A Semiotic Analysis of the Portrayal of Masculinities in Selected Gay Magazines

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Abstract
In contemporary Western society, advertising plays an undeniable role in the formation of an individual's identity. However, the commodification of identities in advertisements results in the creation of an illusion of equality and negates the problems that the bearers of these identities face in their everyday lives. Inequalities between different identities may be further amplified by stereotypical portrayals of race and gender. This paper analyses a sample of print advertisements extracted from the gay lifestyle magazines Attitude and Gay Times in an effort to examine the portrayal of specific forms of masculinity within the confines of homonormativity.

Keywords: *homosexuality, advertisement, gender, race, masculinity.*

Introduction

As Bartholomew has pointed out, identity can be understood in various ways – whether as an individual's life-narrative that they present to others or as the choices an individual makes in regard to the societal roles that they adopt. However, in contemporary Western society, it is abundantly clear that identity is not something that miraculously comes into being, nor are any of us born with a fully developed identity in place. Instead, identity is made and remade through an individual's interaction with their surroundings, their responses to the events that they encounter, the knowledge which they acquire, and the relationships that they build with others (2009: 936). An individual is a collection of various time and space-dependent identities, and among the most important of these identities are social identities, more specifically those which give an individual the sense of belonging to a certain social group. Social comparison theory conceives social identities as being based on perceived differences or similarities perceived through comparison with others (Ozgen 2019: 4).

In a media environment which is oversaturated with visual impulses, it is unlikely that this process of comparison would occur without reference to the constructed images of men and women which surround us and, at the same time, it is equally unlikely that individuals would adopt the ideas from these images in a straightforward and uncomplicated way (Gauntlett 2008: 14). As Lipovetsky claims, advertisements no longer simply offer products but instead concoct imaginary lifestyles and identities by linking products to specific emotions, spectacles or metaphors (2007: 42). In a similar vein, Baudrillard points out that material goods are no longer the objects of consumption but rather of needs and that in order to become an object of consumption, the object must first become a sign (2005: 173). These understandings of the function of advertising served as the basis for the emergence of niche markets targeted at particular social groups (for example, the gay market) at the end of 1990s. However, as Siapera has noted, identities are subject to a regime of commodification which creates a hierarchy among identities based on the respective profit that they can generate (2010: 132).

Given the important role which gender plays in the construction of an individual's identity, an examination of the portrayal of masculinities in the homonormative environment

would offer valuable insights. The analysis draws on several theoretical sources and previously published research, in particular the concept of power relations in various forms of masculinity as proposed by Connell. In her book *Masculinities*, Connell explains how contemporary hegemonic masculinity, the form of masculinity which is held in greatest esteem in society, subordinates homosexual men by linking them to femininity (2005: 78). This form of homophobic stereotyping is the perfect grounds on which advertisers can build their promises of a more masculine self.

At this point, it would be useful to offer some clarification of the terms of sex, gender and sexuality. Messerschmidt describes sex as being based on bodily characteristics, primarily on physical appearance. As he notes, we are seldom exposed other people's genitals in everyday interactions, and yet we are nonetheless able to ascribe sex to individuals; as a result, sex can be considered to be a social construct (ibid. 111). Gender too can be seen as a social construct and refers to social practices in specific settings (ibid. 114). Finally, sexuality is governed by similar principles to gender (ibid. 115). All three categories are fluid and temporal as we are constantly negotiating our physical appearance, behaviour and desires. However, Messerschmidt also points out that these three aspects of an individual's identity are held in place by a rule of congruence; in other words, to be male is to be masculine, and to be masculine is to be heterosexual (ibid. 116).

Furthermore, Messerschmidt revised Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinities by including features adopted from the theory of intersectionality. As with the afore-mentioned concepts, hegemony came to be seen as situational in nature and thus dependent on other social categories such as age and race or ethnicity (2018: 115). In her work on the various forms of representational regimes in media, Siapera refers to racist regimes of representation which portray members of non-white races as inferior and notes that they are often presented in a sexualized manner in Western media (2010: 149). In a 2013 study, Tan and others demonstrated that Western models were often portrayed as Tough and Macho in lifestyle magazines, whereas Asian models were shown as Vigorous and Sunny, emphasising their youth and attractiveness in contrast to the stoic and manly Western idols (2013: 245).

Before moving on to the earlier research into the portrayal of masculinities in gay magazines, it is necessary to summarize what has been stated thus far. Homosexual men are considered feminine but, due to the performative, fluid, and situational nature of gender, advertising may carry the promise of masculinity. By connecting this trait and the preceding statements which were made in relation to identity, it becomes clear that advertisements are capable of connecting a random commodity, such as an item of clothing or a perfume, with masculine identities, thereby offering spectators the promise of a more masculine self – and thus the myth of masculinity is created.

The majority of research which has been conducted to date on the portrayal of masculinities in gay magazines is quantitative and rarely delves into the underlying level of representation. Such works often reach similar conclusions, mainly finding that the majority of male models portrayed in these magazines are muscular with low body-fat and, of course, white (Saucier and Caron 2008: 522). Furthermore, comparisons of gay and straight lifestyle magazines reveal that gay subcultures are more 'appearance potent', in that they display a greater reverence for appearance ideals, and it is therefore possible to assume that the effect of appearance-related ads has a greater potential influence on gay men than straight men (Jankowski et al. 2014: 480). While the high concentration of muscularity and low body-fat levels may disclose something about the portrayal of masculinity – Connell also mentioned that physical prowess is one way of displaying masculinity (2005: 54) – it may be also

connected with what Lipovetsky has identified as a prevalent feature of the current Hypermodern age – a strong focus on healthy lifestyles and the need to preserve youth for as long as possible (2005: 52). While much of the research into this topic shows a preoccupation with quantitative studies of the portrayal of male bodies, this paper will adopt a qualitative approach, examining gay lifestyle magazines and the power of advertising to sell identities.

Based on the afore-mentioned theoretical assumptions and on earlier research, this study will investigate how male models are portrayed in advertisements in gay magazines and assess the influence of other social categories on the portrayal of masculinity. Two hypotheses were formulated at the outset of the research: the myth of masculinity is the predominant feature of the selected advertisements, and non-white models are associated with femininity.

Methodology

Selection of Research Materials

The corpus of materials used in this study consists of all 2020 issues of the gay lifestyle magazines *Attitude, Gay Times, Advocate* and *Out*. A single issue from each of these publications was selected at random using the online service *textfixer.com*. Appearance-related advertisements promoting, among others, apparel, cosmetics, perfumes and jewellery, of meaningful size (i.e., a third of the page or greater) and portraying a male model with a clearly visible face were then extracted from the selected issues. This process yielded a total of six advertisements:

- Carolina Herrera: Bad Boy (Attitude 2020: 4– 5)
- Topgay.com (Attitude 2020: 25)
- Farah (Attitude 2020: 114)
- Dsquared2 (Attitude 2020: 148)
- Moschino: Toy Boy (Gay Times 2020: 9)
- London Sock Co. (Gay Times 2020: 13)

As is apparent from the list of advertisements, no suitable appearance-related advertisements were identified in the American magazines *Advocate* and *Out.*, and therefore any generalisations resulting from the analysis can only be ascribed to the two British magazines, *Attitude* and *Gay Times*. One possible reason for the lack of material in the American magazines may be related to the fact that their content is more heavily focused on more serious issues such as LGBT rights advocacy, culture and art in comparison to their more commercial British counterparts.

Semiotic Analysis

The methodology employed in the study is based primarily on Beasley and Danesi's book *Persuasive Signs* in which they propose an approach proceeding from diegesis – that is the description at the surface level, to the construction of connotative chains. Connotative chains can best be described as the brainstorming of all the connotational meanings which can be evoked by a sign in an advertisement (2002: 71).

In addition to signs, the analysis was enriched further by an examination of the aspects of camera angles and the presence or absence of gaze, and it is even possible to state that gaze seems to be one of the crucial defining features. in portrayals of power relations. The determination and interpretation of various camera angles, colour schemes and gazes in visual media was based on the methodology shown in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* by Kress & Leeweun (2021: 123– 144). Also important in this respect is the work of Philip Bell, who integrated the concepts of Goffman's Gender Advertising (1987) into the earlier work of Krees & Leeweun to develop a comprehensive intersection of both theories (2004: 29).

Furthermore, Rinallo also mentions that the interpretative strategies of straight and gay men differ in that gay men complement shared narcissist and critical readings with insider readings which can approximate the concept of a queer gaze and connect fragmented signs in an effort to determine whether the model in the advertisement is gay (Pullen 2016: 41). As Laura Mulvey has noted, a further approach with similarities to the concept of the male gaze is that of fetishist readings (2007: 82). Patterson and Elliott point out that in the contemporary period, hegemonic masculinity is forced to adopt 'feminizing' strategies in relation to the portrayal of masculinity in media in order to remain relevant. As a result, male bodies become subject to the male gaze, a process which can provoke feelings of rejection, identification, and desire in men (2002: 241)

Discussion

At first glance, the selected advertisements may evoke the impression of having little in common other than their portrayals of men and their attempts to sell appearance-related products or brands. However, by taking a holistic view of the partial analyses of the visual texts, certain repeating patterns become apparent. Nonetheless, before addressing these patterns, it is necessary to discuss the partial analyses.

In *Carolina Herrera: Bad Boy* perfume advertisement, the model gazes directly into the camera lens, confronting the viewer. The young man is sitting firmly in an armchair, dressed in a suit with the last button of his shirt left unfastened. His face is partly covered by his hand which evokes feelings of danger, suspicion, or something secret. Combined with the dark colour palette and the play with shadows, the model evokes the bad boy archetype. With the model gazing directly into the camera fixed at eye-level, the viewer is positioned as being equal to the bad boy. The whole setting creates a connotative chain revolving around the bad boy, the dark colours, and the sense of masculinity. This focus on masculinity is further enhanced through the lightning bolt-like shape of the perfume bottle. In Greek mythology, the lightning bolt is associated with the god Zeus, a symbol of vitality, masculinity, energy and movement. The energy and vitality are enhanced further in the advertisement through the use of golden hues, which also symbolize luxury. The advertisement is also accompanied by two slogans: "The New Masculine Fragrance" and "#GOODTOBEBAD". From these two slogans, it is very apparent that masculinity is being conveyed through the image of the bad boy and that the advertisement proposes that it is good to be masculine, clearly implying that the viewer should also aspire to a masculine appearance.

The *TopGay.com* advertisement portrays two muscular men in underwear against a dull background portraying a featureless landscape. In the words of Kress & Leeweun's work, there is a contrast between the low sensory modality in the background and the high sensory modality

of the foregrounded models which clearly draws the viewers' attention towards the models and, more specifically, towards the colourful underwear. The focus on underwear may be interpreted as phallocentric symbolism, a characteristic which is clearly linked with masculinity. The featureless landscape has a dream-like quality which is further enhanced by the jungle-pattern on the models' underwear. The models are positioned in the medium distance with their gaze turned away from the camera. Such a portrayal is reminiscent of the idealised statues of classical Greece, and thus evoke a combination of eroticism, sexuality, and masculinity. The allusion to classical mythology and/or masculinity is also achieved through the stylisation of the O in the brand name into the symbol of Mars. Eroticism and sexuality are further enhanced by the portrayal of the two models – one standing firmly with his legs in a wide stance, and the other towering over the former, resting one of his arms rested against the lower model's shoulder. Given that the towering model is portrayed with visible body hair (in contrast to the less hirsute appearance of the other model), a clear signifier of masculinity, this portrayal evokes the gay jargon related to the roles of men in homosexual intercourse.

The *Farah* advertisement takes a different approach to marketing clothing and to the portrayal of masculinity. The image is a simple portrait of a young slim Black man in a close distance shot, taken at an oblique angle, and with the model turning his gaze away from the camera. The man is wearing a cream-coloured jacket which matches the similarly cream-coloured background behind him. The positioning of the model implies equality, yet, due to the oblique angle, also emphasises a sense of difference. The usage of the cream colour creates a contrast with the skin tone of the model. The advertisement is accompanied by a slogan, "Crafting Modern Menswear for a Century", which can be read on several levels. It may signify that racial diversity in men's apparel advertisements is a modern aspect, or that modern men are no longer required to conform to traditional definitions of masculinity. This latter reading is, however, obscured by the afore-mentioned use of the oblique angle.

The *Dsquared2* advertisement depicts the model holding a mobile phone, seemingly taking a photo of his reflection in the mirror (represented here by the viewers themselves). The model is young, athletic, and, due to the sensory modality and play with shadows, evokes an exotic and erotic impression. The eroticism of this advertisement is further enhanced by the setting of a public toilet, a direct reference to the hook-up aspect of gay culture, and by the fact that the model being dressed only in underwear. The red colour of the toilet booths, the high level of colour saturation, and the low exposure evokes adventure, vulgarity and desire. The placement of the brand name above the underwear is crucial as it symbolically castrates the model, obscuring his masculinity and thereby positioning him as an object of desire.

The grayscale portrayal in the *Moschino: Toy Boy* perfume advertisement is of key importance as, in combination with the latex clothing worn by the model, it immediately evokes the imagery of BDSM and Tom of Finland. The model is a young white man with delicate features who is sitting cross-legged on the floor holding an oversized perfume bottle in the form of a teddy bear. The high angle of the camera and the model's direct gaze towards the viewers emphasize the 'childish' subordinate position of the model. The entire advertisement is structured around the 'toy boy' archetype of the young partner of an older man. The shape of the bottle is reminiscent of a child's toy, implying that the latex-clad model should also be understood as a toy on a sexual level.

The *London Sock Co.* advertisement has a similar arrangement to the *Carolina Herrera: Bad Boy* image; a young man dressed in a suit is sitting with crossed legs on a couch drinking tea. However, this man has typical East Asian facial features; his gaze is turned away from the camera and he is wearing pink socks. He is also portrayed at an impersonal distance from the

viewer. The advertisement is accompanied by the slogan "Classic style, with a modern twist". The "Classic style" here is clearly referring to the traditional portrayal of masculinity conveyed through the suit and the dark colour palette, but also to a stereotypical depiction of Englishness identified in the stained glass behind the model and the drinking of tea. On the other hand, the 'modern twist' refers to the racial aspect of the model which, together with the colour of the socks, is typically linked with femininity. While the message of supporting diversity which this advertisement is likely attempting to convey is undoubtedly noble, it is nonetheless reliant on a stereotypical portrayal of an Asian man. Furthermore, as with the portrayal of the Black model in the *Farah* advertisement, the impersonal distance signifies that there is a difference between the model and the viewer.

When conveying their messages, the selected advertisements rely on references to archetypes, ideals and stereotypes which are both internal and external to gay subcultures. Allusions to Greek mythology or ancient Greek culture are common when portraying traditional notions of masculinity based on muscularity. In contrast, young men who are not openly portrayed as muscular are often sexualized and positioned as objects of desire, implying their subordinate role. The usage of the bad boy archetype is somewhat different here, as it portrays a young masculine man who is by no means in a subordinate position. This portrayal is often tailored to niche markets as it infuses products with a sense of juvenile masculinity (Gopaldas and Molander 2019: 11).

Powerful figures such as muscular men or the bad boy are portrayed in a dominant manner through compositional techniques including specific camera angles, poses, gazes, allusions, and colour schemes. These depictions contrast with the portrayals of young men who are typically shown as subordinate objects of desire. One exception here is the portrayal of non-white young men, with camera angles, the impression of distance from the viewer, and gazes being employed to suggest that the models are equal yet different to the viewer. While the non-white models are portrayed as equal to the viewer, stereotypical depictions are used to achieve this effect.

Conclusion

When reflecting on the selected advertisements, we can see that certain hypermodern features are present. Some of the advertisements revolve around selling the brand rather than the product, and all of the images employ strategies which relate to archetypes or stereotypes based on various definitions of masculinity. When portraying traditional masculine ideals (for example, those taken from Greek mythology) or archetypes such as the bad boy, the models are positioned as either equal to the viewer or as an ideal to which the viewer should aspire. Body form and facial hair are frequently used as symbols of masculinity, while young hairless men are depicted as subordinate objects of desire. There are some differences in terms of the representation of race, however, with non-white models being portrayed as equal to the viewer regardless of the fact that they are young, slim and hairless. Nevertheless, techniques such as the use of impersonal distance or oblique camera angles emphasise the essential difference of the models in these images. Furthermore, both of the non-white models who features in the selected advertisements were linked in some way with femininity; for example, the Black model was the slimmest of the featured models and the Asian model was wearing pink socks. Returning to our initial hypotheses, it can be concluded that the myth of masculinity is

prevalent in the advertisements and that non-white models are associated with femininity, findings which are in agreement with the conclusions of earlier research.

While this research offers some insight into the depiction of masculinity in advertisements targeting gay audience, there are some shortcomings to this study. The qualitative nature of the analysis meant that the sample used in the study was necessarily limited in scope, and further research with a wider sample range should be carried out in the future. Although the sample was small, the random sampling did nonetheless result in a surprisingly diverse corpus. The corpus consisted of traditional advertisements which seem to be losing their primary role in selling products and brands, and thus research into advertorial and editorial material would also offer valuable insights. Lastly, other forms of media such as social media, television, or even video games should be analysed to determine whether the intertextual approach in advertisements is equally effective in different contexts. Nonetheless, the findings of this study can be utilized in further research.

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