GENDER OPEN REPOSITORIUM

Advertisements myth: commercialization of queer identity

Koch, Anna-Lea

2023

https://doi.org/10.25595/2974

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Koch, Anna-Lea: *Advertisements myth: commercialization of queer identity*, in: Gender : Zeitschrift für Geschlecht, Kultur und Gesellschaft, Jg. 15 (2023) Nr: 2, 11–24. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25595/2974.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here: https://doi.org/10.3224/gender.v15i2.02

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY 4.0 Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY 4.0 License (Attribution). For more information see:

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.en

GenderOpen – Repositorium für die Geschlechterforschung: www.genderopen.de

FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN

Schwerpunkt

Anna-Lea Koch

Advertisements myth: commercialization of queer identity

Zusammenfassung

Werbemythen: die Kommerzialisierung queerer Identitäten

Die immer häufigere Darstellung von queeren Menschen in der Werbung lässt auf eine soziale Anerkennung von Queerness schließen. Insbesondere während der Pride-Monate füllen queere Werbespots westliche Bildschirme und Plakatwände. In diesem Beitrag möchte ich den Einfluss von queerer Sichtbarkeit in Werbung auf die Konstruktion queerer Identitäten untersuchen, indem ich Jean Baudrillards Konsumgesellschaft, Robert Goldmans und Anne Cronins Analyse von Werbung und Rosemary Hennessys Erkenntnisse über Queerness in Kapitalismen zusammenführe. Die kritische Analyse dieser Ansätze kommt zu dem Schluss, dass Kommerzialisierung von Queerness in Werbungen, basierend auf dem Konzept, dass Konsum eng mit Staatsbürgerschaft verbunden ist, oft als Anerkennung missverstanden wird. Darüber hinaus wird in diesen Werbungen Queerness durch den Versuch mystifiziert, die Fiktion einer kohärenten queeren Identität aufrechtzuerhalten. Dabei wird dieses missverstandene queere Subjekt entweder als 'abnormal' abgestempelt oder an Vorstellungen der dominanten Heteronorm angeglichen. Diese theoretischen Ergebnisse werden durch die Interpretation eines amerikanischen Werbenarrativs und einer kritischen Reflexion der Betrachtungsposition ergänzt.

Schlüsselwörter
Kommerzialisierung, Konsumgesellschaft, Queere Identität, Pink Capitalism

Summary

The ever more frequent appearance of queer folk in advertisements may suggest a social recognition for queerness. Especially during the Pride months – international celebrations of queer life including protest, parades, and parties – queer ads fill western screens and billboards. This paper wants to explore the impact of queer visibility in advertising on the (re)construction of queer identities in consumer societies by bringing together Jean Baudrillard's theory of consumption, Robert Goldman's and Anne Cronin's analysis of advertisements and Rosemary Hennessy's findings about queerness in capitalisms. I will argue that the commodification of queers in western mainstream advertising, framed through the concept that consumption is closely tied to citizenship, is often mistaken as recognition. Furthermore, queerness is mystified in advertising through an attempt to maintain the fiction of a coherent queer identity that contributes to the construction of either an 'abnormal' queerness or aims to soothe the derivations from the heterosexual norm. These findings will be put into perspective by a critical examination of an American advertising clip and reflection on the viewer's position.

Keywords
commercialization, consumer society, queer identity, pink capitalism

Open Access © 2023 Autor*innen. Dieses Werk ist bei der Verlag Barbara Budrich GmbH erschienen und steht unter der Creative Commons Lizenz Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).

1 'I am queer all year'

During the Pride celebrations of the last years a range of advertisements have caused an outcry in the queer scene – again. Leading banks, clothing retailers and various other companies have decorated their shopping windows and websites with Pride flags and queer advertisements. Their slogans can be seen on the wagons at Pride parades across the globe but have dominated American and European parades. Although, the reactions amongst queers have reached from appreciation to outrage, a feeling of consternation remains, because as soon as the Pride celebrations are over these advertisements and 'queer-themed' products vanish, only to be brought up again during the next Pride event. Certainly, queer advertising, as part of pink capitalism, is nothing new. The first company to explicitly market with advertisements featuring a queer identity in the United States was Absolut Vodka in 1979 and many more followed. This work wants to approach the issue of pink capitalism from a consumerist perspective and ask the following questions: How are queer identities in advertising constructed, formed, and consumed? And how does this construction relate to the liberation of queerness in late capitalism?

I will argue that the visibility of queers – mostly non-heterosexual cisgender individuals[1] – in western mainstream advertising, framed through the idea that consumption leads to citizenship, is often mistaken as recognition and does not bring the promised social and cultural liberation. In contrast to the heteronormative matrix in western capitalist society that organizes and enforces the emergence of devaluation of queer identities and queerphobic acts of hate, visibility may seem like a major accomplishment. However, many theorists have proposed a contrary argument: firstly, queer identities in advertising can be seen as another attempt to maintain the myth of a coherent, stable queer identity, and secondly, these appearances contribute to the construction of either an 'abnormal' queerness or aims to soothe derivations from the heterosexual norm. Yet, this is not a universal claim. Due to the focus, the limited length and the empirical examples chosen, this work only takes western capitalism into account and hence, only has a limited scope.

In the first two paragraphs of the following chapter, I will consider Jean Baudrillard's and Robert Goldman's theories of consumption, the relationship between advertisements and their target groups and the (re)construction of (queer) identity. Following this groundwork for a theory of queer identity as commodity, the third section will explore the evolution of pink capitalism and analyse issues of visibility and (mis)recognition. Additionally, an American advertising campaign will be considered to illustrate the theoretical implications of the concept of commercialization of queerness.

1 This paper will purposely focus on the topic of sexual orientation, because most advertisements that include queer identities incorporate homo-, bi- or pansexual individuals. The exploration of the (non)existence of trans identities in commercials would lead to a new, but nonetheless necessary discussion.

2 Queer identities in the consumer society

According to Jean Baudrillard the western postmodern lifeworld can be described as a consumer society in which everything is dominated by the laws of consumption and exchange (Baudrillard 1998: 43). However, while consuming the individual does not only annex the commodity itself, but also its figurative meanings, the meanings *behind* the good (Goldman 1992: 18). Robert Goldman argues that this additional sphere of consumption fosters the occurrence of the "commodity-sign" (Goldman 1992: 18) He explains:

> "The commodity-sign is a composite of a signifying unit and a signified meaning. The signified unit or signifier could be a word, a picture, a sound or an object. The signified is a meaning (a mental image, concept of impression) suggested by a signifier. The precise relation between signifier and signified is not fixed but emerges out of a social practice." (Goldman 1992: 18)

Therefore, consumption is guided not only by the utility of a product itself, but also by its ability to constitute to an individual's identity and 'their place in society'. Consequently, the logic of commodification has invaded every part of society and cannot be separated from individual, cultural, social, or political practices.

Likewise, consumer society has influenced our understanding of the relationship of capitalism[2] and democracy. Baudrillard exposes the common misconception, that "growth means affluence; affluence means democracy" (Baudrillard 1998: 51). Complementing Baudrillard's thesis, Anne Cronin, a researcher of promotional culture, states that "within European nation-states individuals' access to citizenship rights has been framed through discourses of consumerism" (Baudrillard 1998: 4) inspiring the myth that a democratic free choice is achieved through the act of consumption. Nonetheless, advertising seems to play a key role in promising an economic and social freedom as the consumer's choice (Goldman 1992: 3). Thus, the focus must be shifted to this essential component of consumption that establishes a relation between marketing experts, commodities, identities, and consumers.

2.1 Advertising in relations

In the second chapter of *Advertising and Consumer Citizenship* Anne Cronin acknowledges the double-sided position of commercials in the consumer society. She argues – based on Goldman's and Judith Williamson's discussions about advertising – that even though advertisements are often commonly thought to have no meaning of their own, they are not only the bearer of meaning, but take part in (re)producing economic, social, and cultural meanings (Cronin 2000: 37f.). This (in)materiality of advertisements (Cronin 2000: 37) draws attention to the importance of advertising campaigns as a process of integral meaning-making and at the same time as the meaning-transmitting part of consumption. Albeit, these meanings are not simply created by advertising agencies, they are rather reassigned and reorganized to suit their new signifiers (Goldmann 1992: 38).

2 Capitalism here is understood as a "mode of production characterized by the economic practice of extracting surplus value through commodity exchange" (Hennessy 1994: 33).

Cronin further claims that the consumption of meanings in advertisements includes performative aspects concerning individual and collective identity (Cronin 2000: 39). Consumption hence partly consists of communicative aspects to negotiate one's identity in affiliation to others (Goldman 1992: 18ff.; Cronin 2000: 40[3]) and to inform others about available and desirable identities. Baudrillard expands this relational understanding of advertising and argues advertisements "target everyone in their relation to others, in their hankerings after reified social prestige. It is never addressed to a lone individual but is aimed at human beings in their differential relations" (Baudrillard 1998: 64).

The differential mode of addressing various objective groups implies the necessity of identifying a target market. In order to identify a servable target market, a collective coherent identity needs to be envisioned first. However, target markets are not simply selected by marketing experts, they are fabricated ideals composed by marketing experts to be profited on (Cronin 2000: 52f.). Hence, advertising agencies need to come up with a coherent collective identity that can be ascribed to the target market.

2.2 'Queer identity' in mass media

Despite the well-fuelled myth that identity can be seen as a coherent aspect of one's individuality, this paper is committed to a postmodern understanding of identity, based on the conviction that identities are (re)constructed every day in various contexts and discourses that are governed by a complex hierarchy of social norms. These "discourses offer different subject positions: people are positioned by discourse or use it to position themselves and others" (Ladendorf 2010: 269), for example through the consumption of advertisements and commodities. This act of positioning is not necessarily a matter of one's own choice, but rather limited in its freedom by the narrow confinements of social expectations, which for example are also reflected by the "constraints of commercial enterprises" (Cronin 2000: 41) in advertisements. Hence, identity is neither a matter of one's individual assertiveness, nor of one's experience, but rather the result of domineering norms (Butler 1990: 17). While performing these norms through activity that is limited by them, one secures the legitimization of this implicit social arrangement. Cronin sums up the individual identity in relation to discourse as the following:

> "'the individual' is not an entity formed prior to an engagement in discourse. […] The self is constituted performatively in the very action of acting, mediated through discourse. Social contract is a particular discursive structure which frames individual agency through citizenship, belonging, entitlement and consumerism." (Cronin 2000: 36)

Considering these notions, a singular collective 'queer[4] identity' cannot exist. At the same time, queer individuals' actions co-construct a meaning of what is perceived as a 'queer identity'.

3 Cronin also draws upon the ideas of Colin Campbell, who criticizes the one-sided nonperformative approach to the analysis of advertisements. For a detailed discussion see Cronin (2000: 38ff.).

4 Following the ideas of Judith Butler, Rosemary Hennessy states that the word 'queer' is often used to expose the myth about a supposed stable (queer) identity (see Hennessy (1994: 35) and Butler for further readings).

In order to make a 'queer identity' visible to consumers, marketing experts must face a problem. 'Queer identity' is not necessarily a matter of appearance; hence it may not be detectable straightaway. To make it noticeable to an audience queerness needs to be made explicit through 'queer' acts – e.g., kissing a person of the same-sex – or codes, like stereotyped behaviour or clothing (Ladendorf 2010: 274). The discursive construction of collective and individual identities and the consequence of the explication of 'queerness' through specifically 'queer' labelled acts leads Ladendorf to the conclusion that 'queer identity'[5] is perceived as a free-floating signifier in mass media (Laclau/Mouffe 2001; Ladendorf 2010: 274), only to be visible through often stereotyped modes of behaviour. However, the signifier might not be as free-floating as it may seem. Goldman limits this idea, because even though the signifier may seem unbounded, it is restricted – under capitalism – by the need to render a profitable product (Goldman 1992: 9). Consequently, the free-floating signifier enables marketing experts to maintain the fiction of a coherent 'queer identity' and fill it with characteristics that will suit their marketing goals.

Skover and Testy have witnessed a transformation in 'homosexual male identity'. It has "formed radically from the 'sissies', 'fags' and 'losers' of the '50s and '60s, as it has been commodified into the newer style of buffed-out and erotically charged manliness" (Skover/Testy 2002: 241). The trend for the queer community indicates a similar picture: the depictions of 'queer identity' "are less pathetic, more admirable; less hateful, more lovable; less unalike, more equal, more 'normal'" (Skover/Testy 2002: 243). Over-normalizing the essence of queer identity is what Daniel Mendelsohn has called "the heterosexualization of gay culture" (Mendelsohn 1996: 26) in 1996 in the *New York Magazine*. However, if this analysis of 'queer identity' is appropriate in terms of reflecting and representing queer culture adequately, does not affect the mythmakers. From their perspective only the utility and profitability of the 'queer identity' displayed matters (Skover/Testy 2002: 246). Likewise, the true-and-false schema in commercials has been eradicated. For Baudrillard, the arbitrary assignment of truth is a constitutional aspect for the creation of an advertisement in consumer society. He argues that an advertisement's alleged 'truth' or 'falseness' does not matter, precisely because advertising "is beyond the true and the false" (Baudrillard 1998: 127).[6] Thus, precisely *how* the free-floating signifier of 'queer identity' is constructed, is secondary for the marketing campaign itself, only the profit based on its coherence counts.

Furthermore, the creation of fictional identities is caused by "aspirational and regulatory reasons" (Skover/Testy 2002: 244). Considering aspiration, consumption is associated with true democratic epitomes of freedom and individual self-actualization (Skover/Testy 2002: 244) framed through citizenship. Through consumption one's individual self is allegedly revealed and manifested, which refers to the formerly mentioned Baudrillardian idea of consumption as democracy and happiness (Baudrillard 1992: 49). In contrast, the restrictive side contains the regulation of any derivations from socially manifested norms for any identities (Skover/Testy 2002: 244f.).

5 Ladendorf focuses her analysis on Lesbians in the TV series *The L Word*. I am proposing that her analysis can be transferred to other queer identities.

6 Baudrillard also concludes his nihilistic argument that there is no need to criticize advertisements, because of the commercial's location *behind the true-and false-schema* (Baudrillard 1998: 127). For a detailed critique of Baudrillard see Bert van den Ven (2000: 162ff.).

'Queer identity' seems to have found its way into modern mass media. Since the 1980s, advertisements, series, talk shows, etc. featuring or centring around queer characters have appeared in the communications industry slowly heralding the advent of pink capitalism. 'Queer' marketing campaigns in their requirements of a relatively stable identity contribute to the creation and protection of a fictional collective identity that is then left to the (mis)interpretation of others.

2.3 Pink capitalism: Visibility as a panacea?

Advertisements addressing a gay target market have been around for nearly a century in the United States. Blaine Branchik sectioned the short history of gay advertisements into three different chapters. The *first* phase was the result of increasing "urbanization [and the] Industrial Revolution" (Branchik 2002: 88). Skover and Testy argue that capitalism has enabled the formation of a homosexual identity, because queer individuals were no longer reliant on their families (Skover/Testy 2002: 240). Their economic and social independence permitted a slightly more active enjoyment of their sexual identities that still complied with the social pressures of heteronormativity.[7]

Although a proper queer market had not been established by then, an increasing number of private hidden gay parties and gatherings took place promising a beneficial market sector to marketers (Branchik 2002: 88). During the *second* phase, the "community building" (Branchik 2002: 88) phase, the market grew. The Stonewall Riots and the general reformist mood of the 1960s fostered the possibilities of a more covert queerness in the city centres, but still there was no direct targeting. With the slow beginning of the *third* phase during the 1970s, the social tolerance of queerness and its visibility in society grew, hence advertisements targeting queer people were featured in mainstream mass media (Branchik 2002: 88). Martina Ladendorf further contends in her analysis of the homosexual market sector:

> "In the early 1990s, advertisers started using these codes in what Clark calls a dual marketing strategy, where they tried using covert gay codes to reach a homosexual audience without alienating heterosexuals. […] The ads encouraged queer readings, but did not restrict the readings to homosexual relationships or identities, creating open texts that could be read differently by different groups." (Ladendorf 2010: 270)

Nonetheless, it is certainly debatable whether the presence of queer identity even implies that the advertisement is targeted at queers. These commercials could also be addressed at a potential target audience that wishes for the representation of queerness in the mainstream media. This imaginative audience could – but does not necessarily have to – consist of queer people or it may be composed of liberal humanists who want to see diversity in media for the sake of a confirmation of their own progressive open-mindedness. This idea corresponds to the consumption of intimacy in advertising highlighted by Baudrillard. He argues that advertising apes

7 "By targeting heteronormativity rather than heterosexuality, queer theory and activism also acknowledge that heterosexuality is an institution that organizes more than just the sexual: it is socially pervasive, underlying myriad taken-for-granted norms that shape what can be seen, said, and valued" (Hennessy 1994: 36).

"intimate, intimist, personal styles of communication. It attempts to speak […] to each of us as our friend or our superego or as an inner voice in the confessional mode. It thus produces intimacy where there is none – either among people or between people and products – by a veritable process of simulation" (Baudrillard 1998: 161).

Consequently, this intimacy reassures the confirmation of one's own identity and in this fashion, the consumption of queer identities would function as a "commodity-sign" (Goldman 1992: 18). It is crucial to distinguish between advertisements featuring queer identity and advertisements that are targeted at queers. Hereafter, it is implicitly assumed that a 'queer advertisement' is meant to include queers and is at the same time directed at queer *and* non-queer liberal audiences.

Yet, the invasion of pink capitalism into the modern market sectors is still open to interpretation, and we need to pose questions about the social and political consequences: Does the increasing – covertly or blatantly queer-addressing – appearance of queer identity in advertisements truly generate the desired change, namely the formation of a safer, more friendly, more accepting environment for queers? The legal and social situation for queer people has drastically improved since the beginning of the 20th century in many countries worldwide. But the sellers' aim and capitalism's driving force is profit, not emancipation. Measured in terms of positive reactions to 'queer identity' in advertisements, this harsh reality is often denied by consumers, which further contributes to the creation of a fictional free choice in the consumer society. Baudrillard assert that "the specific message of 'the language of advertising' is the denial of the economic rationality of commodity exchange" (Baudrillard 1998: 164).

Albeit with good reasons, critical voices come have been defending visibility for its beneficial consequences. The materialist feminist Rosemary Hennessy denotes that the growing visibility of queer identities in the communications industry has certainly had positive effects: It "can be empowering for those of us who have lived most of our lives with no validation at all from the dominant culture" (Hennessy 1994: 31). Is visibility per se therefore an accomplishment for queers? Is it a remedy for society's stereotypical pictures of queers and queerphobic acts of hate? The theoretical answers to these questions are as diverse as the reactions from within the queer community. Although, Hennessy acknowledges some positive effects of visibility, she also points out that the political intention of queer visibility movements is "not to include queers in the cultural dominant but to continually disclose the heteronormative" (Hennessy 1994: 36). Consequently, the idea of a queer critique is not to contribute to and at the same time legitimatize the fiction of a fixed queer identity, but to expose these socially constructed rules of the heteronormative system that demands fixed identities. The heterosexual ideal creates the classification of what counts as 'normal' and desirable and what does not and thus, enforces implicit heteronormative boundaries for what an individual can or cannot be.

This process of othering has been explored by various critical theorists in multiperspective academic fields of application (for early works see Hegel; de Beauvoir). Here, othering is understood as a mechanism of differentiation between two groups, which often includes a devaluation of identities, that differ from the implicit dominant group which constitutes 'the norm'. Concerning the process of othering within the heterosexual matrix, Hennessy recalls Diana Fuss' findings that "heterosexuality is not an original or pure identity; its coherence is only secured by at once calling attention

to and disavowing its 'abject interiorized, and ghostly other, homosexuality'" (Fuss 1992: 732; Hennessy 1994: 46). Consequently, heteronormativity secures its dominance and superiority by deprecating queerness as distinct from 'the norm', which is triggered by othering.

Taking advertisements into account, the depiction of queer identity seems to have taken two contradictory paths, one that leads to the former-mentioned "heterosexualization of gay culture" (Mendelsohn 1996: 26) and another that orients itself towards the intensification of differences between the heterosexual norm and queer 'abnormalities', whereas queerness is not necessarily portrayed as negative.

Recalling the previously asked questions whether visibility is accomplishment for queer activism the answer appears to be: 'no'. Either the "heterosexualization of gay culture" (Mendelsohn 1996: 26) or the othering of queers in advertisement stipulate the terms for the preservation of the myth of a coherent queer identity, which – as we have already concluded – cannot exist. A myth that is in itself paradoxical, due to the oppositional representations of queerness in mass media, may be explained by the fact that 'queer identity' is a (not quite) free-floating signifier that is utilized to bring about the sellers' aims.

The sociologist Alan Sears offers a far more radical response to our question by recognizing in the emergence of pink capitalism a backdrop for queer liberation movements, because it succeeds in introducing itself as an achievement for queer civil rights and hence, leads to decreasing political activism amongst queers (Sears 2005: 101f.). However, he seems to forget that queer emancipation is not a task to be solved by queer people, but a problem that must be considered by society as a whole. Only if society meets this task, can a resolution of the queer myth be accomplished. Skover and Testy further argue that in the marketplace context the advertisement industry

> "promises LesBiGays that their commodified identity will stretch the cultural canvas in creative and compelling ways, that they will get to push the parameters for the commercial culture. Not only will LesBiGays transform the culture, the myth goes, but they will also consume it as fully in/vested American citizens" (Skover/Testy 2002: 245).

This, however, is counterproductive because placing queers "into the mainstream [means] wrenching out of them any real potential for social transformation. […] Commodification of their identities renders [queers] less powerful as a countercultural force" (Skover/Testy 2002: 245). Skover and Testy root this claim in the construction of the commodity identity that is not simply in the power of the queer but also shaped by the commercial stakeholders (Skover/Testy 2002: 39). Hence, queer activism would lose its revolutionary potential not simply due to becoming more visible and present in society, but because of being reduced to a commodity. Visibility, therefore, does not equal recognition.

Whereas Hennessy argues that visibility may function as a foundation for queer liberation (Hennessy 1994: 36), Skover and Testy refer to the positive effects of visibility, not as solid groundwork for change, but rather as an obstacle for queer transformative activism (Skover/Testy 2002: 245) because visibility is put right into the mainstream not as a means of counter-production but as a commodity. Although it is questionable that *every* queer transformative movement is "wrench[ed] out of […] *any* potential for

social transformation" (Skover/Testy 2002: 245, emphasis L. K.), visibility may have led to a decrease of urging for change among queers at least to some extent caused by the confusion of consumer choice and democratic freedom.

But what if Hennessy is right, and visibility is indeed a genuine base for social redemption and acceptance of queer people? There are still other challenges to be met. A study conducted by Wan-Hsiu Tsai surveys reactions of lesbian and gay individuals to the appearance of homosexuals in advertisements (Tsai 2001: 87f.). She concludes that minorities "embrace consumer power as evidence of accomplishment and a rebuttal of marginality, while advocating active mainstream engagement through consumerist activism as a legitimate means for social reform" (Tsai 2001: 92), which corresponds to the decline of political activism amongst the queer community found by Skover and Testy.

Furthermore, Tsai also acknowledges consumer society's myth-making structures, whilst she sees queer customers' active position in performing "such myths to construct subjective positions that focus on acceptance and acclamation in consumer culture" (Tsai 2001: 92). The participants of her study falsely connected their buying capabilities as consumers with monetary citizenship to levitate their subordinated status, precisely because they are aware of their marginalized significance in consumer society (Tsai 2001: 93f.).

Congruent to the former inference of the paradox of queer identity amongst the antipodes of the mechanisms of othering and the "heterosexualization of gay culture" (Mendelsohn 1996: 26), Tsai argues that queer minority consumers are caught between "*subcultural distinctiveness* […] and *mainstream assimilation*" (Tsai 2001: 94, emphasis in original). The constant certainty about the ongoing stigmatization of queer identity contributes to a defence of "*subcultural distinctiveness*", although only limited to positive differences, like for example gayness as in colourfulness or uniqueness. Simultaneously, minority consumers want to overcome the gap between the dominant objective of the heterosexual ideal and their own inferior otherness through "*mainstream assimilation*" or the "heterosexualization of gay culture" (Mendelsohn 1996: 26). In her study, Tsai argues that queer identity as commodity in advertisements fosters a myth of visibility that leads minority consumers into thinking 'they have made it' into mainstream culture (Tsai 2001: 92ff.). As a result, they perform a balancing act between empowerment through assimilation, whilst paradoxically delimitating themselves from the conventional mainstream culture by emphasizing the positive distinctions.

Moreover, if the positive effects of visibility are appreciated, another aspect needs to be focused on. While the attention is directed to a certain group, a shift of invisibility may take place.

> "Redressing gay invisibility by promoting images of a seamlessly middle-class gay consumer or by inviting us to see queer identities only in terms of style, textuality, or performative play helps produce imaginary gay/queer subjects that keep invisible the divisions of wealth and labor that these images and knowledges depend on." (Hennessy 1994: 69)

In the same text, Hennessy affirms that queerness is characterized by various intersections, which further exclude other individuals from being visible (Hennessy 1994: 68f.). The dominant queer images hence correspond the expectation of a coherent queer identity, whilst the invisibility is shifted to poor, PoC, disabled, unemployed, etc. queer folk.

Yet, the shift of invisibility offers space for another misrecognition to emerge. Considering the free-floating signifier (Laclau/Mouffe 2001; Ladendorf 2010: 274) it is possible for queer identities to be constructed incorrectly by marketers and to be misinterpreted by consumers. Skover and Testy argue that people consume depictions of queerness in the mass media and understand these images as accurate and legitimate confirmation of the 'essence of queerness', although such an essence does not exist (Skover/Testy 2002: 253). At this point, a false confirmation of stereotypes could be dangerous. It is therefore important to appreciate that mass media depictions of *any* (queer) identity are always selective and limited to the medium, the message, and the time available. Hence, stereotyping and misrepresentation are to be expected.

Despite this negative approach to commodification of queer identity, is there any resolution in sight? Nancy Fraser distinguishes two different modes of injustice[8]: a "socio-economic injustice [e.g.] exploitation […], economic marginalization […] and deprivation" (Fraser 1995: 70); and a "cultural or symbolic [injustice that] is rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication, [e.g.] cultural domination […], nonrecognition […], and disrespect" (Fraser 1995: 71). She also asserts that the subordination of queer people has its origin in a lack of recognition by society, which is governed by a cultural injustice that can be defeated by the recognition of queer. In her words, "overcoming homophobia and heterosexism requires changing the cultural valuations (as well as their legal and practical expressions) that privilege heterosexuality […] and refuse homosexuality as a legitimate way of being sexual" (Fraser 1995: 77f.).

It is striking that Fraser uses the word 'recognition' here, rather than 'visibility'. Recognition includes an active consumer who is engaged in the process of viewing. Albeit Cronin questions such approaches to an active consuming individual, as the interpretation of consumption is not left to the consumer itself, but rather a myth of free choice – as it was argued before – that leads consumers into thinking of themselves as agents of their own will. It is debatable whether recognition that includes an active consumer can even be performed concerning advertisements, or whether "the seeing subject is formed in those very processes of vision" (Cronin 2000: 89). If consumption itself produces the consumer, what and how the consumer consumes or 'recognizes' displayed identities is organized by consumption and not the consumer themselves. Active participation in the interpretation of 'queer identities' would be impossible according to this interpretation.

Hennessy takes a critical stance towards visibilities: "visibility in commodity culture is in this sense a limited victory for gays who are welcome to be visible as a consumer subject, but not a social subject" (Hennessy 1994: 32). How does this paradox accord with Cronin's observations that consumption and citizenship go hand in hand (Cronin 2000: 4)? Branchik draws a similar picture: He argues that analogous to the evolution of a market targeted at queers, queer civil rights have unfolded (Branchik 2002: 86). Certainly, this chicken-and-egg problem will not be solved within the scope of this work but considering the still marginalized position of queers in society at large and the shift of invisibilities, it is questionable whether it even matters. Allowing the positive effects of visibility in, negative or stagnating developments are covered up. Even though visibility has had affirmative consequences on the legal position of queers,

8 Fraser asserts that this differentiation is merely for analytical purposes rather than exhibiting any practical implications (Fraser 1995: 72ff.).

Fraser stresses that only "transformative remedies" (Fraser 1995: 82) can bring about the desired social change. Rather than concerning the redemption of unjust results of the heteronormative society, such as the devaluation of queer identities, transformation aims at its targets, namely, to break with the mythical construction of coherent identities, which emerge from cultural hegemony (Fraser 1995: 83f.).

In conclusion, visibility of queerness in advertising, even if it seems like a major accomplishment, may also be considered an obstacle for queer rights activism and queer liberation. Rather than challenging the heterosexual matrix, representations of queer identity have redounded to the fiction of a coherent queer identity. This identity, as a free-floating signifier, has been filled by marketing agencies to suit their goals, namely, profit and utility. Paradoxically, the establishment of queer identity in the communications industry has been shifted in two opposing directions. On the one hand, queer identity has been 'heterosexualized' and hence, presents queer folk as 'normal', on the other hand, depictions of queers have stressed their otherness positively. Moreover, a shift of invisibilities to other marginalized consumers has taken place further questioning the exaggeration of visibility as a panacea for social injustice.

3 Analysing the American market: Honey Maid and selling otherness

Focusing on advertising as an integral meaning making part of pink capitalism has allowed us to frame queer identity as a commodity in western capitalisms. Despite this focus, advertising cannot be separated from its unique embeddedness in consumer society and analysed separately. According to Robert Goldman "in a society that is fundamentally structured by commodity relations – by relations of private property and wage labour – ads offer a unique window for observing how commodity interests conceptualize social relations" (Goldman 1992: 2). Taking a look through this window will allow the viewer to conceptualize the theoretical implications from the former embattled approach to queer identity as commodity.

In 2014, Honey Maid, a daughter company of Mondelez International, one of the world's largest food companies, published a whole advertising narrative. Their original advertising clip shows happy family constellations, such as a Black family, a tattooed father, a single father and gay fathers with their sons, eating Honey Maid's products (Honey Maid 2014a). Relaxing acoustic music plays in the background. Concerning Goldmanian semiotics, in the product in the commercial, Honey Maid's crackers symbolise the family's positive relationship as the signified unit. More precisely, the advertisement suggests the consumption of Honey Maid's products will lead or at least contribute to a happy family life. Because the advertisement is targeted at parents who are able to buy these crackers, the signified could further be constituted of the concept 'being a good parent'. Goldman argues that:

"A particular mental image of being a successful mother [or in this case parent] is detached from the total context of being a [parent] and attached to a particular product so that the image appears realizable through the purchase and consumption of the good: it might be attached to a toothpaste, mouthwash, detergent or frozen food" (Goldman 1992: 18)

… or – as in this case – Honey Maid's products. Hence, buying them will eventually make you a good parent. Carefully embedded in the narrative of a "wholesome" (Honey Maid 2014a) family, the clip suggests it is maybe even mandatory to buy these products to achieve "wholesome" happiness of your family. Although Goldman argues that being a successful parent is segregated from its original meaning and connected to a commodity (Goldman 1992: 18), it can be observed that, in this commercial, the crackers become an integral part of enabling a good family life alongside with other parental activities that are displayed, such as cuddles, kisses, or shared fun. Hence, by buying the product, the consumer parents also consume the commodity-sign, namely the promise of a happy family.

However, how do these observations connect to the appearance of queer fathers? It is noticeable that exclusively 'minority' parents are featured in the advertisement. These protagonists have one thing in common: they are united in their distinctiveness. Even though the advertisement agency's intent might have been to draw a positive picture of somewhat 'different' parents and their children, inadvertently their differences and stressed and accentuated. This emphasis gives room to the possible interpretation that, albeit their 'otherness', these parents could be successful *as* parents, if – and only if – they buy and prepare Honey Maid's products for their family. Yet, at the same time and contrary to the accentuation of their otherness, the protagonists, and especially the gay men, are embedded in the heteronormative ideal of fatherhood. This phenomenon – as explored by Hennessy, Fraser, and Tsai – may appear paradoxical at first, as the advertising campaign tries to eradicate individual characteristics like sexual orientation by emphasizing these exact characteristics. The gay parents are good fathers through the consumption of Honey Maid's products despite their 'otherness'.

A few days after the release of Honey Maid's first advertisement on YouTube, a second, nearly two-minute commercial clip titled "Honey Maid Documentary: Dad & Papa | Official" was issued. As the title suggests, it resembles a short documentary rather than a typical advertising clip. The commercial focuses on the essence of the family and the product, Honey Maid's Graham Crackers. It seems like a trivial matter, but is apparently deeply rooted in the family's tradition of coming together and talking about their day (Honey Maid 2014b: 00:15–00:26). The clip further introduces the 'normality' of the somewhat 'different' family. One of the fathers assures that "we [are] kind of traditional guys. Marriage and kids and having a family was always important to us" (Honey Maid 2014b: 00:43–00:50) while pictures of the family are displayed on screen. The two protagonists are portrayed as average fathers who just happen to be gay, while otherwise perfectly corresponding to the parental ideal of a conventional family constellation. Pictures like this may contribute to a "*mainstream assimilation*" (Tsai 2001: 94) and "heterosexualization of gay culture" (Mendelsohn 1996: 26), because they could be taken and interpreted as a universal image of a gay individual by viewers. Obviously, individual life choices are left to the individual. However, the (mis)interpretation of queerness as seen in the advertisement could lead to a manifestation of a single queer identity as 'normal'. A coherent identity then could contribute to a deepened ditch between the "*subcultural distinctiveness* […] and *mainstream assimilation*" (Tsai 2001: 94), rather than being a plea for acceptance of all queer identities whether they perform traditional gender roles or not.

Similar depictions of gay people as part of a traditional family can be found for example in other American commercials by Google (Made by Google 2017), Wells Fargo (Eze Free Viral Videos 2017), Campbell (NeuroPsyche 2016) and many more. Besides the formerly observed urge to acknowledge a company's selflessness in the release of queer advertisement, a trend trying to overcome "*subcultural distinctiveness*" through "*mainstream assimilation*" seemed to have evolved in mass media's commercials. A reduction of queer identity to Pride, and the enshrinement of queer identity to a singular subjective, have contributed to the constitution of a fictional single queer identity rather than to a social recognition of the diversity of queer life. Although the question of the impact of these findings on queer transformative movements (especially outside the western point of view) and their revolutionary powers remains unanswered, it seems that visibility alone does not lead to an accurate recognition of the diversity of queer identities.

4 Vetting the viewer – what is the 'queer' ad?

While working on this article, I came across various western advertisements that feature queerness in some way. All of them had one thing in common: queerness was visible. For the sake of this paper, queer identities obviously had to be visible to me, so I would be able to analyse it in some way. Hence, visibility was a requirement for advisements to be mentioned here. However, as argued by Ladendorf, sexuality, being transgender, and queerness are not necessarily matters of appearance, thus, it needs to be made explicit to audiences in order for them to classify the protagonists as queer (Ladendorf 2010: 274). But is there such a thing as a 'queer act' which implicitly hints if a person is queer or not besides clear outings like 'I am gay/lesbian/…'? And adjacent thereto: what is a 'queer' ad?

If queerness is not a specific way of being – which it is certainly not, because every way of being is individualistic to some extent – then any advertisement could include queer individuals or some form of queerness. Queerness does not need to be visible in order to exist and consequently, queerness may exist without being visible to the viewer, in this case to me. Its visibility and recognition are independent consequences from its existence, which are in our society reliant on capitalism's aim to profit, rather than being an outcome of social transformation. My argument here is that if everybody were to understand that any advertisement could include queer individuals – visible or not – and hence, that anybody could be queer, the myth of a stable coherent identity could be dissolved providing room for social transformation, which is hindered by the heteronormative presumptions that the individual in advertisements is naturally not queer, because it is simply reduced to its visibility.

Annotation

I would like to thank Prof. em. Hanjo Berressem, Michael Göbel and Daniel Austerfield for their support and critical feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

References

Baudrillard, Jean (1998). *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage Publications.

Butler, Judith (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* New York: Routledge.

Branchik, Blaine (2002). Out in the Market: A History of the Gay Market Segment in the United States. *Journal of Macromarketing, 22*(1), 86–97. https://doi.org/10.1177/027467022001008

Cronin, Anne (2000). *Advertising and Consumer Citizenship: Gender, Images and Rights*. London, New York: Routledge.

Eze Free Viral Videos (2017). *Wells Fargo Commercial Learning Sign Language.* Date of access: 25 February 2020 at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1K9kghcftPg.

Fraser, Nancy (1995). From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age. *New Left Review*, (212), 68–93.

Fuss, Diana (1992). Fashion and the Homospectorial Look. *Critical Inquiry, 18*(4), 713–727.

Goldman, Robert (1992). *Reading Ads Socially*. London, New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203976944

Hennessy, Rosemary (1994). Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture. *Cultural Critique*, (29), 31–76.

Honey Maid (2014a). *Honey Maid Documentary: Dad & Papa | Official*. Date of access: 25 February 2020 at https:// www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UMMn6oVtOc.

Honey Maid (2014b). *Honey Maid: This is Wholesome: 30 TV Commercial | Official.* Date of access: 25 February 2020 at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xeanX6xnRU.

Laclau, Ernesto & Mouffe, Charlotte (2001). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.

Ladendorf, Martina (2010). Commercialization of Lesbian Identities in Showtime's The L-word. *Culture Unbound, 2*(2), 265–282. https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.10215265

Made by Google (2017). *Carpool | Google Home now supports multiple users*. Date of access: 25 February 2020 at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZNqSy-zFXo.

Mendelsohn, Daniel (1996). When Did Gays Get So Straight? How Queer Culture Lost Its Edge. *New York Magazine, 24*, 24–31.

NeuroPsyche (2016). *Your Father 30s Campbell's #RealRealLife*. Date of access: 25 February 2020 at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNkCp5vjYzs.

Sears, Alan (2005). Queer Anti-Capitalism: What's Left of Lesbian and Gay Liberation? *Science & Society, 69*(1), 95–112. http://doi.org/10.1521/siso.69.1.92.56800

Skover, David & Testy, Kellye Y. (2002). LesBiGay Identity as Commodity. *California Law Review, 90*(1), 223–255. http://doi.org/10.2307/3481310

Tsai, Wan-Hsiu Sunny (2001). How Minority Consumers Use Targeted Advertising as Pathways to Self-Empowerment. *Journal of Advertising, 40*(3), 85–97. http://doi.org./10.2753/JOA0091-3367400307

Ven, Bert van den (2000). Postmodernism and the Advertised Life: In search for an Ethical Perspective on Advertising. *Zeitschrift für Wirtschafts- und Unternehmensethik, 1*(2), 155–170. http://doi.org/10.5771/1439-880X-2000-2-155

Author's details

Anna-Lea Koch, B. A., *1998, Department of American Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Cologne. Research focus: queer theory and social justice.
Email: a-l-koch@web.de