Transgender Representation in Mainstream Advertising:

How Exposure Can Change Society Outlook

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Abstract

This study focuses on the transgender community’s presence and portrayal in advertisements that reached a broad, American audience base. The paper first analyzes various advertisements in the past three decades that have included some form of transgender theme or motif and how the framing of these advertisements have influenced societal perceptions of the transgender community.

With the expanse of communication and visibility that mass media has increasingly afforded in the last two decades, the inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community has grown exponentially. Recent years have seen an increase in academic studies surrounding LGBTQ+, and pop culture has brought the community to the forefront, sparking conversation and work aimed at decreasing stigma.

This paper will explore how the transgender community is *portrayed* and *marketed* *to* in mainstream advertising. Due to the diverse nature of the LGBTQ+ community, a defined focus on transgender representation will lend focus to the unique experiences, portrayal, and responses of individuals who identify as transgender. While transgender representation in the LGBTQ+ community can play a large role in a feelings of belongingness, referring to LGBTQ+ community as a whole can negate the experiences of each individual community. Not all those who identify as transgender also identify as homosexual, as gender expression and sexuality are seen as independent factors.[[1]](#footnote-1) Hence, this paper aims to explore a rather under-researched subset of the LGBTQ+ community in research studies, transgender persons.

**Definition and Prevalence**

In 2016, an estimated 1.4 million Americans identified as transgender, making up about 0.6% of the total population.[[2]](#footnote-2) The term transgender encompasses all those who identify as non-conventionally gendered, meaning they do not fully identify with their biological sex assigned at birth *or* conform to the societal expectations of masculinity and femininity attached to their gender identity.[[3]](#footnote-3) This included those who identify as genderfluid or genderqueer, crossdressers, drag queens/kings, transvestites, and transsexuals.

Furthermore, a focus on mainstream advertising will distinguish the level of visibility in regards to the mass public’s exposure to transgender actors and rhetoric. This study will include advertisements both implicitly and explicitly targeting transgender consumers and advertisements that include transgender themes. However, the advertisement must be featured in or on a mainstream media outlet or have a wide range of exposure outside of the LGBTQ+ community. This serves to explore the impact advertisements of this nature have in shaping the societal image of transgender individuals.

**Portrayal**

Because advertising serves as such a reflective tool in cultural perception, the image an advertisement of high exposure creates about the transgender community can go far in moving toward societal tolerance overall.[[4]](#footnote-4) For this reason, fair representation of transgender individuals – both in inclusion and portrayal – plays a vital role in the future of transgender acceptance and understanding. This paper will evaluate both the adverse effects negative advertisement can have on the acceptance of the transgender population and the positive implication we have seen in the past years as advertisements have progressively improved their transgender framing.

In her book, *Sex Change, Social Change*, Viviane Namaste asserts that non-transgender, or cisgender, individuals “have the first and final word on the matter” of how transgender messages will be received by the mass public.[[5]](#footnote-5) From deciding what is seen by the public to having a say in where and how transgender content has access to outlets, who is controlling the media channels plays a large role in the presence of transgender voices in mass media.

**Transgender as a Plot Twist**

In an act to appeal to the mass public, the framing of transgender individuals has often been as a humorous punchline in ads. They are often portrayed as deceitful with the set up to offer a surprising twist to the ad. Furthermore, commercials almost exclusively depict male-to-female transgender persons, grossly oversexualizing the women to amplify the surprise factor when they deliver the “She’s a He!” twist. Oftentimes, the surprise comes at the expense of a duped male who was “tricked” by the woman’s sexual allure that is now shattered by the knowledge that they are transsexual.

The nonprofit organization Truth in Advertising released an ad following this trope in their 2014 campaign titled “The Truth’s Not Always Easy.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The ad shows many individuals being “brutally honest” including two individuals in an intimate setting where the perceived woman suddenly says, “you should know I’m a man before this goes too far” in a deep voice before pulling the, now surprised, man down onto the bed. Not only is the transgender individual portrayed as being deceitful, but the suggested forwardness before the scene cuts off insinuates nonconsensual malice on their part.

This message is harmful in many ways. In framing the transgender community as deceiving, the ad negates the very real discrimination and danger that disclosing one’s gender identity can bring for transgender individuals. The ad also sought to make humorous what can be a sensitive experience of sexual intimacy. Trans people risk facing ridicule, dismissal, and even violence in their choice to disclose their identity to a partner, and the decision is rarely an off-the-cuff one as seen in the ad.[[7]](#footnote-7) The Truth in Advertising commercial also perpetuates the idea that a person’s gender is defined by their genitalia by stating the individual is a man only right before the situation becomes intimate. For many transgender individuals sex reassignment surgery (SRS) is not always an option or a desire to define the gender with which they identify. To both transgender and cisgender individuals, this stereotype paints a limiting view of acceptance to a complex notion of gender expression.

The idea of sex appeal making the woman has also been a trope commonly used to objectify trans women in early advertisements. In a 1997 Holiday Inn commercial, a sexually attractive women is shown arriving at her high school reunion. The male voiceover then lists various surgical procedures that implies this women has gotten, all while the camera pans to each of her features in a highly sexualized manner.[[8]](#footnote-8) A man then flirtatiously approaches the women before realizing that she was once his former male classmate, saying “Bob? Bob Johnson?” The commercial concludes with the voice-over stating, “It’s amazing the changes you can make for a few thousand dollars. Imagine what happens when we spend a billion on our new Holiday Inn.” A hotel chain used the seemingly unrelated fetishism of a trans woman for shock effect in order to gain attention for their new company-wide remodeling. By referring to the woman by her birth name[[9]](#footnote-9) and listing off the various cosmetic procedures, the commercial makes her appearance out to be artificial and strips the woman of her gender identity by revealing her “true nature” as former Bob Johnson. The stance this commercial takes argues that transgender identity is only skin deep and is highly dependent upon a fraudulent presentation of one’s self. Furthermore, the appreciation of a trans woman’s identity only holds value when their appearance warrants the male gaze.

This trope can be more subtlety noted in some advertisements, but still present and still harmful in perpetuating the idea that the external image is the only way one’s identity is defined. In a less obviously crude take, Goodwill ran a commercial in 1996 where the voiceover follows an unseen individual around the house as they prepare items for what we assume is a donation to Goodwill. All the while the voiceover is claiming “You’re not the man you used to be,” and lists of masculine activities the subject no longer does, such as golfing, watching sports, or wearing their hat backwards, implying they are taking up more and more feminine characteristics.[[10]](#footnote-10) Upon viewing the commercial, the audience could conclude that these “bachelor characteristics” were abandoned upon the introduction of a female figure in their life. However, the scene ends with the person picking up the bag of donations where all we see is feminine high heels and the voiceover saying “You’re not one of the guys anymore. In fact, you’re not a *guy* anymore.” Not only is this commercial using the transgender reveal as a plot twist, but it implies that in order to be seen as a woman, it is essential to abandon all masculine activities and characteristics and adopt a highly feminine persona.

**Male Gaze Defining the Ideal**

Tsai, (2010), argues that the over-feminized portrayal of trans women reaffirms “binarized gender stereotypes” by defining a transgender woman’s worth by how convincingly she can pass as the ideal female (i.e. highly feminine and sexually appealing to men).[[11]](#footnote-11) This can be seen in the 1996 Clothestime commercial “Bedroom” where a blonde woman is seen through a window flitting about her bedroom in a black silky nightgown.[[12]](#footnote-12) The view in which the audience sees the woman – as a detached party “peeping” through her window – further fortifies the part the male gaze plays on the framing of women in advertising. The duration of the commercial builds up the sex appeal of the woman, only for the twist to come when they answer the phone in a deep, masculine voice saying, “Hello? Yeah, this is Mark.” A female voice-over states “If Clothesline can make Mark look this good, imagine what we can do for a *real* woman,” invalidating the gender expressions of transgender individuals as authentic or genuine.

**Sparking Change**

With the progression of LGBTQ+ social movements and the legalization of same-sex marriages in 2015 by the Supreme Court, the socio-political understanding of the transgender community has grown as a more prominent concern for marketers.[[13]](#footnote-13) This shift can also be credited to the growing transparency and communication digital media has afforded. Creative Director of Google’s series of short films, *#transvoice*, Tea Uglow said 2016 “was the year that trans storylines broke into mainstream US cinema and TV.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Conversations about inclusion and representation are coming to the forefront in popular culture, and many marketers are scrambling to get on the bandwagon. This presents the challenge for advertisers to handle the topic properly, and the question is raised whether brands are taking on these social issues with genuine, ethical concern for the matter or simply to turn a profit.

The alcohol industry has not shied away from addressing the transgender topic. In 2016, a Bud Light commercial starring Amy Schumer and Seth Rogen shares a LGBTQ+-positive message by proclaiming “beer should have labels, not people.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Transgender actor Ian Harvie makes an appearance in the ad, though it’s short lived. While the message of the advertisement advocates for an acceptance of gender identity and expression, it is delivered by two popular, cisgender individuals. Hiring Schumer and Rogen was likely done to appeal to a broader, heteronormative audience and increase the likelihood of attentiveness to a trans-positive message. Although the commercial may have fallen flat on inclusive representation, the message was in support of the transgender community.

This Bud Light spot is a far cry from the 2001 Samuel Adams spot labeled the derogatory term “Trannie.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The commercial follows much the same plotline as the Truth in Advertising spot where the transwoman reveals her transgender identity right before intimacy with a partner while handing him a beer. The disgusted man makes an excuse to go, then he drinks the beer and totally forgets what he was doing, turning back to the woman asking, “What was I saying?” The woman flirtatiously responds, “You were about to nibble on my lip,” before the intimacy continues. The message of the spot is that the fine taste of the beer helped the women coerce the man into sex, perpetuating a deceitful stereotype of the transgender population.

With the transparency and communication that social advertising has created in the last year, what could air sixteen years ago, now runs the risk of facing a more vocal backlash today. [[17]](#footnote-17)Online platforms and brand’s own social networks allow a space for their consumers to have more of a voice with the content brands are creating through advertising. This shift has the power to create more socially responsible brands, and I believe we’ve seen that change in many of the advertisement in the more recent years.

The unifying-power-of-beer trope is more positively framed in the early 2017 Heineken experiment, “Open Your World”, where people of different outlooks or backgrounds are brought together to build a makeshift bar.[[18]](#footnote-18) The pairs are all shown helping out the others and then sharing a little about themselves through questions the Heineken team has provided. The sharing of these experience is cooperative and empathetic between the two apparent strangers. After completing the task, personal statement videos of the individuals are shown to the other and the option to leave or stay and discuss their differences over a beer is given. One such pair included a trans woman and a man who was against gender conversion. Their story arch concluded with the pair sitting down to talk, each with a Heineken, on the bar they had made together. We can see the expression of the idea that the Heineken was a unifying force for the pair, but this idea takes second stage to the larger notion of cooperation and empathy through communication for which the commercial sought to allude.

Absolut Vodka also ran a spot in May 2016 where the male narrator is reunited with an old friend “Dave, except it wasn’t the Dave [he] remembered…his name was Darla now.”[[19]](#footnote-19) The narrator says he tried to make an excuse to get away, but Darla grabbed his hand. Here we see a light play on the aggressive-transgender trope again, but the remainder of the commercial depicts the two old friends having the night of their lives (with the help of Absolut Vodka of course) where the narrator’s voiceover describes him listening to Darla about her feelings and her journey as a transgender woman.

Darla, played by trans actress Carol Marra, is depicted as the life of the party throughout the ad, friends with everyone she meets and getting them access to various exclusive opportunities. The ad positively frames a trans woman as the center focus of the spot, and the commercial ends with the narrator stating that Darla hadn’t changed, he had, thanking Darla for “bringing [him] back.” While critics have found fault in the fact that Darla does not speak throughout the whole one minute spot, the narrator’s depiction of the night’s events and his initial misgivings surrounding his transgender friend offer a more authentic outlook of how a cisgender individual may feel toward the transgender community. The commercial appeals to a wider, more mainstream audience in this way and is reflective of the hesitation and uncertainty that many Americans may hold toward the idea of transgender people.[[20]](#footnote-20) While the voiceover can be assumed to be the male friend in the spot, the overlay style of the narration allows the audience to self-project themselves on the narrator’s journey, attempting to lead what could be a hesitant audience member – like the narrator – on a journey of acceptance for their transgender friend.

While Absolut Vodka is included throughout the two friends adventures, the brand isn’t central to their reconnection. The tagline of the spot and overall campaign – “Make your nights #absolutnights” – stands as a platform for various stories to share epic nights/adventures rather than the reason behind the stories themselves.

The transgender representation of Carol Marra in the Absolute spot and Ian Harvie for Bud Light are important factors in the mainstream audience’s exposure to the transgender community. Because of the theory of selective exposure, including transgender individuals in such high exposure, primetime ads means that this platform may be one of the few opportunities for transgender individuals to be seen by the mass media. [[21]](#footnote-21)Nike, another major name in popular culture, released two spots in the past year featuring two transgender athletes, dancer Amazon Mother Leiomy and triathlete Chris Mosier.

Nike’s “Unlimited” campaign featured Chris Mosier in the “Unlimited Courage” spot, which followed Mosier throughout his training.[[22]](#footnote-22) A voiceover spoke directly to Mosier, asking him various questions such as “how did you know you’d be fast enough to compete against men?”, “how did you know the team would accept you?”, “Or even be allowed to compete?” to which Mosier answered “I didn’t” to each one. The video depicts the male triathlete training in various ways and even shows a clip of him changing shirts in the locker room when asked how he knew if the team would accept him. Similar to the Absolut ad, the voiceover reflects the thoughts of the skeptical audience member while simultaneously sharing the courage of Chris Mosier to persevere. The ad ends with the voiceover asking, “Didn’t you ever just want to give up?” and Mosier replying, “Yeah, but I didn’t.” True to Nike’s inspiration-driven campaigns, the ad frames Mosier’s accomplishments as inspiring and courageous efforts, ending with the tagline overlay of “Unlimited Courage.”

Nike’s “Vogue” commercial, starring vogue dancer Amazon Mother Leiomy, took on a more solemn approach with a voiceover style akin to reading a letter to someone, in this case Leiomy. Throughout the spot we see Leiomy in various scenes – running on the streets, dancing in a studio, “vogueing” in a crowded club – with the voiceover asking her how she accomplished what she has in her life and career.[[23]](#footnote-23) Although Leiomy remains center focus, we see various other dancers throughout the commercial that display atypical gender identities. The speaker is highly reverent in his regards to Leiomy, and in one scene we see a dancer wearing jewelry and short hair right as the voiceover says “like you saved me,” hinting that this is our narrator. Because of this, the ad is targeted more toward the LGBTQ+ community, but its mainstream presences reaches Nike’s target demographic segment of adults 18-34.

**Non-Apparent Representation**

While the two Nike advertisements embrace the transgender identity of the two athletes, another question that begs exploring is if the portrayal of transgender individuals needs always have one’s transgender identity as clearly indicated in advertisements? Among Secret Deodorant’s #StressTest campaign, the spot “Ladies Room” shows a woman nervous to exit a bathroom stall when two other women enter the bathroom talking.[[24]](#footnote-24) The wider shoulders of the woman may lead the viewer to presume she is transgender, but the commercial never makes this clear. The commercial concludes with the woman stepping out of the stall only to be met by complements from the other women in the bathroom off-screen. The copy reads “Dana finds the courage to show there’s no wrong way to be a woman.” The commercial inspires courage to express oneself while also encouraging overall support and solidarity among the female community.

The feminine hygiene company, Thinx, ran an NYC subway campaign in May 2016 that featured a transgender man wearing their period-proof underwear.[[25]](#footnote-25) The print ad did not state the man was transgender and followed the same layout of the other ads in the series. Their website, shethinx.com, features a page called “People with Periods” were the model in the ad, Sawyer DeVuyst, shares his story of being a transgender male along with a longer photo-spread of DeVuyst wearing the Thinx Period-proof underwear.[[26]](#footnote-26) Both DeVuyst’s testimonial and the subway ad take the stance that not all gender identities are conventional to biological sexes and that some men have periods. The ad makes no attempt to explain that DeVuyst was born a different gender than the one he identifies as today, rather changing their product positioning from underwear for women to underwear for people with periods.

Neither brands made their transgender inclusion easily discernable to the viewer. By doing so, their transgender inclusion efforts could be seen as more genuine in the way that the brand is not targeting a specific group or outwardly stating their alliance with a group purely to sell their product. Furthermore, their quiet inclusion argues the point that one’s transgender identity need not always be a defining trait for an individual’s acceptance of who they are. [[27]](#footnote-27)

**Non-profits**

Non-profits have also sought to change the public’s perception of the transgender community. Ad Council’s “Love Has No Labels”, released its “We Are Americans” campaign on Independence Day 2016.[[28]](#footnote-28) Their video PSA featured WWE Superstar John Cena as he spoke about what it means to be patriotic and have love for one’s country. As Cena walked through a textbook American small town, telling the audience various statistics about the people that make up the US population, representatives of the different identities can be seen in the background. A print ad accompanying the campaign shows a high school cheerleading group with the front-most member having some masculine features. The only copy on the page is #WeAreAmerica with the Love Has No Labels logo on the top right corner. The PSA video carries a message of acceptance with the end depicting a video montage of individuals with different physical abilities, ethnicities, and gender and sexual orientations.

As with the Bud Light and Absolut commercial, showing a masculine figure that is largely unchallenging to traditional gender ideals, such as John Cena, as the main narrator of the commercial works to solidify the initial acceptance of the viewers to receive the preceding message. Those more skeptical about LGBTQ+ motifs may be unlikely to pay attention to messages clearly framed to do just that. By including figures that are comfortable to current popular culture trends and expectation, these commercials have a higher chance at keeping the attention of both an accepting and skeptical audience.

Fall 2012, the District of Columbia office of Human Rights launched its Transgender and Gender Identity Respect campaign on bus shelters around the city and has been praised for being one of the first government-funded campaigns supporting transgender rights. The campaign featured five D.C. citizens who identified as transgender or gender-fluid with the headline reading, “I’m a transgender (woman/man) and I’m part of D.C.” [[29]](#footnote-29) The ads aim to decrease discrimination for transgender and gender non-conforming individuals and increase reporting of discrimination to the Office of Human Rights. The ads focus on framing the transgender individuals as fellow citizens by including personal quotes from the models and presenting the individuals in a non-sexual, relaxed manner.

Similarly, the New York City Commission for Human Rights launched a similar ad campaign in December 2016, asserting the legal rights of New Yorkers to use the bathroom of the gender with which they identify. The campaign consisted of public transport ads and digital videos on the nyc.gov website and includes two designs, one featuring a trans woman and the other a trans man.[[30]](#footnote-30) The model’s first name and the area of New York City where they live are included on the poster, humanizing the transgender individual as fellow citizens of New York. The series also includes the same two above-mentioned ads in Spanish for further inclusion. New York efforts for the protection of the transgender community have received a “true perfect score for LGBT inclusion” by the Human Rights Campaign for its fifth year in a row. [[31]](#footnote-31)

**Conclusion**

The positive trends of portrayal by many widely accepted brands and figures play a large role in decreasing negative stigma surrounding the transgender community. As mainstream advertisements including transgender-acceptance themes grow in popularity, so too does the conversation of transgender rights and experiences. Discourse surrounding such advertisements aim to shape how the industry and brands approach transgender representation and ultimately how society does as well.

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