

# **Sexuality Sells: Reading Personal Advertising within Australian Gay and Lesbian Newspapers**

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This paper forms a part of a larger project on advertising in the lesbian and gay press in Australia. The wider research involves three fold interviews with editors and advertisers; content analysis of adverts in magazines and social geographic mapping of business locations. In this paper I want to explore the role of personal advertising in lesbian and gay papers. Personal adverts remain under theorised within existing studies of gay and lesbian targeted advertising. In large part this is because it is already a complex task to analyse business advertising in Australia's gay and lesbian newspapers because of diversity of disciplinary approaches to studying sexuality and advertising.

Marketing executives have been focused on exploiting sexual responses and using them to produce lasting product recall, while doing no harm to the standing of the product being advertised. Scientists and psychologists too have studied and measured sexual responses and sex appeal. Standing in some contrast to these approaches Humanities studies and Histories of advertising along with Cultural and Media Studies have been more interested in the wider cultural significance of advertising. Thus many studies focus on symbolic meanings, subliminal messaging, and the operation of cultural myths and stereotypes of class, race, sex and gender. Feminist academics have been especially concerned for the intersection of gender role stereotypes and the media through sexualised advertising, which restricts representations of femininity, and promotes docile female heterosexuality through consumption.

For this reason existing studies of advertising targeting gays and lesbians are often concerned about lesbian invisibility and sanitisation but as Fejes also notes

While it is typical to think of lesbians and gay males in terms of their sexual identities, with their emergence in recent years as economic subjects – self-conscious identities produced within the structure of commodity relationships – they have achieved an equality far greater than that found in the political or social realm. Indeed it seems that the acceptance of lesbians and gay males as sexual/political subjects is predicated on their acceptance and importance as consuming subjects.<sup>1</sup>

The role advertising might have in representing and forming identity and community has served to focus most academic attention on the use of sex in advertising. Actually my own study began instead to try and classify different types of advertisers – Large corporate, gay identified small business, and personal adverts to avoid this immediate over sexualisation of their content merely because the niche market was base on sexual orientation. However, this has given me few points of reference for my wider study of the role of community newspapers in identity production. Therefore I now turn instead

to the different categories proposed for understanding the use of sex in selling to the lesbian and gay consumer.

Three categories are discussed as significant in existing studies of sexuality in advertising. The first is where sex is used to sell products not traditionally sexualised this could involve almost anything and everything from tools to computers. The Pet Hypermarket advert suggesting readers have a wonderful Sleaze Ball, titled 'don't forget to feed your cock', and using a graphic of a rooster is a typical example which appears in Brisbane's *QNews*.

The second category covers items traditionally linked to sex appeal such as clothes accessories perfume and make-up, body waxing. Sometimes this group includes party products such as alcohol and perhaps even status objects such as cars which are so often sold using subliminal messages about the sex appeal of the driver/owner that they can be understood as traditionally sexualised. Heterosexual adverts have been argued to be very likely to use fear (especially of castration) and guilt (particularly around homoerotic suggestions) in association with sex to enhance the subconscious appeal.<sup>2</sup> Adverts in gay and lesbian newspapers more routinely use perversity and humour to subvert heteronormative fear and guilt. Here I particularly like the Becks beer advert with a line drawing of a stereotypical leather man with 'Not another half-arsed attempt to appeal to the gay market...just Becks real Beer'.

The third category of interest is those adverts selling sex as a product. This obviously includes prostitution and escort services, some forms of massage adverts and sex on site venues. There has always been a particular affiliation between lesbian and gay newspapers and this category of advertisements, especially male escorts, men's sex on site venues and personal ads. In Australia these adverts do appear at the back of the magazines but this, the editor of Queensland Pride argues, is more a matter of tradition borrowed from mainstream advertising placement than any attempt to remove them from the papers.

At a more subtle level I think chat lines, dating pages and personal ads also fit into this category of selling sex. I would argue that one of the signs of limited censorship is the way in which these less sleazy and less overtly sexualised matters of meeting and dating are intermingled with or directly precede or immediately follow escort adverts. Gay and lesbian newspapers have some of the best gay personal adds in the world. Actually I have yet to work out how to test this statement but within the context of this paper I will highlight the fact that they remain subversively sexually explicit, diverse, mixed, harsh, amusing, ironic and often very funny. Many readers have a habit of reading

'passing glances' 'announcements' 'greetings' and 'would like to meet' adverts placed by individual readers. Thus it appears to me that these low cost and sometimes free personals focused on individual readers form a link between the paper's readership and their commercial advertising.

Explicit adds from 2003 include:

BRIS 39 yo 5' 15" #1 haircut, goatee, Perfect Arse, 7.5 cut, no tats yet! Seeks hung young male into goatees/tats/piercing for r/f/ship

There was a busty blonde Lesbian Escort selling sex for a while but stereotypes of lesbian life would suggest this is more typical:

36 YO looking for any women who'd like to form a support group for women who've been off scene for a while, been through emotional trauma, or are lonely. Age and size open

Escorts too can be explicit as in:

BRAD 6'2" hung athletic body, very sexual, almost insatiable. If U need 2 relieve some pressure call me – all passive men taken care of.

But sometimes assume you know they are selling sex rather than using sex to sell themselves such as:

ANDY Escort, fit, muscular, well toned, masculine, casual

The mixed adverts tend to combine spectacular typos with detailed request to be particularly amusing:

Surfers 29YO sexy, stunning body, seeking gorgeous young female /transgender who is into male with women sensuality and dominant man-thrust. Enjoyable kinky personality, into dirty outdoors and bathroom fun, leather to lingerie – be pleasantly surprised

Even here diversity has its limits and it seems sometimes as if everyone can agree on the loathed bisexual. My 'favourite' anti-Bi lesbian advert is:

S/Coast good looking femme, WLTM a butch in uniform, police officers o.k. too. Like to cook and clean for my tired butch after her day at work. No Bi's No baggage

Maybe it is just my own sense of irony but I love the use of honest in:

35YO Lonely guy incarcerated with 5 months to go, seeks whatever. If you're honest, loving and have a GSOH we already have things in common – photo appreciated.

Ironic but sometimes without intention, like the honest criminal above I always smile too at the 'easy going' adverts like the very high maintenance: Attractive Easy-going Lesbian in-between Fem/butch, enjoy a simple life, keep fit – seeking femme lady for fun times and perm r/ship No butches, bi, drugs non-scene and no time wasters.

Source: Selected examples from personal columns in *Queensland Pride* and *Q News* April 2003

I have quoted this selection of personal adverts so as to highlight a number of features that seem to me to be particularly Australian and worthy of

celebration, and to suggest that the collapse of the commercialisation and ‘consumerisation’ of the gay and lesbian media may have been an unexpectedly good thing. The personal adverts quoted all appeared on interrelated pages under headings that typically begin with Massage then Escorts, Men’s Personals, Women’s personals, Mixed, Messages and then Passing Glances. These personal categories followed Accommodation, Buy/Sell, employment, health & Beauty (male waxing), and (household) Services and appeared before the social pages with pages of pictures with ordinary locals seen at popular nite clubs and social events. Sure the ‘sex for sale’ adverts are towards the back of the magazines in Australia – but they do not seem to be in danger of falling out of them.

Unlike my instinct to interconnect sex for sale and mixed personal dating ads, around the issue of sex as content, most studies of advertising separate the two and Australian editors voice sensitivity as to the positioning of sex ads on the basis of the potential for lesbians to find this material sleazy and offensive, but they also defended visible sexual diversity and denied that this content is at any risk of falling out of gay and lesbian newspapers. I find this representation of lesbian readership fascinating. Brisbane reader surveys suggest that there is an unequal readership split, with gay men constituting 75% of readers while lesbians made up just 25%.

There is very little written on the unevenness of this division. There might be slightly lower numbers of ‘out’ community identified lesbians, because the coming out stereotype is male, but around 10% is the accepted rate of same-sex desire for both men and women. Some older lesbians might more closely identify with a feminist or separatist community and read lesbian targeted newsletters and have less to do with gay male culture. However, this is unlikely to skew readership figures this much. These readership statistics help produce a bind wherein men as majority readers have more clout and therefore magazines are more gay male focused. However this ‘boysie’ focus then makes it difficult to attract a larger lesbian readership. As Fejes notes:

An additional irony is that even while the commodification of lesbian/gay identity represents a pioneering political strategy, in many ways it reproduces the same old gender disparities. Lesbians and gay males may have achieved equality, but because of their more attractive income profile, advertisers decided early in the game that gay males are more equal than lesbians.<sup>3</sup>

This has created or at least exacerbated a problem of lesbian invisibility in the gay press. Queensland Pride in Brisbane has recently responded with a new section of 4 pages called ‘L-Pride’ which this month offered a focused section of girly party pics and a discussion of lesbian parenting<sup>4</sup>. This is a currently popular way of addressing and increasing a lesbian readership.

Clark, writing on commodity lesbianism, notes that most feminist concerns about representations of women in media texts, including adverts, have focused on ‘the heterosexual woman as consuming subject’<sup>5</sup> because of the heterosexual context of most media. It is rare for the advertising industry to ignore targeting a potential niche market. The reasons for this blind spot ignoring lesbian consumers may be many. Lesbians have not historically been economically powerful and have not been recognised for their purchasing power. Gay market research emerged from the male dominated gay presses and actively created a stereotype of the hyper-rich gay male couple with a remarkable disposable income. Further research has demonstrated that probably when using statistics for the whole of the population gay men do not on average out earn their straight counterparts. Lesbians are in fact the single most highly educated group and while still suffering unequal earnings do have purchasing power. However, lesbians are harder for advertisers to identify, understand and target in part because they resist both objectification and higher visibility in a phobic and misogynist culture. Also I think most advertisers just aren’t motivated to try targeting lesbians, the gay press and gay male readers will do.

The emergence of the ‘Lipstick Lesbian’ in 1990s gay window advertising suggested that this might be about to change. Hicks in this study of homoerotic appeals to the gay and lesbian community from mainstream advertising notes that ‘contemporary advertising abounds with sexually ambiguous images.’<sup>6</sup> Gay window advertising refers to mainstream advertising which use ‘double speak’ dual messaging images and innuendo that can be ‘decoded’ by those ‘in the know’ as homoerotic. They usually avoid overt heterosexual imagery and replace the heterosexual couple with a single male figure, always very attractive, sometimes partly dressed in items drawn from gay fashion into the straight community. Often the positioning of the body is referenced to gay male porn. Calvin Kline did this writ large on billboards. Early ads placed into the gay press by large corporate advertisers tended to use these images and to be identical to their national campaigns. However, dual messaging had long been successful in selling products like men’s aftershave – in the straight market women were the buyers while the homoerotic images of men used to appeal to women could be easily read by gay males as homoerotic.

When advertisers began to target their ads in the gay press they often remained very like their standard ads with same-sex couples substituted for married couples for ‘home loan’ type products. Early advertisers feared their product would become associated with sexual sleaze and in the American context there was some evidence supporting this fear. Beer was one of the

first products to target gay males, before women began to buy beer, gay men were seen as a niche market for a men's product. When Bud Light ran an ad showing two men holding hands touching flesh to flesh in 1999 right-wing religious groups began a boycott of Anheuser-Busch, it is not clear that they were huge buyers of beer, and after a survey of wider community support the campaign ran in full.<sup>7</sup>

Lesbian window advertising doesn't work in the same way and does not seem to have promoted the same kind of crossover into lesbian targeted advertising in the gay and lesbian press. Reichert, Maly and Zavoina argue that Lesbian Chic, or homoerotic images of women in the mainstream media, are not aimed at lesbians.

These images mirror those of women engaged in "lesbian" sex in mainstream heterosexual pornography. These images are powerful and become part of a system in and through which women, both lesbian and heterosexual, become socially constructed objects. Further, these ads function to tell women what they must do to market themselves as consumer goods designed to satisfy the desires of heterosexual males.<sup>8</sup>

These are the most common images of homosexuality in the mainstream media and predate targeted advertising in the gay and lesbian press. However, these images have little if anything to do with lesbianism and may have limited appeal for lesbians. Fashion ads involving two women do not contain a secret message intended for decoding by lesbians. They are intended to be read as 'lesbian' by heterosexual men and have not supported lesbian inclusive advertising or lesbian friendly adverts in the gay and lesbian press.

So to return to my original point about the sleaze in the gay and lesbian press having the power to offend lesbian readers, there emerges an interesting tension. Lesbians through gender stereotypes and through a lack of lesbian imagery are set up as the moral police of good taste and called into play when identifying the self-censorship forces which are operating to confine the sex explicit advertising to the back of the newspapers. No research currently establishes whether most lesbians, following gender alliances, do find this material offensive. Lesbians may just find it irrelevant and may even enjoy an advertising voice which addresses men without objectifying women in any way.

I am perhaps being unduly optimistic, but it is certainly possible that more lesbian targeted representations might draw in a lesbian readership without requiring the removal of sexually explicit advertising. Thus it is explicable that the 'lebo-centric' advertising in Australia's gay and lesbian press is

focused almost exclusively on lesbian owned and run small businesses. These adverts have tiny budgets and lower production values and are less likely to use overtly sexualised imagery, in part because they rely on appealing to a gay male clientele as well. For example the currently popular Brisbane café Lizard's Tongue relied on the oral sex reference to convey lesbian ownership.

What strikes me as interesting then is that fact that commercialisation and consumerisation may have a strikingly negative impact sexual self-representation in general and lesbian visibility in particular. Two recent studies of the commercialisation of advertising in the gay and lesbian media in America suggest another way of thinking about the pitfalls of mainstreaming the gay and lesbian community through corporate advertising and sponsorship. In 2003 Fejes<sup>9</sup> noted a three pronged approach within the gay and lesbian media to attract mainstream advertisers: remove the overtly sexual content; improve the production quality of the publication; and do market research to demonstrate to advertising executives that an attractive niche market exists that is worth targeting. Then in 2004 Sender<sup>10</sup> also argued that the worn adage that 'sex always sells' ignores the mainstream limits placed on acceptable representations of sexuality. Both authors were concerned with the level of sexual censorship exerted by publishers and editors with an eye to attracting national corporate advertising in gay and lesbian magazines. Fejes argued that:

The centuries-old underground gay and lesbian culture – in which people with strongly stigmatized identities blurred class and race boundaries and risked much to affirm their own desires – has been repackaged with its "rough edges" trimmed away. The commodification of gay and lesbian identity has resulted in the construction of a "straight" gay/lesbian identity.<sup>11</sup>

Fejes, like Phelan below, pointed to the success of books like Kirk and Madsen's 1989 *After the Ball: how America will conquer its fear and hatred of gays in the 90s* and Lukenbill's 1995 *Untold Millions: Positioning your business for the gay and lesbian consumer revolution*<sup>12</sup> in popularising a sanitised monogamous sexually healthy young white attractive professional mainstream affluent gay male stereotype for heterosexual consumption. Sender similarly worried about the policing and narrowing of homosexual erotic representation on the basis of 'good taste'. Sender argues that in America:

Anxieties about gay men's sexuality...have shaped the constitution of the ideal gay consumer. Local and national gay and lesbian print media and Internet sites have eliminated their sexual content or debuted with an express policy to ban it. Yet this closeting of queer sex leaves us with an interesting paradox: a market that is constituted as distinct through the non-dominant sexuality of its constituency could be brought into being only through the effacement of that sexuality<sup>13</sup>

Sender is arguing that in the American context of a commercialised and nationalised gay and lesbian press, gay sex does not always sell – gay sexuality has been muted and gay and lesbian consumers have been reshaped as more acceptable through the more appropriate placement or total displacement of sexuality in the gay media. The irony of this pressure to mainstream homosexual sex should not be lost or ignored – marketing distinctions made through sexuality can nevertheless lead to the erasure of queer sexual representations. Explicit representations of gay and lesbian sexuality and in particular gay sex acts in the American context may have been delegitimised through the mainstreaming of lesbian and gay media and courting of corporate advertisers. Thus there seems to be emerging within the American media a new order as to what constitutes good and normal homosexuality. Wider tolerance of non-heterosexual, non-marital, non-reproductive non-monogamous and serial sexual practice is not boundless or non-normative. In order to court the status or normal or acceptable or respectable sexual practice certain homosexualities and queer sexualities have been erased largely through self-censorship by marketing editors targeting more conservative corporate advertisers.

The New Zealand based academic Annie Potts in her study of the science fiction of heterosex<sup>14</sup> argues that the production of heterosexual norms has occurred within the contemporary context of less direct regulation of heterosexual relation, through humanist therapeutic self-help books like Gray's *Men are from Mars: Women are from Venus*.<sup>15</sup> This is a book I love to hate. Gray has binary mythology where in men and women are correctly different species and heterosex involves prescribed roles, a set program of performance and matched body parts centred on the male orgasm, with the female single great orgasm an aside signalling only his total mastery in the bedroom before his orgasm completes and ends the event. Now we all know that this is not all that is going on between heterosexuals, it does however, mark out representations of heterosex which are legitimised as ideal.

Rather than overtly branding gay and lesbian sex as it's illegitimate opposite heteronormative ideals actively construct 'good' gay sex as normal in its most acceptable form which is refigured as natural. The self-censorship of gays towards this acceptable norm for homosex is interesting. Phelan<sup>16</sup> as early as 1994 had noted the immense popularity in the US of Kirk and Madsen's *After the Ball* wherein the authors propose a marketing strategy to end hatred with slogans such as '*just like everyone else*' 'We look, feel and act just as they do; we're hard-working conscientious Americans with love lives exactly like their own'<sup>17</sup>

Not that there is anything wrong with being a conscientious hardworking American, but it all too easily accepts monogamous marital heterosexuality as the norm which far too easily pathologises other representations of sexuality. It both ostracises and reaffirms the hypersexualised gay male and operates so as to repackage representations of lesbian sexuality for heterosexual consumption. Thus there remains a number of stereotypes for loathing and fearing - the hypersexual predatory gay man, the paedophilic man/boy relationship, the loathed closet bisexual, the lesbian butch, the promiscuous HIV carrier, sex on site and sex workers all still trouble the heterosexual media and can still easily trigger media driven moral panics which work to undermine gay citizenship.

However, within my own study of advertising in the gay and lesbian media in Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney this level of sexual censorship has not been evident. The other two of the 'prongs' (improved quality and marketing research) identified by Feje as associated with sexual censorship have occurred to some extent in Australia. There has been some improvement in the production quality of gay and lesbian newspapers. The contemporary gay press in here in Australia, as in America, emerged largely from a tradition of gay rights flyers and newsletters. These slowly commercialised selling low-cost advertising to self-identified members of its own community. As revenue has grown so too production values have risen. However, this has usually stalled at the level of cut and staple into a part colour free magazine but the Australian papers have not bridged the full gloss full colour magazine with cover price format.

In addition most newspapers have done market research to measure circulation and demonstrate consumer profiles to promote niche marketing advertising. Most newspapers claim circulation of about 20 000 and readership upward of 50 000 with Sydney Star Observer's circulation at 35 000 claiming 80 000 strong readership in Sydney.<sup>18</sup> Melbourne Community Voice makes this marketing link to consumers overt.

Our publication is of the highest standard...a publication that is both informative and looks good. MCV is the preferred medium and media partner for almost all of Victoria & Tasmania's major festivals, including Midsumma, the Queer Film Festival, Pride March, Melbourne Queer Film Festival, GLOBE (gay & lesbian organisation for business and enterprise) New Mardi Gras (Sydney) and The Dorothies (Tasmania)' (MCV.net.au/about us). In marketing and advertising they argue that 'Conservative estimates measure the gay and lesbian community at 8% of the adult population of Australia - larger than any ethnic minority group. With a widely acknowledged high disposable income, MCV is an important medium to consider as part of any good marketing plan!<sup>19</sup>

These similarities have prompted me to consider what then is different about the context in which gay and lesbian newspapers are published in Australia. As these differences might help to explain the reduced the level of self-censorship around sexuality and the continued integration of sexually explicit materials within these community newspapers. In Australia the current understanding of gays and lesbians as consumers to be targeted by advertisers, also emerged as a by-product of the economic impact studies conducted by the organisers of the Sydney Mardi Gras. These studies found the Mardi Gras to be both Australia's single largest cultural festival and worth millions of tourist dollars to the New South Wales economy each year. The overarching intention of these early economic impact studies of the power of the pink dollar did not consider advertising and marketing. Rather the aim was to garner local and state government cultural events funding and then to perhaps encourage corporate sponsorship.

These tourism studies also increased Sydney's tolerance and ownership of the event and pushed back against the extreme religious right denouncement of this event as undermining Sydney. Perhaps unintentionally, studies of gays and lesbians as consumers of cultural events and tourist destinations also drew attention to a key transfer point between consumption and sexual identity in Australia which is politicised and which as a celebration of visible sexual self-representation actively refuses sanitisation. A further difference in niche marketing research arises from the fact that in the Australian context there is a comparatively smaller audience to define as a consumer market. There are also fewer corporate advertising dollars and as a result there has been less courting of the corporate dollar. Perhaps this in turn has limited the amount of pressure for self-censorship to attract either straight corporate dollars or wider heterosexual audience appeal.

Additionally in the Australian context there has been a significant and interesting constraint on any push to go glossy and mainstream the community newspapers using corporate advertising revenue. Satellite Media emerged in the early 90s to take over a wide variety of gay and lesbian Magazine formats in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne – most notably in on the Brisbane scene - Brother/Sister. Satellite Media listed on the stock market largely on the basis of the worth of these media outlets given that national and international corporations could now target a mainstreamed cashed up and loyal niche gay market. However, Satellite Media spectacularly crashed in the late 90s.

Obviously in the initial fall out and with the notable exception of the Sydney Star Observer (S.S.O) – The Satellite collapse took out most of the large gay and lesbian Broadsheets in the Eastern States. S.S.O had long claimed that

Satellite was mere puffery and marketing hype disguising large-scale financial mismanagement of and over-investment in Sydney nightclubs and pubs. These claims eventually proved to be more than sour grapes. Thus the Sydney scene lost several long-standing gay venues and assumed the whole of Australia would care. The Satellite debacle also took with it a large amount of investor's money – much of the twenty-five million dollars cashed raised by the float I presume was lost by individual gay and lesbian investors. However, I would argue that the long-term impact of this collapse is less of a disaster. The necessary rebirth of local lesbian and gay media is much more interesting and in many ways much less bleak.

Thus the queer media in Australia is now strikingly unlike the American media context which has seen the refiguring of small local papers and journals into nationally distributed glossy magazines largely monopoly controlled online and in print since the merger of PlanetOut & Gay.com. American magazines have become increasingly segmented and clearly associated with slick Internet sites and user pays online contact/dating weblinks.<sup>20</sup> Instead of the ever more narrowly defined niche gay magazines which have emerged in the USA targeting 'gay entrepreneurs (*Victory*), parents (*Alternative Family*), youth (*XY*), investors (*gfn.com*) tourists (*Passport*) and many more.'<sup>21</sup> Interestingly the Satellite Media experience was cited in the US when PlanetOut and Gay.com merged.

The collapse of Australia's Satellite media group has been cited as a warning against gay media monopolies in the United States. The warnings came as two American gay media companies, PlanetOut and Gay.com, plan to merge. PlanetOut publishes Out magazine and has recently bought the Advocate, while Gay.com is the world's largest gay and lesbian Web-based service.

"The collapse of Australia's gay media may serve as a harbinger of the media blackout that could happen," said Jim Provenzano, a former PlanetOut staff member. Henry Scott, former president of Out, said "this looks like an amazing concentration of gay media. Where is there going to be this world of different voices?"<sup>22</sup>

As outlined above, within the American context this concentration and commercialisation of the lesbian and gay media has prompted self-censorship and a narrowing of sexual self-representation in ways not evident in the Australian context. What we have seen in Australia instead has been the reconfirmation of local capital city and state based newspapers (*Q News*; *Queensland Pride*; *Melbourne Community Voice*; *Sydney Star Observer*) and some very long standing niche newsletters (*Lesbian Network*; and *Lesbians on the Loose*). Most claim circulation of about 20 000 and readership upward of 50 000 with Sydney Star Observer's circulation at 35 000 claiming 80 000 strong

readership in Sydney (SSONet.com.au/advertise) Thus in Australia the gay venues and events announcements, gay owner operated small business adverts, and personals which have historically made up the bulk of advertising income continue to dominate as primary gay and lesbian community based income revenue streams.

Also Australia remains a very small market and the Australian lesbian and gay market is miniscule. While targeted globally through websites such as Gay.com Australia, the collapse of Satellite media nevertheless drew some kind of line under the ability of marketers to further commercialise or further segment this consumer group. Some might see this as the loss of the chance to go glossy, get mainstreamed, and produce advert supported community contact. Instead, as I have argued, it is better to recognise that the impact of commercialisation and consumerisation is complex and there may have been be blessing in Satellite Media's collapse. Given that two of the unintended consequences of corporate advertising and investment in gay and lesbian marketing are lesbian invisibility, and a rising anxiety about explicit representations of other than heterosexual marital sexuality. Then Australia has unexpectedly sidestepped a worrying form of heteronormative sexual censorship at the distance of corporate advertising.

Nonetheless in the Australian context the role of the gay and lesbian media within wider media and politics is fraught. The market for gay and lesbian magazines is too small and has been too fractured by the collapse of Satellite Media to mean that the presence or absence of sexually explicit materials, in particular sex work adverts, cannot be used to segment the readership and this means that Australian gay and lesbian Newspapers have sustained more diversity of sexualised representations both within the adverts themselves and within the newspapers as a whole. However, at the same time within wider Australian politics Prime Minister John Howard has exhausted race base elections focused on native title (or lately the removal of self governance) and fear based elections figured around cue jumping refugees who never threw children overboard (and now the wars we have to have to make us safe) he has redeployed his wedge politics around sexuality for the federal election in 2004.

In the run up to this year's federal election there is mounting evidence of a increased willingness within the Howard federal government to discriminated on the basis of both sexual preference and marital status to win the next election. Howard's long-standing personal preferences are well known. In 2001 in a Triple J Radio interview on youth issues Prime Minister Howard said he would be disappointed if one of his sons was gay and that he had not met a parent yet who wants their children to grow up gay.

Mr Howard said 'although he did not think homosexuals should be discriminated against, he did not believe they were entitled to the whole hog...My view is we should be completely tolerant and fair-minded about people's sexual preferences, but I don't believe homosexual relationships should be given the same place in our society as concepts such as marriage'.<sup>23</sup>

These notions of sexual 'preference' and lifestyle 'choice' are now routinely used by the Howard government to blame homosexuals for their own perversity. While debating the recent three pronged legislation re-stating marriage as between a man and a woman, banning overseas adoption and allowing same sex couples to access the superannuation entitlements of a deceased partner, Deputy Prime Minister Anderson said

Gays had to accept they could not have it all. "I do think it's a choice and . . . that's a choice people have an absolute entitlement to make, but . . . if I choose a particular lifestyle, certain other things are not open to me." <sup>24</sup>

So as to avoid any claim that the proposed legislation is blatantly homophobic, Howard has at the same time offered to reform superannuation laws to allow non-married partners to qualify for entitlements in the event of death. The Democrats have been pushing for this reform ever since the current Liberal government was elected. Under current superannuation rules and regulations a wife or husband legally married automatically inherits most of the superannuation entitlements of their partner in the event of death. However, de facto couples, those in common law marriages, ex-partners and children and same sex couples can only access superannuation funds of a partner after death, if they can demonstrate dependence. Superannuation boards have responded in three ways: First, they have been using a broad definition of dependence. Second boards have transferred funds according to the will of the deceased and accepted as dependent any benefactors listed in the will. Third they have assumed that those persons listed by the account holder as beneficiaries are dependents. So in reality the existing practise of superannuation boards already reflect Howard's proposed ability to nominate benefactors. Without this reform superannuation is a stupid investment for all those who either die before retirement or do not live very long there after and are not legally married. Superannuation funds are our own savings and since it is our own money we ought to already be able to nominate who will inherit. Therefore this reform is not some great concession to same sex couples. It is just necessary to continue to encourage the vast majority of the population to save for their own retirement through this scheme.

Perhaps unexpectedly, given marriage and adoption involve bans, of the three proposals the superannuation reforms annoy me the most, because the underlying script of this legislation when you strip it down pre-election

wedge politics is an assertion by Howard, that he will not recognise same sex couples, and he will not recognise same sex parenting, in fact the only same sex relationship he will acknowledge is one involving death. This half-hearted concession on superannuation fails to mask the deeper message that 'the only good homosexual is a dead one'. Thus, for all the attempt to use superannuation to soften this legislation, to my mind it only serves to reinscribe the ability of the federal government to discriminate on the basis of both marital status and sexual preference.

Therefore in response I want to argue here that it is more important than ever to defend self-representations of same sex desire. In particular I would now seek to defend the sleaze in gay and lesbian advertising, which so actively resist any automatic reference to heteronormativity and family values and cannot easily be hammered as political correctness. In particular I have noted here that there has always been an affinity between business advertising, personal adverts, escort advertisements and personal services within the Australian lesbian and gay newspapers. A very small but loyal market has made less of the fear that visible gay sexuality will offend heterosexuals and drive out mainstream and corporate advertisers and resisted self-censorship.

In addition I would argue somewhat hesitantly that in the American context there has been a more striking rise in prudish sex focused censorship and arguments that powerful gays are 'attacking poor Christian liberty by undermining their right to see only representations of sex which remind them of god'. Overall this has meant that within the Australian context here has been less of a drive to de-sleaze the gay and lesbian media from an internal community policing of 'standards' in the hope of additional mainstream acceptance. However, Howard's restriction of gay adoption and restatement of marriage as a heterosexual citizenship right, do still attempt to apply a mainstream conservative pressure based on 'good taste' to idealise good safe monogamous loving marital sex with the lights off. Heterosexualising full citizenship by reinscribing marriage as a privilege and narrowing adoption legally marks out gays and lesbians as less than full citizens. Unwittingly I think it also limits the appeal of any strategy wherein gays might emulate heteronormative sexual representations so as to court wider community acceptance. Thus I think it remains a striking feature of the Australia gay and lesbian media that sex still sells almost everything, including sex itself.

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- <sup>11</sup> Fejes, F. (2002) 'Advertising and the political economy of Lesbian/Gay identity.' pp.207
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- <sup>14</sup> Potts, A. (2002) *The Science/Fiction of Sex*. Routledge: London p66
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- <sup>17</sup> Kirk, M. & Madsen, H. (1989) *After the Ball* p137.
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- <sup>20</sup> Sender, 'Sex Sells' pp331-332
- <sup>21</sup> Sender, 'Sex Sells' pp332
- <sup>22</sup> *BNews*, 15 February 2001 BNews Pty Ltd: Richmond Vic
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- <sup>24</sup> Wroe, D. (2004) 'PM Accuses Playschool over Gays.' *The Age Newspaper* Melbourne: Vic. June 7 2004.