Targeted Marketing to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Community: A primer

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Targeted Marketing to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Community: A primer

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Gross (2001) provides a theoretical framework by way of the "Of" "By" "For" model in which we can conceptualize how media functions with respect to a mixed and / or targeted audience (i.e. heterosexual and LGBT). Gross presents a construct explaining the traditional fashion in which images of a heterosexual mainstream and homosexual minority have been created and transmitted (see figure 1).

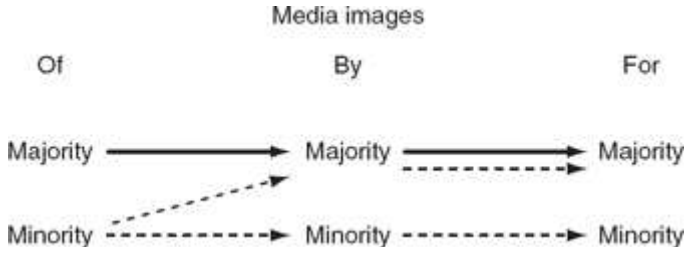

Figure 1: Media framework using the concept "Of", "By" and "For" with regard to the development of images for majority and minority audiences (reproduced from Gross, 2001, p. 11).

But with access to empowering technology, namely the various social media platforms available, the LGBT community has an increased ability to improve the accuracy of, and proactively shape, just how they are represented (Cooper, 2010; Pullen, 2009; Sender, 2012). This would appear to challenge, if not complicate, the classic media notion of "sender - message transmission - receiver" not only for an LGBT audience, but for consumers in general (Sender, 2012).

Gay consumers are seen as one of the last frontiers in terms of marketing and advertising, but this community has been the focus of relatively little empirical research (Kates, 1999). As a result, limited information is publicly available about LGBT targeted marketing, especially in terms of print media (Um et al., 2015). Branchik (2002) makes the observation that, whether they meant to or not, US companies have been advertising to homosexuals for more than a century. But deliberate marketing to homosexuals was practically illegal in the US before 1958. In that year, the US Supreme court ruled that gay themed printed material was not obscene, and thus could be more freely distributed (Streitmatter, 1995). But the gay press in

the US, for the most part, had limited circulation and almost no mainstream advertisements (Smith and Malone, 2003), and well up into the 1970s there were almost no ads depicting gay men and women in mainstream media (Sender, 1999). Homosexuality was still a subject of debate in the 1960s as to whether or not it was a medical condition, being viewed by many as an illness or perverse disorder (Duberman, 1993; Foucault, 1980). However, it was during the 1970s that advertisers began to realize the economic value of the gay community (Baltera 1972), and starting in the 1980s several companies created ad campaigns exclusive designed for use in alternative gay publications (Hester and Gibson, 2007). This arguably gave rise to the phenomenon known as targeted gay advertising. In the 1990s gay advertising became even more mainstream, with well-known household brands trying to take advantage of this elusive, but perceived as being upscale, niche market (Kates, 1999). By 2004, it was estimated that over 35% of the top 100 companies in the US had at some point or another directly targeted the gay and lesbian community with advertisements (Commercial Closet Association 2010). LGBT targeted marketing, however, is still considered as being in its infancy (Ginder and Byun, 2015).

The recognition of the importance of gay consumers can be associated with advances made by the gay community in the US in terms of their civil rights (Branchik, 2002). But Kates (1999) argued that much empirical research still needed to be done in order to get a better understanding, from an advertiser's viewpoint, of the gay market. Um et al. (2015) would underscore this by noting that in spite of being a highly coveted demographic on the part of advertisers, there is still a relative lack of understanding about the influence and interaction between targeted print ads and gay consumers. And in the meagre mainstream homosexual advertising that exists, lesbians would be generally underrepresented (Sender, 2012; Tsai, 2011). Advertising targeted to bisexuals and transgender individuals is almost unheard of in mainstream media (Tsai, 2004). When one talks about the history of gay advertising they are invariably talking about the history of marketing products to gay (White) males (Branchik, 2002; Baxter, 2010).

There is still quite a bit of hesitation, if not outright trepidation, on the part of many marketers when it comes to targeting the LGBT community using mainstream media (Oakenfull & Greenlee 2005). The primary fear is that of a negative backlash on the part of heterosexual consumers, a much larger and more valuable cohort. This concern is not unwarranted, in that studies have shown mainstream consumers, under certain circumstances, can have an unfavourable reaction towards gay themed ads (Angelini and Bradley, 2010; Bhat et al., 1998; Hester and Gibson, 2007; Hooten et al., 2009; Oakenfull and Greenlee, 2004; Oakenfull and Greenlee, 2005; Oakenfull et al. 2008; Um, 2014; Um & Kim, 2014; Wilke 2007). But for companies wishing to reach the LGBT market, there may be no other choice. It has been estimated that half of homosexuals living in North America do not consume gay media of any type, and that over 90% of gay men and 80% of lesbians admit to reading generic mainstream magazines (Oakenfull et al., 2008, Tharp, 2001). Reportedly, only 3% of gay and lesbian media outlets and platforms reach their intended audience (Um et al., 2015).

But with increased risk apparently comes increased reward, in that it has been found that brands that choose to engage in targeted marketing are likely to have higher levels of market visibility and support from gay consumers (Wardlow, 1996). Like almost any niche market, gay males and lesbians appear to appreciate brands that make an effort to engage them specifically (Dotsen et al., 2009). In one survey, almost 70% of homosexuals (male and female) admitted that they were likely to be positively influenced by ads containing gay male and lesbian imagery, and would be inclined to purchase these products (Gay/Lesbian Census, 2005). Hester and Gibson (2007) found that consumers who professed a high degree of acceptance towards gays had more positive attitudes towards brands that used ads depicting homosexuals or a homosexual lifestyle. More specifically, it has been shown that gay consumers exhibit higher levels of interest in (with an associated greater proclivity to purchase) products that are deemed to be marketed specifically towards them (Smith and Malone, 2003; Um, 2014).

One strategy for mitigating the risk of a backlash from mainstream consumers over targeted marketing is something known as "gay window advertising" (Bronski, 1984, pg. 187). Here, advertisers use special cues, signals and markers that allow their ads to be specifically noticed by gay consumers, but go more or less unnoticed by consumers at large (Borgerson et al., 2006; Clark, 2000; Kates, 2002; Rohlinger, 2002; Tharp, 2001; Schroeder and Borgerson, 2003, Um, 2012). The subtle use of codes is often referred to as implicit gay-themed advertising, as opposed to the overt use of readily identifiable gay imagery, i.e. explicit gay-themed advertising (Um et al., 2011). Tuten (2005) cautions that mainstream consumers may be more adept at recognizing embedded gay codes than many advertisers realize. It has been found that a greater percent of the ads placed in the gay press would be explicit rather than implicit in nature (Um et al., 2015). A related strategy is one called "gay vague," a phrase credited to Michael Wilke when he was a writer at Advertising Age, in which the relationship or sexual orientation of the people in the ad is not clear (Elliot, 1997). Tsai (2012) argues that it is difficult to know for any given ad if gay window (or gay vague) advertising has been deliberately employed to cater to a gay audience. The limited number of studies that exist with regard to the efficacy of targeted gay advertising primarily deal with the pros and cons of explicit vs. implicit gay imagery and messaging (Tsai, 2011). Many ads found in the gay press (somewhere between 42% and 46%) were determined as not having any gay or lesbian signals and codes at all (Marshall, 2011; Um, 2012). Related to this would be the marketing approach of standardization, in which the same conventional advertisement is used in both mainstream media and gay magazines (Um et al 2015). Companies have also been known to create two versions of the same ad, one heterosexual, the other homosexual, with each being placed in the appropriate outlet (mainstream media or targeted gay media) (Um, 2012). This strategy would take the position that gay men and lesbians would have the same goals, desires and aspirations as straight people, and as thus, can be marketed to in almost the same way (Chasin, 2000), but Oakenfull et al. (2008) argued that this strategy was "suboptimal".

Burnett (2000) found that homosexuals and heterosexuals differed in the types of media that they preferred, as well as in the way in which they reacted to advertisements, perhaps raising question regarding the logic of a standardization strategy. There are studies suggesting that

the best way to reach gay consumers would be through targeted marketing initiatives using gay media platforms or through the sponsor ship of gay events and charities (Gardyn, 2001; Kates, 1999, 2000; Smith and Malone, 2003; Yin, 2003). The tobacco industry has been shown to be extremely effective at marketing to the LGB community through the use of LGB focused media, the sponsorship of events and by giving away free samples and products (Dilley et al., 2008; Ryan et al., 2001; Smith & Malone, 2003; Smith et al., 2008; Stevens et al., 2004). While treating gay/lesbian employees fairly, using gay images in both mainstream and gay media and providing financial support to gay causes are all seen as important elements to gaining support from the gay community (Tuten, 2006), the precise manner in which a brand can convince its intended audience that it is gay-friendly is still a matter open to debate (Gudelunas, 2011).

Some have put forth the proposition that there is nothing "natural" about consumerism and commercial consumption, and that consumers are in fact constructed, and their associated behaviour influenced, along the lines of race, social class, gender and sexual identity (de Grazia and Furlough, 1996; Sender, 2001). This construct has been extended to homosexuals, in that by marketing to gays, marketers in effect created the gay market through, for lack of a better expression, a virtuous cycle of positive reinforcement. In other words, gay marketing led to a self-recognition (constituted and continuously reinforced through the media) on the part of homosexuals that they really are an identifiable and distinct community (Chasin, 2000; Peñaloza, 1996; Sender, 2012). Whitaker (1999, pg. 148) argues that targeted gay marketing is a recent phenomenon in that it "could only happen once gays and lesbians began to come out of the closet and self-conscious gay and lesbian lifestyles and cultures began to appear." Guidotto (2006) laments, however, that instead of "liberation" homosexuals are experiencing "commodification."

But is there really such a thing as one homogeneous gay market? Stuber and Iltgen (2002) argued that no, like almost any consumer group a business would like to sell to, there are several sub-strata that should be taken into account if a marketing strategy is to be successful. Branchik (2002) found that what is considered as the gay market is in fact comprised of several gay niche markets. Also, gay/lesbian consumers could be individuals from many different races, religions, ages and ethnic groups (Wright et al., 1999), something that would appear to preclude the "one size fits all" marketing strategy that many companies use (Oakenfull and Greenlee, 2005; Oakenfull, 2007). The work of Fugate (1993), Peñaloza (1996) and Bhat (1996) suggests that homosexuals should be treated more as a discrete sub-culture rather than as a consumer segment that can be addressed with classical marketing techniques. Kates (2002), as a result of a prolonged field study, concluded that within what could be considered as gay male culture, there existed several (possibly conflicting) sub-cultures, questioning the logic of thinking about gay culture in monolithic terms.

Complicating potential targeted marketing initiatives further would be the social phenomenon known as "post-gay" (Savin-Williams, 2005), i.e. gay millennials who have somewhat differing attitudes and expectations as those of elder gays. This new generation sees LGBT as being something completely normal, if not mainstream, and automatically deserving of equal

rights and acceptance (Russell and Bohan, 2005; Savin-Williams, 2005; Schulman, 2013). As a result, ads that were once effective on older gays might not work so well on post-gay individuals. A study by Nölke (2015) found a high degree of ambivalence, some of it bordering on outright cynicism, from millennial LGBT interviewees with regard to targeted advertising. Previous research has shown that homosexuals are sensitive and receptive to targeted advertising, having positive perceptions of it (Aaker et al., 2000; Grier and Brumbaugh, 1999; Peñaloza, 1996).

Dhoest and Simons (2012), in a study of the LGB community, found that that there was a strong desire to see LGBT persons represented as "normal" in mainstream media. Freymiller (2005) carried out in-depth interviews on subjects who self-identified as being LGB, concluding that, in general, there was a high degree of dissatisfaction with the way gay relationships were depicted in the media, and that more representative portrayals should be given. In research by Kerns (2012), with regard to the lesbian community and their perceptions of the television series *The L Word*, discovered that many women expressed a strong desire to see lesbian characters shown in a more prescriptive feminine manner. Furthermore, Edwards (1998) found that for many lesbians, in terms of self-perception, it was important for them to not be seen as being outside of mainstream society. Mikkonen (2010) reports a perception by lesbians that many targeted ads could be considered as being shallow or too focused on sex, and that there should be more of an effort to show the emotional complexity of homosexual relationships. In a longitudinal study of gay males and females, Tsai (2012) found that interviewees had a strong desire to see people from the gay community depicted in what they deemed as "normal" or classic gender roles. Dotson et al. (2009) argued that there was a "sexual orientation" effect in homosexual consumers, with many gay males and lesbians stating a desire to see themselves depicted in mainstream advertisements.

In terms of strategy, companies using implicit ads could be seen as taking advantage of Morley's (1993) concept of "structured polysemy," the belief that a variety of interpretations can be implied from any given text by its recipient. Fiske (2010) argued that polysemy is a basic element of any media message and can be positively used to reach a larger audience. Tsai (2012) puts forth the notion that this would include gay window advertising.

Previous studies into media and the LGBT community (Doty, 1993; Jenkins, 2004; Weiss 1993) argue that LGBT audiences have an innate desire to self-identify and search for people "like themselves" (even when presented with images and text in a heterosexual context). Bhat et al. (1996) determined that gay consumers showed a preference for ads showing homosexual male couples as opposed to traditional heterosexual couples. The findings of Dotson et al. (2009) imply that homosexual consumers (both male and female) have a desire for more ads having overtly gay and lesbian images, as opposed to ads using implicit codes and signals.

Gay consumers, when looking at homosexual images in advertisements, are predisposed to self-identifying with their perceived in-group (Um, 2014). Stayman and Deshpande (1989) propose that customers, when presented with an opportunity to consume a product or service, become quite self-aware and can take on a heightened sensitivity to their group membership,

with Belk (1988) promoting the concept that consumption can be interpreted as an extension of one's concept of self. Dhoest and Simons (2012), for their part, concluded that, in general, lesbians and gay men had a preference for their own gender with regard to portrayals in media. Braun et al. (2015) determined that, in the context of fashion advertising, lesbians were not receptive to ads clearly targeted to gay males. Oakenfull (2007) found that the greater the degree of self-identification as a gay male or lesbian, the greater the influence gender had on how someone reacts to homosexual (gay/female) ads. Dotson et al. (2009) report finding that both gay males and lesbians showed a preference for gay male images in the context of fashion ads. But Peñaloza's (1996) cautions advertisers against simply using sexual orientation as a defining characteristic of gay or lesbian. Sender (2004) reports that many advertisers target gay males in the hopes that there will be some "positive spill over" in terms of reception by the lesbian community. Descubes et al. (2016) would provide support that this practice might have some merit.

There are detailed studies showing that gay males and lesbians have quite different responses when presented with different types of advertising images (Oakenfull and Greenlee, 2005; Oakenfull, 2007). Puntoni et al. (2011) determined that gay men were more receptive to gay window ads than mainstream ads. Oakenfull and Greenlee (2005) argued that lesbians preferred ads containing lesbian images over ones using gay male or heterosexual ones. For advertisers looking to reach the LGBT community, there would be a potpourri of options available to them. But a word of caution is in order. Kates (2004) argues that once touched, members of the LGBT community have a propensity to do follow up research on a company's internal policies and past history with regard to people who identified as LGBT. Companies that are not genuinely LGBT friendly would be advised not to present themselves as such.

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