

## EXPLORING ADVERTISING AND PRODUCT DESIGN SEXUAL IMPLICATIONS: A SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACH.

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores design thought and application on various fields of its domain, under the prism of the human sexuality. However the two main areas of our concern are the fields of advertising and product design which, according to the author, represent the most significant parts on which the concept of human sexuality is thoroughly applied and still remains effective.

Designing under this instinctive human value, one can easily trace the importance of concepts such as charm and pleasure, which can overlap and possibly ‘beat to death’ the concepts of usability and quality of use, in many ways. The starting point of this allegory in handling and promoting new products, most of which are not directly connected with the sense of sexuality, are the advertisements.

On the other hand, one will be able to find out the myth of gender and its contradictions in a certain group of products which have direct sexuality references and most of them are designed for a limited, however faithful and increasingly concerned consumer group.

Thirdly, the author aims to focus on the ‘discovery’ of socially marginalized consumer groups, such as the homosexual community, by some inventive entrepreneurs and designers, for the formation of a ‘new market’ which seems to thrive in terms of profit. As this, meteoric rise, market is directly connected with analogous social changes globally, one will be able to understand its development, but also the exploitation of homosexual behaviour, via the ideological points of both sides: designers and consumers.

**Keywords:** sexuality, consumption, advertising, product design, homosexual community.

## **Introduction**

In this paper we will try to keep the focus on one of the numerous methods of the current worldwide human-centered design process, which mainly employs a series of cultural, aesthetic, sensual, even directly sexual or sexist issues in order to produce pleasurable objects or services, based on the profitable, marketwise, source of human sexuality. Most of the sexuality-based design derives from a non-ideological or cultural way of design thinking as the term of sexuality has profoundly been used as a discourse of continuation of the eternal debate between the sexes and their illusory compatibility (Jordan, 2000, p. 65-66). So, as sexuality may suggest the concepts of pleasure and desire, we can easily assume that it can certainly be the source which a vast range of emotional design benefits can derive from. Approaching the concept of sexuality through psychology, we can identify that it has now totally changed since the time of the first Freud's analysis. One of its most important changes is that the 'drive model' of sexuality has now been transformed to a totally different type which is particularly concerned with 'sexual objects'. This phase of the sexuality concept development seems to contain the rise of 'object relations psychology' which, in our times, has become an important school of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy (Horrocks, 1997, p. 47).

Both in the past and particularly nowadays sexuality has been employed as one of the major elements of design thinking in order to give the appropriate 'personality' but also a 'pleasure' touch to a long series of products and services and this can be examined accordingly.

## **Advertising design**

*"Want to know what gets between me and my Calvins? Nothing."  
(Sischy, 2008).*

Possibly the less direct effect of human sexuality on the design of certain goods belongs not to the goods themselves but to the way they seem to follow in order to reach us at home, places of work or entertainment. Advertising is a significant domain which constitutes a useful marketing tool working in an artificial environment. It has established its power as a means of invisible, immaterial but highly significant communication system which can be extremely effective (Douglas & Isherwood 1979, p. 36). However, it is characterized with a certain myth which incorporates the axiom that it can create a demand for products which otherwise would not exist. If this really happened, we might as well assume that there will have never been markets, target groups, psychological analyses, product experts, let alone the designers. Generally speaking, advertising can cultivate 'dormant or previously unperceived desires' (Leiss,

Kline & Jhally, 1997, p. 37) it can help to satisfy old or new needs but in a rather modern way, it can influence the acceleration of consumption of a product, but it can not determine the existence not even the ultimate size of a market.

Desire and pleasure are two terms inextricably woven with the advertising myth. But how can advertising employ these two meanings under the principle of sexuality and influence consumption? As sex evokes a strong emotional response (which is not only linked to the species survival, but also to the motivation of human senses), we can understand why sexuality is employed in this case. As it also bears the enticing message of *pleasure and desire*, it becomes automatically a synonymous concept with that of *promise*, a keyword for the advertising industry (Lury, 1996, p. 55-57). This can be particularly obvious in advertising intended exclusively for the world of women. In many cases, the depiction of females is usually rendered, as appropriate, in a specific way, i.e. flanked by conventional symbols of cultural / social characteristics of this gender. More specifically, female promotional models follow, generally speaking, traditional cultural stereotypes on which the female portrait has been depicted through the centuries. Therefore, it is not surprising that women can be many times presented as too feminine, with an accented sexuality, according to which they are transformed into the stereotype of a - ready to be used - sexual object which is, most of times, strongly associated with the *desire* and *pleasure* of males (Tsoumas, 2015, p. 13).

In contemporary consumer advertising world (the internet, television, magazines) sex is present in promotional messages of a variety of products. Our eyes and ears get widely open after such emotional information which, generally speaking, can easily find a way of piercing our perpetual fields by beating any other kind of information trying to grab our attention. Thus, human sexuality is primarily used as a bridge of communication between the product and the consumer, enhancing the advertising myth and its promises. As myth in advertising can be highly catalytic in the way we think and perceive our purchasing ability, human sexuality can be fully associated with it and therefore constitute an important means of reconciliation of human dreams and desires with people's monotonous and often awkward everyday lives (Forty, 1987, p. 9). It can also work as an immaterial but highly significant culture making the promoted goods lie at the heart of the human existence because this makes meaning palpable and provides an excuse for people to meet their own intimate demands (Fowles, 1996, p. 45). In whichever way it is employed - as a highly overt or an extremely subtle selling message -, it finally works as the primary reason for buying and using a certain brand.

Many companies have used sex in their advertising campaigns in the last years for some certain periods of time, with highly profitable results. One of them, Gianni

Versace, linked the subtle or explicit concept of sexuality, with the ‘undesirable’ but provocative meanings of violence and pain in his advertising campaign, making it more attractive in the taste of a mainly young, socially experimenting consumer group. There are also many cases in which sexual positioning strategies have resulted in long-term success. One of them is, of course, Calvin Klein who has also based his brand identity on sexuality. For more than thirty years this company has used sex, in one form or another, as a main stray for its fragrances, accessories, fashion or underwear advertisements and it is still hugely increasing its profit.

In western societies we can now talk about ‘gender equality’ in advertisements with sexual references, as since, at least, the last two decades gender sexuality has been used in the formation of many of them. Statistically, male sexuality seems to have escaped from the strict boundaries of phallocracy and has claimed a vigorous and healthy position in the female imagination through advertising. Many years ago, though, this would be considered not just as a prejudice, but a defeat for the male. Only women were meant to be used as attractive sexual themes or even sexist subjects in the world of selling messages. Not strangely enough, sexuality in advertising had been signified as an objectifying stereotype, according to which women should look and act under the powerful male umbrella. This of a rather low quality female monologue dictated mainly by male advertisers has its roots to the gender inequality profoundly established across the time (Ridgeway, 1992, p. 1,2).



**Figure 1.** Typical sample of Calvin Klein’s advertisements based on human sexuality. Needless to say that as long as people desire to be attractive to others and as long as people yearn for romance, love and body touch, this kind of advertisements can only be the means of making them meet these needs, contributing to the society’s intimacy equation.

On the other hand, both at present and past advertising with sexual connotations plays a particularly important role to the consumption of a variety of goods many of which may be overpriced, uninteresting, unnecessary or even inappropriate for many buyers. This kind of advertising has the power to reshape their values and can 'interfere' to their usability concept making them look indispensable. Because it has always been covering products with an obscure veil of psychological force, it enables them to claim priority in mass consumption. As it has been designed to target directly to the consumers natural curiosity, their unfulfilled or repressed sexual desires, their unstable self-esteem and debatable social status, finally seems to 'win the battle'.

### **Product design and sexuality**

As we may have already understood, sex is used to grab consumers' attention though we reckon that this is a short-term success. Whether using sex in advertising can be effective depends on the nature of the product itself (Daye, 2008).

However, both in advertising and product design innovation and creativity carry out a substantial role. Most of the times individual creativity (designer's view) can work along with company creativity (entrepreneur's view) and technology, so all can result to the production of goods which may influence and possibly form social trends. Entrepreneurs try to employ as many new, fresh, revolutionary ideas in order to prevail in the world design battleground. They can be regarded as visionary activists and creative change agents who perform crucially in the process of renewal and overall development of a society (Nystrom, 1988, p. 22-26). Ideologically this may seem correct. Practically though, especially when such fragile concept as sexuality is involved in the perplex game of product design, things may not result ideally, as it is common knowledge that the main incentive for entrepreneurs is profit. Innovation and creativity through sexuality in the world of product design are meanings which have probably been used according to this axiom. In this case, the concepts of desire and pleasure are also employed, however in a more explicit way than in advertising, as products themselves seem to bear intimate qualities which, in most cases, represent, and possibly reveal, the 'hidden sides' of their possessors. Different from erotica, sexuality-based design goods constitute a fairly new field of production which is strongly associated with everyday use objects magically formed by sexual implications. Functionality is an issue of primary value in these products, as their additional sexuality features do not have any influence on their usability.

Nowadays, in terms of consumption, audiences can assimilate more quickly than ever what once was thought to be controversial or even confrontational. The design community has admitted the fact that human-centered design seen through a sexuality prism symbolizes the search for a human touch after so many years of modernist

austerity. These objects which may openly work as symbols of consumers' intimate attitudes and at the same time as an antidote to the downbeat, oppressive mood of a stereotypical society, constitute new ways to surprise and startle the consumer. This is why they are now being produced on a constant basis, flooding the American and European markets. Belly button tableware, jugs with vibrating spouts, beer cans with female lingerie imagery on them, pasta drainers with female naked legs, are a few only samples of a witty, extraordinary collection of these objects, many of which are presented in several world product design shows.

Fetishism and symbolism are the two main principles which characterize this type of design and they can function on a subconscious level. Their values are attributed to the strong emotional effects they may have on consumers' psychology which can be, many times, easily captured by the sexual stimulus of an otherwise inanimate object. These objects of texture, colour and shape are made to interact with varying intensity to either take consumers' senses by storm or quietly fuel their perceptions of intimate lust. Highlighting dark or repressed sides of people's personalities, they aim to be incorporated in their everyday habits and environment so as to contribute to their personal or social emancipation and they claim to be a distinctive design method to form sensuality experience.

Taking as example particular artifacts, the female high-heeled handbags designed by Peter Jakubik, we can easily identify their specific features which combine both the basic ergonomic elements of a handbag and a shoe heel incorporated to the bottom part of its main body. That particular element makes the difference to this otherwise ordinary object as it aims to enhance all the above. As high-heeled shoes are strongly associated with female sexuality and beyond this, with a range of fetishistic and social values, this product may hold symbolic meanings and connotations which can vary from the sexual liberation to a meaningful reaction to the social status quo of the holder.



**Figures 2, 3.** Peter Jakubik's handbag (left) and Pharrell Williams's rather unusual chair design (right) with strong sexual implications.

On the other hand, the character of these objects may also prove to be contradicting and frivolous if seen under a gender equality perspective (but not necessarily a feminist view). Many of them carry controversial meanings as the gender features they bear in order to be more appealing, may suggest sexual polarization. For instance, multi-talented artist and designer Pharrell Williams's covered in a rubber-like plastic coating 'Respective Chair'(2008) the front leaning female legs of which are followed by a couple of back leaning male legs can only be one of a series of similar identity objects which both signify and project the male chauvinism over the female sexual oppression. This object can also suggest the underestimating and humiliating profile of women's sociocultural position, which, at the same time, works in favour of the male supremacy and dominance. As male sexuality is strongly connected with masculinity, a concept which is defined in more concrete sexual performance terms, this 'masculine' product can easily symbolize the peak of male prevailing arrogance over the chronic female sexual exploitation. The 'feminine' high-heeled handbags can also raise such issues as they imply specific stereotypical elements (allure, challenge, and coquetry) which characterize the female sexual identity. Thus these unusual products can suggest the female 'availability' in an androcentric world where sex is used to undermine women's rights and perspectives. All the above can constitute one only link to the important, timely and complicated chain of gender sexuality which is, in large, a social construction (Devor, 1989, p. 89).

### **Designing for the homosexual community**

Designing and marketing based on demographic criteria certainly is a totally different matter from the above. Such a practice has been spotted in the late sixties

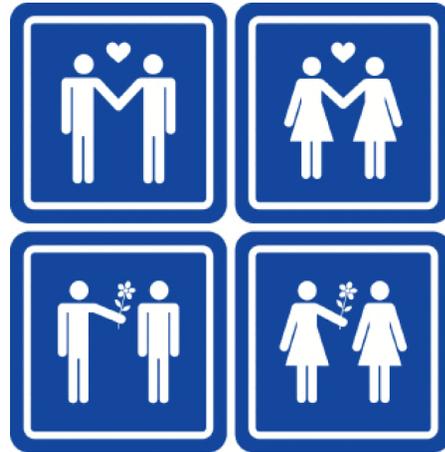
U.S.A. when, after a series of sociopolitical upheavals concerning racial and sexual minorities, many brands started to target on black consumer groups whose purchasing power was considered important. Afro-American culture was an unexploited market with a lot of potential in terms of profit and soon an astonishing variety of products designed according to the racial features and personal needs of black Americans emerged. At the time homosexual community was not a priority in the marketing tasks of the companies which even before the early nineties seemed to ignore the existence of this segment of society for many reasons. For instance, it was believed that lesbians had never been a powerful social group economically, so like other social groups who do not have a strong purchasing power they could not be attractive to companies. At the same time, just because of their easier incorporation in society (in sharp contrast to gay men) they could not be easily identifiable and this is why they could not be easily accessible. They also had an uneasy relationship to the perspective of fashion in any sense and a long tradition of resisting other cultural definitions such as female beauty (Clark, D. 1993, p. 187,188). On the other hand gay men were a more identifiable and accessible social group however the rest of society was not mature enough to accept such kinds of business experimentation plans.

But times have changed since and an increased concern for gay people in the world of media and mass production goods has been observed in the form of more and more brands looking to find a way out of the closet. Homosexual culture, known as LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) in the market world, easily recognized by the characteristic Rainbow symbol, is now considered powerful, both socially and economically, though it varies widely in terms of identity of the participants and location. Homosexuals of the western societies (mainly in the U.S.A. and Europe urban areas where people can have an easier access to the commercial gay scene) appear to have high incomes not so because of their education level, but mainly because of their motivation to be more self-reliant as most of them grow up with the knowledge of being neither accepted nor protected socially. Designers and entrepreneurs of this type of products are deep connoisseurs of all the psychological, social and emotional characteristics of such a culture and thus profoundly aware of their successful potential in terms of sales. This is why many, mainly American, companies, specialized in the production of LGBT goods such as Ginch Gonch, The Gay Products Company, The YankeeDingo, KS Beckett and so forth, since the turn of the century have seen their businesses thrive. Categories of these products and services include fashion, luxury or pharmaceutical goods, hair, entertainment, car rentals, travel, counseling and psychotherapy, financial or TV services. Most of these commodities bear distinctive features of homosexual behaviour and lifestyle and their design logic is primarily based on them rather than on their functional or aesthetic structure. Otherwise ordinary

handbags, t-shirts, posters, buttons, ties, hats, cutlery and crockery as well as specially made advertisements for services (gay hotels, restaurants, dating services etc) are stamped with lettering, symbols (mainly the rainbow feature which is supposed to represent the gay liberation and pride), pictures or phrases which constitute essential codes of communicating and broadcasting the homosexuality issues.

These products are meant to be 'innovative', with accurate depiction of the gay community values without being negative or stereotypical. Most of them have to be tailored-made to earn consumers' loyalty and trust, two crucial concepts strongly connected with their emotional needs, desires and pleasure which, in this case, are detached from any direct sexual or fetishist values. On the contrary, they are closely related to people's wishes for social acceptance, equal rights and lack of prejudice or sexual discrimination. The LGBT products task focuses primarily on the effacing of the stigmatizing non-heterosexual orientation and supports the 'rediscovery' of homosexual people's human identity by heterosexuals. Let us not forget that homosexuals have long endured the social stigma attached to their preferences. This is something that heterosexuals have never experienced and therefore are not able to understand the homosexuals' claims and demands. In an effort to balance this inequality, gay people seek through these products to protect not only their self-esteem but also the recognition of their own existence (Arvanitis, 2014, p. 3).

At the same time though, they function as a challenge to the privileging of heterosexuality within society and project proudly a wide spectrum of qualities and perspectives of the lives and experiences of gay people (D' Augelli, 2002, p. xiv, xv). Consequently what is sold is not really the product itself but certainly its conceptual, symbolic messaging character which not only enhances the importance of variability among humans, but also works as a catalyst for the elimination of homophobia in a strictly judgemental heterosexual world.



**Figures 5, 6.** Ordinary toothbrushes launched as ‘gay products’, Atlanta, U.S.A. (left) and a gay match-making services sign, Seattle, U.S.A.

From another point of view, in spite of the fact that sexuality is frequently assumed to be the predominant and, in many cases, the sole basis of existence for non-heterosexuals, the significance of these products can not be examined separately from the essential issues of their gender, culture, race, social class and ability (Clark & Peel, 2007, p. 12). It is possibly convenient for companies to categorize human sexuality into particular consumer groups in order to achieve their profit goals. However, such generalization does not apply to people whose cultural status, financial independence, social position and sexual physiognomy constitute unique positions of an individuality rank which would never allow them to be hidden in the armour of a social minority alliance. Homosexuals who do not belong to any ‘sexuality protection syndrome’ environment, who do not suffer from social alienation and need not be reassured by any means of heterosexual approval, would never buy goods of this character. Therefore, some of the questions that may arise can be: *Doesn't the mass consumption of such products confirm a deeper self-marginalization of homosexual people? Don't these commodities embody the peril of nourishing and even shaping another ghetto doctrine in the core of a society?* The answers are to be found on each individual.

### **Conclusion**

Concluding this challenging and controversial study on human-centered design a sexuality prism we can fully assimilate its basic areas where advantages and positivenesses coexist along with perplexities and peculiarities. The science of psychology is proved to be an important factor according to which design can be analysed to its main stages:

conception, formation, production and interpretation. We all now know that human sexuality, a non-stereotypical, unconventional and not fully explored but of vital importance area of psychology functions both positively and negatively in the design discourse, raising many interesting and contradictory issues. When the power of this multi-facial concept is mobilised by the advertising designation and product design experts in order to form a new, strong interselling method applicable to the largest part of society, it has to be handled according to its own ambiguities which, from our point of view, also constitute its only indubitable aspect. Researchers have to understand that as sexuality is a fundamental part of human nature, it will always keep its primordial laws and works both ways so as to achieve the balance required. Design, however contemporary, can not turn to its favour this equating procedure which will always be superior to whichever marketing processes or methods it is employed by.

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Received: 15 de September de 2015.

Accepted: 24 de March de 2016.