

Sexuality, Race, and Ethnicity in American Advertising

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Fig.1. A Case of Advertising Imagery Reinforcing a Racial Myth¹

Introduction

Advertising imagery has usually depicted sexuality as heteronormative.² Over the last couple of decades, gays and eventually lesbians have crept into it.³ It is a fair generalization to say that advertising imagery, in nearly every case, tends to follow and mimic social and cultural changes rather than to initiate them.⁴ Depictions of alternative sexualities in advertising thus began only after LGBT

¹ "Body Politics: Not Yet Past-the-Other (Part One)," *Discoatemybaby* Blog, February 14, 2012, <http://discoatemybaby.wordpress.com/2012/02/14/body-politics-not-yet-past-the-other-part-one>

² Heteronormativity is the ideology that proclaims that heterosexuality is the normal sexual orientation of people and that sexual and marital relations are only appropriate between a man and a woman.

³ Katherine Sender, *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

⁴ For example, depictions of women only changed after the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s was well along its way. Also, the severe antismoking ads of 2012 began appearing a long time after the society had largely accepted the idea that smoking is unhealthy.

people came out in American society and media programming, most notably TV sitcoms, included first gay and later lesbian characters.⁵ If all this were slow to happen, the inclusion of *non-white, non-Anglo* LGBT characters and imagery began even more recently and remains quite limited today.



Fig. 2. Mixed-Race Heterosexual Couples in Ads Are a Recent Phenomenon⁶

Clarification of Terms: Gender and Sexuality

The terms *gender* and *sex* are used in somewhat confusing ways in everyday language. Prior to the feminist movement of the 1970s and thereabouts, the usual way of asking whether a person is male or female was simply: *What is your sex?* Nowadays it is at least as common, if not more so, to ask: *What is your gender?* American political correctness has tended to prefer *gender* to *sex*, although there remains considerable ambiguity and inconsistency in the use of the terms. For example, the application forms pictured below follow different usages.

⁵ It was not until *Ellen* (1994) and *Will and Grace* (1998) that TV programs featured gays and lesbians as central characters and in a positive light, or in a respectful way.

⁶ "Vanilla Label Banana Republic Debuts Interracial Couple in New Ad Campaign," Bindie.com Blog, December 24, 2008, <http://blindie.com/2008/12/24/vanilla-label-banana-republic-debuts-interracial-couple-in-new-ad-campaign>.

DMV DRIVER'S LICENSE AND IDENTIFICATION CARD APPLICATION DL 1P (08/2010)

Purpose: Use this form to apply for a Virginia Driver's License or Identification Card.

Instructions: Applicants complete the front and back of this application.

Note: Va. Code §§46.2-323 and 46.2-342 require that you provide DMV with the information on this form (including your social security number). It is not necessary to provide a social security number for an identification card. This social security number is for record keeping purposes and may be disseminated only in accordance with Va. Code §§46.2-358 and 46.2-206. Persons convicted of certain sexual offenses (as listed in Va. Code §§ 1-962) must register or re-register with the Virginia Department of State Police as provided in Va. Code §§1-961, 9-1-903, and 9-1-904. If you provide a non-Virginia residence/home address or non-Virginia mailing address, your application for a driver's license or identification (ID) card may be denied.

APPLICATION TYPE (Check one)

1. Driver's License 2. Learner's Permit 3. Driver's License 3. CDL Learner's Permit or License 4. Motorcycle Learner's Permit
5. Driver's License with Motorcycle (Class M) 6. CDL with Motorcycle (Class M) 7. Driver's License with School Bus Endorsement (to carry less than 16 passengers)
8. Identification Card 9. Hearing Impaired ID Card 10. Emancipated Minor ID Card 11. Driver's License Testing for Foreign Diplomats

If you are applying for a replacement license or identification card check one of the following:
 I am surrendering my current license or identification card.
 I hereby certify any current license or ID card is unavailable for surrender because it is Lost Stolen Destroyed or Mutilated

Do you currently have or have you ever held a driver's license or learner's permit from Virginia, another state, U.S. territory or foreign country? Yes No
If yes, provide the following:

LICENSE NUMBER _____ ISSUE DATE (mm/dd/yyyy) _____ EXPIRATION DATE (mm/dd/yyyy) _____ STATE/COUNTRY _____

APPLICANT INFORMATION

NOTE: YOUR ADDRESS BELOW MUST BE CURRENT. THE U.S. POSTAL SERVICE WILL NOT FORWARD.

FULL LEGAL NAME (last, first, middle, suffix) _____ SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER (BIRTHDATE (mm/dd/yyyy)) _____
DAYTIME TELEPHONE NUMBER _____ GENDER (check one) HEIGHT _____ FT. _____ IN. WEIGHT _____ LBS. EYE COLOR _____ HAIR COLOR _____
 MALE FEMALE
STREET ADDRESS _____ APT. NO. _____ CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP CODE _____
IF YOUR NAME HAS CHANGED, PRINT YOUR PREFERRED NAME HERE _____ NAME OF CITY OR COUNTY OF RESIDENCE _____
 CITY COUNTY OF _____

Fig. 3. Virginia Driver's License Application⁷

U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE
Online Passport Application

Need help with this Site?

About the Applicant

First Name * _____ Middle Name: _____
Last Name * _____ Suffix: _____

Date of Birth (MM-DD-YYYY) * _____ City of Birth * _____
Country Of Birth * UNITED STATES State/Territory Of Birth: Please Select _____
Social Security Number * _____

Sex: Male Female
Hair Color * Please Select _____
Occupation * _____
Employer or School * _____

Height: * Feet: 0 Inches: 0
Eye Color * Please Select _____

Fig. 4. US Passport Application⁸

In general, scholars have tended to be much more precise in their use of these and related terms like *sexuality*. This precision was occasioned by the rise of *gender studies* where certain issues needed consistent terms of reference.

⁷ Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles, <http://www.dmv.state.va.us/webdoc/pdf/dl1p.pdf>

⁸ US Department of State Online Passport Application, <https://pptform.state.gov/FraudAbuseNotice.aspx>

Accepted scholarly uses are:

- *sex* referring to the biologically-based differences in humans (male versus female⁹)
- *gender* referring to the socially-defined differences between men and women (masculine versus feminine¹⁰)
- *sexuality*, a term appearing more recently, referring to the sexual preferences of individuals for partners of the same or opposite sex (hence, *homosexual*, *heterosexual*, *lesbian*, *gay*, *straight*, *bisexual*, etc.)

Advertising deals with all these issues as a matter of course. This essay focuses specifically on how it handles and represents sexuality, both *heteronormative* (straight-as-normal) and otherwise.

Ads Depicting LGBT Individuals

The appearance of gays and lesbians in American advertising only occurred after they become visible on TV and in other public media. One of the signal events was Ellen DeGeneres' outing herself on the sitcom *Ellen* in 1997. Thereafter follows *Will and Grace* (1998-2006), *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005), and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007). It was not long before including gay people among the characters of TV programs became the vogue. It took a while before the explicit portrayals of non-straight romantic relationships (for example, *Brokeback Mountain* 2005) and other non-comedic portrayals of non-heterosexual romantic relationships occurred on TV and in movies.

⁹ Scholars also include *intersex* individuals, that is, persons with ambiguous genitals or genitals of both sexes, as a matter of sex differences.

¹⁰ These expectations can and do vary from one culture to another.

Even today the number of such portrayals remains small, but the point is that it does occur. Originally, these gay and lesbian characters were exclusively white Anglos. *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) expanded their range with one of the (white) main characters having a continuing romantic relationship with another man, but of a different race (African-American). Advertising imagery followed along, but at a cautious pace. For example, an Ikea ad (1994) was one of the first to feature a story line around a (white) gay couple. This is not to say that there have not been other portrayals of GLBT people in advertising before, they are typically in a derisive context.



*Fig. 5. This 1994 Ikea Ad Was One of the First Featuring Gay Men in a Positive Way.*¹¹

¹¹ IKEA Ad, "Dining Room Table," GLAAD Advertising Media Program, <http://www.commercialcloset.org/common/adlibrary/adlibrarydetails.cfm?QID=76&ClientID=11064>.



Fig. 6. This British Ad for the Services of an Advertising Agency Contains a Derisive Portrayal of a Man in Drag¹²

There are many more portrayals of gays and lesbians in advertising nowadays, but the bottom line remains: it occurs in quite limited circumstances and these characters are almost invariably white.

There is an important exception to all this. In magazines and media programming specifically targeted to gays and lesbians (for example, *Out*, *Genre*, and *Logo*), these portrayals are much more overt. Also some major advertisers like as *Anheuser-Busch*, *Miller Brewing Company*, and *Coors* exhibit what might be called “a gay persona” in such media. For example, Bud Light runs ads that make explicit reference to gay men and their relationships. The brand can do this with impunity because the readership is almost entirely limited to gay people. Additionally, there is the phenomenon of “gay vague” ads that depict imagery that, given the context in which it is placed, is easily interpreted as referencing LGBT people.

¹² From the author's collection.



Fig. 7. Bud Light's Gay Persona"¹³

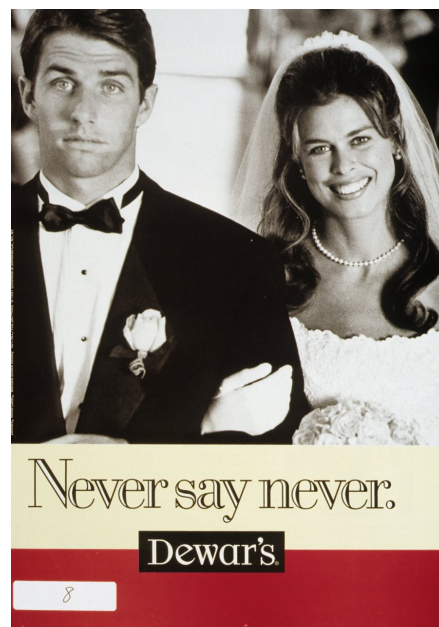


Fig. 8. Placement Influences the Interpretation of this Gay Vague Ad¹⁴

Race and Ethnicity in Out Magazine

¹³ From the author's collection.

¹⁴ From the author's collection.

This section examines a selection of ads from *Out* magazine.¹⁵ Each of these ads is an example of a conscious effort on the part of the advertiser to appeal to gay consumers. They are therefore different, as are all highly targeted ads, in that they intend to reach and speak only to a specific audience whose interests, habits, and preferences are taken into account. These ads sometimes depict people of diverse or indeterminate ethnic and racial backgrounds, although the vast majority of the ads show only white people. The ones examined here do depict racial and ethnic diversity in the LGBT community.

Bud Light encourages readers to “be yourself.” The illustration pictures women as well as men and whites as well as people who are either clearly or possibly non-white. In addition, the familiar rainbow, a well-known LGBT symbol, appears twice in the ad. Once, it is the color base for the brand logo. One color from the rainbow appears on each person in the otherwise monochromatic ad.

¹⁵ The ads discussed in this section were drawn from the February, June, and November issues of *Out* (1992–2010).



Fig. 9. This Bud Light Ad Depicting LGBT Life Includes Racial Diversity¹⁶

Wells-Fargo proclaims its support for LGBT issues in an ad that features two men and a dog. Even though there is no certainty that they are gay, the image is easily interpretable as a gay couple with their pet. Several factors support this interpretation, including the residential setting, the proximity of the two men, the out-walking-the-dog clothes of the men and the accompanying copy, which includes the word “pride”.

¹⁶ *Out*, June 2003



Fig. 10. Wells Fargo Depicts a Gay Couple in this Ad¹⁷

Many other companies show their open support for LGBT people in their ads.¹⁸ Volvo, for example, depicts a panorama of LGBT lifestyles. The ad features (from L-R): two women embracing, one of them clearly pregnant; an interracial lesbian couple in an affectionate pose in a domestic setting; a white gay couple with an African-American baby; a racially ambiguous gay couple embracing, one of whom holds what is presumably their pet; a racially ambiguous lesbian couple lying on a bed; and a white gay couple in an affectionate pose. Through all this, Volvo demonstrates its understanding of diversity within LGBT relationships.

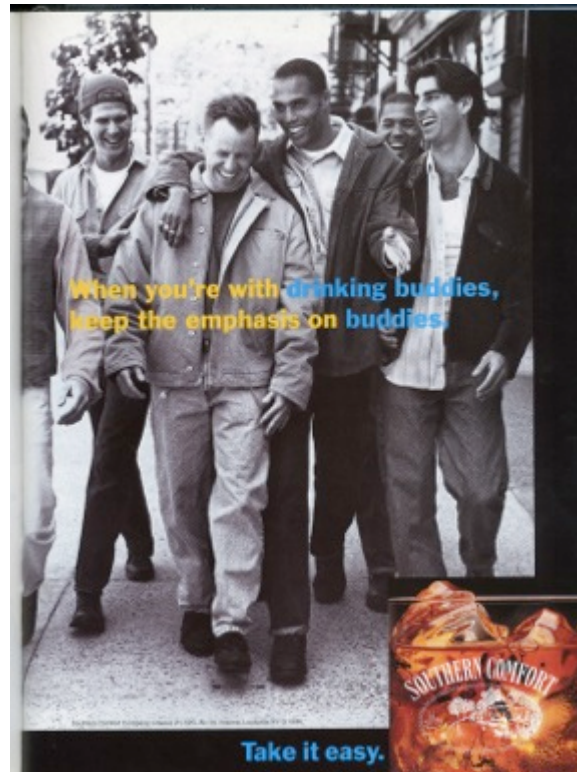
¹⁷ *Out*, June-July 2009.

¹⁸ There are perhaps many motivations for this, but at the base of such practices lie important business reasons. Many advertisers now recognize the buying power of the gay market and want to cultivate this niche market. (See *Niche Advertising: Gay Consumers and Multiculturalism in the Marketplace in AdText*.) In addition, it makes good business sense to try as hard as possible to be sensitive to all potential consumers and to avoid alienating any of them.



Fig. 11. Volvo Emphasizes Its Universal Appeal by Showing a Variety of LGBT Images

A Southern Comfort whiskey ad shows six men walking along a sidewalk. They are physically close to one another and one (African-American) man has his arm over the shoulder of another (white) man. It is, however, the words of the ad along with the context of placement in *Out* that makes it possible to interpret this is an interracial group of close, presumably gay men.



*Fig. 12. Another Racially Diverse Group of Gay Men*¹⁹

Finally, a public service ad sponsored by the California Department of Health Sciences depicts a group of LGBT people marching in support of the anti-smoking movement. The image includes the rainbow flag and references the discrimination that that gay people face in the larger society. The group includes women (presumably lesbians) and men (presumably gay) as well as people of diverse races.

¹⁹ *Out*, June 1995.



*Fig. 13. This PSA Emphasizes Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the LGBT Community*²⁰

Thus, this selection of ads from *Out* shows that many national companies as well as some state governments recognize and support LGBT people and their lifestyles and recognize the diversity within their community. At present, this level of openness and depictions of racial and ethnic diversity among non-heterosexual people are largely confined to specialized media like *Out*. Whether general audience ads will eventually feature this degree of openness and diversity remains to be seen.

Some Related Issues

Several other related issues about race, ethnicity, and sexuality in advertising deserve at least some mention.

²⁰ *Out*, June 2004.

1. *Fetishizing the Black body.*

From the Age of Exploration (beginning in the 15th century) onwards, black bodies have been treated as “other.” Black men were thought to be low in intelligence but to possess great physical prowess. This so-called empirical evidence was based on observations in non-European parts of the world and in turn led to the conclusion that black men’s bodies are more animal-like than other humans and that, in addition to their unusually strong bodies, these men were highly sexed creatures with extraordinary genitals.

A version of this racial myth continues in 20th and 21st century advertising as the fetishization of the black body. In these ads, black bodies are depicted as hyper potent and super strong. This occurs not just in ads featuring famous athletes but also in gay contexts, like *Out*, where the black body is treated as an object of great beauty, sexual attractiveness, and desire.



*Fig. 14. African-American Supermodel David Agdobji Appears Naked and Clothed in a Calvin Klein Billboard*²¹

2. *Lesbians as well as gays.*

Although *Out* magazine originally billed itself as a magazine for gay and lesbian readers, most of the advertising images show gays rather than lesbians. This may be based in the demographics of readership, but it is more than that. Just as the English pronoun *he* when used generically requires women to understand themselves as included, depictions of gay men in ads function similarly as a generic statement of homonormativity by asking lesbians to understand themselves as included as well. The same goes for racial and ethnic representations of gays as white Anglos.²²

²¹ "NEW YORK CITY STREETSCAPE," *The Imagist* Blog, February 1, 2010, <http://www.theimagist.com/taxonomy/term/5702>

²² Advertising typically seeks to be inclusive and the working assumption has been, until recently, that white is generic and non-whites should feel included. Contemporary advertising increasingly is moving beyond the generic use of white or gay.

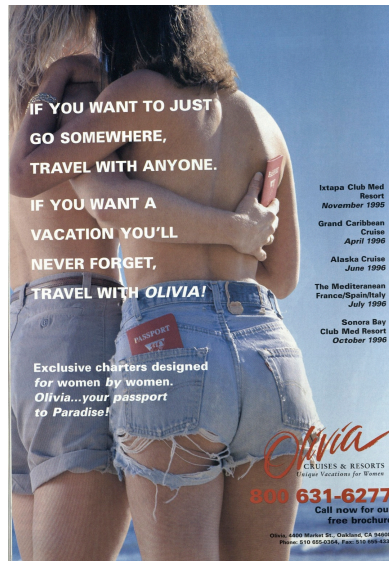


Fig. 15. Some Ads in Out Depict Lesbians ²³

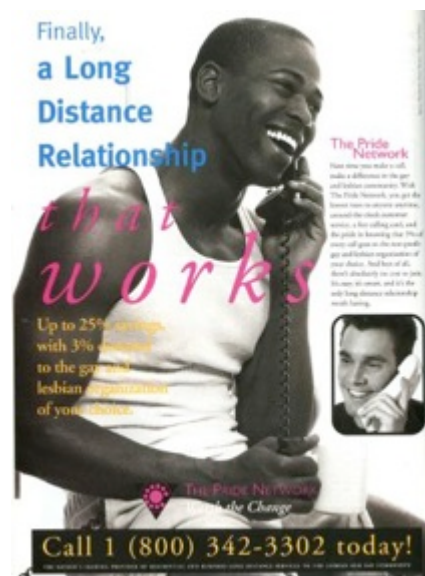


Fig. 16. This Gay Relationship Is Interracial ²⁴

3. Older ads with gay subtexts.

When reviewing older advertising images, it is sometimes possible to “read” a gay subtext into them. When in, say, the 1930s or 1940s homosexuality was

²³ *Out*, October 1995.

²⁴ *Out*, September 1995.

typically illegal in most American jurisdictions and out gay people simply did not exist, ads showing various kinds of intimacy and close relations can be interpreted retrospectively as having a gay subtext. Many of these ads have taken on an iconic status and become campy in contemporary gay culture.



Fig. 17. A Campy Reading of This Old Ad is Possible²⁵

²⁵ "They must have slept on a Karpén," *Commercial Closet*, <http://www.commercialcloset.org/common/adlibrary/adprintdetails.cfm?QID=1388&ClientID=11064>. Ad appeared in *Good Housekeeping*, April 1939.

4. Lesbians as a straight male fantasy.

Depictions of women in what appear to be lesbian situations have appeared in general audience magazine and TV commercials for at least the last two decades or so. However, these have not been representations of lesbian sexuality or lifestyles to lesbian audiences. Rather, they are understood as straight male fantasies because they appear in media like *Playboy* and *Sports Illustrated*. These images of sexually ambiguous or clearly lesbian women speak to the fantasies of a great many straight men.²⁸ Such ads include non-white as well as white women.



²⁷ "From a WWII magazine," *The Decorum Forum* Blog, April 24, 2010, <http://decorumforum.blogspot.com/2010/04/from-wwii-magazine.html>. Ad appeared in *Life* August 16, 1943.

²⁸ In classroom discussions of these ads with my undergraduate students at Duke University, it is frequently suggested that the logic of this male follows along the lines of "I like having sex with women. I also like watching women having sex. It is way cooler and way more interesting to watch just women than to see another man involved in it which makes me jealous."

Fig. 20. This Ad Is Open to Many Interpretations from Various Standpoints²⁹



Fig. 21. This Catfight Appearing in a Beer Aired During a Sportscastr³⁰

Pushing Too Far over Socially Acceptable Limits

Advertising images can be daring and push boundaries quite successfully. For example, fashion advertising is highly sexualized and frequently explores sexual variations (for example, Tom Ford).³¹ There are sometimes situations, however, when the social boundaries are overstepped. Two recent examples illustrate.

First, Benetton's new *Unhate* campaign features a computer-generated image of Pope Benedict kissing Muhammad el-Tayeb, a well-known Muslim cleric. An immediate legal response from the Vatican and the social outcry from other offended people let Benetton know that they had stepped over the line of

²⁹ "Backseat," *Commercial Closet*, 1993, <http://www.commercialcloset.org/common/adlibrary/adPrintdetails.cfm?QID=514&clientID=11064>

³⁰ "Next Stop, Avoiding Reality," *ESPN.Com*, June 17, 2003, <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?page=tmq/030617>

³¹ See Sex and Advertising in *ADText*.

acceptability. The Vatican issued this statement: "This is a grave lack of respect for the pope, an offense against the sentiments of the faithful and a clear example of how advertising can violate elementary rules of respect for people in order to attract attention through provocation." As a result Benetton pulled the ad and issued an apology to those who were offended.



Fig. 22. This Benetton Image Broke Too Many Social Taboos³²

Second, there are virtually no advertising images that depict interracial couples made up of a black man with a white woman. This taboo has been successfully broken in American social life and TV sitcoms, but it remains off limits in the world of advertising. To venture here would be so risky that no business seems willing to try it, at least now. This kind of interracial couple too easily recalls the opening images of this essay: the black man attacking a white female victim.

³² "Benetton's Controversial Unhate Campaign," *My Modern Metropolis Blog*, November 16, 2011. <http://www.mymodernmet.com/profiles/blogs/benetton-unhate-campaign>.



Fig. 23. Black Man/White Woman Images Like This Have Yet to Appear in Ads³³

³³ "Yes It's True...Black Guys Can Like White Girls AND Black Girls Too," Very Smart Brothas Blog, December 21, 2011, <http://verysmartbrothas.com/yes-its-true-black-guys-can-like-white-girls-and-black-girls-too/>