

# Eroticizing Men: Cultural Influences on Advertising and Male Objectification<sup>1</sup>

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The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, the model offered by Thomas Rochon is used to examine how ideas, activism, and changing American values have influenced advertiser practices as they relate to sexualized images of men in mainstream media. Previous research has highlighted the importance of economic shifts on advertiser practices, ignoring the importance of cultural factors, such as the influence of the gay liberation movement on representations of masculinity in the post 1960s era. Second, a quantitative analysis of sexualized depictions of masculinity is presented. These data suggest that men in contemporary advertisements increasingly display the visual cues of objectification. After positioning these sexualized images in a larger social, political, and economic context, the implications of male objectification is discussed.

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**KEY WORDS:** gender roles; objectification; advertisements.

In recent years, the proliferation of sexualized images of men in advertising has been a topic of examination (Bordo, 1999; Ehrenreich, 1983; LaFrance, 1995; Mosse, 1996). However, it is unclear how such images fit into a larger discussion of gender representations. Some authors discuss sexualized images of men in terms of economics. In a postindustrial era, advertisers seek to find new markets. As such, erotic images of men are designed to appeal to liberated women as well as the new male consumer. Intuitively, this observation makes sense. The feminization of the workforce that resulted from the shift in the economic base (from manufacturing to service) placed more dollars in the hands of consumers. In response to this economic shift, advertisers adapted commercial imagery to appeal to a generation of “liberated” women, who made and spent their own earnings (Whipple & Courtney, 1985). In addition,

advertisers have increasingly tried to transform men into consumers through the legitimization of male freedom (Barthel, 1994; Ehrenreich, 1983) and beauty.

The logic of economics is also used to explain the muddying of gender role divisions in contemporary advertising. Briefly, the feminine gender role model encourages women to please themselves. Implicit to this model is that in the process of pleasing themselves, women will also please others (Barthel, 1994; Wolf, 1991). Conversely, the masculine gender role model emphasizes power, whether in the boardroom, bedroom, or on the playing field. Within this context, the masculine role is not defined through beauty and fashion, but through the power of choice (Barthel, 1994). Products are juxtapositioned with images of power, which suggests that the product is an extension of the owner. In short, the associations of power, performance, and precision with products ultimately reflect the level of physical and financial power as well as the technical expertise of the male owner. However, men are increasingly able to operate in both modes: “the feminine mode of indulging oneself and being indulged and the masculine mode of exigency and competition. With the right look and the right

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stuff, he can feel confident and manly in the boardroom or suburban backyard” (Barthel, 1994, p. 137; also see Alreck, 1995). In other words, because gender role prohibitions have relaxed, many advertisers feature crossover behavior in their advertisements. The legitimacy of this practice is buttressed by the fact that the consumers with the most desirable demographics to advertisers (young, single, professional, employed, high-income, well educated, and urban) are also the least likely to adhere to and purchase products that depict traditional gender roles (Alreck, 1995).

Although economic phenomena are an important explanatory variable in the discussion of changing gender roles and representations, they should not be discussed separately from the cultural phenomena that also shape the images of gender in mass media. The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, I examine one cultural change that has contributed to the proliferation of sexualized images of men, the success of the gay liberation movement. Using the model offered by Thomas Rochon (1998), I examine how ideas, activism, and changing American values influenced advertiser practices as they relate to sexualized images of men in mainstream media. Second, I offer a quantitative analysis of sexualized depictions of masculinity and address one implication of eroticizing men: objectification. Undoubtedly, there are implications of social power associated with images of masculinity and femininity in mainstream media, and it is not my intent here to diminish the social implications of these power differentials. However, although images have different social meanings, they have a similar social effect: the body becomes an object that is manipulated, disciplined, and viewed by others.

### **EROTICIZING MEN: DEPICTIONS OF MALE SEXUALITY AND THE GAY LIBERATION MOVEMENT**

Sexuality is socially constructed, that is, it is a learned set of behaviors accompanied by cognitive interpretations of these behaviors. Sexuality, then is less a product of biology than of the socialization processes specific to a given culture at a particular point in time (Fracher & Kimmel, 1995). The most significant element of this construction is gender. Gender is an achieved status that is constructed via psychological, cultural, and social means (West & Zimmerman, 1991).

The relationship between gender and sexuality is dialectical. Fracher and Kimmel (1995) have noted that

For men, the notion of masculinity, the cultural definition of manhood, serves as the primary building block of sexuality. It is through our understanding of masculinity that we construct a sexuality, and it is through our sexualities that we confirm the successful construction of our gender identity. Gender informs sexuality; sexuality confirms gender. (p. 367)

In other words, sexuality is one area where masculinity is enacted; hence sexuality provides a powerful expression of masculinity. Because masculinity requires both the avoidance and repudiation of all behaviors associated with femininity, a man must engage in an incessant surveillance of his performances to ensure that he is sufficiently masculine (Connell, 1995; Fracher & Kimmel, 1995; LeMoncheck, 1985).

Because masculinity is believed to proceed from men’s bodies, it is by and large presentational (Connell, 1995; Epstein, 1988; Fiske, 1987; Kimmel, 1996; Mead, 1967). The male body is a tool that men, on various levels of consciousness, manipulate in order to achieve a gendered identity. This is clearly illustrated in the way that society ranks men according to physical strength and athletic ability (Glassner, 1995; Messner, 1995; Pleck, 1995). The appearance and use of the body serves as a hierarchical gauge, which ranges from the masculine, the very strong, to the feminine, the very weak (Glassner, 1995; Katz, 1995; Mosse, 1996; Pleck, 1995). In short, masculinity is not a matter of the mind, but of the body (Kimmel, 1996). As such masculinity is expressed physically—through muscles and the consumption and adornment of mass-produced goods that are regarded masculine (Barthel, 1994; Goffman, 1979; Jhally, 1995; Kimmel, 1996; LaFrance, 1995; McAllister, 1996; Williamson, 1978).

In recent years, sexualized images of men, or the “erotic male,” have proliferated in men’s magazines. In these images, the erotic male represents a physical and sexual ideal, whereby an attractive, muscular man is placed on display. Such imagery is undoubtedly in part a response to the economic trends over the last 50 years, but it is also a product of cultural changes in American society. For the purposes of this paper, this tension is discussed in terms of the gay liberation movement, which has increased in legitimacy over the last two decades. Using Thomas Rochon’s cultural framework of value diffusion and drawing on the example of media co-optation of feminism (Rochon, 1998), I offer an alternative explanation of

the increased presence of the erotic male in mainstream media.

In his model, Rochon (1998) argued that broad cultural change begins with critical communities or networks of critical thinkers who think intensively about a problem and over time develop a shared understanding of how the problem should be viewed, analyzed, and solved. In order for a critical community to survive, however, it must avoid insularity. In other words, critical communities must spread the ideas beyond their boundaries—to and through mainstream culture—if they are to survive. One way that ideas are injected into the mainstream is through the publication of books. Texts such as *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan, 1963) and *Unsafe at Any Speed* (Nader, 1965) legitimized the ideas of feminism and consumer rights as well as established the respective authors as issue-experts in the mainstream media. However, as a movement community expands its understanding to the wider culture, it loses its ability to claim influence and ownership of the issues. Hence, movements can change values, but the symbols and values used by the movement may be co-opted for other purposes (Rochon, 1998).

Advertisements are a particularly good channel for studying values because advertisers often position the product in relation to cultural symbols and values. This, according to Rochon (1998), is particularly the case when new cultural values have implications for product consumption. Such was the case with feminism. As the women's movement expanded its understanding of women's liberation to the wider culture, the movement exponentially lost its ability to claim influence and ownership of women's issues. Because traditional stereotypes of femininity were increasingly ineffective on a generation of women exposed to the women's movement, advertisers infused their products with the themes of liberation (Goldman, 1995; Whipple & Courtney, 1985). This led to the commercialization of feminism (Rochon, 1998). More specifically, mass media made themes of women's liberation more palatable to a mainstream audience by equating liberation with versions of sexuality. As a result, the women's movement was divided into legitimate, liberal feminism and illegitimate, radical feminism (Dow, 1996). Whereas radical feminists were largely regarded as angry, militant, ugly man-haters, liberal feminism was personified by the "attractive, thoroughly heterosexual, thirtyish, never married Gloria Steinem" (Dow, 1996, p. 29).

Advertisers also neutralized themes of feminism by picturing liberated single "girls" who sought

self-gratification, rather than self-determination, through the consumption of goods. Within the context of mass media, equality for women had been successfully achieved (Faludi, 1992), and women's liberation became just another marketing technique used to sell cigarettes, clothing, and tampons. Women no longer had to reflect on their political and philosophical identities because consumption of mass-produced goods "became a shorthand route to and expression of identity" (Fishburn, 1982, p. 178). In effect, what a woman consumed and wore expressed her politics and values (Fishburn, 1982), which made women's liberation another identity that could be expressed outwardly with the correct accessories.

Although it is not as overt as the feminist movement, the commercialization of the gay liberation movement has been under way over the last 40 years.<sup>3</sup> The movements of the 1960s had personal, social, and political agendas that had implications for masculinity (Mosse, 1996). The joy of bodily movement and expression as well as the undisciplined release of feeling were diametrically opposed to the "manly" qualities associated with the masculine stereotype. Changing attitudes were accompanied by a more "natural" look, such as long hair and loose-fitted clothing, which challenged gender distinctions. The political climate of the 1960s also reinvigorated the gay liberation movement (Adam, 1995; Mosse, 1996). After the Stonewall rebellion in 1969 gay liberation organizations sprung up around the country and vigorously advocated gay rights and freedom from repression, which included challenging the definition of homosexuality-as-pathology institutionalized by the American Psychiatric Association (Adam, 1995; D'Emilio, 1998; Vaid, 1995). Although the movement failed to produce a "gender-free communitarian world [it did face] unprecedented growth of gay capitalism and a new masculinity which challenged the stereotype of what 'real men' look like" (Adam, 1995, p. 104; also see Mosse, 1996). In short, the movement paved the way for the normative ideal of manly beauty (Mosse, 1996), pushed the discussion of homosexuality into the mainstream press (D'Emilio, 1998; Vaid, 1995), produced a new lucrative market for advertisers (Hennessy, 1998), and liberalized American opinions toward the status of the civil liberties of homosexuals (Epstein, 1988; Loftus, 2001).

<sup>3</sup>The specifics of the gay liberation movement are considerably more complex. The purpose here is to highlight the influence of the movement on the larger society. For more detailed accounts of the movement refer to Adam (1995), D'Emilio (1998), and Vaid (1995).

In 1984 major firms began actively to pursue the “gay dollar” because manufacturers believed that gay consumers were young and robust with a large discretionary income, upscale tastes, and strong brand loyalty (Alsop, 1999b; Elliott, 1992b; “Gay Press Looks to Madison Ave.,” 1990; Harris, 1984; Rothman, 1999; Swisher, 1993).<sup>4</sup> Advertisers’ interest was in part spurred by surveys done by *The Advocate* in the late 1970s, which indicated almost three fourths of its readership were between the ages of 20 and 40 and earned incomes well above the national median (Clark, 1995). The political climate, however, changed as the 1980s progressed with the AIDS crisis (Vaid, 1995) and a Republican government hostile to the movement (Loftus, 2001). Manufacturers that had actively pursued gay consumers in gay publications went “totally straight” (Alsop, 1988).

Because gay men constituted a high-risk group, mainstream media tended to focus attention on the lifestyles of the victims (Albert, 1986; LeVay & Nonas, 1995; Vaid, 1995). As a result, the medical and scientific aspects of AIDS were downplayed, and mainstream media overwhelmingly conveyed the idea that homosexuals were socially deviant. By “medicalizing” social deviance media simultaneously created a new form of outcast and distanced the mainstream readership from the homosexual community (Albert, 1986; Gross, 1995). This not only led to increased homophobia (Alsop, 1988; LeVay & Nonas, 1995; Rothman, 1999; Swisher, 1993; Vaid, 1995), but also directly influenced the decisions made by the advertising community. Manufacturers were hesitant to advertise to gay consumers in the gay or mainstream press for fear that they would alienate the larger heterosexual markets (Alsop, 1988; “Gay Press Looks to Madison Ave.,” 1990; Swisher, 1993). In fact, advertisers found gay liberation so taboo that they pulled more than 1 million dollars in advertising from ABC’s show “Thirtysomething” because an episode contained a scene of a homosexual couple talking in bed (Fabrikant, 1989; Swisher, 1993).

<sup>4</sup>This discussion is based on scholarly research of the gay liberation movement and a Lexus-Nexus search that identified all articles containing variations of selected key words in major newspapers around the country. The focus here is on advertisers, who sought to target gay consumers in a political climate that became increasingly hostile to the gay liberation movement. The political climate of the 1980s as it relates to gay politics is considerably more complex. The purpose here is to highlight advertiser response to a larger political and cultural context rather than offer a definitive time line of political and cultural events.

In the 1990s the gay liberation movement moved more steadily into the mainstream as gay men and lesbians claimed public space for people to be openly gay (Adam, 1995; Loftus, 2001; Vaid, 1995). When the *Washington Post* refused to carry an advertisement for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), citing its policy to accept advertisements only from “legally recognized groups,” GLAAD members took to the streets in protest (Farhi, 1991). Gay rights groups, in an attempt to improve the “gay image,” funded a \$500,000 grass roots public education media campaign (Swisher, 1993) and began to question public policy decisions (Reilly, 1998; Yang & Marcus, 1996). In 1992, Bill Clinton made history by actively campaigning for the “gay vote” (Swisher, 1993). In addition, the entertainment industry began to feature gay characters in movies and popular sitcoms (Brownfield, 1999; Horowitz, 1994; Kilbourne, 1999).

The changing political and cultural climate again influenced how advertisers targeted the homosexual audience. After polls indicated that few voters appeared interested in the Republican appeals to “family values” and the economic climate declined, blue chip companies such as Benetton, CBS, Hiram Walker, Philip Morris, Seagram, Calvin Klein, Toyota Motor Company, North American Philips Consumer Electronics, Saab, General Motors Corp., Proctor & Gamble Co., Time Warner, and various financial companies began to pursue the affluent gay consumer actively in the gay press (Elliott, 1992a, 1992c, 1994b, 1994c, 1995a, 2000b; Goldman, 1995; Gorman, 1993; “North American Philips Consumer Electronics,” 1993; Span, 1994; Swisher, 1993; “2 Companies Aim at the Gay Market,” 1995), a trend that analysts predicted would increase over the next decade (Span, 1994; Swisher, 1993). Major companies began to use recognizable gay celebrities in advertisements, mainstream publications such as *Details*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, and *Mademoiselle* carried features on various aspects of gay life (Elliott, 1992b, 1995b, 2000b; Hennessy, 1998; Kilbourne, 1999), and businesses that offered products that celebrated gay-pride began to flourish. These changes were attributed to the increase in gay activism and public acceptance of the homosexual lifestyle (Jefferson, 1993; Loftus, 2001; Swisher, 1993). In fact, advertising spending in gay publications increased throughout the 1990s from 61.6 million in 1995 to 73.7 million in 1996 (Elliott, 1996), 120 million dollars in 1998 (Rothman, 1999), and 155.3 million dollars in 1999 (“Spending Increases in Gay Magazines,” 2000).

Although the gay liberation movement has made important cultural gains, overt appeals to gay consumers in mainstream media have remained largely taboo (Clark, 1995; Hennessy, 1998; Kilbourne, 1999). An NBC News program had difficulty selling commercial time for a television special entitled "The Gay 90s: Sex, Power and Influence" (Elliott, 1993), companies reported difficulty in getting printers to do contracted work that contained images depicting same sex couples (Swisher, 1993), and gay rights organizations had difficulty getting advertising campaigns into mainstream outlets (Barringer, 1998; Dunlap, 1995; Lowry, 1997). These difficulties may be attributed to the fact that gay men and lesbians are still considered a controversial minority group, a label fueled by a religious and conservative backlash (Alsop, 1999a; Dunlap, 1995; Horovitz, 1994; Swisher, 1993). Vocal conservative groups with the ability to mobilize protests across the country (Elliott, 1994a; Horovitz, 1994; Rich, 1994; Span, 1994) have been a deterrent to targeting homosexual couples in mainstream advertising. Ikea, for example, featured the first *identifiable* gay customers in a television commercial that aired on the East Coast. GLAAD heralded Ikea for "humanizing" homosexuals, but conservative and religious groups regarded the ad as a degradation of values and quickly organized mass protests (Elliott, 1994a; Horovitz, 1994; Rich, 1994; Span, 1994). Anheuser-Busch experienced a similar problem in 1999 when Jerry Falwell launched a call-in campaign in response to a Bud Lite advertisement in a gay publication (Rosin, 1999; Rothman, 1999).

Companies, however, have been reaching gay consumers through encoded messages in print media (Clark, 1995; Kilbourne, 1999). Gay male consumers have suspected for years that images of partially-clothed, muscular men with sexually ambiguous appeal were designed to attract their attention (Harris, 1984; Swisher, 1993). In fact, advertisers of men's cologne and cosmetics, such as Clinique and Calvin Klein's Obsession, argued that they reach gay men just fine through magazines such as *GQ* and *Esquire* (Alsop, 1988). The benefit of encrypted messages is that they "allow advertisers to speak to gay people in public places or through mainstream publications with less risk of backlash since the symbols or slogans are lost on many heterosexuals" (Alsop, 1999a, p. B1; also see Sender, 1999). This is the heart of the dual marketing approach: advertisers can speak to homosexual consumers without offending the straight audience (Clark, 1995; Kilbourne, 1999; Sender, 1999). Clark

(1995) suggested that ads employing the dual marketing approach

Avoid explicit references to heterosexuality by depicting only one individual or same-sexed individuals within the representation frame. In addition, these models bear the signifiers of sexual ambiguity or androgynous style. But "gayness" remains in the eye of the beholder: gays and lesbians can read into an ad certain subtextual elements that correspond to experiences with or representations of gay/lesbian subculture. If heterosexual consumers do not notice these subtexts or subcultural codes, then advertisers are able to reach the homosexual market along with the heterosexual market without ever revealing their aim. (p. 144)

Although the recent gay visibility is aimed at exploiting new, lucrative markets, as with most market strategies, money, rather than liberation, is the bottom line. In this sense, visibility in commodity culture is a limited victory for gays, who appear as consumers rather than as social subjects (Hanke, 1998; Hennessy, 1998; Vaid, 1995). Stated differently, cultural changes have brought gay men and lesbians into the mainstream, but society continually fails to address issues of liberation and civil rights adequately. Hence, much like the women's liberation movement, the symbols of the gay liberation movement are commodified, packaged, and sold.

Gay rights activists and writers seem to be aware of this double-edged sword. Although selling the gay lifestyle in the mainstream creates a consumer target rather than a social being and mainstream media coverage conflates celebrity and legitimate political leadership in the movement, Vaid (1995) believes that

The gay and lesbian movement needs to concentrate far more on culture than on politics as we strive to win deeper acceptance and genuine equality. Religious organizations and leaders, media, and pop culture, and our families are pivotal sites for shaping people's views of homosexuality. But to date the gay and lesbian movement remains focused primarily on political and legal reform rather than on these cultural spheres of influence. (p. 25)

Arguably, the above discussion illustrates the importance of the cultural success of the gay liberation movement to sexualized depictions of masculinity. Advertisers are not simply responding to economic pressures, but also are moving in step with political and values changes. As homosexuality is increasingly viewed as a legitimate lifestyle, advertisers step up the imagery they disseminate in the mainstream. Within this context, the sexually ambiguous image of the erotic male may simply be a transitional depiction

in mainstream media. That is, until advertisers have good research that indicates that most Americans will not mind explicit references to homosexual couples in images, they will veil their multiple target audiences with sexually ambiguous images of men.

This discussion raises a number of other questions. How prominent are images of the erotic male compared to other more traditional depictions of masculinity? What are the social implications of media that sexualize men for men? How do men and women read these images? Can a discussion of the erotic male provide bridges between feminist theory, queer theory, and men's studies? All of these questions are important, but all cannot be addressed in the context of this paper. In the following section, I examine depictions of masculinity in mainstream magazines, largely focusing on the images of the erotic male. The problem with much of the current literature is that it focuses on an examination of one or two advertisements rather than offering a systematic analysis of images that depict men. In addition, I will examine one implication of such sexualized images: the objectification of the male body. Objectification is a contested term and is typically discussed in terms of women. Although I do not negate that differentials in social power between men and women continue to exist, I argue that the term objectification can apply to the erotic male and that there are implications for the ways in which men regard their own bodies.

## METHODS

The advertising industry's representations of masculinity were examined in five mainstream magazines, which target an 18–49-year-old male audience. Advertisements were analyzed from 1987 and 1997 in the following magazines: *Sports Illustrated*, *Men's Health*, *Popular Mechanics*, *GQ*, and *Business Week*. The five magazines chosen for analysis were selected on the basis of the circulation numbers provided in the *SRDS Consumer Magazine Advertising Source: The Complete Source for Consumer Magazine Information* (Standard Rate & Data Service [SRDS], 1998).<sup>5</sup> A letter was sent to each magazine to request the demographic information of the target audience. Responses were received from *GQ* and *Men's Health*

<sup>5</sup>The circulation numbers for each magazine (per month) are as follows: *GQ* – 688,752; *Men's Health* – 1,506,145; *Popular Mechanics* – 1,425,043; *Sports Illustrated* – 3,280,233; and *Business Week* – 576,457.

**Table I.** Demographic Profile for the *GQ* and *Men's Health* Male Readership

Characteristic	Percentage of total readership	
	<i>GQ</i>	<i>Men's Health</i>
Age		
18–34	70.5	49.9
18–49	94.5	83.8
25–49	67.5	72.5
Marital status		
Single, not married	69.7	54.0
Married	30.3	46.0
Education		
Att/Grad college	68.5	66.6
Graduated college	28.4	32.4
Household income		
\$50,000+	50.8	53.3
\$60,000+	42.2	43.2
\$75,000+	30.3	NA
Occupation		
Employed	81.9	83.0
Professional/managerial	23.9	26.6

(see Table I). The other three magazines declined to provide any specific demographic data. Although specific information regarding race and sexual orientation was requested, the magazines indicated that it was not common practice to maintain demographic records on this type of data. For each of the five magazines, samples were taken from the months of October and May, and the advertisements, which met advertisement size requirements and contained human models, were coded.

An extensive coding scheme was developed to analyze the depictions of masculinity in the sample. The coding scheme was based on the historical analysis of masculinity discussed at length by Kimmel (1996), the masculinity types provided by LaFrance (1995), and the body positioning discussed by Goffman (1979). Nine main depictions of masculinity were identified: the hero, the outdoorsman, the urban man, the family man/nurturer, the breadwinner, the man at work, the erotic male, the consumer, and quiescent man.<sup>6</sup> Briefly, the hero has this status as a result of his celebrity in sports, business, politics, or military service. The outdoorsman is depicted as either conquering nature or animals or, at the very least, gaining significant control over a seemingly wild environment. The family man/nurturer is depicted as an active participant with children as either a father,

<sup>6</sup>Many of these depictions have several subcategories. The outdoorsman, for example, has three subcategories: the frontiersman, the cowboy, and the time-traveler. A detailed discussion of the methodology is available upon request.

family member, or coach. Conversely, the breadwinner is depicted as overseeing or directing children and/or his family. In this instance, the man does not participate in familial activities, but serves as a leader from whom the rest of the family takes direction. The man at work is engaged in his profession or area of expertise. The consumer is the average man, who is either using the product being advertised, desperately needs to use the product, or is positioned as a satisfied customer of the advertised product. In short, there is a clear connection between the model and the consumption of the product being advertised. The urban man enjoys the luxuries and offerings of the big city. He takes pleasure in fashion and is shown in or around bars, theaters, restaurants, or involved in other social engagements. Quiescent man is either engaged in a light recreational activity (such as playing a video game), in tourism, or is completely inactive. Finally, the erotic male is placed on display, either by himself or with other models. More specifically, the erotic male has sexual overtones because the model is positioned in a sexual manner or his crotch area or penis, which is illustrated symbolically, rather than actually shown, becomes the focal point of the image. In these advertisements, the man's body and physical appearance are highlighted and may be used as a display area for products or logos. The erotic male is almost always posed or "caught" in a personal movement; he rarely smiles, and his eyes are often focused on something other than the surrounding models or audience. Because the man's body is emphasized in the image, the setting is typically plain, blurred, or otherwise unclear.

The coding scheme also noted the sexuality of the erotic male in each advertisement. For this study, sexuality referred to the *visible* signs of sexual orientation. A model in an image was identified as being heterosexual, homosexual, ambiguous, or unknown. The sexual preference of the erotic male was identified and coded as (1) heterosexual if he was displayed in a heterosexual relationship; (2) homosexual if the model was shown in a homosexual relationship; (3) ambiguous if the coder was unable to determine whether or not the figure is depicted in a homosexual relationship; or (4) unknown if the model was shown alone and the text did not provide additional information regarding sexual identification. Admittedly, this is a simplistic way to view sexuality that privileges heterosexuality. However, the objective of this analysis was to initiate research on these connections rather than to provide definitive answers.

In addition to sexuality, the coding scheme also noted differential use of touch and gaze behavior.

Here, Erving Goffman's classic study on gender advertisements was used as a springboard to examine how gaze and touch applied to male models (Goffman, 1979). In his work, Goffman identified the conventions used in magazine advertisements to reinforce the status quo and ultimately contribute to the subordination and objectification of women. It is clearly up for debate whether or not Goffman's analysis can be applied to men in a parallel manner even after one accounts for differentials in social and institutional power; however, the conventions identified provide a useful heuristic for examining sexualized images of men.

In his analysis, Goffman (1979) suggested that men and women in advertisements engaged in different touch and gaze behavior and that these differences contribute to the subordination and objectification of women. The feminine touch, for example, is a convention that utilizes self-touch in a way that depicts the female body as delicate and precious. Unlike male models, who manipulate, grasp, or shape objects or products, female models use their hands to caress, touch, and hold themselves or others. In short, male models engage in active touch behavior that positions them as instrumental subjects in advertisements and women engage in passive touch behavior that positions them as ornamental objects in advertisements. The question, of course, is whether this observation regarding touch behavior holds true in sexualized images of men. For the purposes of this study, touch referred to whom the figure coded was touching. The figure could be engaged in the following types of touch: the self-touch, touch with a female, touch with a male, or touch with both a male and female. Touch behavior could also be undetermined or unknown or the figure may not be engaged in touch.

Goffman also attributed different types of gaze with male and female models in advertisements. Male models typically gaze directly at the audience. Conversely, female models often engage in the mental drift, in which the female model does not make eye contact with the audience but instead allows her gaze to focus in the distance, on a small object, or on the protective male character. This withdrawal entrusts the woman's physical and mental safety to the dominant, superior man, who may or may not be physically present within the advertisement. Again, the question is whether this observation holds true when examining sexualized images of men. Gaze referred to where or to whom the coded figure was looking. The gaze categories were as follows: a self-gaze, a gaze at another model, a gaze at the unknown audience, an unknown

or distant gaze (mental drift), no gaze or the model's head/face is obscured, and a gaze other than those listed above.

A pretest was conducted before the coding began. Two coders examined advertisements that met the sampling criteria from each magazine for December 1999. The intercoder reliability was 99%. The coding scheme was designed to address several research questions as part of a larger project. Because of space considerations, only a small piece of the data will be discussed here. First, the dominant depictions of masculinity in the sample and their variation over time are discussed. Second, the erotic male, the visible signals of sexual orientation and objectification as well as the variation in these signals over time are discussed.

**RESULTS**

**Depictions of Masculinity**

Of the nine depictions of masculinity coded in the sample, four were prominent: the erotic male, the hero, man at work, and the consumer. The single largest category was the erotic male, which accounted for 36.9% of the sample (see Table II). The erotic male was the most dominant depiction in both 1987 and 1997. In short, the focus on sexualized images of men is warranted. However, these data provide very little information about the types of characteristics associated with the erotic male.

**The Erotic Male and Visible Signals of Sexual Orientation**

The analysis is intended to answer the following two research questions: What sexuality type is most

**Table II.** Depictions of Masculinity in the Sample by Year

Masculinity type	n	Percentage of the sample		
		Total	1987	1997
Erotic male	407	36.9	38.5	37.8
Hero	197	18.3	14.6	21.8
Man at work	184	17.1	17.8	16.4
Consumer	143	13.3	16.1	10.5
Quiescent	58	5.4	0.1	0.1
Family man/nurturer	45	4.2	0.04	0.04
Outdoor	27	2.5	0.03	0.02
Other	9	0.8	0.01	0.01
Urban	8	0.7	0.01	0.01
Total	1078	100.0	100.0	100.0

**Table III.** Sexuality Types by Magazine and Year

Magazine	Sexuality type		
	Heterosexual	Ambiguous	Unknown
<b>Sports Illustrated</b>			
Total	50.0	16.7	33.3
1987	57.1	28.6	14.3
1997	40.0	0.0	60.0
<b>Popular Mechanics</b>			
Total	25.0	0.0	75.0
1987	50.0	0.0	50.0
1997	0.0	0.0	100.0
<b>Men's Health</b>			
Total	18.2	0.0	81.8
1987	25.0	0.0	75.0
1997	15.5	0.0	84.5
<b>GQ</b>			
Total	23.6	9.0	67.4
1987	24.4	16.7	59.0
1997	22.7	0.0	77.3
<b>Business Week</b>			
Total	80.0	20.0	0.0
1987	66.7	33.3	0.0
1997	100.0	0.0	0.0

often associated with the erotic male? Does this sexuality type vary by magazine or over time? The single largest sexuality type in the sample for the erotic male was the "unknown" sexuality type, with 282 of the 408 figures or 69.1%. The heterosexual type accounted for 23.8% or 97 of 408 figures, and the ambiguous sexuality type accounted for 7.1% or 29 of 408 figures. Male models were never depicted in a homosexual relationship. Therefore, the homosexual type was excluded from the analysis. Significant differences in the representations of the erotic male sexuality types were found among the magazines,  $\chi^2(8, N = 408) = 31.09, p < .001$  (see Table III). The dominance of the unknown sexuality type in the overall analysis is explained by its prominence in three magazines: *Men's Health* (81.8%), *GQ* (67.4%), and *Popular Mechanics* (75%). In contrast, the unknown sexuality type accounted for 33.3% of the figures in *Sports Illustrated* and 0% in *Business Week*. The heterosexual erotic male, however, was dominant in *Business Week* (80% of the figures) and *Sports Illustrated* (50% of the figures).

When the erotic male sexuality types were partitioned by year, significant differences in the sexuality types were found between the years,  $\chi^2(2, N = 408) = 38.53, p < .001$ . The differences were in part explained by the fluctuations in the unknown sexuality type, which ranked first in the sample overall and in the years sampled. In addition, significant differences

among the magazines were found in each of the sample years when the sexuality types were partitioned by year and magazine, 1987:  $\chi^2(8, N = 196) = 16.83, p < .05$ ; and 1997:  $\chi^2(4, N = 212) = 0.59, p < .05$ . When sexuality types were compared over time in each magazine, images of the erotic male with an unknown sexuality increased in all of the magazines except *Business Week*.

**The Erotic Male and Gaze**

Significant differences in gaze were found among the erotic male sexuality types,  $\chi^2(12, N = 408) = 148.55, p < .001$ . The significant differences in the gaze categories were explained by the fluctuations in each of the sexuality types (see Table IV). It is interesting that four of the five gaze categories (self, audience, unknown, and none) were most often associated with the unknown sexuality type. In contrast, in 82.7% of the cases where the gaze was at another model, the sexuality was heterosexual.

Significant differences in gaze were also found among the sexuality types for each year, 1987:  $\chi^2(12, N = 196) = 69.47, p < .001$ ; and 1997:  $\chi^2(4, N = 212) = 81.12, p < .001$ . However, the differences among the gaze categories mirror those of the sample overall. The self, audience, unknown,

**Table IV.** Gaze Categories by Erotic Male Sexuality Types and Year

Gaze category <sup>a</sup>	Sexuality type		
	Heterosexual	Ambiguous	Unknown
<b>Self</b>			
Total	0.0	0.0	100.0
1987	0.0	0.0	100.0
1997	0.0	0.0	100.0
<b>Model</b>			
Total	82.7	13.5	3.8
1987	73.3	23.3	3.3
1997	95.5	0.0	4.5
<b>Audience</b>			
Total	13.6	2.9	83.6
1987	14.0	7.0	78.9
1997	13.3	0.0	86.7
<b>Unknown</b>			
Total	15.3	8.7	76.0
1987	17.7	16.7	65.6
1997	12.6	0.0	87.4
<b>None</b>			
Total	26.9	3.8	69.2
1987	62.5	12.5	25.0
1997	11.1	0.0	88.9

<sup>a</sup>The task and other gaze categories are excluded because only one image was coded in each of these categories.

**Table V.** Touch Categories by Erotic Male Sexuality Types and Year

Touch category	Sexuality type		
	Heterosexual	Ambiguous	Unknown
<b>Self</b>			
Total	5.3	8.0	86.7
1987	4.4	16.7	78.9
1997	6.1	0.0	93.9
<b>Female</b>			
Total	89.8	8.7	1.4
1987	82.5	15.0	2.5
1997	100.0	0.0	0.0
<b>Both</b>			
Total	0.0	100.0	0.0
1987	0.0	100.0	0.0
1997	—	—	—
<b>Unknown</b>			
Total	15.9	3.2	81.0
1987	21.4	7.1	71.4
1997	11.4	0.0	88.6
<b>None</b>			
Total	17.4	4.7	77.9
1987	25.0	11.1	63.9
1997	12.0	0.0	88.0

and none gaze categories are most often depicted with an unknown erotic male sexuality type, and the model gaze category is most often depicted with a heterosexual erotic male. In addition, gaze categories were increasingly associated with certain erotic male sexuality types over time. The audience, unknown, and none gaze categories were increasingly associated with the unknown erotic male sexuality type, and the model gaze category was increasingly associated with the heterosexual erotic male.

**The Erotic Male and Touch**

Significant differences in touch categories were found among the erotic male sexuality types,  $\chi^2(8, N = 408) = 241.82, p < .001$ ; (see Table V). The significant differences in the touch categories were largely explained by fluctuations in each of the sexuality types. The self, unknown, and none touch categories were most often associated with the unknown sexuality type, and the female touch category was most associated with the heterosexual erotic male. The male touch category was excluded from analysis because the models were never depicted engaged in touch with another male only.

When the erotic male sexuality types were examined by touch categories for each year, statistically significant differences were also found in each of the sample years, 1987:  $\chi^2(8, N = 196) = 105.98,$

$p < .001$ ; and 1997:  $\chi^2(3, N = 212) = 125.55, p < .001$ . However, the differences among the touch categories mirror those of the sample overall. The self, unknown, and none touch categories were most often depicted with an unknown erotic male sexuality type, and the female touch category was most often depicted with a heterosexual erotic male. In addition, touch categories were increasingly associated with certain erotic male sexuality types over time. Specifically, the self, unknown, and none touch categories were increasingly associated with the unknown erotic male sexuality type, and the female touch category was increasingly associated with the heterosexual erotic male.

## DISCUSSION

### The Implications of the Erotic Male: Conceptualizing Male Objectification

Objectification is typically discussed in terms of representations of women and femininity. However, scholars increasingly recognize that “women’s bodies, and men’s bodies too these days, are dismembered, packaged, and used to sell everything from chain saws to chewing gum” (Kilbourne, 1999, pp. 26–27; also see Bordo, 1999). Although sexualized images of men and women have different social meanings, the social effect is similar. The body becomes an object that is disciplined, manipulated, and viewed by others.

The bodies in advertisements come to represent an ideal that individuals seek to achieve, and hence provide the foundation for a masochistic or punitive relationship with one’s own body. “It becomes possible to think about one’s body as if it were this thing which followed one about and attached itself unevenly to the ideal outline which lingers beneath” (Coward, 1992, p. 416). The dislike for the body becomes pathological and has very real consequences such as low self-esteem, distorted self-image, eating disorders, and even changing the body through painful plastic surgery (Coward, 1992; Kilbourne, 1999; Wolf, 1991).

Increasingly, these consequences are manifesting in men, who are responding to a consumer culture that is less and less forgiving of those who are not sufficiently young, thin, and attractive. In response to these images of the perfect male, men are getting manicures and facials, dyeing their hair, concealing blemishes, and spending millions on plastic surgery.

In 1992, men spent \$88 million on liposuction, face-lifts, nose-reshaping, and eyelid surgery. This number increased to almost \$130 million in 1997. In 1996, men spent \$12 million on penile implants, and silicone calf and pectoral implants are rapidly increasing in popularity (Fraser, 1999). In addition, men now account for almost 10% of individuals suffering with eating disorders (Fraser, 1999). In short, men are increasingly dissatisfied with their bodies, go to great lengths to achieve a more youthful and hard-bodied appearance, and are suffering the psychological consequences that are a side effect of consumer culture.

Although the results of this study do not conclusively link male objectification to bodily dissatisfaction among men, they do illustrate that the erotic male is increasingly becoming *the* depiction that dominates mainstream conceptions of masculinity. The erotic male was the most prominent image of masculinity in the sample overall and in both 1987 and 1997. In addition, the erotic male with an unknown sexuality type was the most prominent depiction of male sexuality in the sample overall and in each sample year. In fact, when sexuality type was partitioned by year and magazine the unknown sexuality type was the most prominent in all the magazines in 1997 except for *Business Week*.

Moreover, the men in advertising increasingly display the signals of objectification as it relates to gaze and touch behavior. It is clear from the sample that over time the erotic male with the unknown sexuality type is increasingly shown either as engaged in the mental drift or with his face/head obscured or missing. The mental drift belies Goffman’s description of the instrumental man, who is in charge of his surroundings, and draws attention to the focal point of the image: the male body. This conclusion is reinforced by the increased prominence of the unknown sexuality type with his face/head obscured or missing. Again, the identity of the male model is less important than his physicality. In fact, additional analysis indicated that the erotic male with an unknown sexuality type is also increasingly depicted without clothing (78.9% in 1987 relative to the other sexuality types and 81.3% in 1997 relative to the other sexuality types). In short, the male body and its related parts are increasingly coming to signify the whole man—and this constitutes objectification.

The links between touch and sexuality type, however, are much more difficult to decipher. The link between the female touch category and the heterosexual erotic male is not surprising. The presumption is that “real” men want “real” women, that is, women

that have social worth in the eyes of other men (Wolf, 1991), and touch is an indication of social worth. The types of touch associated with the unknown erotic male sexuality type, however, are very interesting. In his analysis, Goffman (1979) suggested that the use of various forms of self-touch and caress conveyed the female model's ornamental nature. He argued that this type of visual cue strips women of their instrumentality and reinforces their subordinate position in the social hierarchy. Because the self-touch or caress clearly applies to images of the erotic male with an unknown sexuality, it may be suggested that in certain situations this signifies sexual deference to the viewer. However, the prevalence of the unknown touch category, in which it is unclear if the model is touching himself or someone else, and the none touch category, in which the model is not engaged in touch behavior, with the unknown erotic male sexuality type cannot be discounted. It might be suggested that the advertisers are engaged in a "balancing act" in terms of creating sexual images that appeal to a various viewers. For example, if half-naked men with a distant gaze were most often depicted in a self-caress, it is possible that heterosexual male and female viewers may no longer be attracted to the image and/or the product being sold; a response that would completely undermine a dual marketing approach.

In sum, there has been significant movement toward advertisements in which the male model has an unknown sexuality. It is clear that male models in these images are being objectified. However, it is also clear that men are being sexualized and objectified in an effort to appeal to multiple audiences. Stated differently, the image of the erotic male with an unknown sexuality is sexual, but it is devoid of a *specific* sexual context. Thus, the male body becomes a blank canvas on which the viewer can project meaning. The viewer is free to imagine the male body in any sexual situation, heterosexual or homosexual, and advertisers do not offend the heterosexual male viewers.

### Links to the Gay Liberation Movement

These results may be linked back to the discussion of the influence of social movements on advertising images. The prominence of the erotic male in advertisements also reflects the desire of the movement to liberate sexuality from its narrow definition. In addition to legal reform, the gay liberation movement challenges traditional definitions of sexuality

and encourages the celebration of the body. Hence, male objectification is a mixed bag. On one hand, the sexualized images of men resonate in a homosexual audience as a celebration of the male form. From this vantage, the images are empowering. On the other hand, advertisers are less concerned with teasing out the relationship between liberation and sexuality and are more concerned with selling products to a target audience. From this vantage, the gay liberation movement seems to be heading down the same road as feminism: commodification. Moreover, the mainstream media's translation of sexual liberation masks the social and psychological implications of objectifying men because these advertisements also tell sexually liberated women that it is "ok" to objectify the male body—just as men objectify female bodies.

The growing interest in the "gay dollar" seems to support the latter perspective. In fact, the relationship between manufacturers willing to target a gay audience in mainstream media and the concentration of different product types in the magazines help explain the increased prominence of the unknown erotic male in the sample. The dependence of advertisers on men's fashion and health magazines to reach gay men explains the high concentration of the unknown erotic male in *GQ* and *Men's Health*. In fact, clothing and alcohol companies were among the first to pursue the gay male consumer actively (Elliott, 1992b, 1992c; Harris, 1984; Horovitz, 1994; Kilbourne, 1999; Swisher, 1993). An analysis of the types of products advertised in each of the two magazines in the sample indicate that more than 60% of the products are either clothing, body products (such as cologne), or jewelry. This lends support to the argument that as the gay liberation movement gained legitimacy in the mainstream, advertisers increasingly tried to reach affluent gay men with appealing images of sexually ambiguous models.

The cultural changes in the United States in the post-1960s era and the willingness of companies to pursue gay consumers may also explain the huge increase of the unknown erotic sexual male in *Sports Illustrated* and *Popular Mechanics* over time. The two magazines are similar in that most of the advertisements are for cars and services such as credit cards and travel.<sup>7</sup> Car manufacturers, travel companies, and credit card providers followed the clothing and

<sup>7</sup>Of the advertisements in *Popular Mechanics* 26.1% were for cars and care accessories and 56.5% were for services. Whereas 28.6% of the advertisements in *Sports Illustrated* were for services, 7.1% were for cars and car accessories and 19% were for clothing.

alcohol industries in pursuing gay consumers (Alsop, 1999b; Elliott, 1994c; Rothman, 1999; Span, 1994). This trend is visible in mainstream magazines. The sexual ambiguity of the unknown erotic male allows companies to attract gay consumers in sport and mechanical magazines while maintaining a heterosexual consumer core.

The only magazine that deviated from this pattern was *Business Week*, which increasingly depicted the erotic male as identifiably heterosexual over time. This lag may in part be explained by the reluctance of big life and health insurance companies, electronic companies, and financial institutions that offer mutual funds and other money management services to advertise to gay consumers<sup>8</sup> (Elliott, 2000b; Rothman, 1999), or this could be a function of the types of advertisements in the magazine. Unlike fashion magazines, which rely heavily on imagery, the advertisements in *Business Week* use text to offer lengthy descriptions of products. This type of advertisement emphasizes the merits of the product rather than the enthymeme connecting the image (social value) to the product.

## CONCLUSION

This examination revealed that the presence of the erotic male is, in part, a response to cultural factors such as the gay liberation movement and that the responsiveness of advertisers to gay consumers varies with the political climate. In hostile climates companies may fail to sponsor ads in gay publications but still attempt to reach gay men through men's fashion and health magazines. Conversely, in more supportive climates, images of sexually ambiguous men and identifiably gay men in mainstream media increase. Although the gay liberation movement is far from over, advertisers do recognize the affluence of gay consumers and increasingly seek to create images that resonate with this target audience.

Moreover, advertisers know that in a cluttered image environment, sex does in fact sell (Jhally, 1995). The problem with such images, much like with the example of feminism, is that it attaches themes of liberation with sexuality, which may eventually dilute equality issues in favor of commodification. In fact, a particularly favored tactic of marketers is to associate a company with social and political issues that interest target audiences (Elliott, 1994b). As the gay

liberation movement continues to gain momentum, legitimate gay rights will be defined and undoubtedly a spokesperson with liberal ideas and a fabulous physique will become a media sweetheart. Gay liberation, much like feminism, may become another marketing theme used to peddle clothing, cigarettes, and expensive shoes.

There are in fact indications that this type of commodification is already in motion. Although manufacturers publicly supported the gay community's protest against CBS's Dr Laura Schlessinger's talk-show by withdrawing advertising dollars (Rutenber & Elliott, 2000), they continue to sell images of liberation and the gay "lifestyle" in Levi ads, in beer ads ("Almost Miller Time," 1999), and in TV spots on MTV and Comedy Central (Rothman, 1999). As the gay liberation movement continues to make strides in the cultural realm (Vaid, 1995) and to change the network of manners, morals, and social ideals that dominate American life (Mosse, 1996), notions of masculinity will undoubtedly be altered further. Within this context, the erotic male represents the increasing plasticity of masculinity in contemporary culture.

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