural products, I understand the media not merely as
reflecting mirror but as active contributor and constructor of meaning.

Media is “the most important forum for understanding cultural impact since
they provide the major site in which contests over meaning must succeed politically”
(Gamson, 1998). How an issue or social group is depicted in media discourse largely
affects public opinion. “Atypical” sexualities have lacked mainstream visibility, social
cohesion, and visible representation within many social institutions (Thompson,
1995). The invisibility is declared intentional by Thompson (1995), who argues “the
management of visibility through the media is an unavoidable feature of modern
politics.” Given that advertising business news is backed by over $150 billion spent
annually by American advertisers (Fox, 2001), advertisers do more than sell products.
They pervade every aspect of life, reach every social group, and are “become[ing] one
of our most dominating voices, if not the most dominating voice” (Fox, 2001) in
society.

Studying the impact diverse sexualities have upon institutions requires
exploration of the links between sexuality, discrimination and institutionalized forms
of inequality. The majority of works exploring homosexuality deal with issues such
as AIDS, legal rights, ethics, the “science” of sexual preference, gender, psychiatry or
politics. Until recently, little sociological research has been devoted to establishing
how major social institutions, including the media, have or have not changed over
time in response to diverse sexualities. “Of all the major U.S. social movements...the
gay and lesbian liberation movement has perhaps been least studied by sociologists”
Within the US, sexuality, as a topic of study, was not considered a valid area of research until the 1950s. And, as recently as 1994, critics have exclaimed the lack of sociologists examining the categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality critically (Epstein, 1994).

Much current research on how institutions accommodate or disadvantage homosexuals has focused on social movements (Mac Nair et al., 2000; Jenness, 1995; Esterberg, 1994; Blasius, 1990; Cohn and Gallagher, 1984; Melucci, 1980; Smith, 1978; Corzine et al., 1977). Organized religions’ response to gays and lesbians (Roozen, et al., 1995; Glock, 1993), discrimination policies against homosexuals in the US military (Leggett, 1994) and educational systems’ alteration of approach to GLBTs as a means of combating AIDS (Booth & Ainscow, 1988) exemplify ways contemporary institutions have changed in light of GLBT visibility. As Leggett (1994) reveals, historically institutions, such as the legal system, have worked in unison to support other institutions’ (psychiatry and the military) anti-gay policies.

Studies as diverse as “the sociology of story telling” (Plummer, 1995), and textual analysis of the 1999 Society for the Study of Social Problems’ presidential address (Ferree et al., 1999) have attempted to measure changes in perception of homosexuality. However, despite growing familiarity with GLBT issues, exploring institutionalized forms of social change surrounding homosexuality remains an arduous task due to issues of invisibility, political correctness, sensitivity and undisclosed feelings of shame, guilt or immorality.

Theorizing sexuality, I use contemporary stratification theory, which sees stratification processes as “interactive”, not additive (Fere & Hall, 1996), to understand how contests for visibility ought to be explored in conjunction with other social categories possessing a potential to stratify. Understanding that an integrated,
as opposed to additive model, “does not imply that race, class and gender are equal in their effects, but argues that they need to be analyzed as theoretically codeterminative” (Feree & Hall, 1996 p.936), I place sexuality among these social categories as “one of a number of intersecting, interacting forces that stratify access to resources, autonomy, and power in society (Andersen & Collins, 1992; Rothenberg, 1992; West & Fenstermaker, 1995)” (Feree & Hall, 1996, p.936). Hence, just as organizational research on gender inequality reveals gender to be integral to the operation of organizational processes which cannot be properly understood without addressing the dialectical relationship of class and gender (Acker, 1989, 1990; Connell, 1987; West & Zimmerman, 1987), I argue that so too must we understand sexuality as one of many elements within that same dialectical relationship.

An awareness of the interconnections between sexuality, gender, class and race enables us to “think more creatively beyond the dilemmas of identity politics about the formation of collective consciousness and the process of social change” (Hennessy, 2000 p.18) when confronted with the reality of multiple identities. It is my argument that sexuality norms exist and function similar to gender norms which have been shown to act as ideological devices that create and limit choice (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Smith, 1990).

Social theorists linking the emergence of modern day sexualities with growth of consumer society attest identity is thoroughly intertwined with consumption (Weeks, 1985, 1991; Chauncy, 1994). Analyzing the connection among “non-normative” sexual identity, capitalism and consumption, Hennessy (2000) cites increasing mainstream cultural and corporate acceptance of homosexuality as “proof” that we are witnessing a period of “global gay culture”, with gay imagery becoming an increasingly international phenomenon spread via consumerism (Altman, 1982,
The world of advertising exhibited marked social change in perception of and interest in homosexuals over the last twenty years. Between 1997-2001 alone, advertisements in lesbian publications grew from $100 to $208 million, despite recession (Yin, 2003). Clark (1991) found the popularity of lesbian imagery in mainstream advertising to be less indicative of growing homosexual acceptance and more due to capitalism’s appropriation of ‘styles’.

Vehicles of mass media reflect the encompassing socioeconomic structure (Hartley, 1982) and “play a pervasive role in shaping practically every aspect of our post-intellectual culture - our family, political, economic, educational, religious, and entertainment institutions” (Wood, 1996). Historical descriptions of Times (Alwood, 1996; Gross, 2001) reveal the commonality of homophobic images between 1950-1970. In the Seventies, three-fourths of Americans defined homosexuality as morally wrong (Haeberle, 1996). By the mid-Nineties, just over half agreed with such statements (NORC, 1996). Due to scope, such studies have privileged documentation over critical analysis (Simpson, 1998). Times is an institution known for its historical neglect and work against gays (Iwata, 1992). Studies of Times exemplify how events (i.e. gay rights movement, AIDS) brought about resisted changes in the portrayal of homosexuality in the Eighties and Nineties (Alwood, 1996; Gross, 2001).

**Methodology:**

A random sample of 284 news articles was taken from the Times’ largest news category, “general news,” based upon their inclusion of one or more of the following keywords: gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, queer and homosexual. A decision was made to narrow the category General News, which is comprised of the subsections medical health, entertainment, legal, and business/finance news, to include only business/finance news. All "business and finance news", excluding
"merger and acquisition" news, articles were coded from a coding scheme emerging directly from article content. This produced 7 topical, non-exclusive, categories: Advertising & Marketing, Discrimination, Publicity, AIDS, Gay Press, Work, Business, & Finance, and Descriptive Terms. Since advertising was the largest category, I recoded all articles containing an advertising focus into one final group, producing a final sample of 127 articles. Via qualitative, critical textual analysis, I analyze the ideological assumptions, norms and stereotypes embedded within Times’ advertising business news articles to critically examine examples of support/refutation of heteronormativity (Hennessy, 2000), challenge/confirm pre-existing stereotypes and socio-cultural images (Badgett, 1998; Quinones, 1998; Lukenbill, 2002) and meet Gamson’s (2000) substantive challenge to reveal: “how particular institutions work to heterosexualize and gender, and with what material effects.”

Findings:

The Times’ coverage of non-heterosexual subjects in advertising news divulges three trends: corporate shunning, corporate curiosity and corporate pursuit. Although the trends are generally linear, several instances demonstrate fluidity among these trends. In this paper, I focus on the first of these trends, corporate shunning. During the Seventies, there is no discussion of homosexuality in The Times’ business news. Initial awareness of "the homosexual market" occurs in the Eighties, with much negativity associated with “that segment of the population” (Times, 11/18/84) whose members were routinely identified as a “problem” (1/31/88) and whose presence made companies fearful “of losing their market” (11/14/89). Advertisers, and the corporations they represented, strongly avoided association with homosexuality. “The ad business is the straightest business there is” exclaimed an ad agency coordinator describing marketing to The Times in May, 1981. Times concurs
with this depiction, describing advertising as a conservative, archaic, field that avoids any type of controversy like the plague. Two examples, tennis champion Billie Jean King and the “tainted football star,” evidence corporate aversion to homosexuality.

"Mrs. King" is introduced by The Times as a celebrity “thrust into controversy”, along with a list of others earning disapproval from their “blemished” lives. Titled “When a Personality is Tainted,” Mrs. King is reported embroiled in a lawsuit by her former secretary for assets promised during their “homosexual relationship”. Estimating $150,000 lost in potential sponsorship “since the disclosure,” advertisers are cited saying “the advertising business won’t giver her a vote of confidence [because] it’s too straight”. Times ads “although moral attitudes have changed appreciably”, “in the world of soap and suds” the atmosphere remains intolerant. Times’ choice to list King’s homosexual affair along with Peter Lawford’s drinking problem, Marilyn Chamber’s porn film, Roberto Duran’s “quitting” a boxing championship and Flip Wilson’s arrest for possession of drugs, contributed to the deviantization of homosexuality and its representation as a moral failing.

Manifestations of homophobia continued throughout the Eighties:

The advertising agency executive, Marty Blackman, was frantic. He had just heard a rumor that a former football star serving as a spokesman for his client, a major soft drink company, was gay. He wanted Mr. Blackman to find out whether it was true…The executive called him because of his reputation as an impeccably accurate source. Mr. Blackman checked out the rumor and, within a few days, was able to tell the executive that it was untrue. (1/31/88)

Mr. Blackman, described by Times as a native New Yorker, Columbia Law school graduate and former sports agent, is advanced as the best in his business, working with top corporations Exxon and Miller Lite and the Yankees, Mets and Oakland Raiders. Mr. Blackman’s authority and role as expert is confirmed by the statements “He can tell you who will be terrific and who will be a problem” and further details how “corporate executives increasingly call on Mr. Blackman and others like him not
only to suggest suitable athletes but to reassure themselves that those selected have no hidden bombshells.” (1/31/88) The only other “bombshells” described were death of a basketball player from a cocaine overdose and a Mets’ pitcher’s entrance into a drug rehabilitation center, Times, via contextualization, constructed homosexuality as a social problem akin to substance abuse. Mr. Blackman's comment, and Times’ decision to print, “The awful part is that because horror stories shock the business and advertising communities, they are terrific for my business” further reinforced the stigmatization of homosexuality in 1988. Ultimately, homosexuality was used to justify termination of employment. In questioning Mr. Blackman about his power to make or break athlete’s reputations, Times quotes “It’s up to the company to make the final judgment”…executives “were going bananas because they were considering renewing his contract. With AIDS, corporations are even more paranoid about homosexuality than they used to be” (1/31/88). Thus, AIDS made businesses already fearful of association with homosexuality further paranoid.

The prevailing attitude about homosexuality’s detrimental consequences to advertising extended to product managers selling products historically of interest to homosexuals. The male fashion market is one business arena where heterosexuality is not presupposed. Advertisers worked to break the stereotype that only gay men are fashion-consciousness. In 1985, an article disclosed fashion media felt compelled to justify and persuade non-apparel, mainstream advertisers their magazines discussed “more than just fashion,” ensuring heterosexuals also read such publications:

Style-oriented publications, particularly GQ, have also had to deal with a perception that their primary readership was fashion-conscious homosexual men, say advertising executives. Steven T. Florio, publisher of GQ, said the magazine is trying to appeal to a broad range of male readers, without excluding anyone. “There are probably some guys who read the magazine who are married with six kids, and there are probably some who are gay,” Mr. Florio said (4/8/85).
Although not disparaging, the message conveyed is *GQ*’s association with homosexuality was a negative attribute. As one of only three 1985 advertising articles, this contributed to gay marginalization, minoritization and invisibility.

Much Eighties’ business news mirrored the nervous state of consumers, with gay businesses reporting declining profit as heterosexual customers exhibited fear of contracting AIDS. Articles focused on dilemmas faced by insurance companies, with the disease’s potential to “bankrupt insurance companies” from a flood of claims and monumentous health bills” (2/22/87). “Businesses …run by homosexuals” suffered, even in predominantly gay locations due to heterosexual fear of catching the disease because “straight people don’t want to try on clothes that gays have put on” (12/29/84). *Times* attributed the “cause” of business decline to closeted gays, since “too many gay-owned businesses hide the fact that they are” (12/29/84).

Heterosexual businesses inadvertently affected ensured their customers knew they excluded gays. Safecom, a private AIDS-detection center’s marketing plan stated it “will include neither homosexuals nor intravenous drug users but heterosexuals about to begin a relationship and couples who have decided to have a baby” (7/18/88). *Times* contributed to Safecom’s exclusion of gay parents and families by dissociating “homosexuals” from “couples who have decided to have a baby.”(7/18/88).

In 1989, *Times* published eleven business news articles about “gays,” none of which discussed advertising issues. Conservative backlash in other media arenas, particularly boycotts and advertising withdrawal from several programs with “anti-Christian” content, including *Heartbeat* with its lesbian nurse character, and *Thirtysomething*, the first show to air a gay male lovemaking scene, bolstered disinterest in gay consumers. *Times* printed two articles discussing the advertising
ramifications. In “Ads Reportedly Lost Because of Gay Scene”, *Times* wrote

"Several advertisers, apparently concerned about a scene depicting a homosexual
couple on ABC’s prime time show “Thirtysomething,” pulled advertising from last
Tuesday’s episode, costing the network about $1.5 million in lost sales, a source
familiar with ABC said yesterday. He declined to identify the advertisers” (11/14/89).
Business disinterest was further exemplified by advertiser action: “With last
Tuesday’s cancellations, the advertisers apparently made their own choices and did
not respond to outside pressures. This appears to be a case of companies reacting to
protect their interest,” said an agency executive. “They are fearful of losing their
market” (11/14/89). Homophobia constituted business sensibility and the bulk of
collective action. “It is understood that the network received about 400 phone calls
after the show, of which about 90 percent were negative. A network spokesman said
they were not calling in behalf of a particular organization. He added that the network
also received 50 letters, all favorable.” (11/14/89).

The perception that business affiliation with homosexuality would cause
adverse consequences continued into the Nineties. Although news coverage remained
slim, with three articles discussing G/L and advertising, 1990 represented the first
instance of “positive” framing of homosexuals as a social group, with some
companies said to welcome “gay” publicity. However, the means used to achieve gay
publicity are problematic. Advertising agency Smith & Greenland, capitalized on
“controversial” advertising campaigns to “distinguish themselves” from the crowd.
*Times* described an ad showing “two sweaty young men staring at each other after a
racquetball game. ‘He works as hard as he plays,’ reads the caption. ‘And he drinks
Johnnie Walker’” (4/13/90). Framed by *The Times* as “novel” and “unique”, such ads
avoided controversy and heterosexual disapproval while luring the gay dollar. In the
“talking billboard” ad, a telephone number and male model dressed in a bathing suit were shown. When the number was called, “‘Tom talked about going to the theater and to Fire Island, a Long Island beach that is popular among homosexuals’ (4/13/90). Vagueness enabled business to reach what came to be known as the lucrative gay male market and excited gay groups that their lives were receiving national validity. However, when questioned, advertisers denied pursuit. “We walk through life with a certain innocence. When that ad came through me, I loved it. It did not occur to me it would get the reaction it got. We did not target gay people, but we are delighted they could relate to it (4/13/90). The Times, not advertisers, validates consumer perception – “groups and advertising executives naturally considered this reference to an absent “he” a bold example of aiming at the gay market (4/13/90). The first article to call corporate America on its lack of accountability for gay visibility, The Times wrote “the ad received a great deal of free publicity in gay-oriented publications,” (4/13/90) without purchasing a single ad. This was the first time a mainstream corporation reached the gay market while avoiding direct association of its products with homosexuality. Times’ deduction “gay groups and advertising executives” considered this ad to be “a bold example of aiming at the gay market”, indicates social change in visibility and representation of gays by 1990.

AIDS largely impacted the perception, representation and visibility of homosexuality. Prior to 1990, Times characterized mainstream business pursuit of G/L as hesitant and with social disapproval, marked by rare instances of intrigue. In an article about AIDS in the workplace, Times discussed criticisms of the Justice Department’s decision to exclude persons perceived to transmit AIDS from the 1973 Rehabilitation Act: “the criticisms are misplaced…strident critics are complaining that the opinion will foster discrimination against homosexuals or others perceived to
be potential carriers of AIDS. These complaints are misdirected for several reasons (7/13/86). *Times* stridently supported the Department’s ruling, going so far as to tell G/L how they should feel: “the gay community and other political minorities…should applaud, not condemn, the Department’s opinion” (7/13/86).

By 1991, a shift in corporate and public perception emerged. In “Ads Against AIDS”, *Times* positively reported the “first national educational campaign to fight the disease” (7/26/91). However, criticism from *Advertising Age* helped *Times* to define AIDS as a homosexual disease:

The column attacked Ads Against AIDS for, among other things, “its implication that AIDS is a major problem in the advertising business,” adding, “Despite its gradual increase, AIDS is still heavily concentrated among the homosexual population and certain entertainment and artistic circles in contrast to the general population (7/26/91).

In 1992, corporate interest in G/L increased exponentially. *Times* reported, “hundreds of major marketers still omit homosexuals from their plans” (7/31/92), listing automobile, fast food and soft drink market sectors, but withholding company names and commentary while publicizing “unconventional”, newsworthy trendsetters. *The Times* described television advertising as less conservative, given “Popular shows can easily replace any skittish advertiser with another willing to take the risk” of advertising during shows with “sexually oriented content” (12/7/92). *Seinfeld* and *Roseanne* were used to reveal how “both networks were able to replace the advertisers immediately, losing no revenue”, even gaining revenue in some cases. However, despite *The Times*’ defensive tone, the fact that nine out of ten scheduled advertisers withdrew from *Seinfeld’s* episode alone indicated continued social disapproval - even if no money was lost. Furthermore, in the same article *Times* reported monetary network loss earlier in 1992 due to dropped advertisements, concluding the “harmlessness” advertisers’ threats were due to show popularity and success. As
declared by a media buyer, program ratings affect perception and “sex and violence become love and adventure if a show has a 25 share or higher” (12/7/92). *Times* declared

“most advertisers, to be sure, still shun even elemental efforts in this realm [G/L marketing] because of a stigma about homosexuality” rationalizing “some companies, particularly those selling mass-market products, remain reluctant to enter the market...because of the stigma in some quarters about homosexuality or fears of a backlash among conservative customers (6/9/94).

Marketing strategies for dealing with homosexuality differentiated businesses and distinguished corporate policy. In February, 1994, *Times* labelled advertisers’ reaction to homosexuality “this contentious issue” and wrote how it sparked “a rambunctious debate roiling corporate America” (2/23/94). Corporate response remained diverse. Kraft General Foods inadvertently sent an internal memorandum to the media, evidencing corporate statements such as “no KGF commercials can run in the episode” of the *Rosanne* show because it “deals with homosexuality” (2/23/94). Subaru endorsed a counter-normative position, “motivated by money,” (10/6/95), which strengthened the association of homosexuality with affluence. Although provoking intrigue and monetary potential, corporate generosity did not extend to gay spokespersons. Martina Navratilova, the “nonpaid public spokesperson” for Subaru’s Rainbow Card, was chosen “because she has incredible credibility not only in the gay community but in the straight community” (10/6/95). Paraphrasing Rainbow Card’s marketing CEO, *Times* printed “Ms. Navratilova has often linked her paucity of lucrative national endorsement contracts to her openness about being a lesbian” and concluded “most mainstream advertisers continue to shun the market because of stigma many attach to homosexuality” (10/6/95).

*Times’* depiction “the vast majority of marketers have continued decades-old policies of shunning any involvement or association with homosexuals because of the
pervasive societal stigma surrounding homosexuality and concerns that they might be subjected to consumer boycotts" (2/23/94) remained true in 1997, when Esquire cancelled a fictional story containing a homosexual sex scene when four, full-page Chrysler ads were scheduled to run (10/17/97). Although Chrysler discontinued its policy of “requiring magazines in which it advertises to notify in advance about articles that may stir controversy” (10/17/97), they declared their guidelines avoiding the homosexual “controversy” unchanged, continuing the deviantization and stigmatization of homosexuality in American society. Similarly, in the first advertising article to mention transsexuals, Times reported avoiding discomfort remained an advertising hallmark:

Holiday Inn Worldwide said today that it was dropping a television commercial featuring a transsexual that appeared during the Super Bowl. The hotel chain, a unit of Bass P.L.C., said the ad, which was aimed at dramatizing the company’s $1 billion renovation program, offended some people. The ad, first broadcast on Sunday, showed a woman drawing admiring glances at a class reunion. She turns out to be a male alumnus who had a sex-change operation. (1/29/97).

The ad agency’s comment “We embrace controversy that’s relevant to the consumer target” serves to associate transsexualism with “controversy” and offensiveness, along with Times’ further descriptions of “unconventional” and “risk-taking” (4/21/98).

Discussion:

This analysis highlights the prevalence of homophobia both within the media and corporate America. The dialectical relationship between media and business in constructing meaning systems supports Thompson’s (1995) articulation that the media intentionally and actively manages invisibility. Negative publicity and fear of AIDS, coupled with stereotypical race, gender and class norms, worked to associate homosexuality with white, wealthy, gay men. As an institution, Times changed from excluding homosexuals in the Seventies, to marginality in the Eighties, to
unprecedented coverage in the Nineties. However, visibility did not result in equal representation. Homosexuals were frequently presented as a homogenous whole, not only in race, class and gender, but also sexuality. Bisexuals, transsexuals and transgender persons received little to no news coverage. The commonality of reporting homosexuals as universal sexual beings worked to dismisses the complexity, inter-connectivity, and socioeconomic conditions that stratify these social groups.

Homophobia was justified as good business acumen until the Nineties when American business noted the niche market potential of gay men. The corporate-media construction of sexuality, including a host of non-sexual characteristics - "lifestyle", disposable income, product preferences, propensity for disease, tasting wine, shoes, etc., reveals sexuality’s embedment in social relations (Melucci & Lyyra, 1998). However, commodification did not end homophobia. Rather, it divided the market and American society into pro and anti-gay groups.

Marketers continued to find homosexuality stigmatic in the Nineties and even in 2000 it maintained an aura of deviance. Referring to an IKEA commercial with a gay male couple shopping for furniture, Times cited Deutsch Inc. as “gain[ing] a reputation for unconventional approaches to prosaic product categories” (10/24/00). To make a mundane experience, furniture shopping, memorable and “creative”, Deutsch had to introduce something novel, extraordinary - i.e. a gay male couple. If homosexuality were normative in American society in 2000, it would not be noteworthy or “creative” to display a homosexual couple furniture shopping.

Contemporary fascination with homosexuality characterizes the nouveau desire to sell more than commodities. By postulating products as symbolic signs of success, agents creating consumer culture impart consumption with the power to
surpass class representation. In addition to reflecting social status and wealth, consumption allows individuals to acquire social identities, perceived social mobility, and a false selfhood. As J.S. Mill conveyed, “the possession of such and such an object is in itself a social service: as a certificate of citizenship the TV is a token of recognition, of integration, of social legitimacy” (Baudrillard, 1981). Consumption is a process that reproduces systemic inequalities. “Consumption…is our most powerful cultural force, helping to shape our attitudes, beliefs, values and lifestyles” (Fox, 2001). Commodities are tokens, fetishized objects that mask exchange-value and inequitable social relations. It is “through objects a stratified society speaks and, if like the mass media, objects seem to speak to everyone, it is in order to keep everyone in a certain place” (Baudrillard, 1981). This research reveals the "certain place" GLBTs occupy is defined, in part, by business need and media perception.

References


