

Sex sells: Sex, taste, and class in commercial
gay and lesbian media.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Sex Sells

Sex, Class, and Taste in Commercial Gay and Lesbian Media

A teenage girl kneels on the backseat of a car in short shorts, turning toward the camera with a look both innocent and wanton. A young man lounges shirtless, his top fly button open, gazing with lazy invitation through the frame. "What's the story in these ads?" I ask students. "Well, you know," they shrug, "sex sells." Frustrated at how this aphorism closes down discussion, I have begun to consider its status as a commonsense response to some advertising. Antonio Gramsci and others have written about how "commonsense" beliefs become naturalized, taken for granted as "the way things are," and thereby obscure their own ideological foundations.¹ "Sex sells" precludes further analysis: "Well, what can you say? We all know that sex sells and that advertisers use sexualized images of women/men/teens/whomever to market products." The commonsense of "sex sells" masks the relationship between sexuality and commerce, discouraging analysis of the particular *ways* that sex is articulated to marketing and ignoring the limits placed on visible manifestations of sexuality in advertising and commercial media. To put this another way, when might sex *not* sell? What manifestations of sex are not commercially viable? How do some forms of sex preclude selling?

The question of when and how sex sells takes an interesting turn when we consider the cultivation of the gay market, especially since the distinguishing feature of this market is its nonnormative sexuality.² The past thirty years have witnessed an exponential rise in attention to gay consumers, increased representations of gays and lesbians in mainstream and niche media, and the diversification of gay and lesbian media. Interest in gay and lesbian consumers from national corporations such as Seagram, Subaru, and American Express has helped take gay media from small, local newspapers and journals (such as the earliest days of the *Advocate* and the Daughters of Bilitis's *The Ladder*) to a plethora of increasingly segmented, nationally distributed glossy magazines and Internet affinity portals. **[End Page 331]** The gay market is now even considered to have sufficient size and spending power for MTV and Showtime, both owned by Viacom, to announce that they are developing a new gay cable channel.³ As Joseph Turow comments on the increasing diversification of markets throughout the twentieth century: "Curiously, advertising and media practitioners' way of complimenting a group was to further divide it. Generally, the more attractive a population segment was to marketers, the more they segmented it."⁴ As gay consumers have become more identifiable, reachable, and desirable as a target market, gay media have blossomed to address more and more narrowly defined niches: gay entrepreneurs (*Victory!*), parents (*Alternative Family*), youth (*XY*), investors (*gfn.com*), tourists (*Passport*), and many more.

With the explosion of national ad-supported gay and lesbian media, one feature has remained relatively consistent: the sequestering or removal of sexual advertising and editorial content.⁵ Anxieties about gay men's sexuality, embodied in the two stereotypes of the hypersexual, predatory, possibly pedophilic gay man and the promiscuous AIDS victim, have shaped the constitution of the ideal gay consumer. Local and national gay and lesbian print media and Internet sites have either eliminated their sexual content or debuted with an express policy to ban it.⁶ Yet this closing of queer sex leaves us with an interesting paradox: a market that is constituted as distinct through the nondominant sexuality of its constituency could be brought into being only through the effacement of that sexuality. If "sex sells," why must gay sex be so contained? How must gay marketers construct the gay market if not through its sexuality, and with what consequences for queer sexuality and politics?

This research starts from the assumption that, in Richard Ohmann's phrase, "markets are shaped, not discovered."⁷ Ohmann looks at how family magazines such as *Munsey's* and the *Ladies Home Journal*, at the...

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