

Laugh, Sneer or Kill: U.S. Advertising and Negative Gay Male Depictions

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As gays and lesbians integrate into mainstream society and culture, gay male images have been appearing with growing frequency in a variety of media in advertisements for a broad range of products and services. Despite such progress made in the struggle for gay civil rights and recognition, negative depictions of gay men or male homosexuality in advertising persist even today.

This research focuses on those print and video advertisements where gay men are presented as effeminate, ridiculous or evil figures; or even as objects deserving death. It attempts to answer three questions: (1) What sorts of negative depictions of homosexuality are presented in U.S. advertising in the 20th and 21st centuries? (2) How, if at all, have pejorative depictions of gay men evolved in the past 100 years in American advertising? and (2) Why have they changed?

To answer these questions, this study entails the analysis of 103 depictions in 87 print and video advertisements from the 1920s to the current century for a variety of product categories culled from an examination of over 1500 ads collected from several on-ground and online sources. It provides insights into how pejorative depictions of minorities in general are used to sell products and services. It further investigates an important cultural and marketing area since ads are known to both reflect and set society's interpretation of groups and individuals (Cortese 2004, Goffman 1979, Gross 1994, Pollay 1986). Finally, it provides insights to marketers contemplating the integration of gay figures into their ad campaigns.

BACKGROUND

Homosexual men have always existed (Boswell and Halperin 1989). However, the presence of an identifiable gay male sub-culture or community can be traced to the late 19th century and urbanization resulting from the Industrial Revolution and mass immigration (D'Emilio 1983). In the 20th century, the demographic disruptions of World War II further enabled men from small towns and farming communities who were attracted to other men to find others like themselves. Following the War, many decided to remain in coastal cities such as San Francisco or New York to begin their post-War lives. Gay communities began to grow.

Ironically, the increasing public visibility of nascent gay communities created societal fears of the *problem* of homosexuality on the part of broader society. Homosexual bars were subject to constant police raids. In 1952, the U.S. Congress enacted a ban on gay and lesbian foreigners entering the country. This law remained on the books until 1990. Even the American Civil Liberties Union would not take an official stand on gay rights until 1967. In 2014, anti-sodomy laws were in effect in twelve states, despite a 2004 U.S. Supreme Court ruling nullifying them (Langlois 2014). Even though Dr. Alfred Kinsey's (1948) survey of human sexuality published in the bestseller *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* indicated that 4 percent of white males identified themselves as exclusively homosexual and 37 percent of men admitted to having a homosexual sexual experience, the American Psychiatric Association continued to categorized homosexuality as a mental disorder until 1972.

Beginning in June 1969 with the *Stonewall Riots* in New York resulting from a routine police raid of the Stonewall Inn gay bar, the gay rights movement began its historic trajectory. The AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s had the effect of exposing gay men to media attention "outing" gay men both famous and ordinary and demonizing them as diseased and deadly. Today, gay characters appear routinely on television shows and films; same-sex marriage is legal in over two-thirds of the U.S. states and the District of Columbia, and is recognized by the Federal government.

Before a recognizable gay community or even the public conception of a gay man came into being, gay male characters existed in media in the early 20th century in theater and film. During the

prohibition years of 1920 to 1932, in cities such as New York the *Pansy Craze* gave stereotyped portrayals of effeminate performers and transvestites – or drag queens – unprecedented prominence in newspapers, Broadway productions, novels and films (Benshoff 1997, Chauncey 1995).

Following the 1934 strict enforcement of the Production Code in Hollywood, openly or implied homosexual characters were banished from the movie screen, and words such as “fairy” and “pansy” were deleted from scripts. In essence overt homosexuality ceased to exist on American film (Benshoff 1997, 35).

Gay communities developing after World War II brought the beginnings of media scrutiny to homosexuality. In 1954, a Los Angeles-based talk show examined “Homosexuals and the Problems They Present.” (Tropiano 2002). In 1961, KQED-TV in San Francisco aired the first documentary about homosexuality produced for television (KQED 1961). In an introduction to the program, the California state Attorney General Stanley Mosk referred to “all the revulsion that some people feel toward homosexuality” adding that “we might just as well refuse to discuss alcoholism or narcotics addiction.” (Mattachine 1961, 16).

In 1967, the CBS television network broadcast *The Homosexuals* (CBS 1967). Respected television journalist Mike Wallace spoke to the “growing concern about homosexuality in society”. He went on to state that the results of a survey commissioned by CBS indicated that two-thirds of American viewed homosexuality with disgust, discomfort or fear.

Beginning in the 1970s, television began featuring more sympathetic portrayals of gay characters in shows such as *All in the Family* (1971), *The Corner Bar* (1972), and *Hot l Baltimore* (1975). The television film *That Certain Summer* in 1972 revolved around a divorced father explaining to his son that he was gay. However, medical and police drama series such as *Marcus Welby, M.D.* and *Police Woman* continued to feature gay and lesbian characters as sick or criminal-minded. In 1988, the NBC series *Midnight Caller* aired an episode in which a bisexual man knowingly infected both his male and female sexual partners with the HIV virus. Of the 32 films with major lesbian or gay characters between 1961 and 1976, 13 featured gays who committed suicide and 18 had the homosexual character murdered (Gross and Woods 1999, 293).

As described by Benshoff (1997, 1-2) in his study of homosexuality and horror film villains, homosexuality has traditionally been viewed by American society as a “monstrous condition” with homosexuals running “rampant across the countryside, claiming ‘innocent victims’”, existing in “shadowy closets”, causing “panic and fear.”

Advertising – both in video in print formats – lends itself well to communicating a message to a target audience quickly. Stereotyped – or negative depictions of gay men reflecting society’s revulsion towards homosexuality communicate a message that broad society can understand. Turow (1984, 169, 174) summarizes these representations as “vehicles for getting work done quickly, efficiently,” capitalizing on “what the audience can [relate to] instantaneously.” This research explores just these images.

METHODOLOGY

For purposes of this project, the term *gay* refers to male homosexuals. A four-dimensional definition of the term includes desire for and attraction to other men, behaviors associated with that desire, identification as gay or homosexual (Laumann et al. 1994), and/or a perception of belonging to a larger gay community (Herdt 1992; Laumann et al. 1994; Thompson 1988).

In order to clarify what constitutes a negative depiction of male homosexuality, the author provides the following criteria adapted from Branchik (2007) to connote a negative depiction of homosexuality:

1. Men in an effeminate pose (limp wristed, mincing);
2. Men depicted as rejecting women’s advances;
3. Men in traditionally “gay” occupations such as hairdresser or decorator;
4. Men undertaking traditionally feminine activities such as sewing or cooking;
5. Men dressed as women (in “drag”);
6. Men being rejected by others for being gay;

7. Men depicted as being sexually predatory towards another man or as fearing being the recipient of homosexual advances.
8. Men depicted as being assaulted as a result of being presumed to be gay or as assaulting another man due to fear of intimate contact with a gay man.
9. Men reacting to fear they may be gay or be perceived as gay.

This research entailed the use of a variety of primary sources, specifically print and video ads, over the past 100 years culled from a variety of on-ground and online archives. The author spent over ten years examining well over 1500 advertisements for purposes of selecting those presenting male homosexual images in a negative or pejorative way.

The author analyzed these ads for year, medium, advertiser, exact nature of depiction, ad storyline, and tagline. He then grouped depictions by the following time periods: (1) 1900-1934, coinciding in 1934 with the beginning of rigid enforcement of the Hollywood Production Code ; (2) 1935 to 1941, the U.S. entry into World War II; (3) 1942-1945, the period of the War; (4) 1946 to 1969 and the birth of the gay rights movement; (5) 1970 to 1984, including the disco era to the beginnings of the AIDS crisis; (6) 1985 to 1999, beginning with the high visibility of gay men resulting from the AIDS crisis and including the death of movie star Rock Hudson; and (7) 2000-2010, the first decade of the 21st century. This ex ante approach (Hollander et al. 2005) is reflective of the general paucity of gay male ad depictions before the 1990s (only 15 ads featuring negative depictions were found before 1980); and historic eras in gay history and society's as well as the media's attitude towards and presentation of gay men.

The author then performed a cross-tabulation of all images, examining ad theme counts and frequency patterns by time period. See Table One for summary results of this analysis.

Counts Ad Themes	Time Periods							Grand Total
	1900-1934	1935-1941	1942-1946	1946-1970	1971-1984	1984-1999	2000-2008	
1			2	1	1		5	9
2	1		1					2
3							3	3
4				2		1	4	7
5		1		2	2	4	12	21
6	3						5	8
7						2	25	27
8						2	15	17
9			1			1	7	9
Grand Total	4	1	4	5	3	10	76	103

RESULTS

The reader will note a significant increase in negative depictions of male homosexuality in advertising since 2000. The depictions increased from ten in the 1984-1999 time period to 76 in the 2000s, a seven fold increase or 73.8% of the total. In a parallel vein, the number of ad depictions increased from an average of 3.4 in the first five time periods to ten in the 1984-1999 time period, which featured 9.7% of all themes. This growth reflects the increasing visibility of and familiarity with gay men by larger society.

The most popular theme overall, with 26.2% of all themes was Theme 7, Men depicted as being sexually predatory towards another man or as fearing being the recipient of homosexual advances. However, virtually all (92.6%) of these ads were featured during the period 2000-2008. A similar pattern emerges with Theme 8, Men depicted as being assaulted as a result of being presumed to be

gay or as assaulting another man due to fear of intimate contact with a gay man, which is presented 17 times. All themes appear in the 1984-2008 periods. At 20.4% of all ad themes, Theme 5, Men dressed as women (in "drag") was the most consistent popular depiction. While 57% of this theme total appeared during the 2000-2008 period, 19% appeared in the 1984-1999 period, 9.5% in each of the 1946-1970 and 1971-1984 periods, and 4.75% in the 1935-1941 period. Theme 1, Men in an effeminate pose, was also a fairly consistent theme, with 22%, 11%, 11% and 55.6% of depictions in the 1942-1946, 1946-1970, 1971-1984, and 2000-2008 periods respectively. Finally, 89% of the nine appearances of Theme 9, Men reacting to fear they may be gay or be perceived as gay, are found during the last two periods.

DISCUSSION

Gay imagery in general was very infrequent in advertisements until the late 20th century. Imagery found during much of the early to mid-20th century depicts gay men as objects of ridicule in humor appeals. These sorts of negative portrayals have continued. However, the themes and presentation of gay men for humorous effect have changed. The early 20th century depiction played mostly off the image of the *pansy*, as featured on Broadway and pre-code cinema before morphing into the macho man in drag or soldier having to take on female roles during World War II's sex-segregated environment.

In a 1943 print ad for Munsingwear underwear, two soldiers - Sammy and Hammy - prepare for a show. Hammy strikes a feminine pose, hand on hip, wrist and buttocks extended, while extolling the virtues of the underwear's "Stretchy-Seat". Another World War II era ad for Lux Soap, a soldier tries to convince another that Lux isn't for sissies (and defending his own sexuality for using it?) "No sissy soap this - soldier!" he cries, using various war-oriented metaphors to describe the soap's efficacy. A group of soldiers bathe in a water-filled canoe in a 1944 print ad for Cannon Towels. One of the soldiers - naked - strikes a pose in the style of Gypsy Rose Lee using a palm frond while his compatriots laugh.

Gay ad imagery - positive or negative - all but disappeared during the conservative post-War 1950s. Following the 1969 Stonewall Riots, gay images gradually started to reappear. But the theme was essentially those of early 20th century depictions. In a 1972 print ad for Camel cigarettes, two effeminate men, one a tailor, the other who appears to be his customer stand in front of a mirror wearing hot pants, knee socks, scarves, and smoking a cigarette. The text reads, "With every pair of Mr. Stanley's Hot Pants goes a free pack of short-short filter cigarettes."

However, starting with the AIDS crisis and its disproportionate impact on gay men in the mid-1980s and into the early 21st century, negative depictions began growing with a relative explosion after 2000. Of these negative depictions, three themes emerge. The first is the straight man experiencing anxiety after manifesting some action or affect associated with being gay. In a 2004 video ad for Lava Soap, a man wakes up noting a body sleeping next to him in bed. He smiles a self-satisfied smile when he sees the women's clothes until he notices a wig and finds that the body next to him is a man. A panicked look overtakes him. The tagline "Scrub hard" flashes on the screen. In a 2006 TV ad for Miller Beer, a group of men including actor Burt Reynolds fear that clinking tops of the bottles is a proxy for kissing and that clinking bottoms of the bottles implies anal intercourse. The popularity of this theme no doubt results from the increasing presence of gay men and gay images in various media.

The second theme is men reacting to what they view as a flirtatious or predatory gesture by another man, usually with embarrassment, disgust or even violence. For example, in a 2000 video ad for Kozmo video delivery service a young man perusing the pornography section at a video store flees the store in terror as a second man in the section begins to leer at him. That same year, in a video ad for the National Track Racing Association, an enthusiastic man in the stands kissing a male stranger after his horse wins elicits a malevolent look. A young woman tells a young man that she can't go on a date with him to a concert but that her friend, an effeminate man, can go with him in her place. The man is nonplussed in a 2007 American Eagle television ad when the effeminate man winks at him.

The third - and darkest theme - is that of violence done to men who manifest stereotyped gay behaviors. For example, in a 1987 television ad for Nut 'n' Honey breakfast cereal, five cowboys draw pistols on the cook who responds "Nut 'n' Honey" (Nothin', Honey) to their question "What is for breakfast?" A man trying to get a spot at a crowded bar causes a fight between two other men in a 2005 ad for Pokertime net by pinching both men's buttocks, making them believe that the one is being sexually aggressive to the other. In several video ads from a 2006 campaign for Old Milwaukee Beer, a man undertaking some feminine (read "gay") behavior is literally crushed to death by a gigantic beer can as punishment for the proscribed behavior. In a 2007 video ad for Snickers Candy Bar, two auto

repairmen whose mouths meet as they both eat the same candy bar from opposite ends resort to violence against each to “do something manly” to atone. Those manly actions include the first man pummeling his friend with a large wrench; the friend attempts to crush the first man’s head in the hood of the car they are repairing.

It is ironic that with same-sex marriage legal in most of the United States and regular media exposure of gay men, negative depictions of gay men in advertising not only persist but seem to be growing in frequency. It may be that society itself is attempting to navigate this new cultural territory, walking a fine line between parody and scorn. On the other hand, it may be that male consumers’ perceptions are changing. American men, as a culture and as consumers, are undergoing rapid flux. This metamorphosis is reflected in men’s increasing focus on their bodies (Alexander 2003, Pope et al. 2000) and manifest in their own consumption patterns (Salzman et al. 2006). It may be that when presented with ubiquitous gay images, men are increasingly questioning their own behaviors or ultimate orientations. Finally, it may be society’s rejection of yet another minority demanding fair treatment.

The review of these pejorative depictions of homosexuality over the past century has augmented previous research on gay male images in advertising (Branchik 2007), on pejorative and stereotyped African-American ad imagery by Motley et al. (2003); on Asian images by Taylor et al. (2005) and Taylor and Stern (1997); and on Native American images by O’Barr (2013) and Green (1993). This area will provide a fruitful area for future research as this increasingly visible minority continues to gain a foothold in the popular conscience.

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