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Putting Your Best Face Forward: A Critical Visual Analysis of Gay Advertising Images and Self-Branding on Grindr

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Rochester Institute of Technology

School of Communication

College of Liberal Arts

Putting Your Best Face Forward: A Critical Visual Analysis of Gay Advertising Images and
Self-Branding on Grindr

by

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A Thesis submitted

in partial fulfillment of the Master of Science degree
in Communication & Media Technologies

Degree Awarded:

December 12, 2016

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PUTTING YOUR BEST FACE FORWARD: A CRITICAL VISUAL ANALYSIS OF GAY
ADVERTISING IMAGES AND SELF-BRANDING ON GRINDR

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Master of Science in Communication & Media Technologies

Term Degree Awarded: Fall 2016 (2161)

Abstract

Advertising is used to sell a brand by depicting a lifestyle or persona that one aspires to attain. We brand ourselves, or self-brand, in accordance to how we want to be perceived by others and to convey a particular message. This study addresses the following research questions: 1) How are men presented in advertisements in gay orientated magazines? 2) How do gay men portray themselves in online dating profiles? 3) Is there a relationship between the portrayal of the male body in advertisements in *Out* and self-portrayal on online dating profiles? 4) What messages are gay men portraying on online dating profiles? The results indicate a definite correlation between men self-branding and the advertisements in gay targeted magazines. This study is important to recognize how consumers use the Internet as a self-branding tool and to predict trends of future use on social media. A critical visual analysis is implemented and this study is based on using the social construction theory.

Keywords: gay, advertising, self-branding, and social artifacts

Putting Your Best Face Forward: A Critical Visual Analysis of Gay Advertising Images and Self-Branding on Grindr

Advertising and Marketing are crucial for businesses and important to look at from a social aspect. These tools are significant in that advertising images reflect the present day society and culture to whom advertisers are marketing. When a viewer looks at advertising images he or she has a sense of what life was like when the advertisement was printed. The standard of beauty is understood and important cultural artifacts are recognized when examining advertisements. In other words, advertisements tell society what is important and why products are significant.

It is not until the 1970s that advertisers begin to openly target gay men in advertisements. The context of the advertisements becomes increasingly sexualized the more gay publications come into print. This is important to keep in mind as ads shape people's perception of the world and in turn, perceptions of the self and others (Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015). Today, all forms of media, entertainment, shopping, and communication are integrated into online and electronic use. This study is important to present findings that advertising is in fact a reflection of society and in turn society mirrors advertising.

As social media continues to grow in playing a major role in its users lives "the self is under pressure to be commoditised" (Wee & Brooks, 2016, para. 3). Whether searching for a new career, keeping up with friends, or looking for love, personal profiles on social media are used as a tool to portray oneself to viewers online. This study is socially important as a way to recognize how consumers are currently using the Internet as a self-branding tool and to predict trends of future use. Personal branding, whether subconscious or not, is the persona that one visually projects to the online community. In this study, the visual projection takes the form of the profile picture on the social dating app Grindr.

Thomson (2016), defines autonomy as “a person’s need to feel that his or her activities are self-chosen, self-governed, and self-endorsed” (p. 106). Autonomy is imperative to understand in this article as the subjects studied are portraying themselves with the idea to attract a mate. These subjects self-brand and use social constructs to form visual messaging in the form of a profile picture. In other words, users commoditize themselves with hope fellow users sell into their brand to which success is measured by messages in the user's inbox. In order to understand the manner in which a gay man self-brands online, it is important to look at a brief history in gay advertising.

A Brief History in Gay Advertising

So as to not offend its more conservative customers, mainstream magazines do not typically include advertisements with an LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender) theme. Advertisers use symbols and coded messages to target the LGBT community without alienating mainstream consumers. The terms most commonly used for this are “gay window dressing” or “gay vague” which signifies the use of social cues only members of the gay community understand (Schroeder & Zwick, 2004). Marketers must choose the advertising message carefully so the message is successfully received by all viewers. This study analyzes only advertisements marketed in the openly gay targeted magazine *Out* to deter any doubt that these are not specifically gay targeted ads.

As a member of the LGBT community there are shared subcultural meanings of social artifacts, in other words subcultural authenticity. Subcultural authenticity is common knowledge within a social group perceived to be iconically accurate (Mikkonen, 2010). Advertising to the LGBT community changes over time because of society’s changing opinion of the community. As society becomes more open to the LGBT subculture, specifically gay male, advertisement

images follow. It is important to briefly explain the history of gay advertising. A framework is developed to explain the timeline of gay images in print media.

Branchik (2007a) adopts a framework of gay male images in advertising based on the framework of minority depictions in the media created by Clark (1969). The framework's first period is Targeted Recognition and this lasts until the late 1920s. According to Branchik (2007a) advertising images use subtle cues and messages that may only be understood by the subculture of gay men. These cues (also know as polysemy advertising) are not recognized by the mainstream.

Unlike the first period, the second period from the late 1920s - 1970, is recognized by the mainstream in the form of Ridicule and Scorn. The images during this period specifically target gay men as laughable characters, buffoons, and objects of social rejection. Between the 1970s and the mid-1990s the portrayal of gay men switches to Cutting Edge.

The third period shows gay men in an edgy light, as fashion trendsetters. The sexuality aspect is also recognized which causes advertisers to push the envelope of "socially acceptable images" (Branchik, 2007a, p. 49). The final period from the mid-1990s to present day is Respect. Gay men are now portrayed in many different occupations and social settings. All aspects are seen as socially acceptable. Also, the products gay men are advertising are not limited.

This framework works parallel with mainstream society's opinion of the gay male community. As time passes, gay men are portrayed in a more positive light until they are completely socially accepted as in reality.

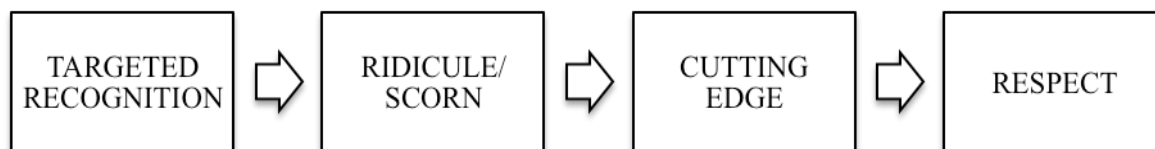


Figure 1. Progression of framework periods of gay male images in advertising

It is safe to say that the mainstream gay magazine *Out* has successfully achieved the Respect piece of history. *Out* magazine openly targets gay people and there is no need for advertisers to use polysemy messaging in ads. This magazine allows for a critical visual analysis free from speculation on whether or not these advertisements are intended to reach the gay community; the advertisements are certainly intended to target gay people. A critical visual analysis is performed to answer the following questions to explore advertising in the gay community and use of self-branding on online dating:

Q1: How are men presented in advertisements in gay orientated magazines?

Q2: How do gay men portray themselves in online dating profiles?

Q3: Is there a relationship between the portrayal of the male body in advertisements in *Out* and self-portrayal on online dating profiles?

Q4: What messages are gay men portraying on online dating profiles?

This study begins with a literature review detailing the importance of marketing to the gay community or the “gay dollar.” To accommodate changing social norms and the family structure, mainstream media is increasingly more accepting and normalizing to LGBT people. The use of the social construction theory and self-branding are discussed to further educate the reader on social cues. It is important to know that social media acts as a tool used to interact with the community. A critical visual analysis is performed to answer the research questions and to explore the visual message conveyed by the online user. Interpretation and discussion of five advertisements in comparison with online dating profiles is implemented. Finally, this thesis concludes with a discussion of the findings, limitations, and opportunity for future research.

Literature Review

The Dream Market

According to Tsai (2012), “having one’s community represented in mainstream advertising can be profoundly meaningful, exerting a critical predisposing power in the reciprocal process of consumers’ identity construction and maintenance” (p. 41). In polysemy, advertisers use social cues recognizable only by the intended subculture. In this study polysemy advertising is not analyzed, however it is important to be aware that it exists in advertising and marketing on all channels. Polysemic advertising is important for a gay person’s identity, to feel social inclusion.

The LGBT community has the highest buying power of any minority group in the United States (Hooten & Noeva, 2009). The LGBT community is often referred to as the “Dream Market,” the “Pink Dollar,” and the “Gay Dollar” because of its massive spending power. The majority of gay couples are comprised of two people with two salaries, usually zero children, and a great deal of disposable income. The amount of money a gay couple has to spend is so great that most companies would be foolish not to promote their products to the LGBT community. As previously stated, advertisements tell society what is important and why products are significant. Ads use beautiful models and seductive poses to entice and spark an interest in the viewer, to invoke a need for the product. It is important for a gay person to feel included in society and seeing oneself and relating to public advertising is very meaningful.

This research paper is unique because Grindr was released in 2009, just seven years ago. There is little to no research using Grindr although it is the first gay online dating app and has two million active users on a daily basis (Davidson, 2016). It is important to research Grindr because it is the first tool of its kind to commoditize dating and interaction for and to the LGBT community. A Grindr user is free to pursue affection and love openly, while offline this may not

be an acceptable option depending on the community. Due to the fact that Grindr is a dating app created for gay men to meet, this study assumes that the persona a Grindr user portrays is to attract fellow males. While an advertisement's purpose is to sell a product, a Grindr user self-brands and uses his default picture as an advertisement to sell the product, himself. It is important to this thesis and to better understand the research questions to discuss the social construction theory. The social construction theory deals with society's beliefs about a particular group of people or a particular item associated with a group of people.

The Social Construction Theory

Social constructionism deals with how social knowledge shapes the social reality of social actors. However, the ideas of social constructionism do not hold a belief in a single all encompassing reality but a view of multiple realities with a particular perspective being dominant at a particular time. The major focus of social constructionism is to explain the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the construction of perceived social realities (Keating & McLoughlin, 2005, p. 133).

The media tells society what is beautiful, popular, cool, and uncool. In turn individuals display themselves online to conform to what they believe other people think about their exterior persona, also based on what the individuals have seen via the media. The exterior persona is completely public and open to judgment from society whereas the self, although shared with people, is ultimately private. The exterior is judged based on a culture's theory of identity; one's self is based on one's own beliefs about his or her being as a member of the culture (Littlejohn, 1999). Personal beliefs come from experiences with others, a reality rooted immensely in sociological thought. The manner in which one self-brands is based on his or her beliefs about themselves and how one believes other people perceive them (Littlejohn, 1999). In other words,

in the social world one portrays a persona which he or she intends viewers to believe he or she embodies, just as a company would portray itself in an ad.

In corporate advertising and individual self-branding, the use of visuals is imperative. According to Schroeder and Zwick (2004) “photographs encompass both a critical part of the advertising world and an important process of representing identity” (p. 30). The manner in which advertisers market a brand to consumers uses the same schema as an individual using a profile picture to convey his or her personal brand to viewers. Lippke (1995) supports this idea by stating that:

The ways in which individuals habitually perceive and conceive their lives and the social world, the alternatives they see as open to them, and the standards they use to judge themselves and others are shaped by advertising, perhaps without their ever being consciously aware of it. (p. 108)

It is important to explain a user’s profile on the social date app Grindr to understand the significance a man’s main profile photograph or “default picture” plays in the message he is conveying to fellow Grindr users in terms of self-branding and interpersonal communication.

Grindr

Grindr is a useful context to study in terms of self-branding. One assumes and understands on social media, especially online dating, that the picture presented in a profile is the true representation of the user. In some societies, being a gay person is not acceptable and as a platform for gay men, Grindr is a way for users to display their own persona as individuals. Self-branding is important for a Grindr user to show who they are to a world of people they may not be free to showcase to the outside world. Visual messaging is imperative to study as online profiles and user interaction increase every day.

Grindr begins with the preface of finding men geographically close that want to meet and potentially hook up; it is an app for the stereotypically promiscuous. Once a user is signed up for Grindr, the first order of business is to upload a picture to use as a default photograph. There is only one main default picture to call the attention of fellow members and potential mates. It is imperative that this photograph encompasses messaging that the member is trying to get across, whether it be of sexual nature or casual.

It is important to mention that with a standard Grindr account, only the closest 50 users appear on the home screen. Default pictures of fellow users are arranged on the home screen in rows, side by side, and include a small area at the bottom left of each picture for a username. This interface allows those users in the closest vicinity to show up at the top of the screen. Initial interaction is completely based on the presentation of self in the default picture, and whether the user seems appealing to fellow members or not. The appeal, of course, is based on the opinions of other viewers. Personality is not what initially triggers an instant message. There is a section on a user's profile for a brief description of the user in writing, however this section does not pertain to this study. This research intends to show the care and precision that Grindr users implement to ensure his self-branding messaging conveys a particular message to the intended viewer.

Self-Branding

“For Harre, the person is a publicly visible being that is characterized by certain attributes and characteristics established within a culture or social group” (Littlejohn, 1999, p. 179). Self-branding is the manner in which people portray themselves in public in order to convey a particular message to onlookers. This message is attained through social cues and specific cultural artifacts understood by the peers. Self-branding is a way for people to distinguish

themselves as part of a group or to make a personal statement about him or herself. No matter the “social position” every person brands himself or herself to be part of a wanted group. According to Brady (2007) a person should identify as a brand that can be described in 15 words or less. This study determines if there is a relationship between advertising images and the way that gay men self-brand online.

The public image one conveys is extremely important in the culture today. “You” are the brand therefore “You” must advertise in a way that is most beneficial to self-confidence and achieving the goal of advertising value to a particular person. The clothing one wears is an example of immediate self-branding. Clothing is used to project a persona or idea about a person, the meaning of that idea is decoded most accurately by someone of a similar social background. Self-branding is a means for an individual to allow onlookers to recognize or assume a fact about him or her. We brand ourselves in accordance to how we want to be perceived by others.

Branding is exactly what advertisers execute onto a product. A product is branded into something which the consumer finds appealing and that the consumer wants. Advertisers find a target market in which to sell a product to. In the case of online self-branding, the product is the person depicted in the profile. The target market, in this study, is a potential significant other or partner. An individual self-brands by styling their hair and dress a certain way and by using facial expressions in a particular fashion to make themselves more appealing to whomever is his or her “target market.” A person’s individual socially constructed reality determines how one self-brands.

Self-branding is culture specific but meanings may extend to outside groups of people depending on the level of knowledge about a culture. For example, a person wearing a button with a rainbow may be assumed to be supportive of the gay movement. However, the rainbow is

also the symbol of Peace in Assisi, Italy. A person from Italy may link the rainbow button to a person supportive of world-peace. An artifact refers to an object used in a certain culture that one may link to that lifestyle or culture. In a way the artifact may be a stereotype associated with a group. Self-branding is only accurately understood in the context of the social group in which the individual is positioned.

Every person's social reality is different. However, people of similar social groups, cultures, and families have a parallel understanding of social reality and an understanding of specific artifacts relevant to that reality. In the gay community, there are different social cues that the mainstream may not recognize. Once an item is perceived with a certain message attached to it, the item becomes an artifact of the group. An artifact is an object used in a certain community that one may link to that lifestyle/culture. Every artifact may encompass a positive or negative idea about the person and social group. To the group, the artifact has one meaning. To people of other social groups, the artifact has a meaning specific to every person's different social reality.

The specific social construction is based on experiences and uses one's perception of reality as well as the opinions of one's own social circle to create the self-image the person intends to display to others. This image may include specific social artifacts with intent depending on what message the sender is trying to convey to the particular receiver. The sender keeps in mind the parallel understanding of certain social cues. The message one conveys to another visually is also known as self-branding. This research investigates the extent to which the codes used in advertising transpires into the self-branding of gay men online.

"The body and its surfaces are a medium where identity is both enacted as well as socially patrolled" (Poland & Holmes, 2009, p. 32). This quote also applies to social networking profiles. "...people feel more compelled than ever to post fascinating alter egos on social

networking sites, painting an image of themselves through clothes, musical tastes, and interests that can be much edgier than the ones they let on about..." (Brady, 2007, para. 3). The saying "a picture is worth a thousand words," takes on an entirely new meaning in a world devoted to social networking. A picture is interpreted with many different positive and negative opinions attached. Social networking is all about creating an image and profile that one wishes to expose and deliver to others. Technology allows the control of creating a persona encompassing exactly what one wants others to perceive them as.

Self-branding occurs on dating websites in order to attract the ideal partner. A public persona is created to define oneself for others and to shape oneself into a person for whom he or she would *like* to be perceived as. For example, there is nothing stopping an overweight client on a dating website from taking a picture above eye level and angling the camera downwards to elongate the face and body to appear thinner than in reality. The picture on a social website is the most immediate way of self-branding to onlookers and to create an immediate perception and persona about oneself.

According to Keating and McLoughlin (2005) while dealing with the social histories aspect of social constructionism, there are a few firm beliefs that researchers approach a topic with. First, researchers uphold that identification and knowledge of a social cue relies upon one's social location. Identification depends on how liberal or conservative a location is and the historical conditions of the culture. Secondly, researchers affirm that the reason a social cue is established is a very complex network of elements (from political to the economic) that combine to form a mutual understanding into society. In other words, the social knowledge of an artifact is created and understood only after many different factors have been established and understood on many different levels.

Currently, gay images in print leave little to the imagination, advertisers no longer worry about offending the mainstream. Advertising images have historically reflected society's view of the LGBT community (Branchik, 2007b) as well as set opinions. With all of the technology and media available today there are so many ways that a gay man can become available to others in a different number of personas. For example, on Facebook a male may keep all information private and make his default picture of himself atop a beautiful mountain, which would lead people to believe he is well traveled and a professional. The opinion that he is potentially professional lies only with the fact that there are no visible pictures to lead onlookers to believe otherwise. This same male may however use Grindr and may be shirtless holding a cocktail as his default picture. Same man, two different messages being conveyed. This man is self-branding in a way to attract certain opinions about himself based on the differing groups of onlookers. This introduces the second research question by asking:

Q2: How do gay men portray themselves in online dating profiles?

Using identity theory, which assumes that people have a strong social bond between the self and the way they are perceived by others, consumers respond less favorably to advertisements that do not reflect their self-identities (Jaffe, 1991). Aggarwal and McGill (2012) theorize that people have the "desire to achieve an effective interaction" with those brands that people feel relate to them. This study focuses on the use of images as indicated by the advertisements and what, if any, relationship exists between the portrayal of the male body in advertisements and self-portrayal on online dating profiles.

Consider the enormous amount of money advertisers put into the creation and idea of images in the ads themselves. In turn, advertisers are affecting their audience not only psychologically but also in the buying power that the Dream Market possesses. This study also

follows the ethos supported by Fitzsimons et al. (2008), which states that “consumers are motivated by their desire to achieve the key personality or trait dimension associated with the brand” (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012, p. 308). In other words, people are motivated by brands which he or she identifies with and are inspired by. Due to the nature of the strong relationship that one may possess with a brand, the third and fourth research questions pose:

Q3: Is there a relationship between the portrayal of the male body in advertisements in *Out* and self-portrayal on online dating profiles?

Q4: What messages are gay men portraying on online dating profiles?

Research Questions

1. How are men presented in advertisements in gay orientated magazines?
2. How do gay men portray themselves in online dating profiles?
3. Is there a relationship between the portrayal of the male body in advertisements in *Out* and self-portrayal on online dating profiles?
4. What messages are gay men portraying on online dating profiles?

The following terms are used in the research questions as well as throughout this study and are defined by *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (1987):

Advertise: To announce or praise (a product, service, etc.) in some public medium of communication in order to induce people to buy or use it.

The following term is used in the research questions as well as throughout this study and is defined by *LGBTQ America Today: An Encyclopedia* (2008):

Gay: refers specifically to men who are exclusively sexually attracted to men, though it is often used to describe all people who have sexual desire for people of their own sex.

Method

A critical visual analysis is implemented to answer the research questions. Performing a critical visual analysis allows the viewer to evaluate and dissect a piece of art to compare, contrast, and determine what is being visually communicated below the surface. According to Schroeder and Zwick (2004) “photographs encompass both a critical part of the advertising world and an important process of representing identity” (p. 30). A picture allows communication to others of what exactly a person embodies and represents; it is a powerful tool. In this study, the medium analyzed is photography in marketing campaigns and in online dating profiles.

A photograph depicts a message through body language, lighting, model placement, and facial recognition. Here, the visual display of models in advertising is compared to the manner in which users in the online dating app Grindr portray themselves. Advertising is used to sell a brand by depicting a lifestyle or persona that one aspires to attain. David Ogilvy, famous advertising mogul, described what is now known as branding as “the intangible sum of a product’s attributes” (McLaughlin, 2011, para. 8). Branding is an idea that a company emits with visuals, messaging, and design to attract consumers that explains what the brand exemplifies and embodies.

It is important to recognize that social media and advertising are closely related on the Internet. Advertising images are disguised as social media posts that target users, which increase web traffic and therefore increase advertising dollars. “Advertising images produce powerful, persuasive simulations of a real world,” by integrating advertising into social media the two evolve, grow, and become seamlessly integrated into everyday life (Schroeder & Zwick, 2004, p. 30). Through social media a person uses self-branding to explain with visuals, what messages he

or she wants the viewer to recognize. Belk explains: “Goffman argued that ads are part of the real world and a powerful influence on our self-concepts, how we view right and wrong, and how we conceive of living a good life...” (Goffman, 1979, Belk, 2006, p. 312). Ads are carefully camouflaged and intertwined into social media as well, while consumers are heavily influenced by both the visuals of the ads and their peers’ own self-branding.

By performing a critical visual analysis, the researcher compares self-branding on Grindr juxtaposed with professional advertisements. In this study, the visual communication of advertisements is used to compare to the manner in which men are self-branding in online dating. This is important to study as media becomes more interactive to predict how people and personas evolve with media.

Sample

The researcher views all advertisements in the issues of *Out* magazine from February 2015-August 2016. The most recent issues of the magazine are chosen as these are the most likely to be viewed by the individuals on Grindr, either in the magazine or in mainstream media, and would depict what is most trendy in popular culture. All of the ads from said months are cataloged to review and compare to the Grindr users that are sought out. In order to collect photos from Grindr, the researcher downloads the mobile app and creates a profile without a default picture or name to remain anonymous.

While signed-on into Grindr, the app uses geolocation and only the 50 closest users in cell phone radius appear. In order to retrieve the largest amount of data, the researcher chooses three Starbucks locations to sit at for one hour each and take from this crop of users. A Tuesday and Wednesday evening in July are selected between the hours of 7pm-10pm because these are busy hours for City dwellers leaving work, running errands, and socializing. Starbucks is one of

the most mainstream, grab-and-go coffee shops in the world. Day of the week, time, and chosen location allows for a high amount of foot traffic and in turn, a larger percentage of potential Grindr users.

Once at Starbucks, which includes the following locations on the island of Manhattan: Columbus Circle, Grand Central Station and Hell's Kitchen, the researcher turns on the Grindr app and records the profiles that appear. The 50 closest Grindr users in the vicinity changes quite frequently as users commute to their respective destinations. In order to capture as many users as possible, the researcher saves the pictures of the Grindr users onto a smart phone. Once all of the data has been collected, a comparison and contrast of all ads and Grindr photographs is implemented to find the five most similar images. The appendices include the ads and Grindr images used. The Grindr images are edited to protect the identity of the users by placing a black bar over the eyes of the men.

Out is chosen to use in this study because it is one of the most mainstream gay targeted magazines on the market today. The advertisers that buy space in *Out* are well known brands which increases the chance that the ads are seen elsewhere. A lesser-known magazine does not have the quantity of readership; therefore, a large brand would see value in buying ad space. It is important to research a medium that is the most mainstream and therefore has the biggest audience. The more mainstream the outlet, the higher the probability that an ad is seen by a Grindr user and influences his own visual messaging. The following ads and issues of *Out* are chosen to perform the critical visual analysis on to compare to five Grindr profiles:

- Versace: March 2015
- Topman: April 2015
- Bottega Veneta: March 2015

- Visit Tel Aviv: July 2016
- Diesel: February 2016

Results

It is important to understand brand history, target market, and public personification when relating the Grindr profile photos to the ads. This research follows the critical visual analysis implemented by Schroeder and Zwick (2004) by recognizing that ads are cultural artifacts and identifying overarching messages in theme and having awareness of subtleties in the visuals. The researcher also links representation of self on Grindr to the male models in *Out* much like how Schroeder and Zwick (2004) discuss advertisements in comparison to the male consumer.

The researcher explains the setting of the ads and overall tone of the presentation. The stature of the model used, clothing, and body language are analyzed and inferred upon. Social artifacts are explained and given meaning, which assists in drawing conclusions about overall messaging of the brand. Once the analysis of the ad is complete, an evaluation is performed on the Grindr user for comparison. Both images are juxtaposed next to one another while the similarities and differences are documented. The research achieves a correlation between the brand portrayed in an advertisement and the juxtaposition with self-branding in the dating profiles.

Versace: March 2015 (Appendix A)

Versace is an Italian luxury brand that uses the iconic and unique Medusa Head as its logo. This global brand is known for its bright, loud style and “strong and fearless designs” (Versace: Company Profile, 2016, para. 3). Versace is a complete house of fashion. The products are extremely expensive and include everything from clothing and accessories, to decorative

home goods for every room. This brand certainly has the most name recognition among all companies in the research.

In this ad we see the Versace model standing in a strong seductive pose, left hand gripping his white jeans at the thigh. His chest and stomach are shown with a dramatic sheen and a soaking wet white shirt compliments his physique. He is wearing a heavy bronze chain, which accentuates his collarbone. With pursed lips and a strong jaw line the model is staring directly into the camera, at the viewer. A white background, white jeans, and white and gold undergarments compliment the model's jet-black hair and tan. It is quite the contrast. The photograph certainly has a strong undertone of sex.

The male Grindr user strikes an almost identical pose to the Versace model. This user cut off the photo purposefully from his eyes up to hide his identity, but where the seduction lacks in his gaze he makes up for with his hand placements. Both hands are placed strategically at his belt line, pulling at the top of his pants. There is a dark background and the photographer uses a bright flash to accentuate the user's torso and jaw line. Like the Versace ad, the jaw line is hard and faced directly at the viewer.

Both the photographs are taken with completely different qualities, however the visual message is construed the same. Both men are almost fully disrobed, tugging at their pants in some way, and facing the viewer straight on. Both of these images have a blatant sexual nature about them.

TOPMAN: April 2015 (Appendix B)

Topman is a British company that sells on-trend and fashion forward clothing at affordable prices. The allure of Topman to customers is the extensive collection of garments sold, in store and online, that is updated on a weekly basis. Topman launches "100s of new

products every week,” all of which are designed right from the luxury brands its customers aspire to own (About Topman, 2016, para. 4).

Here, the Topman model has somewhat of an innocence to his look. He is dressed very suave in a grey blazer, black and gold patterned collared shirt, his white undershirt showing and silver chain necklace on display. The model gazes past the viewer and over to his right. His stance and nonchalant attitude calls out to the viewer to give him attention. Where the Versace model’s cheekbones are very defined, the Topman model has a slight open-mouthed pout and oval jaw. His eyebrows are well defined and strong. The lighting is soft and the background is just about the same grey as the model’s blazer. His hair is styled in a neat auburn quaff. The model is not openly being seductive or overly sexual. However, he is, albeit passive aggressively, seeking the attention of the viewer.

The Grindr user is setting a similar mood as the Topman model, however he is inviting the viewer in with eye contact. The Topman model gives an air that he cannot be bothered yet it seems the Grindr user wants attention from you and he is not shy about it. The Grindr user is dressed in a sharp dark brown, tweed blazer and a low cut black shirt. He has an evident pout along with his own dark quaffed hair and strong brow line. The lighting is backlit and a much lighter color to his dark blazer. The Grindr user’s gaze is not overtly sexual but it is certainly intriguing.

The pout, dress, and the feeling of arrogance from both of these men make them so similar. Both are comfortable with whom they are and the “coolness” of the Topman brand and the self-branding of the Grindr user juxtaposes seamlessly together. If taken with the same camera and same lighting, one might say these men would run in the same circle.

Visit Tel Aviv: July 2016 (Appendix C)

The Visit Tel Aviv brand is bright and exciting. As a tourism company, its main customers are current and potential visitors to the city. The Visit Tel Aviv website offers a unique addition: a link in the main navigation exclusive to people in search of information pertaining specifically to gay interests. The “GayVibe” tab sends the user to a rainbow contingent of photos directing visitors to festivals, shows, bars, and hot spots for the gay friendly (Visit Tel Aviv, 2016).

You can almost hear the party commencing during this Visit Tel Aviv ad. With flying popsicles, ping-pong paddles, headphones, and even a rainbow painted airbus coming in for landing, the viewer’s eyes go straight for the shirtless model front and center. With an “I [heart] Tel Aviv” painted on his chest, the model greets the viewer with open arms and very low cut blue jeans. This accentuates his hipbones. His mouth is open wide, hair a bit messy, and eyes covered with sunglasses. There is a playful, carefree attitude about the model, and his body language is very confident and inviting. The photo is heavily doctored between said airborne items and a sunny beach scene in the background. The ad is very colorful and is certainly less about selling any garments, but rather about selling an experience.

The Grindr user seen here is giving the same amount of playful energy as the Tel Aviv model. With his mouth wide open, this high-energy selfie is complete with a messy head of dark hair and multi-colored paint covering his face. Like the Tel Aviv model, the Grindr user is also shirtless and gives off an inviting feel. It is not clear where this photo is taken; the lighting is heavily backlit and over the Grindr user’s left shoulder are colorful photos hanging and an unknown red garment.

These men are carefree with few inhibitions as the shirtless torsos are one of the most prominent body parts put on display in both pictures. The dispositions of both men are rogue and

seemingly a bit wild. The Tel Aviv travel industry is one known for its party life style and these two men appear to encompass that persona with ease.

Diesel: February 2016 (Appendix D)

Diesel is a classically cool brand launched in Italy and made famous by its denim jeans. The products are expensive, however not as highly priced as classic luxury brands. Diesel is known for its trendy bright underwear and ultra-sexy models with confident attitudes. According to the Diesel Manifesto:

We decode the world around us, take it apart and unlock what we thought we knew. We see differently and unite with those who see it too. Draw your own path. March in the streets with us. Especially the ones our streets are on.

(About Diesel, 2016, para. 4)

The Diesel model is seen here sitting in nothing but a pair of navy blue briefs and leaving little to the imagination. The background color used is a light green that contrasts well with the navy garment. His body language is very casual. The manner in which he is sitting is vaguely slouched. His gaze lets the viewer know he is not shy, but rather calm and passive. The model's slightly hunched shoulders cause his very chiseled stomach to take the backseat to his toned arms and thighs. There is quite a bit of important copy in this advertisement that adds to the overall message of the Diesel brand. The elastic waistband of the briefs has *DIESEL* printed in bold lettering just below the model's belly button. Across his chest written in black marker is "#DIESELMATCH" and on his left thigh "NO FILTER!". There are a few social artifacts here to explain, including the # *symbol* (hashtag) and the term *filter*.

The hashtag is used by brands to encourage interaction on social media and to bring their customers together. When a hashtag is placed in front of text on social media, anyone may click

that grouping of words to see every time the term has been used on that medium. For example, if a person took a photo of themselves on Instagram in their own pair of Diesel clothing, by using “#DIESELMATCH” that person can share with others in-the-know about the Diesel brand and in turn also see who has shared their own photo.

On the top left of the ad, the copy reads “took it for you” implying that the model has taken and sent a picture exclusively to an individual. A *filter* is a term used in photo editing specifically on photographs taken on a cell phone, to enhance one’s looks. The “NO FILTER!” refers to the claim there is no editing done here. The ad is stating: this picture is taken with no edits, special for “you.” The ad is intimate and personal in the copy, however cheeky and potentially sarcastic as the viewer knows the photograph is seen by potentially millions of people, and most likely edited in Photoshop. Although the copy does tell its own story, the model’s body language emits a casual and sexual arrogance completely on brand with Diesel messaging.

Sitting shirtless and slouched, the Grindr user emits a similar casual and sexual tone to that of the Diesel Model. The Grindr user is posed facing forward with his face a bit to the right, his square jaw and collarbone prominent. The background of this photo is a steel blue that compliments his skin tone with the bright flash of the camera. The most significant difference between the Diesel model and the Grindr user is the degree of passiveness in body language. The Grindr user, although confident, is shy and more submissive than passive with his arms folded in his lap. His shoulders are much more slouched than the Diesel models. The Diesel model gives us the idea that this is not something new to him. For the Grindr user, he brands himself timid.

Bottega Veneta: March 2015 (Appendix E)

Bottega Veneta is a luxury Italian company known for its leather goods, especially its unique design of woven leather used on many of its products called *intrecciato* (Bottega Veneta-Our Heritage 2016). All Bottega Veneta goods are crafted by hand and typically cost between \$1,500- \$5,000 for a handbag. Men's backpacks (like the one seen in the *Out* ad) are sold at a minimum \$2,500. This is a high-end luxury brand for the wealthy and its branding prides itself on the Italian heritage and artisanal work behind each product.

The Bottega Veneta bookbag takes the spotlight at first glance in the ad but quickly shifts to the model's face and demeanor as the flash of the camera focuses itself to the top right side of the frame. The model's body language is completely different than what is portrayed in the previous ads. He is standing with his back to the camera, hunched and slightly cowering in a dark red corner. He is fully clothed in a black and white printed sweatshirt and very light baggy pants. There are no overtly sexual tones as the model seems scared, embarrassed, and even shameful. He looks back at the viewer like a child would to his parent upon being reprimanded. He clutches the right strap of the bookbag as if he does not want it taken away.

The Grindr user does not seem as threatened as the Bottega Veneta model, however he is seen in a slouched, unhappy stance with a cigarette in his mouth. As he faces the photographer, his hooded beige cardigan is pulled over his head while his navy blue shorts expose his thighs. The Grindr user's body language is not inviting whatsoever. His face is looking down to the right and his hands seem to be in fists, stuffed into the pockets of his cardigan. Like the Bottega Veneta ad, there are no overtly sexual tones. The Grindr user is on an apartment porch and his back is facing what appears to be an impressive view of skyscrapers, while he faces the entrance to the inside.

Both of these photographs are not perceived immediately with a feeling of positivity. Both men seem to be cutting themselves off from either another human or, one may argue, an entire society of people. Their slouched demeanors and unpleasant facial expressions certainly open discussion to the complex characters both are portraying. These gentlemen cause the viewer to want to know more about what is going on in their lives and in their heads as they both seem troubled.

Discussion

After careful comparison between the *Out* advertisements and the Grindr profiles it is quite evident that there are many similarities between the two. Personas portrayed in the ads are clearly translated through the Grindr user's default profile picture. Attitude, sex appeal, mannerisms, and body language are conveyed in all the images. In this study, the photographs juxtaposed with ease. With social media such a frequent and important part of today's world, many social media go-ers use their profiles as means to let others into their lives. Content is edited and calculated, as though the user is his or her own brand.

Social construction theory observes that one portrays themselves based on what society will perceive. The visual messages the Grindr default pictures display are the users self-branding to personify whom they encompass as a human in order to attract whomever their intended audience is. In the Versace ad and partnered Grindr photograph, both the men's torsos are the focus of the pictures. Based on the social construction theory, one argues that the messaging is hypersexual therefore the subjects personify this hypersexual nature. With the Bottega Veneta subjects, hoodies and sweatshirts are socially construed as a more casual and norm-core (the anti-fashion, fashion) personification. Socially, the message the Grindr user is portraying is detached and apathetic. Based on self-branding, one must theorize that this indifferent persona is

one which the Grindr user hopes to attract those of a similar nature. The use of social artifacts is an aid to social construction. An artifact refers to the use of an object, in this case a photograph, that one links to a lifestyle or culture.

The Bottega Veneta partnered Grindr subject is using the most recognizable social artifact to the mainstream - a cigarette. The use of tobacco products in advertisements abide by a strict set of laws from the FCC and it is not common to see cigarette use in mainstream media. Based on the social construction theory, the cigarette artifact has differing meanings based on each individual's personal opinions. The Grindr user is portraying that he condones cigarettes and in turn, the lifestyle that one perceives the use of cigarettes to entail. Each person has a different opinion about social artifacts and cues used in society.

This study recognizes the broad messages that men use to self-brand their image in order to portray a persona about themselves, in other words their brand. All social artifacts aid in the completed image that one uses to self-brand. It is important to fully understand that social artifacts are pieces of culture that represent the time that a picture was taken. The social construction theory is based in part by those social artifacts that encompass the overall meaning of a photograph as well as the messaging one sends to a viewer when self-branding. Yes, advertising gives a viewer an idea of what popular culture is like at a time in history, however with every new online profile and picture upload, social media essentially provides a rolling timeline of what society is like and the capacity in which people want themselves to be portrayed. This portrayal, in the form of self-branding, deems itself extremely important as this study proves that the visual messages implemented by the Grindr users vary while every person conveys his own unique brand message just like advertisements.

Advertisements are used to sell products, ideas, and lifestyles. Models are used to entice customers to buy and to encourage others to gain a sense of urgency and need for product or lifestyle. In having an online dating profile, one is essentially attempting to entice others to “buy into” the persona of the profile. The advertisements in *Out* are arguably no different than the self-branding that occurs in online dating. Performing a critical visual analysis allows one to become intuitive in regard to recognizing and de-coding visual messaging. The messages immediately conveyed are just as important as those messages that appear to be subliminal in nature. Juxtaposing images side by side is an important tool to implement. By using a critical visual analysis for both the ads and the Grindr profiles the researcher is capable of proving the similarities between the two medium which opens speculation on the impact advertising has on society and how gay men want to be portrayed by others.

The researcher chose gay men and Grindr to research because in some societies a gay person is not able to represent themselves freely. It is assumed that by having a private, dating profile to use one will personify themselves in their truest image. By analyzing the Grindr images one must assume this persona is the closest representation of the person they want to portray themselves to be. Other than a photography team and editors, all images are selling the subject with visuals. Questions for further research include: Is the same persona of the Grindr user portrayed throughout the rest of his social media accounts? Is there a difference in the way different races portray themselves? How do gay women portray themselves in online dating profiles? How do straight men self-brand online and what messages do they convey?

Limitations and Strengths

The limitations and strengths of this study include a few factors. The first strength is that the study is completed in one of the highest populated gay areas in the world. There is an

abundance of Grindr profiles to analyze and compare to the advertisements. In smaller cities matches are harder to come by. Another strength is that the NY Public Library is equipped with all of the hard copies of *Out* magazine from the past two years available to look at. This is uncommon in smaller cities. Weaknesses include that there are not more gay targeted magazines to analyze. It would be beneficial to look at how different sub-groups of gay men are advertised. Also, as the print industry continues to steadily decline, it would be proactive to look at online advertisements as opposed to print. Moving forward this is also a factor that can be used in future research.

As the future of news and entertainment trends inevitably to phones and tablets, it would be interesting to look at website advertisements on the online version of *Out*. Magazine ads are static and marketers choose where to print based on the knowledge of the consumer data provided by said magazine. Data is based on subscriptions and market research. Advertising online is heavily based on years of specific data collected on every individual to target people based on search history and trends. Online advertising is much more enhanced and refined and it would be interesting to see what type of advertisements gay males are subject to based on their demographics.

This study finds that the way gay men self-brand on online dating does correlate with advertisements in gay targeted magazines. Self-branding is a manner in which one communicates his or her image to onlookers with visuals and the goal of this article is to show the role social media plays in self-branding. It is important to understand that with social media, the perception of others is constant. All people, whether consciously or subconsciously, portray themselves in an image they intend viewers to believe they embody, just as a company would portray itself in an ad through branding.

Conclusion

This study adds to the understanding of social media and communication by recognizing what is important to communicate to those that use social media. Although pictures were used in this study, people use different forms of communication to express who they are as a person including verbally, by posting opinions and sharing articles, and in the form of video. Social media is very visual now and with the popularity of photo and video sharing apps, visual communication is only becoming more popular and considered the norm. It will be interesting to see what the future holds for social media communications-wise as it is already such an integral part in many people's lives.

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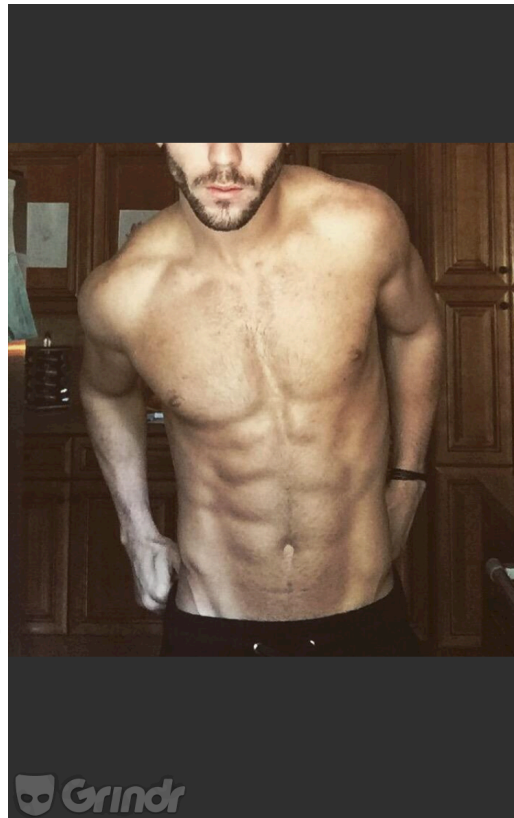
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Appendix A

Versace - March 2015

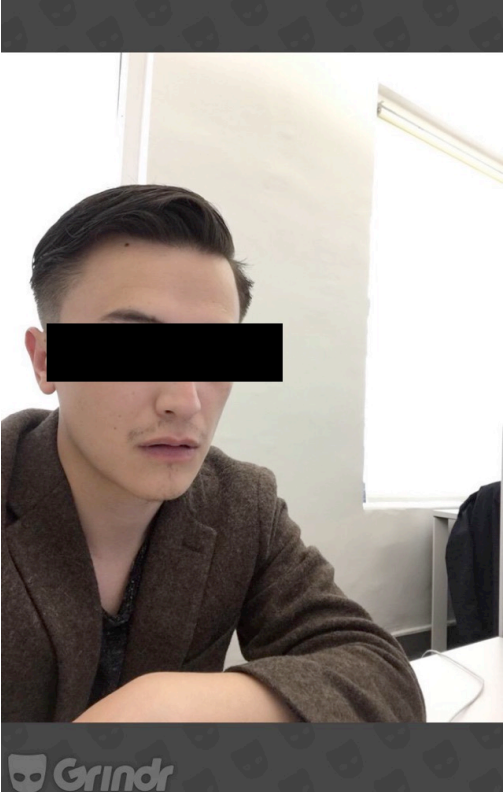


VERSACE



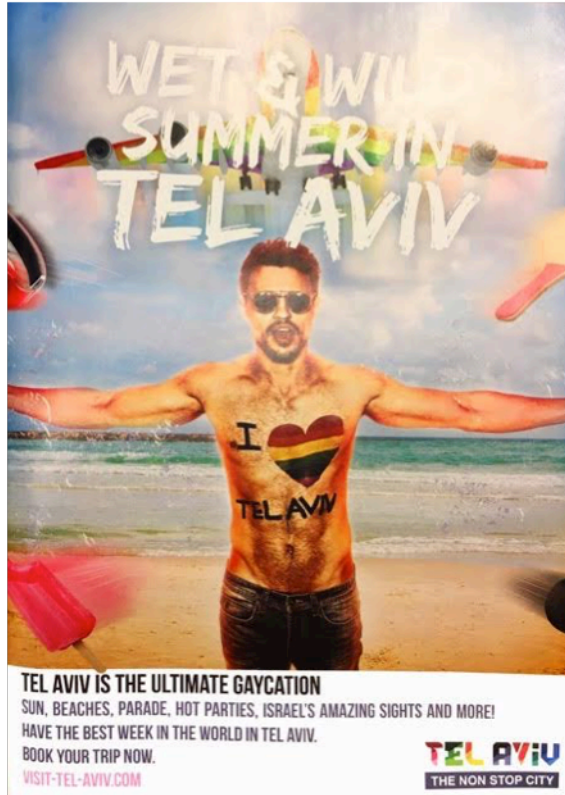
Appendix B

TOPMAN - April 2015



Appendix C

Visit Tel Aviv - July 2016



Appendix D

Diesel - February 2016



took
it for
you



DIESEL

 Grindr

Appendix E

Bottega Veneta - March 2015

