

**Woman as Product Stand-in:  
Branding Straight Metrosexuality in Men's Magazine Fashion Advertising**

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Advertising scholars Lambiase and Reichert (2003) write that “more examination is needed of the arguments advocated in sexual appeals” and that such sexual appeals “provide grist for feminist and gender theory” (p. 248). They argue that sexual and erotic advertising images and texts warrant rhetorical analysis because “there is always content in advertising that cannot be quantified” (p. 252). Despite rigorous coding procedures, some kinds of sexual content go “undetected by scientific scrutiny” (p. 263). Following Lambiase and Reichert, this essay examines the sexualized representation of women in fashion advertising found in men's metrosexual magazines.

Employing visual rhetoric as a critical-analytic tool (Foss, 1994, 2004, 2005; Foss & Kanengieter, 1992; Mullen & Fisher, 2004), we ask how sexualized imagery of women functions as part of branding messages presumably designed to sell fashion products to men. Drawn from an earlier study, the five ads analyzed here were selected purposively to represent “worst offenders” in terms of sexual content. We write as white Anglo able-bodied heterosexual women who are feminist communication scholars with professional advertising experience. Our analysis derives from understandings of gender as both hegemonic social pattern (Connell, 2005) and performative embodiment (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004; Frye, 1983; Golombisky, 2012; Rakow, 1986; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Constrained and enabled within specific socio-cultural milieux, gendered performances of masculinity or femininity are always implicated in historically contingent and intersecting symbolic and material systems of sexuality, race,

ethnicity, class, ableness, and age/generation. Masculinity and femininity then remain ongoing “gender projects” (Connell, 2005, p. 72). Here, we will be speaking of masculinity in two senses: one, as a normative mediated ideal few attain but many condone and, two, as symbolic difference dependent on what it is meant *not* to be (Connell, 2005).

Our interpretation of the five ads suggests that for their target-marketed viewers, men ages 22-35, a masculine lifestyle is signified by luxury possessions, adventurous leisure, and sexually assertive women. Yet, without the presence of women in the ads, such a lifestyle is not necessarily announcing *heterosexual* masculinity. We argue that the sexualized women in the five ads function rhetorically as must-have gear announcing heterosexuality in both a magazine genre devoted to teaching young men to care about their physical appearance through consumption and a homophobic visual culture where looks can deceive when it comes to assumptions about sexuality.

### Literature Review

Scholarship documenting the subordination of women in magazine advertising dates to classic work from the 1970s (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971; Goffman, 1976; Kilbourne, 1979; Lundstrom & Sciglimpaglia, 1977; Millum, 1975; Wagner & Banos, 1973; Williamson, 1978). A common form of the subordination of women is sexual objectification, an advertising practice that has increased quantitatively and qualitatively since the 1970s (Baker, 2005; Reichert & Carpenter, 2004; Reichert, Lambiase, Morgan, Carstarphen, & Zavoina, 1999; Soley & Kurzbard, 1986; Soley & Reid, 1988). But, over the same period, the sexualization of men’s bodies in magazine advertising also has increased (Law & Labre, 2002; Pompper, Soto, & Piel, 2007; Rohlinger, 2002; Sivulka, 2003).

Traditionally in “sex sells” advertising, “sex” is promised as the reward for purchase or consumption, and a woman’s body usually signifies “sex” (Lambiase & Reichert, 2003; Reichert & Lambiase, 2003). Reichert (2003) defines sexual content in advertising as: (1) model’s nudity or stage of (un)dress; (2) model’s sexual behavior and pose, including gaze and physical contact/interaction with other(s); (3) model’s physical beauty or attractiveness; (4) sexual referents, whether material or innuendo, including those facilitated by advertising production and post-production techniques; and (5) sexual embeds targeting the subconscious. Yet Lambiase and Reichert (2003) note that their studies have shown that “sexual content is not always related to dress or interaction” (p. 252). Explicit and implicit “benefits promised in sexually oriented advertising” may include personally feeling sexier, accruing more sexual attractiveness to others, and increased likelihood of engaging in sexual activity, even when none of these promised benefits has anything to do with the product or service advertised (Lambiase & Reichert, 2003, p. 253). In fashion advertising, sexualized images of women tend to: (1) emphasize a gender hierarchy that subordinates women, (2) dehumanize and objectify women’s bodies, (3) submit women to the voyeur’s scopophilia, (4) naturalize violence against women, and 5) eroticize pedophilia (Merskin, 2006).

In the United States, the historical relationship between consumer culture and women’s magazines is well documented (Damon-Moore, 1994). However, a similar historical relationship exists between men and men’s magazines, in which men are hailed to become consumers reinforcing particular kinds of classed, raced, and sexed masculinities (Kay, 2009; Lambiase & Reichert, 2006; Stearns, 1998). Over the last 100 years, men have been positioned as homosocial consumers of recreation and recreational lifestyles implicated with masculinity, sexuality, race, and class (Stearns, 1998). Parallels between the fastidious Victorian dandy appearing in 19<sup>th</sup>

century literature and the well-groomed metrosexual man in early 21<sup>st</sup> century media underscore longstanding though taboo links between heterosexual homosociality and homosexuality (Kay, 2009). Of interest in the contemporary historical moment is the intersection between what sometimes is characterized as a crisis in masculinity due to shifting gender roles and the invention of a metrosexual consumer coveted by advertisers (Harrison, 2008; Sender, 2006; Shugart, 2008; Smith, 2005; Stern, 2003).

As young men as consumers have become lucrative to marketers and advertisers, men's magazines target men with a fashionable metrosexual point of view. Metrosexual refers to young men ages 22 to 35 who are known as "the sexy consumer...versed in gadgetry, clothing and culture" (Fine, 2005, p. 51). The metrosexual is a type of "commercial masculinity" (Shugart, 2008) that encourages men to consume, including formerly women-only product categories such as personal grooming and hygiene. Gay and straight men can object to the ways that contemporary "consumer masculinity" as "vanity consumption" threatens to feminize traditional understandings of masculinity (Clarkson, 2005). To offset metrosexuality's possible feminizing associations with women among target-marketed men, the magazines, their marketers, and the magazines' advertisers have employed sexual content that objectifies women (Benwell, 2004; Krasses, Blauwkamp, & Wesselink, 2003; Lambiase & Reichert, 2006; Wisneski, 2007). Consumer culture, including men's magazines and advertising, may align homosexuality with femininity to preserve masculinity for heterosexuality and to position metrosexuality as distinct from stereotypes of effeminate homosexuality (Ramsey & Santiago, 2004; Shugart, 2008; Stern, 2003). At the same time, deploying sexist heteronormative gender, sexuality, and sex with humor and irony in men's media, including men's magazines, disguises a resurgence of regressive

forms of masculinity and sexism as “just kidding” to short-circuit charges of misogyny and homophobia (Benwell, 2004; Lindgren & Lelievre, 2009; Wisneski, 2007).

Less well studied but noted is the growing presence of homoerotica in metrosexual men’s magazines and their advertising (Kolbe & Albanese, 1996; McRee & Denham, 2006; Soldow, 2006). Savvy marketers have increased the use of subtle and not-so-subtle homoerotica as well as androgyny and sexually ambiguous homosociality to appeal to lucrative gay markets without losing straight ones (Bordo, 1999; Kay, 2009; Kolbe & Albanese, 1996; McRee & Denham, 2006; Smith, 2005; Soldow, 2006; Stern, 2003).

Connell (2005) observes that Western hegemonic masculinity, as a “gendered structure of social practice,” is not monolithic or essentialist. Yet hegemonic masculinity maintains its dominant power by subordinating not only women but also non-white and non-hetero men. As a gendered structure of social practice, hegemonic masculinity depends on gendered divisions of labor to support its greater share of economic, material, and social privilege. This kind of hegemonic masculinity also enjoys a selfish politics of desire coercing subordinates to give rather than receive pleasure. Connell’s (2005) dissection of dominant masculinity—as white, heterosexual, and rewarded by capitalism—reveals a system prone to crisis that has relied on violence when necessary to resolve threats to its supremacy. In the current moment, hegemonic masculinity’s dominance is responding to three eroding fronts: (1) changing power relations as a result of women’s and civil rights’ movements, (2) changing production relations in terms of labor force composition and upward mobility of diverse women and racial and sexual minorities, and (3) relations in which women’s and non-hetero sexual desires are being more empowered (Connell, 2005).

Our analysis situates itself amid the interplay of metrosexual consumer masculinity, increasingly open gay culture, a perceived crisis of masculinity, and strategically ambiguous yet regressive masculinities represented in men's magazines. We argue that, in the men's magazine fashion advertisements we examined, sexualized images of women function not to promise heterosexual *sex* but to certify *heterosexual* manhood. Instead of offering up sexy women as rewards for purchase or consumption, this sexist and homophobic advertising logic positions sexually active women as signs proving metrosexual masculinity as straight. We arrive at this subtle but significant shift in "sex sells" advertising by looking for rhetorical patterns in the ads we inspect (Lambiase & Reichert, 2003). What is more, the rhetorical patterns we describe are visual ones, i.e. visual rhetoric, referring to both the communicative persuasion of images and the technique for analyzing them (Foss, 2004, 2005).

#### Method

Our purpose is to explicate sexual imagery as rhetoric based on the presumption of a shared visual vocabulary within "the larger discourse community in which advertising operates" (Lambiase & Reichert, 2003, p. 251). We label the five ads analyzed here as "exemplars," meaning good examples of bad advertising practice that deploy gratuitous sex at women's expense in men's metrosexual magazines. Our analysis follows Lambiase and Reichert's (2003) demonstration that exemplars of sexual appeals in advertising offer rich sites for examining sexual advertising content as rhetoric; Lambiase and Reichert explicated six ads drawn from a study of hundreds to show how not all sexual content is accessible via conventional coding categories. We chose the five ads under analysis here "because they represent a larger pattern and because they provide examples of meaning within advertising that cannot be captured by content analysis or empiricism alone" (Lambiase & Reichert, 2003, p. 252).

We selected the present exemplars from Ford's 2006 study, which examined April 2005 issues of the top-circulation metrosexual men's magazines, including *Maxim*, *GQ*, *Esquire*, and *Details*. Ford analyzed images of women in men's fashion advertisements, defined as clothing, shoes, sunglasses, watches, jewelry, or any other items that may be worn on the human body. She found women portrayed as active sexual predators or as passive sexual objects. Drawn from the study's 26 fashion ads containing visuals of women, the five exemplar ads for the present analysis include advertisers Banana Republic (*GQ*), Calvin Klein (*Maxim*), David Yurman (*Details*), Rockport (*GQ*), and Sketchers (*GQ and Maxim*).<sup>i</sup> These five exemplar ads represent a judgment sample of worst offenders in terms of their sexual or sexualizing visual content. Each of the five ads was selected purposively to represent one or more of the four visual themes analyzed in the original 2006 study. The themes include model's (1) stage of undress, (2) gaze, (3) body position, and/or (4) body language (Lambiase & Reichert, 2003).<sup>ii</sup>

Our examination of the ads proceeds as visual rhetorical analysis (Foss, 1994, 2004, 2005; Foss & Kanengieter, 1992; Mullen & Fisher, 2004). Visual rhetoric "is a critical-analytic tool or a way of approaching and analyzing visual data that highlights the communicative dimensions of images or objects" (Foss, 2004, p. 306). For each of the five ads, we observe the visual elements and their relationships to one another in the composition. Then we analyze the composition's rhetorical function, including comparisons across the exemplars. We also evaluate the ads' communicative and social legitimacy. Regarding legitimacy, Foss and Kanengieter (1992) write, "An image that functions to arouse hatred toward women, for example, would be seen as questionable" (p. 320).

We recognize that ours is but one interpretation of the ads, and we acknowledge that different ads certainly would lead to different interpretations and arguments. Nor do we make

claims about advertisers' intent or audience reception. Below, we do argue, however, that the ads present a notably similar visual narrative when it comes to women and men, gender, masculinity, and heterosexuality.

### The Exemplar Ads & Message Formulation

The visual elements in each of the five exemplars compose a message suggesting that men are main characters in adventurous and luxurious lifestyles associated with the advertised brand, and women are accoutrements, little different than the advertised products, to these lifestyles. The women in the ads, by their physical proximity to the fashion products in the ads, rather literally become stand-ins for these products. This visual message positions women as interchangeable with the ads' products. Additionally, in the ads, the women are portrayed as sexually assertive but are still visually subordinated to the men. In the heterosexually intimate situations portrayed in these ads, visual cues also imply that women and men who are sexually intimate may not be emotionally intimate. Overall, the visual rhetoric in these five ads suggests a narrative in which men are more powerful, important, and independent than women, in which relationships between women and men are merely sexual ones, and in which women are signified as the property of men.

Advertisement one is a full-page, full-color ad for Banana Republic. In the ad's photo, a brown-skinned woman stands on tiptoe as she faces an open closet in the background of the scene. Her head is cropped from the shot, and she wears pink lace panties and a pink over-sized men's shirt. Her back is to the viewer. In the foreground, a second headless figure sits on the floor. This torso figure, filling nearly half the page, dominates the visual space of the ad. The torso is wearing a shirt, belt, and khaki pants—all in neutral tans and browns. The torso reveals no skin, thus no skin-color. The text reads, "As usual, the postcards he wrote were still in their



luggage.” Viewers may infer a sexually intimate relationship since the scene is staged in what appears to be a bedroom and the woman is half dressed in *his* shirt. However, the two figures have their backs to one another, suggesting emotional distance through body language.

The visual of the headless man contradicts itself. A larger figure generally reads as “superior” (Goffman, 1976), and yet this larger figure’s head is cropped off, which can communicate objectification (Kilbourne, 1979). The man also sits on the floor, a symbolically



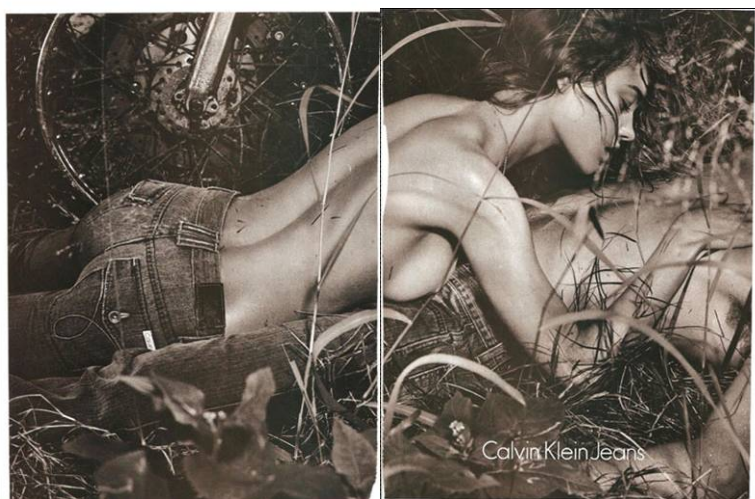
subordinate pose typically reserved for women and children (Goffman, 1976). However, additional visual cues, such as the partially dressed headless woman with her back to the man, her classically feminine pink outfit, her childlike pose on her tiptoes, and her positioning in the background, all communicate that the woman is the subordinate in this Banana Republic story. Perhaps the headless “he” demonstrates what Williamson (1978) argues is the “hole” in which the viewer (in the present case, a male viewer) inserts himself into the

advertisement’s narrative.

In addition to clues about the woman’s subordinate status, a key bit of visual information is her visual proximity to the product advertised. She literally “stands in” (for) the product advertised, a Banana Republic shirt. Her role seems to be as both travel and fashion accessory, not much different than his shirt that she is wearing as she stands in the closet where we might expect the man’s shirt usually to hang or the suitcase, shown open on the floor, where he might pack this shirt.

In this Banana Republic ad, the man and woman are travelers. The visual narrative invites the viewer to imagine the two figures in a sexual relationship. However, the ad's text not only hails a viewing "he" but also is about a "he." She, like the branded shirt she wears, appears as a possession. The ad suggests that if you own the clothing, you own the lifestyle that includes this woman, the sex, and the travel.

The second ad, a black and white two-page spread for Calvin Klein Jeans, features a jean-clad white woman, nude from the waist up, lying prone atop a jean-clad white man, also prone and nude from the waist up. The two figures lie in a grassy bower, which they share with the



wheel of a motorcycle. The woman's exposed breast, the center of the composition, is positioned atop the man's crotch. There is no eye contact between the man and woman; she looks down at the man's abdomen. The man, whose head is cropped from the scene

does not touch the woman. Like the Banana Republic ad, the CK sexual situation suggests no emotional intimacy. But the CK woman is cast as a sexually assertive partner.

The motorcycle harkens to iconic popular culture bad boys, represented by actors such as Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, Marlon Brando, and James Dean. In U.S. culture, motorcycles can symbolize masculine rebellion and the adventure of the open road for those who have no place-bound obligations. The ad in effect confers the characteristics of this outdoor adventure to the

Calvin Klein brand. The ad implies that both the jeans and the woman, like the motorcycle, are correct gear for the adventurous lifestyle that the ad's scene implies.

On the whole, the Calvin Klein ad suggests that the bare-breasted woman is an accessory in this fantasy. For a second time, the woman's role in the ad is literally to stand in the product, here a pair of jeans. It is clear that the man and woman are about to be sexually intimate. The scene suggests the two have ridden the one motorcycle together to this outdoors setting. Indeed, according to this ad's imaginary, the woman, the jeans, and the motorcycle are all symbolically connected to the man's crotch, and so the woman, the jeans, and the motorcycle are, in a sense, equivalent. The ad implies that the woman, jeans, and motorcycle are all outward signs of a CK



man's lifestyle and status.

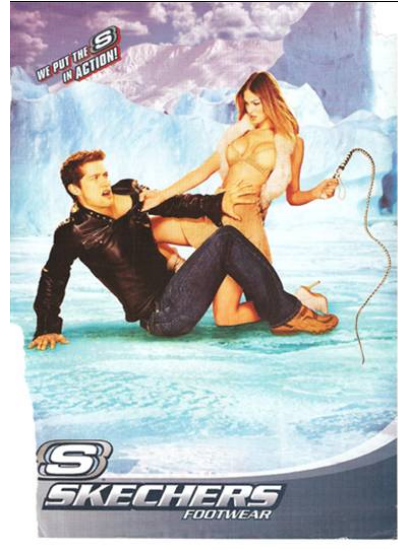
Advertisement three, a single-page black and white ad for David Yurman jewelry, shows a medium shot of a white man and a white woman in an embrace—of sorts—with a nudity role reversal. The man is undressed, except for his bracelets. The woman is clothed, including earrings, watch, and ring. The man's hair also appears longer than most men's. The woman reaches up to caress the man's face. The man's hand, however, grips her forearm. The grip symbolizes feminine subordination (Goffman, 1976) since the man in the ad physically controls the woman in this sexually charged moment. Yet their facial expressions lack passion, and there is no eye contact.

Despite a gender reversal of nudity, the David Yurman ad depicts a conventional narrative in which the man has greater power than the woman, who, upon closer examination, is being subjected to subtle physical domination. Additionally, the woman wraps herself around the



one arm while pushing the woman back with his other arm. The man, fully clothed, keeps his eyes on the woman as he turns his head away. The woman looks directly into the man's eyes.

Facial expressions in the Sketchers ad suggest that the figures do not like each other; however, the woman's position between the man's legs suggests physical and perhaps sexual intimacy. As his hand spreads across her stomach, the hand's larger scale is emphasized. He overpower her if he were in any real danger of being whipped by a woman.



two

bare

could

The woman, kneeling at the man's feet in a ritualized position of supplication (Goffman, 1976), also kneels in proximity to the advertised product, the shoes on the man's feet. The woman even wears brown leather, the material the shoes are made of. For the fifth time, the woman and the product, in this case a pair of shoes, are visually connected. Ultimately, despite her aggression and whip, the woman signifies subordination. As in all the exemplar ads, the Sketcher's ad suggests that the woman is equivalent to the advertised product. But the man signifies the brand that owns the product (Sketchers shoes) as well as the lifestyle (fantasy action adventure) associated with the brand. The Sketchers shoes ad is a nonsensical fantasy about sexual adventure. The ad offers a glimpse into the advertiser's beliefs about the target reader's heteronormative relationships with women. Women may feign control of the heterosexual relationship, but only in terms of sexual assertiveness. The ad's woman is not really in control as she kneels at the feet of a man whose hand is as big as her head.



The exemplars nod to popular understandings of women's movements only to co-opt them into traditional symbolic gender relations. Women may be powerful and assertive but only in their quest for sex with men. Women's independence is limited to emotional independence in their sexual relationships. Men may acquiesce to the sexual advances of women, but only insofar as men retain symbolic superiority in the social order along with physical domination of women. For the target market of young metrosexual men who are meant to consume them, all five exemplars communicate narratives in which sex with women is an emotionally detached physical activity associated with adventurous lifestyles, masculine superiority, and feminine subordination.

#### Rhetorical Function: Gendering Brand and Branding Gender

In terms of rhetorical function and advertising practice, we offer two observations about the exemplars' logics: First, the ads gender brand and product. In the hetero-patriarchy, men are symbolically superior to women. In marketing and advertising, the brand owns the product. These two relationships of superiority and ownership are transferred to the women and men in the exemplars. In each of the five ads, the man corresponds to the advertiser's brand, and the woman corresponds to the product. Brand is superior and associated with the man, and product is inferior and associated with the woman; brand/man owns product/woman. Second, sexy women in the exemplars are not traditional sex-in-advertising rewards for purchase. Rather, sexy women corroborate heterosexual manhood. Without the women communicating their sexual desire for the men in the ads' scenes, how is the viewer to know the sexual inclinations of the consuming metrosexual men depicted?

Upscale fashion brands "portray lifestyles rather than specific items" (Riechert & LaCraze, 2006, p. 183). When stripped of its fashion meanings, clothing essentially represents a

parity product with few distinguishing features to sell as unique selling propositions. Thus it is the brand's symbolic meaning transferred to the product that differentiates and positions the product. In the case of the exemplars, branding consistently means the same thing: Ideal men are brand men who consume, thus become, particular lifestyles. Ideal men do not really care about what they look like wearing fashions; nor do they especially care about the functional features of the fashions they wear. Ideal men merely need the appropriate lifestyle accessories symbolizing manliness.

The five exemplar advertisements seem to argue that a brand's manly lifestyle is signified through branded possessions, including not only clothing, recreational equipment, jewelry, and shoes but also women. These ads invite the young men who view them to identify with the brand. Women, the ads argue, are not partners in this branded lifestyle; women are accessories that function to prove the heterosexuality of the men who live the lifestyle. In each of the five ads, the man becomes the symbol of the brand, and, narratively speaking, the brand becomes the symbol of (heterosexual) masculinity. Each ad visually suggests that, by purchasing the brand, young men as viewers accrue the manly caché associated with the lifestyle symbolized in the ad.

In traditional heteronormative "sex sells" advertising, advertisers sell a logic that promises a sexual return on the consumption investment. However, we argue that the five exemplars shift the promise of sex with a woman from being a payout for purchase to a sign of *heterosexual* manhood. The Banana Republic ad, for example, is not selling clothing or even the promise of sex to young adult men; it is selling the trappings, including a desirable woman, to enact an idealized young heterosexual man's lifestyle. A Banana Republic man is a traveler. A heterosexual Banana Republic man travels with a woman; thus, a Banana Republic shirt and a woman are comparable requisite gear. Calvin Klein is not selling jeans; it is selling the promise

of a rugged, carefree heterosexual lifestyle for men. A Calvin Klein man is a rebellious outdoorsman, so much so that he trades the Banana Republic man's bedroom for a patch of weeds. Associating with this brand means strapping a pair of CK jeans, a motorcycle, and a woman to your crotch. The Rockport man is also an outdoorsman. This guy needs a pair of Rockport shoes and a naked woman in his shower to corroborate his manhood as the heterosexual variety. The David Yurman ad is selling a lifestyle that can afford designer jewelry and the women who wear it. The David Yurman man is refined. He likes the feel of fine jewelry, as well as women who find him irresistible, against his skin. He might come off as a little vain with his long hair and penchant for adornment, but he's definitely hetero and in control of his woman. Last, Sketchers is not selling shoes. Sketchers is selling a cartoon-like heterosexual adolescent action-adventure fantasy about being irresistible to a scantily clad petite dominatrix.

In a culture of image and branding, one needs the branded accoutrements of the lifestyle to signal one's membership in the lifestyle—even if the lifestyle does not exist per se outside of the advertising business, corporate branding, and entertainment industry that invent it—and even if the young target market generally is not in a position to afford such a lifestyle if it did exist. In fact, none of the scenes in the exemplars signifies jobs, careers, or lifestyle-sustaining labor. These are leisure fantasies. In the ads, there are no messages about the symbolic, material, or emotional labor or cost involved in living these manly lifestyles, just as there is no work involved in getting women to find the men sexually attractive. This kind of men's fashion advertising is not about getting "the look" on the material body the way we typically think about fashion. Here, lifestyle *is* the "look," an ensemble of visual paraphernalia extending beyond the material body to declare an independent unattached heterosexual manhood. Indeed, women



become key accessories for broadcasting the “heterosexual” part because, otherwise, the ads’ brands, men, and masculine lifestyles are not exclusively heterosexual.

Evaluation & Legitimacy: Messages about Men, Women, Gender, and Sex

The exemplars promote a soulless kind of sexual intimacy for heterosexual men and women, and position women as possessions little different than the advertised products. Across all five ads, we find a consistent idealized definition of manhood as mastery of one’s world, including financial and interpersonal independence. En bloc, the exemplars argue that this kind of brand man is not only “normal” (or “normative” as Connell [2005] might put it) but also outfitted, literally, by purchased accoutrements. Sexually aggressive yet subordinated women in the ads have but one function—to prove heterosexuality.

The Western visual tradition is built upon an ideology in which men dominate the landscape, always symbolically feminine (Berger, 1972). Masculine power is enacted by colonizing space external to man as independent agent. As a visual logic, viewing man is positioned as owner of all that he surveys. In the representational landscape, man is visually positioned as master of the material world he has conquered. Under capitalism, controlling nature evolved to include a formula that equates what can be seen with what can be purchased (Berger, 1972). This gendered way of seeing drives Western visual logics (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975; Rose 2007). Under this regime, women become objects to be seen and possessed (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975).

Returning to the exemplars, men not only play the main characters in but also colonize the landscapes of the ads. In the logic of the five ads, a man does not rely solely on his material body to define him. All that he possesses defines him as well, including commodities and the scenes of their consumption. It all functions as a mirror reflecting who he is, whether “he” is the

visual narrative's protagonist or the reader gazing at and identifying with the ads. In this advertising visual rhetoric, women function as scenic ornaments reflecting the protagonist's superior gender power *and* his heterosexuality. This tells a gender story that symbolically and materially privileges men with not just greater power than women, but power over women. In the ads, he is her master, and heterosexual seduction becomes her only agency. Her role is actively to woo him. Yet, while interaction between the men and women in the five ads is sexual, the sex does not seem to be a result of human emotional intimacy. Heterosexual relationships seem to be defined as unattached casual sex.

The exemplars also define masculinity and femininity. The ads argue that masculinity, to signify itself, requires being outfitted with the proper external possessions. Masculinity also requires an adventurous leisure landscape in which to enact mastery. The exemplars depict scenes of leisure neither wholly public nor wholly private. This adventuresome masculinity is dissociated from a job or career—the labor necessary to acquire such a lifestyle for most people. Yet, the ads are not scenes of domesticity, either.

Heterosexual femininity is defined in the exemplars as having sexual attraction to heterosexual men. This cisgendered feminine sexuality is not merely passively available; it is insistent. It might be argued that in this narrative the women's movement is limited to women's heterosexual urges, which, in turn, are disciplined by men. In the exemplars, women's heterosexuality means little for women's empowerment. Instead women's heterosexuality is a kind of trophy proving masculinity as heterosexual. Heteronormative gender, therefore, is defined in the ads as a hierarchy in which men are more important and powerful than women. A woman's script is limited to seeking physical sexual contact with a man on his own terms within his own world.

In the ads' logic, the requirement of a sexual woman to prove heterosexual masculinity comments on contemporary homophobia. As long as homosexuality is closeted, a straight man has little to fear that his masculinity can be read as homosexual because the presumption is heterosexual unless otherwise signified. But today, for those to whom it matters, one cannot as easily presume heterosexuality as in the past, especially in the context of potentially feminizing metrosexual consumerism. Hence, the heterosexual metrosexual may be required to announce himself the only way that he can—through sex with a woman. If women reject this role, whether for sexual identity or political strategy, heterosexual manhood may lose its power to signify itself as currently defined. In a sense, then, the exemplar ads' emphasis on heterosexual sex not only speaks to homophobia but also constricts women's role to heterosexual signifier. Moreover, the prospect and consequences of young men "buying" this message are terrifying.

The visual rhetoric of the five exemplars in effect sells idealized representations of so-called normal gender and sexuality that privilege masculine over feminine, men over women, and heterosexuality *uber alles*. Furthermore, in terms of advertising and consumer culture, it is significant that brand and product have been gendered into a hierarchy that parallels asymmetrical symbolic and material relations between women and men. Equally significant, this gender alignment of brand/man who possesses product/woman not only echoes a time when women were chattel traded among men (Rubin, 1975). It also commodifies relations between men and women, including sexual ones, in an imagined ideal normal world inhabited by only one man and one woman who will not make eye contact with each other.

### Conclusion

In the five exemplars' masculine worlds, men rule their personal landscapes, including their possessions and women, while men maintain both economic and personal freedom.

Women, in this *mis en scene*, function as essential commodities authenticating manhood as heterosexual. By aligning men with the brands' ownership of products and by aligning women with the purchased, owned, and consumed products, the ads invite the target audience of young men to step into a corporate-branded fantasy world. This brand-land, populated with women eager to have sex, caters to responsibility-free adventure.

Yet, in the frozen narrative moments of these five ads, while the men clearly have access to sex with beautiful women, it is not always clear that the men want it. In the ads for Banana Republic, Calvin Klein, David Yurman, and Sketchers, the men appear nonchalant if not ambivalent about their sexual desire. At the same time, in the Calvin Klein, David Yurman, and Sketchers exemplars, the women appear to have little choice but to be driven by their sexual desire. In the sexual dynamics of all the exemplars, the men are self-possessed and in control of the sexual moment. This formula in the exemplars communicates choice thus control for the men and an ever-present possibility of humiliation for the women.

In terms of evaluation, we argue that this visual rhetoric functions to rescue white heteronormative masculinity, for, indeed, four of the men in the exemplars read as white. We note that this restoration occurs during a historical moment when the preeminence of white heterosexual manhood is threatened not only by women's movement and feminism but also by an open and politicized discourse about and material activism for lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex, transgender, transsexual, and questioning rights and culture, as well as the queering of gender and sexual binaries in the first place. In the cultural mythos of heterosexual white manhood, as well as in the exemplar ads, real men do not have to work to make their bodies sexually attractive by adorning themselves with fashion. Their sexual appeal is defined by their power over and status in their social and material worlds, including their power over "others." We can

imagine that if this power and status were threatened, the white heterosexual masculine mythos might take on greater significance. Thus, fashion advertising targeting young adult metrosexuals who have a penchant for personal grooming and consumer culture may tap into this threatened and perhaps youthfully insecure white heterosexual masculinity by reinforcing the myth of white heterosexual masculine supremacy as normal and normative.

Moreover, remove the women from the exemplars, and the ads' sexual landscapes become more ambiguous. Without the women, the men as main characters in the ads' brand fantasies are no longer clearly heterosexual. While the ads' visual rhetoric connotes masculine power and control regardless of sexual identity, the men's sexual indifference toward the women in some of the ads connotes something else. We might conclude then that in the symbolic order of the exemplars, signifying masculinity only requires power and control, but signifying *heterosexual* masculinity requires the presence of a subordinated but sexually aroused woman. In these representations, the arrogance of such a fragile heterosexual masculinity would be humorous if the consequences of such beliefs in the real world were not so serious since the symbolic order grants heterosexual masculinity the right to define women for its purpose and the power to keep her yoked to that purpose.

Any contemporary consideration of gender has to consider the ways that heteronormativity and heterosexism play into the status of women. In the five exemplars, masculinity is a detached and effortless mastery of the material and social world. The women's agency is limited to the pursuit of sex with men who dictate not only the terms of the heterosexual relationship, but also the material and social world at large. The potential for abuse in promoting such a narrative should be apparent, even as we gloss over its daily manifestations in the flow of news about brutality, exploitation, neglect, and violence.

If advertising can be described as a kind of cultural call and response to social discourse, then we argue that the exemplar ads both address and respond to a historical moment of perceived vulnerability for the social and cultural dominance of heterosexual white men. The exemplar ads define U.S. masculinity and femininity in classically heterosexist, patriarchal, and racially prejudiced terms within a capitalist consumer society that requires each person to participate, but distributes its privileges disproportionately. Shoring up the primacy of white heterosexual men requires reinforcing current inequities and the prospect of even more restrictive symbolic, cultural, social, institutional, legal, and economic practices and policies for everyone else.

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<sup>i</sup> Every effort was made to gain permission from advertisers to replicate their ads. Only David Yurman granted permission to reprint its advertisement; the others were unresponsive. If any appropriate acknowledgement has not been noted, the researchers invite copyright holders to make the oversight known.

<sup>ii</sup> Because the ads in the first study that were open to gay readings did not offer representations of women, they were not analyzed. Regarding race, just one of the exemplars uses what readers may interpret as a model of color. Race and ethnicity were not used as selection criteria. However, in U.S. magazine advertising, women of color, especially black women, historically have tended to be exoticized as animalistic and predatory, eroticized, and sexualized at a greater rate than white women, even though the percentage of women of color appearing in magazine

ads is far lower than that of white women in magazine advertising or than the percentage of women of color in the general population (Plous & Neptune, 1997).