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UWS 16a Sex and Advertising

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2 May 2020

Transgender People in Advertisements, Transnormativity, and Corporate Wokeness

Very little has been written about the way that trans people have been represented in advertising. This is likely due to the relative newness of ads featuring trans characters and to the number of ads remaining few. Wan-Hsiu Sunny Tsai's 2010 article about LGBT representation in advertising, including a section about trans representation, remains one of the few published works on the subject. However, the social and political landscapes around queer identities have changed drastically since then, and, along with them, the advertising landscape. Ads with explicitly queer characters and themes are on the rise, especially for products that use "more edgy, unconventional advertising" (Tsai).

This increase in visibility could have an enormous impact on both transgender (trans) and cisgender (cis) individuals because of the way that media, including advertising, help construct definitions of gender. The way that trans people are depicted in ads is important to examine critically because "Media representations provide easily accessible representations of transgender people and thus serve as the culturally available knowledge that structures our understanding of transgender identities and experiences" (Johnson 485-86). Queer people inevitably compare themselves to queer depictions in ads, and ads reinforce standards that are used to prove authentic queerness (Tsai). Studies on transgender youth have suggested that media helps shape transgender identities, and even that media is often the first place children learn about transgender people (Johnson 472). Studies on LGB youth further show that positive

depictions of queer people in media provide role models for them (Johnson 472). Advertising can be interpreted as an “official sanction from Corporate America” (Tsai), and so depictions of trans people could do a lot to help the community gain acceptance. Inclusion in ads is a form of societal validation, something to which most trans people have little access, so it could also positively impact trans individuals’ self-esteem. However, advertisers have a vested interest in not rocking the boat too much, as that could offend more people than attract. According to Tsai, advertisers use queer images in order to project an exotic appeal, something far enough from mainstream ads to be interesting, but not too far as to be alienating. Queer ads don’t “challenge heterosexual and patriarchal domination” (Tsai). Contemporary ads use transgender people to project brand progressiveness, while not upending traditional binary ideas of gender.

A good example of the few ads with trans characters outside the past few years is the “High School Reunion” ad from Holiday Inn (Tsai). In it, a woman enters her reunion, and as her old classmates stare at her body, a voiceover announces the costs of various plastic surgeries that she had done. A man stops her and tries to guess who she is, and the audience sees his look of horror as he realizes he’s hitting on “Bob? Bob Johnson?” The voiceover then delivers the punchline: that if this can be done with a few thousand, imagine what a billion dollar remodel to Holiday Inn will do. The punchline is also that the man thought he was talking to a cis woman, and both punchlines are at the expense of trans women through the implication that they are not real women. Bait-and-switch ads that used transgender women as a cheap joke were the only kind of mainstream ad that featured trans women in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Tsai’s article “Assimilating the Queers,” contextualizes this ad in a pattern of trans women depicted as hyper-feminine and sexualized, and as deceiving men into being attracted to them by passing as cis women. “High School Reunion” is also typical in that the trans person featured is a woman; at

the time there were no mainstream ads with trans men or nonbinary people (Tsai). Tsai also notes that these ads focused on elements of the transition process, such as plastic surgery in the Holiday Inn ad. The focus on the methods trans women use to appear more feminine (clothing, surgery, etc.), followed by the revelation of their birth sex, frames their womanhood as a façade (Tsai). The focus on plastic surgery also plays into a medical essentialist definition of being trans, meaning that in order for a trans person's gender to be respected, they have to undergo medical transition. This essentialism both feeds into cissexism and reinforces the gender binary by upholding a biological definition of gender. The sexualization of trans women in ads like the Holiday Inn ad also reinforces patriarchal gender roles by depicting their gender as legitimate only when attracting male attention.

Recent ads featuring trans characters depart significantly from the trends set up by the ads of the 1990s and 2000s. Rather than only depicting trans women, they use men and, to a lesser extent, nonbinary people. Trans people are also not sexualized, nor do the ads focus on medical methods of transition. Most importantly, ads do not use trans women as a cheap bait-and-switch punchline. Just as public policy and attitudes towards trans people have shifted since the late 90s, so have the acceptable ways to depict them, including in advertisements. Advertisements now often show trans people through the lens of “transnormativity,” a term coined by Austin H. Johnson in 2016, which reinforces cisnormative ideas of gender. Transnormativity describes a set of standards used by both cis and trans people to evaluate the authenticity of a person's transness by putting their experiences and expression of gender in a “hierarchy of legitimacy” (Johnson 466). These standards include knowing from childhood that their gender assigned at birth was incorrect, that they perform traditional gender expressions, and that their goal is to transition not just socially, but through hormones and surgery (Johnson 461-480). Kay Siebler

has also noted this fixation with medical transition and following traditional gender roles in her 2012 paper about online interactions in the trans community (83-87). Transnormativity is deeply rooted in the diagnostic criteria for gender dysphoria—an incongruence between a person's gender and gender assigned at birth—which in turn allows access to social, legal, and medical gender affirmation (Johnson 484).

Advertisers use transnormative narratives that convey most widely acceptable ways to perform being trans, much in the same way that most advertisements depict traditional gender roles for cisgender men and women. Transnormativity reinforces the gender binary by emphasizing that the way to be taken seriously as a trans person is to conform to traditional gender roles and to medically transition. In our society, where gender is so strongly tied to correct performance, an ambiguous gender presentation makes it hard or impossible for a trans person to convince people around them of their gender. The onus put on passing, especially when combined with the way medical transition is pushed as a way to pass, codes trans bodies as something that needs to be fixed (Johnson 479, Siebler 85). Making medical transition the correct way to be a certain gender upholds the traditional binary and cisnormative ideology where biology decides gender, and where biology can only put a person in one of two categories (Capuzza and Spencer 216, Johnson 480, Siebler 84). So rather than putting chips into the binary understanding of gender through the inclusion of trans people, who have ostensibly broken that system, the depictions work to subtly reinforce it. Just as depictions of traditional gender roles for men and women reinforce their limitations, transnormative depictions of trans people enforce limiting definitions of trans expression. However, even narrow representations of trans people are still outside the mainstream because of the ongoing debates around trans issues. Simply having a trans person or storyline in an ad can be considered socially progressive.

In an ad from Gillette, a teenage trans man, Samson, shaves his face for the first time, guided by his father. This ad fits neatly into a transnormative narrative. Samson talks about how he always knew he was different and that, “growing up I was always trying to figure out what kind of man I wanted to become,” feeding in to the accepted idea that all trans people are supposed to know that they are trans from a young age (*Dad Helps Transgender*). Although it is not explicitly mentioned, he is evidently taking testosterone, evidenced by needing to shave his beard and his voice having dropped. He says, “I’m glad I’m at the point [in my transition] that I’m able to shave.” This implies that the proper way to transition as a trans man is to develop male secondary sex characteristics through hormone replacement therapy, falling into the medical essentialist definition of being trans. Some traditional men’s gender roles are emphasized as well in the ad, including the father/son bond.

Absolut Vodka put out an ad featuring a transgender-related storyline as well, but from the point of view of a cisgender person. An unnamed man sees an old friend while out clubbing, and he recognizes her even though she’s transitioned. He tries to make an excuse to “get away” but she takes his hand and leads him through a great night at the club, as well as through her story, while they enjoy Absolut Vodka. This ad also presents the transnormative idea that all trans people know from a young age, as Darla “had always felt this way,” as well as making her appearance very feminine. However, the ad also has heavy subtext about the brand’s wokeness, its awareness of social issues relating to inequality and its sympathy towards those issues. The script walks the audience through the man’s process as the audience surrogate, learning to accept his old friend for who she is and understand that she is the “same person, same heart.” The ad is told from the cisgender character’s perspective and in past tense; he repeats to the audience what she told him (rather than having her speak) making him into a kind of guide as well as a

surrogate. She guides him to tolerance, and he in turn guides the audience. At the end of the ad, he says, “she hadn’t changed; I had,” which puts the emphasis on his journey to acceptance while downplaying her journey. The trans character is used as a prop to try to send a message of acceptance to the audience, as well as a message of the brand’s acceptance.

Pantene also put out an advertisement that reads both as a show of support for the trans community and as a statement about the company’s wokeness. A number of different queer people, including multiple trans and gender-ambiguous people, dance while text on the screen states “don’t hate me because I’m gay,” along with similar statements about other queer identities, including transgender and nonbinary. At the end of the commercial, the text changes to “don’t hate me because I’m beautiful,” which older viewers will recognize as an old Pantene slogan. While this ad is the only one that features a nonbinary person, or that shows trans people interacting within their community, rather than just with cis people, it stops short of asking for acceptance. Rather, it only asks for the queer community not to be hated. Admittedly, labeling queer people, especially trans people, as beautiful is still a radical statement. However, the positive message is brought down by the rest of the ad’s statements about not hating people simply for their gender or sexual orientation. The lighthearted attitude of the ad, with bright colors and dancing, implies that queer life, including trans life, will continue unhindered even if there is hatred—something which, unfortunately, is often impossible.

All of these ads seem to be aimed at socially conscious consumers who want the brands they buy to be socially conscious as well. Customers can feel good about buying these companies’ products as a surrogate for, or as part of, supporting the same stances. However, the ads don’t necessarily address the important issues or the ones that are the current focus of trans activism; the “don’t hate me” message of the Pantene ad is out of sync with a community has

turned to working for acceptance rather than lack of hatred. The ads focus instead on stories that seem and are progressive on their face, but they don't affirm much more than the neutral statement that trans people exist.

Trans people are also encouraged by these ads to buy products simply because the brand has trans representation in their marketing, something that is still extremely rare. According to Siebler, "The Internet feeds trans people the notion that gender means capitalist consumption" (94). This is even more true for advertisements, because their explicit goal is to push consumption of a product. Siebler notes that "the consumer not only refuses to realize [they are] being manipulated to purchase products, but also the individual associates product consumption with [their] identity" (82). In the Gillette ad, the razor they are selling is defined as a symbol of true manhood, something that trans men are told to chase endlessly in order to prove their gender. The message of the ad then becomes: our product will help you be a real man

Interestingly, none of the recent ads (with the possible exception of the ad from Gillette) push a medical essentialist narrative of being trans. Neither surgery or hormones are ever explicitly mentioned, nor do the ads focus heavily on the bodies of the trans people they show. This is very different from other media with trans representation, such as TV series, documentaries, and online videos. Documentaries on trans men highlight their medical transitions: hormone replacement therapy, double mastectomies, phalloplasties, or combinations thereof, all as part of becoming a true man in their eyes and in the eyes of the law (Johnson 479-481). As of 2017, a high proportion of trans characters in TV shows were in the process of, or planned to surgically transition, or had done so already (Capuzza and Spencer 223). On YouTube, trans people make videos showing their bodies pre and post-op as part of proving their gender and that they are really trans (Siebler 85-86). Siebler goes so far to as to say that "New

media may support alternative genders, but only those alternative genders that require the assistance of hormones and surgery” (94). Therefore, it is notable that there is such little focus on the body in these ads. There is more focus on clothing than on than the body underneath, possibly because it is more lucrative to commodify things that cisgender people also buy than to commodify medical transition and risk alienating a large portion of the market.

While the greater inclusion of trans people in advertising is an encouraging sign of acceptance, that inclusion is based on narrow parameters. First, trans people are depicted through a transnormative lens that does not challenge binary ideas of gender. Second, they are used as tools to show the audience that the brand is woke in order to attract socially conscious consumers. These narrow parameters of representation can impact the trans community as well as greater society, because the media creates definitions of gender. Media also makes standards that people are taught to compare themselves against, which makes transnormative depictions become a feedback loop. These ads, which imply that there is only a narrow way to be considered legitimate as a trans person, or use trans people simply as a symbol of progressiveness, limit how viewers think about transness, regardless of their gender.

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