Making the Ad Perfectly Queer: Marketing "Normality" to the Gay Men's Community?

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The author introduces queer theory and queer deconstruction to the advertising literature. First, he briefly outlines the theoretical and political concerns of queer theory—an emerging branch of radical thought from the humanities. Then he interprets an ad exemplar from an Australian gay newspaper by both a traditional structuralist approach and a queer deconstruction approach. He argues that queer theory and queer deconstruction are potentially powerful sources of ad critiques and productive perspectives for more perceptive marketing practices, for they generate meanings associated with the "panoply of otherness" and expose the ways in which heteronormative discourse informs various representations of gay men in advertising.

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"...heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself—*and failing*" (Butler 1991, p. 21, her emphasis).

The gay and lesbian population still remains largely unexplored territory for advertising researchers. Despite some recent consumer research (see Kates 1998; Peñaloza 1996; Wardlow 1996) and an emerging discourse labeling gays as dream consumers, advertising research has yet to explore fully that intriguing group of consumers and the ways in which they interpret and react to mainstream advertising and ads in the gay and lesbian media (such as the *Advocate*, *Out*, and *Genre*).

Consider critically a popularly held belief about gay men in particular: that they are "dream consumers" with higher disposable income, education, good taste, and a desire to purchase high quality products. That view has been promoted by mainstream media for many years, and heterosexuals and homosexuals describe gay consumers in that way (Altman 1982; Segal 1994). Let us challenge this stereotype. Gay men living with AIDS, gay men of color, gay men with little formal education, gay men with serious handicaps, and lesbian women—all groups who experience significant stigma beyond homophobia—may be economically disadvantaged. Yet the stereotype of the "gay spender" persists and has motivated marketers to exploit that market opportunity. Inspired by the stereotype, this article has a multifold purpose. First, it introduces and elaborates on a branch of radical thought from the humanities called "queer theory" and argues that it is useful in furthering our understanding of advertising. Next, a traditional reading of an ad from an Australian gay newspaper (see Appendix One) builds on previous contributions in textual advertising research (Scott 1994a, b; 1994a; Stern 1988a, b, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1996a, b). Then queer deconstruction is used to re-read the advertisement and expose alternative meanings by "privileging the absences" of a cultural text (Derrida 1979; Stern 1996a, b). Deconstruction of the received view enables us to challenge the authority of advertising as cultural text. Finally, the usefulness of queer theory and queer deconstruction as a generalized critique of heteronormativity—the understanding of heterosexuality as dominant and natural in advertising—is discussed.

From Here to Queer: An Introduction to Queer Theory

"It's about trying to understand different kinds of sexual desire and how the culture defines them" (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *New York Times*, 1998).

Queer theory may appear impenetrable and frustrating, so let us walk through its key points to demonstrate its contribution to mainstream advertising thought.

Intellectual Roots of Queer Theory

Queer theory originates from gay and lesbian studies, French post-structuralism, lesbian-feminist writing, and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. It is a relatively recent body of radical anti-essentialist thought about the relationships between sexuality, gender, and power for it first appeared in the early 1990s, inspired by a 1989 academic conference on gay and lesbian studies in the humanities. Moreover, as the academic counterpart of "in your face" gay and AIDS activism of the early 1990s, it is controversial, radical, and subject to scholarly disagreement. The fundamental impetus is to explore the instability of gender identity and question the concept of a centred gay or lesbian subject (Butler 1990; Epstein 1996; Jagose 1996; Seidman 1996). Like much postmodern thought (see Brown 1995), it rejects the modernist notion of human beings as sovereign, self-knowing, independent agents (the classic Cartesian notion of the centred subject: "I think, therefore I am") and makers of meanings. In contrast, it posits the decentred subject who is historically and culturally embedded within social relations (see also Firat and Venkatesh 1995) and whose sexual meanings are dependent on historical sociocultural influences and discourses that constitute one's self-understanding, gender, and sexual identities (see also Thompson and Hirschman 1995).

A Radical, Anti-Essentialist Enquiry into Sexuality, Gender, and Power

Queer theory seeks to understand the ways in which knowledge of gender and sexuality interact with power and the ways in which the sexual *status quo*—the privileging of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1986) over other possible sexual "ways of being"—is maintained in social relations and reproduced in cultural institutions (such as business, art, education, and advertising).

The central intellectual dispute informing queer theory is the essentialist versus constructionist debate in gay and lesbian studies. Essentialists assume that sexuality is "a driving, instinctual force, whose characteristics are built into the biology of the human animal, which shapes human institutions and whose will must force its way out...in the form of direct sexual expression..." (Weeks 1981, p. 2). In contrast, social constructionists derive their view of sexuality from symbolic interactionism (Plummer 1975) and reject its conceptualization as an essence, biological instinct, or innate, "hard-wired" attribute. Constructionists argue that sexuality is a historical and social construct (Sprague 1985) made comprehensible to us by shared cultural meanings. Note that essentialism can assume both biological and psychoanalytical forms. Whereas many of us tend to reject reductionist biological determination, constructionist views have also been criticized. DeCecco and Elia (1993) criticize constructionism as reductionist for privileging the social over the biological: "[it] submerges biology and the individual in society, thereby displaying its own reductionism" (p. 12). The integrative point of view assumes that sexuality is inseparably biological and socially constructed (DeCecco and Elia 1993). Moreover, sexuality is constructed in the sense that it is subject to various constraining discourses that make it meaningful (Foucault 1978; Halperin 1995).

Queer theory takes social constructionism one step further, for much of it is based on Foucault's (1978) radical view of sexuality: "The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form..." (p. 43). According to him, power-laden discourses invented the category of homosexual. Queer theory is informed by Foucault's ideas filtered through the works of Butler (1990, 1991, 1993), who conceptualizes sexuality *not* as the biological essence of a person, but as a product of sociocultural and historical influences inextricably woven in a web of unequal social relations. That is, in queer theory, sexuality is conceptualized as a *product* of power relations that open up a diversity of possibilities (Halperin 1995).

The Politics of Queer Theory

Also in contrast to previous gay and lesbian studies, queer theory focuses critically on the construction of *hetero*sexuality, challenging its cultural dominance and exploring the types of resistances that complement it. Paradoxically, the emergence of profoundly homophobic academic and popular discourses about gay identity contributed to the development of politicized gay urban "ghettos" during the latter half of the twentieth century and the emergence of pro-

gay identity politics and theory within the academy (Adam 1987; D'Emilio 1983; Foucault 1978; Seidman 1996). However, queer theory challenges even *pro-gay* perspectives (Jagose 1996). For example, lesbians of various sociopolitical orientations (traditional butch vs. femme, lipstick, radical feminist, or S&M sex and leather enthusiasts) and people of color (blacks, Asians, natives) criticize gay communities as sexist and racist because they marginalize specific forms of experience and oppression by privileging a masculine notion of homosexuality and gay identity (white, male, affluent, macho, yet gay). These critics also argue that race, disability, and gender are not add-ons to an essential gay or lesbian identity, but instead constitute different and unique experiences. From the more academic perspective, feminists such as Judith Butler, Teresa De Lauretis, and Eve Sedgwick contribute to queer thought by exploring the ambiguities and contradictions involved in the centred female subject (Butler 1990, 1991; De Lauretis 1991; Sedgwick 1990). Other queer and feminist scholarship criticizes the tendency of gay studies to assume an unproblematically unified, centred, and naturalized gay or lesbian identity. In sum, queer theory views gender and sexual identities as regulatory regimes, sites where power is exercised primarily by means of a contest for cultural meanings. For example, work in queer theory might seek to expose the power dynamics underlying the pervasive masculine images of gay men in advertising and the exclusion of drag queens and transgendered people.

Meaning(s) of "Queer"

Perhaps because the "queer" label derives from both academic and political contexts (it is attributed to Judith Butler), its meaning is disputed. "Queer" refers both to an identity (that of a nonheterosexual person, context, image, or situation) and a positionality that opposes the normal. The notion of queer can be thought of as one of Derrida's (1976) undecidables, a referent to many signifieds rather than to one in particular (Derrida 1981). Thus, "queer" may be used to classify a gay man but may also include lesbians (implying a political alliance based on sexual orientation) and/or transgendered people (implying a political alliance based on gender), significations that render it problematic as a specific descriptive divorced from context. Moreover, critics claim that because "queer" may refer to gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, people of color, and transgendered people, it conveniently elides differences and, ironically, marginalizes specific forms of experience and oppressions. Finally, queer can refer

to those problematic moments when conventional definitions and boundaries of sexual identity break down.

An example that clarifies the meaning to readers occurs in the film *The Crying Game*. Fergus, a former IRA member, meets an attractive young woman named Dill and becomes increasingly drawn to her. But during one of their first sexual encounters, an unexpected plot twist occurs: SURPRISE! Dill turns out to be a biological male who lives and dresses as a woman. The film replicates the experience of queerness, for after the surprising plot twist, Fergus, a heterosexual man, *still* cares for Dill.

Queer Critique of Sexual Dualism

The key challenge in queer theory is to the sexual dualism that pervades academic and popular thinking (see Thompson and Hirschman 1995):

Dualism	Queer Theory
Heterosexual	Homosexual
Monosexual	Bisexual
Masculine	Feminine
Male	Female
Active	Passive

In its challenge to the sexual binary, queer theory represents an important part of the postmodern project —the "final de-centering of the Cartesian subject" (Hall 1994, p. 120; see also Fuss 1989, 1991; Weedon 1987) that has privileged self-determined sexual identity as rational, knowable, and coherent. Further, queer theory questions the coherence between biological sex, sexual desire, and gender identity. In other words, queer theory does not automatically assume that a biological male/female will have heterosexual desire and a masculine/feminine gender identity and demeanor. Instead, it is open to a panoply of queer combinations. For example, a biological male may have a feminine gender identity and a stereotypically effeminate demeanor but *hetero*sexual desire, disrupting common gender expectations. Queer theory acknowledges the politics of the sexual binary by means of a more generalized critique of sexuality in which one set of concepts usurps or "does violence to" the other through material and ideological mechanisms of dominance, control, and regulation (Butler 1990; Derrida 1976; Namaste 1996; Thompson and Hirschman 1995). That is, white, heterosexual, masculine, monosexual males are thought to enjoy the dividend of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995; Costa 1996) or societal privilege in comparison with black, gay drag queens. However, queer theory focuses on gender trouble—the ruptures, contradictions,

and subversions of the implied coherence of sexual dualism. Butler (1990) argues that gender trouble occurs when the relationship between sex, gender identity, and desire is *not* congruent, as in *The Crying Game,* when a biological male (Dill) has a feminine gender identity and same-sex erotic desire (see Segal 1994, 1997). He is not as he should be, for attraction to a drag queen or to an attractive woman having a penis challenges fixed preconceptions of sexuality and gender. Note that sexual dualism is reproduced in social relations (by the gaybashing of homosexual men as inferior to "real" men, for example) and reproduced in cultural forms such as advertising in which the ubiquitous images of heterosexual couples dominate.

Implications for Scholarly Research in Advertising

What does queer theory have to do with research in advertising? The answer is that queer theorists focus on *cultural* forms in society that potentially reinforce heterosexuality's social dominance. Although queer thought emerged in studies of literature, film, art, and other cultural artifacts (De Lauretis 1987; Doty 1993), it has not yet been applied to advertising, perhaps the most pervasive cultural artifact in postmodern society. Thus, queer theory has the potential to stimulate innovative theoretical insights into key relationships between dominant heterosexuality, subordinated homosexuality, and advertising's representations of gender. One such insight is derived from Butler's (1990, 1991) description of "panicked" and "failing" heterosexuality driven to reproduce itself everywhere—in film, art, literature, theatre, and *advertising*—to guard against the subversive, queer, nonheterosexual Other and maintain its disputed cultural dominance. Queer theory regards ads as forms of cultural representation made understandable by extant sexual discourse (Hennessy 1993, 1995; Laclau and Mouffe 1985), reinforcing a heterosexist *status quo*. Queer deconstruction challenges the so-called natural relationship between signifier and signified to generate subversive ideas about advertising *and* sexuality. Finally, this view of advertising as a discursive practice—an activity informed by dominant sexual sociocultural influences—enables us to examine its locus as a site of negotiation, reinforcement, and contesting of sexual meanings.

Queer Sensibility

The final point about queer theory relates to its critical and political roots in the gay liberation movement as well as its close relationship to other postmodern discourses. It revels in parody, pastiche, and spectacle, for its playful, deconstructive spirit delights in exposing the artificiality of gender. Perhaps its primary political strategy is gender bending— activities in which the signifiers of gender clash to create queer moments. For example, *The Crying Game* creates doubt about Fergus' "true" sexuality after the pivotal moment in the film. Similarly, a type of drag queen known as the "gender fuck" dresses in women's clothing but also sports a beard or moustache to expose assumptions on which traditional gender categories depend. The ultimate queer sensibility is a sense of bemusement revealed in humor mixed with a decidedly uncomfortable tinge or an ironic sense of self-referentiality that calls attention to artifice (Brown 1995). Queerness *celebrates* the violation of gender and boundaries with a sly, zesty theatricality. It is notable that we are beginning to see such sensibility in some ads. For example, over the past two years *Sauza* Tequila has regularly run humorous ads that state or imply that the models are transgendered people.

Use of an Advertising Exemplar

Let us turn to an exemplar (see Appendix)—an advertisement for a product sold in the gay men's community (see Otnes and Scott 1996; Stern 1989, 1993) to unpack the meanings that construct the sexual knowledge. The Toyota ad is representative of current promotions by multinational corporations targeting the gay community. Depicting scenes of sociability with two or more gay men or lesbians (see Peñaloza 1996), ads in this category include a recent Miller Lite beer campaign showing a group of gay men enjoying the beer and each other's company and an Ikea television ad depicting two gay men buying a dining room table. Deconstruction of an exemplar illustrates queer theory's utility as a theoretically grounded means of generating critical and managerially useful insights.

"Playing It Straight": A Traditional Reading of the Ad Exemplar

The ad in the Appendix depicts two men, their car (the Toyota Seca Ultima), and their two dalmations in the parking area in front of their quaint townhouse. They are embarking on a holiday excursion, for they have packed two suitcases (his and his), a tennis racket, and a picnic basket complete with French bread and champagne. Above the picture is the title "the family car," superimposed in white *lowercase* letters. Let us begin by playing along and becoming

the "ideal" reader of this particular ad (Scott 1994 a, b). We then can go to where the text would *like* to take us by analyzing its formal poetic language and by exploring its binary construction: the gay family. By privileging the preferred meanings, we can allow the text to do what it wants to do and construct the preferred reading (Byars 1991). A structuralist reading enables us to arrive at semiotic closures before proceeding to a queer deconstruction.

The text, through polysemy, constrains our meaning-making even as it opens possibilities (a process of negotiation). As Barthes (1977) points out, captions anchor and constrain the varieties of meaning to privilege a primary potential meaning (see also Hall 1997). Here, the reader is asked to foreground the possible meanings of the car in the context of vacation preparations. The media context is essential for it designates the ideal reader. The advertisement was run in a local gay men's newspaper based in Australia in 1994. The product is not just a car and not simply the family car, for the poetic device of metonymy (i.e., the part represents the whole in contiguous visual space) inscribes the car in a particular field of discourse— that of gay identity, gay families, and gay politics— implicating the car in a gestalt visual field.

Family vs. Not-a-Family: A Structuralist Analysis of the Ad

Structuralist analysis (Hirschman 1988; Stern 1996a) is useful to understand the web of meanings in the ad exemplar. The gay man viewing this ad is aware of the tension created by the binary oppositions connoted by the text (Kurzweil 1980; Stern 1996a). Though many binaries can be identified— text/margin, human being/car, human being/animal, gay/straight, and affluence/poverty—the one that immediately suggests itself as dominant is named in the prominent title ("the family car"). The family/not a family binary is reinforced by the ad's placement in a gay magazine. The family binary foregrounds the political imperative of legitimizing gay relationships. The reason is that to many gay men, the fact that one of the largest car manufacturers in the world seems to be promoting gay rights and supporting gay relationships is exciting (Kates 1998; Wardlow 1996), especially in view of the ongoing "family values" controversy in the United States, exemplified when speakers at the 1992 Republican Convention in Texas attacked gays, lesbians, single mothers, and even Murphy Brown.

The family/nonfamily binary is a political lightning rod for gays and lesbians as well as for the (un)Christian fundamentalist right movement. To the Christian Coalition, the family represents everything that is Normal, Decent, Clean, Safe, Beautiful, Natural, Christian, Legal, Moral, Spiritual, Healthy, Chaste (think June Cleaver; think Norman Rockwell). The ideology of the nuclear family sets up its own oppositional Dark Other, the gay nonfamily, which is in turn Abnormal, Obscene, Dirty, Dangerous, Ugly, Unnatural, Sacreligious, Illegal, Immoral, Profane, Perverse, Promiscuous (think Jeffrey Dahmer; think the Marquis de Sade). The binary expresses a fundamental tension between the gay rights movement and its enemies. Note that whereas sexually "impure" acts such as fellatio and sodomy have always existed and have long been condemned and outlawed only within the last century has a certain type of person (the homosexual) come to personify them so completely (Foucault 1978).

Yet structuralism demands that seemingly irreconcilable opposites be reconciled. The ad text performs that task by depicting two healthy, good-looking (but not *too* good-looking which would imply uncaged, dangerous sexuality), masculine, wholesome men. These are fine upstanding portrayals! The men love dogs, an indication of shared humanity with heterosexuals. The dogs are an important part of their family (cf. Hirschman 1994), and the commonality helps bridge the gap between the two sexual camps. The men are not as Other as we would first assume, for they could be *our* sons, uncles, brothers, or even fathers.

Moreover, the binary is reconciled further in the discourse of commercial legitimacy (Harris 1997; Kates 1998). Heterosexuality and homosexuality achieve a commonality insofar as corporations recognize the spending power of gay men, advertise in gay media, grant same-sex domestic partnership benefits, and bestow respectability on gay culture. That discourse is manifested in many places, for gay magazines such as *Out* and *The Advocate* often interview heterosexual celebrities who dutifully "endorse" gay rights and condemn homophobia (Harris 1997). Major corporations now actively target gay men as consumers (Kates 1998; Lukenbill 1995). Reconciliation of opposites occurs when gays and heterosexuals see aspects of themselves represented by two respectable men inhabiting the space between the homosexual family and the heterosexual family, bringing those two institutions together in harmonious cultural diversity by showing that there are many different types of legitimate families (Stacey 1990). The "correct" meaning of the ad is that it positions the Toyota Seca as a superior car for gay men while also positioning Toyota as a socially enlightened corporation that acknowledges

the right of gay men (and by implication, lesbians) to form recognizable families.

Thus, the ad can be viewed as an intertexual product of various historical and discursive currents. Its poetic and historical elements aim at stimulating empathy through emotional authenticity (Stern 1990): gay men may think "we [too] are family!" if they project themselves into the ad. With family redefined to include single parent, traditional, and gay and lesbian families, the text paradoxically *converges* on a notion of multicultural pansexual *divergence*. Viewed in that way, the ad appears to be promoting social tolerance, exhorting acceptance of flexible domestic arrangements. "The family car" positions the Toyota Seca in the traditional marketing sense (Kotler and Turner 1995) as the car best for the gay family by implying that the gay family is positioned (in a sociological sense) as just another type of family. The gay family is but another social option, a historical innovation produced by changing demographics and psychographics coupled with changes in popular attitudes toward homosexuality.

...And Now for My Next 'Trick': A Queer Deconstruction of the Ad Exemplar

Appearances exist to be disrupted by queer deconstruction, an application of Derridean deconstruction analogous to feminist deconstruction (cf. Allen 1987; Derrida 1976, 1981; Stern 1993, 1996a, b). The purpose of queer deconstruction is to destabilize received meanings of a text, subverting and challenging its authority by introducing Other[ed], conflicting knowledges about sexuality through the performance of a "textual sex change operation," similar to feminist role reversal (cf. Stern 1993). It proceeds by identifying a repressed theme and pursuing its symbolic implications, for the act of interpretation acknowledges the ambivalence and discrepancy between authorial intention and a proliferation of possible meanings. The basic feminist technique is to switch the gender of one member of a relationship dyad. The queer theory technique adapts it as follows: if an ad features a man and a woman, the reader is asked either to 1) change the sex of the man to that of a woman or 2) change the sex of the woman to that of a man to permit an interpretation of the text as one containing a gay or lesbian couple. However, because the Toyota ad features two *men*, queer deconstruction requires the reader to do the reverse and use his/her imagination to pretend that one of the men is a woman. Though either man would do,

assume (for the following application) that the man on the left leashing the dog becomes the woman. After the sex change, we can have some deconstructive fun with the text by "playing" with the signifiers and signifieds to explore the creative insights they may yield. Queer theory, with its emphasis on sexual pluralities and its challenge to the sexual binary, is a framework for exploring the play of homosexual, heterosexual, perverse, and normal symbolic conventions in the ad.

As soon as the kneeling man is converted into a woman, we are able to construct other meanings. Overall, the image suggests a familiar *heterosexual* wholesomeness, with an attractive, presumably married couple departing for a weekend trip. Let us assume that this is the heterosexual original and that our other ad (as depicted in the Appendix) is a copy or translation. On the surface, the people are young, happy, reasonably affluent, and in love, the ideal of healthy heterosexuality. Moreover, the "woman" is kneeling, suggesting stereotypically subordinate status (cf. Goffman 1979).

Deconstructing the Wholesome Heterosexual/Perverse Homosexual Binary

The wholesomeness begs a deconstruction. "The family car" is written in *lowercase* type, an anomaly that gives rise to questions. If the couple represents the original heterosexuality from which homosexuals copy *their* relationships, the type should feature uppercase type – "The Family Car" if not "THE FAMILY CAR," connoting heterosexuality's dominant status. Could other things be wrong with this representation?

Indeed, further inspection yields a key absence: there are no *children*. Perhaps the dogs are the couple's surrogate children, but that would disrupt the couple's authenticity and the ad's endorsement of normative heterosexuality. Where are the children? Is the woman infertile or the man sterile? Normative heterosexuality requires that the nuclear family have a man, a woman, and at least one child (but preferably two, one of each gender; two little prototype heterosexuals). The kneeling woman appears subordinate, but may really be a "selfish" career woman who has delayed childbearing to achieve a personal, autonomous sense of success apart from her role of wife and mother. She looks demurely away from the camera, while her husband looks boldly at the spectator. What does she have to hide, one wonders? And why does her husband look so defensive? Derrida (1981) argues that meanings inevitably lead to further meanings; closure or a final meaning is endlessly deferred (see also Derrida 1982; Hall 1997), and deference to domi-

nant meanings (or the preferred meaning of the text) is displaced with mischievous play. So let us play on.

Close examination of the car reveals that the steering wheel is on the *right* side as one would expect in Australia. Hence, the viewer would expect *the woman* to be the driver of the car, the active member of the duo, and her husband to be the *passive* passenger, "just along for the ride." In other words, stereotypical gender expectations of activity and passivity are inverted, indicating that new polymorphously perverse sexual and gendered possibilities may be pursued in the reader's interpretation. As we follow the chain of signification, we ask ourselves whether these two people are married or common law spouses or married to *other* people and having a secret weekend fling in the country. The possibilities spin out into new sexual territory: perhaps they are actually meeting their spouses at a pre-appointed place to engage in "swinging" activities or even bisexual erotic acts. At this point, the "original" seems less and less like a worthy emblem of heteronormativity, for the deconstruction moves toward a realm of sinful sexual possibilities: wife-swapping, bisexuality, adultery, and even bestiality (the two dogs). Now that we acknowledge carnal and lascivious possibilities, we can ponder what the woman will do with the black leather leash when it is not used on the dog. Will she use it to tie up her husband (if indeed he is her husband) and will they engage in a sado-masochistic "scene" with the other couple? Are their sexual tastes truly polymorphously perverse? Perhaps they will engage in bestial pleasures with the dogs.

Once the ad is interpreted in a more liberating, deconstructive, and queer manner, the privileged monosexual heterosexuality defers (but does not defer; the text appears to be "at war" with itself) to an abundance of sexual meanings. The couple's sexual predilictions exemplify Derrida's undecidables, poised between purity and perversity, monosexuality and bisexuality, traditional gender roles and kinky inversions, and sex within the same species versus sex with animals. The ad serves as a poor authentic of normative heterosexuality, for it has much in common with the supplementary forbidden queer Other that signifies promiscuities and forbidden sexual pleasures. Moreover, the interpretation of the characters allows into our consideration themes commonly associated with *homosexuality* (remember the ad before it was sex-changed?) such as kinky sex, problematic roles of dominance and submission, sexual experimentation, and use of leather accessories all of the nasty sexual possibilities *that the undoctored ad tried to hide as well* by presenting a squeaky clean and wholesome representation of homosexuality. Deconstruction has enabled us to focus on perversities of the flesh that hover uncomfortably between the two sexual poles (and the two possible ads), rejected by the text(s) as impure but irrevocably a part of it/them. Given the problematic, deprivileged state of the presumed heterosexual authentic, it is possible that the gay relationship in the first ad is a copy of a "phantasmatic ideal" (cf. Butler 1990, 1991).

Discussion: Marketing to the Gay Men's Community (or Is Queer Deconstruction [Use]Less?)

I don't mind straight people as long as they act gay in public.

—A gay t-shirt slogan seen at the 1994 Stonewall Celebration in NYC

Heterosexuality is not normal. Just common.

—Another gay t-shirt slogan; attributed to the late gay

(British film director, Derek Jarmon)

As Stern (1996, p. 144) has noted, "the panoply of otherness must be brought into the open." In that spirit, queer deconstruction allows for the unrestricted play of sexual meanings in advertising text and reveals the way that privileged and strictly delineated sexual categories fall away into chains of signification that raise questions about taken-for-granted sexual meanings (Eagleton 1983,1991; Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

Queer Deconstruction as a Source of Cultural Critique

Why does queer deconstruction constitute a valuable contribution to scholarly thought in advertising research? It provides an effective, practical, and theoretically grounded critique of representations of sexuality in advertising, assisting us to resexualize advertising text and reveal the values and interests suppressed by its surface meanings. In so doing, it exposes the way knowledges about sexuality are employed and reproduced and demonstrates the ways sexual differences (straight vs. gay) are taken as givens by marketers and consumers. Advertising's problematic cultural role in our society (see Ferguson, Kreshel, and Tinkham 1990; Pollay 1986; Pollay and Mittal 1993; Ringold 1995; Stern 1993, 1996a, b) is elaborated by queer theory, which enhances understanding of "unintended effects" by exploring the ethical pitfalls that these authors condemn. As a perva-

sive institution, advertising is a force for the perpetuation of patriarchal values, notwithstanding the advances of feminists and gay rights advocates in the past 30 years. Queer deconstruction has the capacity to reveal the underlying cultural assumptions behind "positive images" of women, racial minorities, gays, and lesbians and to provide a sophisticated critique of heterosexual dominance. However, queer deconstruction does not merely further knowledge about a small minority of marginalized, oppressed consumers. Rather, the application of queer theory demonstrates the way in which representations of normative heterosexuality (white, married, procreative, male-female couple, healthy, sexually conservative in practice) pervade advertising and other cultural institutions—*even the gay ones.*

The obverse is also the case, for queer theorists have pointed out that homosexuality also informs apparently heterosexual cultural forms (Doty 1993). Imagine that the ad exemplar was found in *Time* magazine or *Sports Illustrated*. In those media, the common assumption would be that the two men are heterosexual brothers or friends. Queer deconstruction would be useful, for we can challenge the "friendship" assumptions by changing the sex of one of the men to female, working from there to spin the chain of associations into strange and perverse possibilities. The ostensibly platonic relationship between the two men can be challenged by the repressed sexual themes if we understand that platonic, masculine, and heterosexual friendship ("male bonding") is defined by its homophobically denied opposite: the possibility of intimate sexual contact between heterosexual men, an underlying, repressed anxiety beneath the fraternal façade.

In sum, our deconstruction of a deconstruction demonstrates the use of a technique developed by merging elements of Derridean (Derrida 1976, 1981), feminist (Allen 1987; Stern 1993), and queer thought (Butler 1990, 1991, 1993; De Lauretis 1987; Doty 1993; Hennessy 1993; Sedgwick 1990; Seidman 1996). This is necessary to critique normative heterosexuality and demonstrate its privileged place in the context of a gay ad. Once the textual sex change operation is performed, the play of meanings can occur to reveal that way the privileged, ideological notion of healthy, conservative, monosexual heterosexuality is contaminated once its supplement introduces "dirty" sex.

Queer deconstruction leads us to ask why gay men must be represented as couples, like heterosexuals in advertisements. It reveals the cultural assumption that couplehood is implictly privileged over singlehood, which presumably saves the couple from the taint of unwholesome sexual meaning. Why *can't* the

ad depict two people heading off to meet another couple for a weekend of kinky, forbidden, and illegal (sodomy is still criminalized in 24 American states, even for heterosexual couples) sexual pleasures? To acknowledge polymorphously perverse possibilities is to foreground the possibility of *gender trouble*—a significant rupture among the naturalized fit among biological sex, gender identity, and sexual desire that problematizes the conventional sexual binary.

Once the denaturalization of normative heterosexuality is allowed, we can take the critique further. What does the deconstructed ad say about its portrayal of normative *homosexuality* —the need for "positive images" of gay men in mass media? When the ad exemplar and other ads created by mainstream marketers are deconstructed to reveal repressed homosexual otherness, they betray themselves as representational whitewash by saying "we accept you homosexuals only if you act straight in public." From a theoretical perspective, the ad exemplar is successful in appropriating familiar and respectable mass media images associated with heterosexuality and diffusing them into the gay men's community (see also Jhally 1987; Turner 1992). However, deconstruction enables us to expose the politics of representation. Once doubly deconstructed, the ad exemplar reveals a panoply of repressed and "dirty" meanings—kinky sex, camp, bestiality, leather, drag—often used to demonize homosexuality. True, those associations are often homophobically motivated; we can well imagine Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson portraying gay men as bestial or perverted. But the meanings must also be interpreted in another way to critique marketing that targets gays and lesbians. Many of the "dark" meanings provide a subversive critique of heterosexuality and lend an exotic richness to gay culture. The "positive images" legitimated by discourses of marketing attenuate the cultural challenge that homosexuality has traditionally posed to heteronormativity and sexual dualism (Kinsman 1987, 1991, 1992). From a queer perspective, we ask why the two men depicted are considered positive, whereas images of people living with AIDS, drag queens, or leathermen are not. A hierarchy that presumes the cultural imperative of coupled, moderately masculine respectability, even within gay communities, is revealed.

That hierarchical ranking is a cause for concern. Consider, for example, a statement from a Canadian business magazine: "[g]ay consumers, alienated and shunned by society, are profoundly touched when companies show an interest in them and in return demonstrate a powerful brand loyalty..." (Mitchell 1996, p. 92). More than brand loyalty is demonstrated when

gay men respond to positive images of gay men in advertising, for they also "buy into" biased stereotypes of what it means to be gay (white, male, healthy, masculine, affluent, *"straight looking and straight acting"*). In that way, other gay possibilities are marginalized and precluded. In theoretical terms, the ad has a performative function; it constructs a particular gay subject and produces what it purports only to describe (Butler 1990, 1991, 1993; Eagleton 1991; Segal 1997). Though marketers are unlikely to represent drag queens or leather dominants or slaves in mainstream ads, those transgressive images lend homosexuality its exotic quality and enable it to mount subversive queer critiques of insecure heterosexuality nervous about its disputed dominance. Transgressive imagery enables us to construct the difference(s) between homosexuality and heterosexuality as cultural phenomena.

It is critical to note that images of gay men such as those in the ad help construct a particular subject position ("the right way to be gay" is to buy this car and have this sort of affluent lifestyle) by artfully obscuring the hidden workings of power (Foucault 1980). In brief, such representations illustrate the market sanitization of homosexuality. Ironically, by importing positive images of gay men sanitized and stripped of any hint of femininity or sexual perversity into gay-owned and -operated media, marketers contribute to the heterosexualization of homosexuality. Theoretically, the ad achieves a form of *performative contradiction* (Eagleton 1991; Turner 1983), "a contradiction between a meaning conveyed explicitly and a *meaning conveyed by the act itself of conveying...*" (Turner 1983, p. 26, italics added). The ad before deconstruction seems to say "let's hear it for the good [*straight*] gays!" Once the ad is deconstructed, the act of conveying appears contrived to construct a certain type of gay subject and to introduce heteronormativity into the discourse on homosexuality. In its failed effort to repress any sign of homosexual otherness, the ad gives itself away by revealing the difference it would rather elide. To summarize, queer deconstruction is a powerful technique for exposing possible ideologies embedded in and reproduced by complex webs of symbolic meaning. Its application furthers our understanding of the relationships between advertising as a discursive representational practice and the processes of power.

Queer Deconstruction as a Managerially Useful Exercise

Is queer deconstruction beneficial to marketers? Let us re-examine targeting to the gay market to see what can go wrong. Product positioning is one of the most important concepts in the marketing canon, for marketers are advised to segment the broad mass of consumers, target various segments, and then position a product so that it *"occupies a distinct and valued place in the target customers' minds"* (Kotler and Turner 1995, p. 299, italics added). The deconstructive perspective denies that a targeted segment of consumers will interpret an ad in unproblematically similar ways. Instead, consumers are likely to play with cultural texts in contextualized cultural frameworks, arriving at nuanced interpretations (Hall 1980; Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Holt 1997) or even radically new ones (Kates 1998; McCracken 1986). For marketers to expect targeted consumers to "get" the intended positioning of a brand is to assume that a fixed and privileged interpretation is there to "get." However, that is not necessarily so (see "The Death of the Author" in Barthes 1977). Interestingly, earlier empirical work in marketing reports that a substantial proportion of consumers "misinterpret" even the *simplest* of corrective advertising statements (Jacoby, Nelson, and Hoyer 1982). It is likely that those consumers who "got the message wrong" were interpreting it from their own cultural frames of reference or from various personally relevant contexts. If consumers "misinterpret" factual statements, then it is even more likely that they negotiate unique personalized meanings (cf. Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994).

What is a marketer to do when messages only *seem* clear and unequivocal in meaning? Marketers must first accept the inevitable: that their ads, no matter how carefully designed, will be interpreted by consumers in different ways, resulting in some wild, wonderful, and wacky brand images. Queer deconstruction is a useful tool for discovering the various sexual (and nonsexual) interpretations a prototype ad may eventually elicit in an actual consumption context (such as a gay man casually flipping through a copy of his favorite magazine or newspaper). If a deconstruction of an ad elicits unacceptable meanings, it may give marketers an "early warning sign" that the creative concept is unacceptable. Conversely, queer deconstruction can also point to some delightful possibilities.

Given the importance of creativity in ad design (Wells, Burnett, and Moriarty 1998) *and* given the popularity of sexual themes in advertising (such as in Calvin Klein ad campaigns and ads in gay-targeted publications), queer deconstruction—following a chain of signifiers to various "conclusions" —may be an effective means of generating creative insights and

ad concepts during the idea-generation stage. It can assist marketers to challenge gender and sexual conventions and target younger, "hip" consumers. Queer deconstruction may help copywriters and art directors to take off the [gendered] blinders and see a product through an unexpected network of sexual and gendered meanings. Some of those meanings may inspire an "aha!" flash of inspiration, suggesting new market positionings.

Further, queer deconstruction is useful to marketers planning to advertise to the gay and lesbian population. As the exemplar indicates, an ad may alienate gay and lesbian potential car buyers who suspect the sponsor of bad faith and market exploitation. Given the highly organized and political nature of urban gay communities, such negative consumer reaction is not a remote possibility. For example, Lukenbill (1995) describes Coors beer company's market failure in gay and lesbian communities, despite the company's aggressive marketing efforts as due to gays' and lesbians' knowing that Coors is owned by a very conservative family that donates money to ultra-right-wing, antigay political causes. In view of gays' and lesbians' vulnerable status as oppressed minorities (Kates 1998; Lukenbill 1995; Rotello 1997; Signorile 1997), advertisers need to demonstrate sensitivity in targeting. For example, the deconstructed ad reveals that a political bias can be read into it. The "white picket fence" imagery of the ad does not necessarily appeal to all gay men, for idealized images of gay men are not accepted without question by all gay consumers (Kates 1998) or by scholarly researchers (Peñaloza 1996). In fact, by coming out of the closet, many gay men explictly *reject* the traditional family lifestyle(s) the ad potentially signifies (Kates 1998; Signorile 1997). Even though the multiple-partner sexual rhetoric of the 1970s gay liberation movement is mostly disavowed (Altman 1982), many gay men also reject the heterosexual model of fidelity and may favor other types of workable domestic arrangements (such as somewhat open relationships) that the ad does not acknowledge (Bell and Weinberg 1978; Rotello 1997; Siegel and Lowe 1994; Signorile 1997). The ads exclude those men as potential customers, which is not sound target marketing. Queer theory and deconstruction can help marketers develop knowledge of and sensitivity to gay consumers. Marketers need to become aware of the "rainbow rhetoric" that describes the diversity of the gay and lesbian population spanning many races, genders, ethnicities, sexual predilections, and cultures. The success of the drag queen and celebrity endorser RuPaul, for example, attests to the capacity of many consumers—both gay and heterosexual—to appreciate drag and a little gender trouble as a part of their consumer experiences.

Conclusion

With the postmodern reappraisal of the marketing discipline (Brown 1995; Firat and Shultz 1997) and the shift from "segmentation to fragmentation" in some markets, ads are unlikely to create but one intended meaning (if such a thing were possible): "...in postmodernity the consumption of symbolic meaning, particularly through the use of advertising as a cultural commodity, provides the individual with the opportunity to construct, maintain, and communicate identity and social meanings" (Elliott 1997, p. 285). By acknowledging the queer perspective, scholars and practitioners can offer gay and heterosexual consumers a bundle of meaning-rich cultural resources beyond simplistic stereotypes.

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