

# Articulations of same-sex desire: Lesbian and gay male dating advertisements<sup>1</sup>

Adrian Thorne  
Justine Coupland

*University of Wales Cardiff*

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## ABSTRACT

A survey of self and other categorisation in 200 lesbian and gay male dating advertisement texts, taken from current magazines and newspapers, reveals the discursive means by which homosexual advertisers in our corpus commodify and market sexual/self-gendered identities. Detailed analysis of a sub-sample of the advertisements allows us to trace the discourse processes and conventions used in formulating identity in such texts. We interpret these discourse practices in relation to a social critique of gay attitudes, beliefs and lifestyles. The different conventions for self-commodification followed by lesbians and gay men in this survey suggest generalisable differences in sexual stance and cultural identification.

**KEYWORDS:** Lesbian, gay male, identity, dating advertisements, self-presentation, discourse, intertextuality

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## INTRODUCTION

Gay female 30 blue eyes, likes nights in/out, seeks female for fun and possibly more. Must have GSOH [good sense of humour] and love life. Could you be my soulmate, write and find out more. You could put romance back into my life. Mid Glam/Gwent area. ALA. Box XQ49.

*South and West Wales Freeads*, 28 February 1996

A lad who likes lads. Me, 24 horny, smooth, good looks, active type, fair, blue eyes, 5ft 11", straight acting. You: 18–25, cute(ish), slim(ish), smooth, good SOH. Photo and frank letter a good start. London/SE. Box 9014.

*Gay Times*, January 1996

Above are two examples which display some of the characteristic features of lesbian and gay male personal advertisements from the dating advertisement market-sites of two popular and widely available UK gay publications.<sup>2</sup> Both are

illustrative of how homosexually oriented advertisers articulate and display socio-cultural as well as sexual identities, for the instrumental goal of finding partners and embarking on new relationships.

In any dating advertisement, the advertiser designs the text by choosing aspects of the self and the projected partner to be packaged for public presentation. For lesbians and gay males in particular, sexual as well as physical and psychological attributes for the self and desired other are articulated. The format of the dating advertisement itself is spatially delimited and (generally) formulaically structured, so these discursive 'snapshots' can present only fragments of the sexual identities of the advertiser and the desired other. For this reason, dating ads are rich and dense articulations of identity. They are acts of commodification (Giddens 1991) in the sense that they offer personal traits and qualities designed to attract consumers with specific characteristics and priorities. In the homosexual marketplace, dating ads define these qualities and priorities particularly clearly and efficiently.

Our aim is to examine the range of discursive devices and conventions used in formulating identities in lesbian and gay male dating advertisements, and to interpret these discourse practices in relation to a social critique of contemporary gay attitudes, beliefs and lifestyles in the U.K. Several previous studies have examined the widespread use of dating ads by heterosexuals (Bolig, Stein and McKenry 1984; Steinfirst and Moran 1989; see also Davidson 1991; Gonzales and Meyers 1993; Laner 1978), generally as a source of information on lifestyles and relational expectations within heterosexual partnerships. But it seems important to interpret dating ads (as Coupland 1996 has recently done in the case of heterosexual ads) more specifically as commodified and marketised discourses operating under particular generic and cultural constraints. This is not to endorse Fairclough's (1995a) arguments that commodification in discourse processes is detrimental to 'authentic' personalisation, and that it risks a kind of discursive psychosis which confuses the authentic and the synthetic. Indeed, Coupland (1996) noted that, in dating ads, self-advertisers exhibit the ability not only to employ the norms of marketplace discourse when these align with their personal goals, but also to unsettle, override or breach those norms if they wish to do so. Nevertheless, we suggest it is equally important not to read off dating ads as self-contained indicators of lesbian and gay male preferences and identities. Rather, we aim to show how the commodifying medium of dating ads shapes homosexual identifications and how such ads both reflect and shape the cultural conditions of gay and lesbian people.

We concentrate on written text ads, rather than the combination of written (newspaper and magazine) and spoken (telephone-based) texts as used in the Coupland (1996) study. Print and broadcast text (on teletext systems) is still the majority medium for dating ads in the U.K., and in this paper we consider sub-samples of 100 lesbian and 100 gay male ads. This data base indexes the self-evidently different life-projects of homosexual women and men, although this

does not imply that we consider lesbian women as in any simple sense the female 'counterparts' of gay men – a recurrent problem within sexological research (see below).

### USING THE MEDIUM: FOR AND AGAINST

For lesbians and for gay men, articulating sexual self-identity via media-sited commodification carries certain risks. First, the siting of homosexual dating ads in the personal columns of national/local newspapers and magazines is itself potentially problematic. Fairclough (1995b: 12) has defined media texts as ideological encoders of particular world representations, social identity constructions and social relations, whose language supports and reinforces social majority viewpoints. From this critical discourse analytic perspective, lesbian/gay discourse often conflicts with, and tends to be neutralised by, the ideology of controlling, heterosexually oriented texts. 'Mainstream' newspapers and magazines of course accommodate heterosexual priorities and perpetuate social heterosexual dominance. Although in principle all individuals are given parity of access to dating ad columns, lesbians and gay males are minoritised and rendered 'deviant' because their ads are infrequent and often placed separately from those of heterosexuals.

Second, even when lesbian/gay dating ads are sited in specifically homosexual media (the personal columns of gay newspapers and magazines), they inevitably bear the imprint of the sales genre. As Coupland (1996) points out, dating ad texts are modelled on the 'small ads' paradigm, which principally serves to sell second-hand consumer goods. The genre is reductionist and promotional and relies heavily on readers' intertextual awareness of the genre's scripting. Probably in consequence, only marketable attributes of 'advertised goods' are referred to and these tend to be restricted to a set of familiar labels and categories (see also Shalom 1997). While committing to this market strategy in the promotion of one's self is a problem for all ad service users, it is particularly threatening to gay men and lesbians, whose oppression has traditionally been accomplished through reductionist, stereotyped discursive categorisation. The labels and categories used risk being added to the list of homogenised 'pariah group' stereotypic attributes available in the culture. It would not be surprising if many lesbians and gay men preferred to avoid any discourse practice in which direct sexual categorisation and labelling are axiomatic. Homosexual identities are widely held within gay cultural discourse to be relatively flexible constructions, open to shifting linguistic realisation as the combination of individual psyche and social context demands (Jenness 1992). In contrast, dating ads impose an artificial textual closure of gender/sexuality self-projects.

Despite these concerns, dating ad use has become a prominent feature of lesbian/gay culture, no doubt partly for reasons of sheer practicality. Lesbian/gay meeting sites and social networks tend to centre on specific urban areas,

and dating ads help cater for individuals without easy access to them. Beyond this, personal ads provide entry to a contact network for people with specific social interests or sexual proclivities. Within gay sub-culture there is a whole spectrum of diverse sexualities and coherence systems. Dating ads facilitate a sex-directed relational process. For example, a recent advertisement for Sexnet, a gay male contact service (*Blueboy*, May 1996) promises: 'Meet people who have the same sexual desires you do no matter how KINKY or BIZARRE!'.

Finally, dating ad services may mitigate some elements of face-threat associated with forming new relationships. Ads can provide a short-cut through the complex and variable symbolic interaction networks of face-to-face initial contact (Coupland 1996). For homosexuals, this uncertainty-reducing function can be very valuable as an alternative to the twilight anonymity of the gay bar/club scene. The textual content of dating ads need not, of course, be factual, and we have already suggested that it is inherently partial and selective. But there is at least the prospect of an initial compatibility between self-selecting and self-defining partners and the prospect of a partner having at least a degree of commitment to the relational process.

But beyond its potential utility, dating ad use fits well with certain principles of self-identity and relationship stabilisation and management in late-modern western society (Giddens 1991). In Giddens' theoretical framework, two salient late-modern processes are the maintenance of the 'protective cocoon' (Giddens 1991: 126), and 'the pursuit of the pure relationship' (90). Pure relationships are defined as contemporary cultural phenomena free from traditional social anchors, such as the procreation of children and extended family networks. The pure relationship is cultivated only for what it can 'bring to the partners involved'. The protective cocoon involves a psychological mechanism for the filtering of external dangers. Dating ad usage by lesbians and gay men can be seen as an effort towards building pure relationships and a protective cocoon outside of dominant heterosexual family and institutional structures.

Giddens has also written about 'the pursuit of artificially framed styles of life' within the late modern self-project (1991: 196), and of how self-actualisation is increasingly 'packaged and distributed according to market criteria' (198). Yet he also notes how the socially oppressed can 'react creatively and interpretively to processes of commodification' (199). This is in fact an agenda-setting statement for the analyses we offer in the following sections. Dating ads provide, as Coupland (1996) has suggested, close to a prototypical illustration of the late-modern marketisation of the self. We would again argue, however, that this theoretical insight has a special relevance to the gay/lesbian case. It has been suggested that the homosexual individual may substitute consumer status-oriented life-goals for the self-evaluation principles taken to be axiomatic among heterosexuals (Woods 1995). That is, homosexuals do not have such ready access to family-centred life-events and rituals which can humanise heterosexuals' life experiences and life narratives (Harré 1983; Linde 1993). Lesbians and gays, to an extent, *have* to articulate their identities via consumer culture

discourse (cf. Jones 1997). Although this debate carries us well beyond the objectives of the present paper, it nevertheless provides one further stimulus for the analyses we offer, and one further dimension to the cultural interpretation of homosexual dating ads.<sup>3</sup>

### LESBIAN AND GAY MALE SEXUAL DISCOURSES

There is only a very limited amount of previous discourse analytic work on gay and lesbian sexuality (Richardson 1992). In any event, there is a risk of over-generalising claims about lesbian/gay cultural stances and trends on the basis of specific textual evidence. We recognise that lesbian/gay sexual values and orientations, and the discourses in which they are represented, are poly-vocal and rapidly evolving. Some contemporary themes have, however, been identified in social theoretic research.

Faraday (1981) challenged the stance taken in male-dominated sexological studies which construct lesbian sexuality as a mode of erotic stimulation for the heterosexual male, and as a female mirror-image of gay male sexuality. It is in this spirit that Kitzinger (1987) called for data-based study of lesbianism as a social and discursive practice. By often rejecting conventional, heterosexist self-presentations of sexual identity, lesbians have been accused of having dismissed all sexualised and eroticised discourse. Lamos (1994), on the other hand, has commented on the dynamism of lesbian sex-texts. Still, it remains the case that all female sexuality, gay or straight, is discursively marginalised. As Miller writes (1994: 214), 'Heterosexual male sexuality remains the standard for sexuality in our culture, against which all others . . . are compared'. The articulation of any version of sexual discourse has become a major project for feminists: how does one articulate an active (even aggressive) sexual persona, without adopting masculinised discourses? The lesbian dating ads in our sample are interesting as particular initiatives in this direction.

In contrast, gay male discourse exhibits a more comfortable approach to the overtly sexual. Male homosexual discourse has an aesthetic fascination with the objectified male body and the spectacle of sexual acts as a focus of desire. While foregrounded sexuality can be seen as deindividuating, it can also be interpreted as a liberating response to heterosexual hegemony. For two thousand years gay men have suffered social repression of their sexuality and are now reclaiming sex and the body. Eroticised discourse can serve to affirm gay men's sexuality as a 'real and positive part of gay male culture' (Tucker 1990: 269). The post-AIDS gay male sexual crisis has arguably neither cancelled nor attenuated the gay male sexual project. In fact it has stimulated a significant sub-cultural re-evaluation of sexual identity and its discursive portrayal in response to a life-or-death challenge. While assimilating the implications of a crisis which has left few people unaffected, gay men are designing and producing sexual discourse which can be positively physical, without the taint of disease. This is once again

a potent ideological backdrop to individual advertisers' rhetorical strategies in the dating ads medium, which we now consider in detail.

### A TEXT SURVEY OF LESBIAN AND GAY MALE DATING ADS

Two hundred homosexual dating advertisements were collected for analysis (100 lesbian, 100 gay male). The ads were taken either individually at random in roughly equal numbers from the various sources, or as a complete set from a day's publication where numbers were low. All gay male ads were taken from three popular and nationally available U.K. gay publications. Because insufficient lesbian ads were available in corresponding publications, we had to build the lesbian sample from a wider range of sources, as shown in Table 1. All dating ad texts were sampled between December 1995 and February 1996.

Texts in homosexual dating ads match general observations made by Coupland (1996: 192) on heterosexual ads. They too display a high level of generic predictability, with rhetorical structure and ideational field tightly specified. Abbreviated characterisations are similarly evident (e.g. *GSOH* 'good sense of humour'; *WLTM* 'would like to meet'). But there is also a more exotic array of acronymic sexual references which assume prior knowledge of, and enculturation with, homosexual sub-culture norms. Although sometimes found in lesbian ads, these overwhelmingly originate from gay men and the gay male sexual

**Table 1:** Sources of the sample of 200 dating ads

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**Lesbian:**

Two weekly national gay newspapers:

*The Pink Paper* (22 December 1995) – 41 texts

*The Pink Paper* (23 February 1996) – 27 texts

Two monthly gay magazines:

*Gay Scotland* (February 1996) – 7 texts

*Gay Times* (January 1996) – 2 texts

One independent weekly local newspaper:

*South and West Wales Freeads* (28 February 1996) – 15 texts

Television Text Services:

The Independent Television (ITV) Information Service Teletext

Teletext One-2-One (29 February 1996) – 8 texts

**Gay male:**

One monthly gay magazine:

*Gay Times* (January 1996) – 34 instances

One weekly national gay newspaper:

*The Pink Paper* (22 December 1995) – 33 instances

One weekly national gay male newspaper:

*Boyz U.K.* (23 December 1995) – 33 instances

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lexicon. Examples include: *BD* 'bondage'; *TT* 'tit torture'; *CBT* 'cock and ball torture'; *WS* 'water sports'; *VWE* 'very well endowed'; *SM* 'somasochism'; as well as an explicit colour codification system (*yellow* and *brown*) signifying chosen sexual roles or practices.

Ads are often very creative, at times employing metaphor and intertextual references which can be both witty and poetic. Most often, however, the sequential organisation of texts conforms to the pattern identified by Coupland (1996) as:

- |               |              |              |
|---------------|--------------|--------------|
| 1. ADVERTISER | 2. SEEKS     | 3. TARGET    |
| 4. GOALS      | 5. (COMMENT) | 6. REFERENCE |

Identity work is done most obviously in the first textual slot, characterising the ADVERTISER. Tables 2 and 3 present a distributional overview of the uses of various categories of own attributes by lesbians and gay men in this slot. Here, the advertiser constructs and projects her/his identity via a constellation of attributes selected from specific categories. Percentages of occurrence for lesbians and gay men are given separately in the tables, with examples of attribute labels. In homosexual ads, the category 'generational/marital status' identified by Coupland (1996) in analysing heterosexual ads (e.g. *divorced*, *single mum*, *widower* etc.) is not normally relevant, and even references to pseudo-marital arrangements are apparently a gay taboo. The gender-sexuality category, on the other hand – extending Coupland's criterion of gender definition (which is also listed in Tables 2 and 3 as an independent dimension) – is heavily represented in the current corpus. Markers of gender and sexual orientation are

**Table 2:** The frequency of mentioned self-attributes: lesbian

Attribute	Frequency	Formulation
Gender	65%	female; woman; girl; lady
Age	86%	simple chronological age disclosure, or other age-marking devices: 30's, 30ish, noisy 40's, getting on, young-looking
Location	46%	North-east, Cambridge-anywhere, Tyneside, S.Glam
Appearance	39%	attractive, stylish, chubby, skinhead, blonde hair
Personality/	73%	socialist/feminist/activist, shy, behaviour affectionate, creative, truthful, Libran, budding free spirit, uncomplicated
Career/ solvency	16%	own home and car, academic, solvent
Ethnicity	6%	Scot, Spanish, antipodean, Malaysian
Gender- sexuality	60%	feminine female, boyish, boyish dyke, lady lesbian, lipstick lesbian

**Table 3:** The frequency of mentioned self-attributes: gay male

Attribute	Frequency	Formulation
Gender	38%	gentleman, guy, lad, bloke
Age	82%	39, 40's, young guy, lively 53
Location	76%	Tunbridge Wells, London-based, Wirral/Liverpool
Appearance	73%	smooth, beard and hairy, athletic looking, tattoos and leather, rugged
Personality/ behaviour	51%	horny, sincere, imaginative, old-fashioned, genuine, hardworking
Career/ solvency	22%	comfortable life, professional, busy executive, writer/designer/teacher
Ethnicity	11%	white, Swedish, Jamaican/English, Irish
Gender- sexuality	31%	non-camp, masculine, straight looking and acting, drama queen

often combined to project a specific self-identity complex interpretable in relation to the cultural norms of homosexual readers.

The category of location addresses the question of geographical convenience with lesbian advertisers specifying place less frequently than gay male advertisers (46 vs. 76%). Frequencies of reference to age (86 vs. 82%), career/solvency (16 vs. 22%) and ethnicity (16 vs. 11%) show no substantial differences. But clear differences emerge in the categories of appearance, personality/behaviour traits and gender-sexuality. Lesbian self-advertisers prioritise personality and complementarity of behavioural characteristics (73%) over appearance (39%). The reverse is true for gay male advertisers who prioritise appearance (73%) over personality, etc. (51%).

Lesbian self-advertisers incline toward more clearly demarcated gender-sexuality self-definitions (60 vs. 31%), often ordered according to the traditional bi-polar categorisation (i.e. a 'butch/femme' split). Gender-sexuality markers might be (impressionistically) ranked on an intersexual spectrum as: *feminine lesbian*, *lipstick lesbian*, *feminine gay lady*, *bi-femme*, *boyish*, *boyish dyke*, *butch*, *skinhead dyke*. For gay men, the personal column appears to be more a site of 'visual' display, with 73 advertisers in our 100-text sample including physical appearance (contrasting with 39% of the lesbian sample).

The fact that lesbian advertisers prioritise personality characteristics and behavioural traits over appearance does not imply that lesbian subculture is less physically immanent or is desexualised, or that lesbian individuals are sexually less self-aware than gay men. Richardson (1992) has written of the new contexts which facilitate lesbian sex-talk, and the new erotic narratives of lesbian sex-fiction attest to the dynamism of lesbian sexuality. However, the dating ad texts offer some evidence that lesbians are resisting colluding with the

polarised sex-activity discourses of heterosexism which sanction the oppression of women as passive and penetrated objects. While the 29 male advertisers from the sub-sample who self-present in overtly sexual terms often use the heterosexist active/passive distinction and represent it in explicit sexual language, lesbian advertisers use more oblique discourse. The imagined lesbian body and lesbian desire are written to be decoded more inferentially, as displayed in Text 1 in the following section.

The texts in our sample resolve into broad thematic patterns. We take the recurrence of these text-types to be indicative of advertisers operating within established generic conventions, and this has influenced our choice of texts for closer analysis. We focus on texts which, in an informal sense, are representative of the main text-types in our data set. In the following section we develop critical analyses of particular instances to examine the means by which (first) lesbian and (second) gay male advertisers establish marketised self- and other-identities in dating ad texts, and how these relate to broader themes of homosexual identity. The analyses are intended as socio-pragmatic explorations of the texts. That is, we are concerned with the relationship between the precise textual formulations of the ads and the socio-cultural contexts in which they are produced and read. Our analyses of these texts are attempts to expose the range of cultural values which resonate in them for enculturated authors and readers. We also comment on how homosexual values and symbolism are used creatively and strategically in furthering what we take to be the goals of particular self-advertisers. Our analytic resources are therefore largely subjective, limited by our own understandings of contemporary homosexual norms and myths. On the other hand, we are able to indicate interdiscursive references – points where socio-sexual values represented in other texts (from fiction, film or gay literature) are invoked as a means of self-advertising.

## EXPRESSING LESBIAN DESIRE

### Text 1

Stylish academic, 27, intoxicated with "The Hunger", desires compelling culinary lesbian to exercise her body and mind and enliven Leeds. Box 3462.

*The Pink Paper*, 22 December 1995

This advertiser is sparing in her use of overt, conventional self-defining categories (the age marker 27 is given, but no details of, for example, ethnicity, appearance or other physical qualities, and lesbianism is mentioned only as an attribute of the partner being sought). The positivity of the description *stylish* perhaps offsets a potential reading of *academic* as bookish and dull and the self-projection generally expresses control, confidence, competence, self-interest and self-indulgence (*intoxicated*). Suggesting being intoxicated with *The Hunger*, a popular lesbian vampire film made in 1983, opens an agenda of images of control and eroticism. The commercially fruitful relationship between vampiric

lesbian eroticism and the moving image has been well documented (Praz 1970; Weiss 1992). From Vadim's influential *Blood and Roses* (1961) onwards, as we noted above, cinema has tended to represent lesbian sexuality as a stimulant for voyeuristic male gaze. *The Hunger* has been critically acclaimed for its glamorous visual imagery, but more importantly the film carries a feminist-oriented ideological weight. Its two central female characters represent both personal power and highly-charged (but visually understated) lesbian eroticism, and these seem to be the values being conjured through the dating ad text.

Vampire narratives may hold a deeper significance for homosexual self-presentation, although there is no textual reflex of it here. Vampires are feared yet fascinating outsiders, driven by physical desires, with pariah status but also miraculous powers of self-transformation. In general, horror, fantasy and science fiction are genres in which culturally accepted gender constructions can be challenged: the female can resist marginalisation, and masculine dominance can be challenged or reformulated.

Vampirism offers a specific context in which to read the advertiser's *desires* (an alternative to the formulaic 'seeks') in Text 1, and the demand for a *culinary lesbian* – will the target cook, eat or be eaten? That the target should be *compelling* echoes the balance of relational power implied by *intoxicated* – that the seeker is herself powerful but wants to use her control to achieve abandon – and maintains the sense of intensity in the relationship being sought. It is an intensity which is projected to be both physical and intellectual, since a stated GOAL is *to exercise her body and mind*. On the other hand, *enliven Leeds* is humorously self-deprecating, since the social milieu of *The Hunger* is the stylish world of rich New Yorkers. Overall, the creative lexical selections and intertextual reference allow the advertiser to project herself as a culturally aware, self-reflexive, powerful individual seeking an intense but not humourless relationship driven by romanticised eroticism.

### Text 2

Cute dyke, 28, vegetarian, non-smoker, likes socialising, films, pubs, theatre, seeks dyke with GSOH for friendship and/or snogs. Box 6709.

*The Pink Paper*, 22 December 1995

Text 2 is far less intertextually allusive, and the advertiser builds her images through a more conventional listing of attributes, contexts and purposes. The self being marketed here foregrounds what are often labelled p.c. (politically correct) traits and conventionally positive qualities. Structurally, the ad realises almost all the predicted elements and sequencing of the genre, although there is no sustained description of appearance (only *cute*). Age in years is given, along with a short list of lifestyle characteristics (*vegetarian, non-smoker, likes socialising*) which imply health and perhaps environmental awareness. Potentially negative readings of p.c. values (smugness and tediousness) are offset through references to sociability and being open to popular and high-culture recreation.

The only trait explicitly required of the target (apart from sexuality, in *dyke*) is the conventional *GSOH*.

In Text 2, the projected sexuality classification, and its matching (*cute dyke . . . seeks dyke*), and the equivocal GOAL statement (*for friendship and/or snogs*) tap into a rich and changing cultural history of lesbian definitions and practices. For many same-sex identified women, the classification 'lesbian' is inherently problematic as a socially imposed objectification (Maher and Pusch 1995). Khayatt (1992: 113) has shown how the word 'lesbian' arose out of masculine-controlled ideology. Rejection of a label which has come to be associated with the 'unnatural' (in both person and practice) has led to lesbians reclaiming the pejorative slang word 'dyke'. Dyke is said to evoke positive images of women who are 'fierce, proud and indisputable' (Tee 1996: 5). Lexico-semantic shifts initiated by sub-groups can be sites of ideological struggle and cultural opposition. As Lamos (1994: 91) says, 'The image of the lesbian that is entertained by some Americans is that of the dildo-wielding butch . . . The figure of the butch dyke is pervasive in twentieth-century literature and popular culture.' However, the negativity in traditional gender-role power asymmetry can to some extent be neutralised by uptake of new or reclaimed self-categorisation labels.

By the late eighties/early nineties dyke-identity was expanding. Stein (1989: 37) refers to 'corporate dykes, arty dykes, dykes of colour, clean and sober dykes', and the word is now often used interchangeably with 'lesbian'. But use of 'dyke' as self-reference may still carry a resonance of masculinisation, possibly disinvitory to some groups of targets. In Text 2, it may be recognition of this which prompts the advertiser to preface *dyke* with *cute*, which is then mitigatory. Through its usual semantic association with 'smallness' and 'prettiness', *cute* minimises the potential for readers to attribute disproportionate masculinity to the advertiser, although no such mitigation accompanies the targeted *dyke*. In the GOALS slot, the advertiser seeks a non-specific relationship which may or may not include romance or physical aspects (*friendship and/or snogs*), without direct or implied reference to sex.

### Text 3

Fred Astaire seeks feminine Ginger Rogers. I'm 40–50 years young, a smoker, short fair hair, 5' 7", living in West Yorkshire. So let's skip the light fantastic and tango the rest of our lives together in a 1–2–1 waltz. Hoping to meet the right lady. Box 4471.

*The Pink Paper*, 22 December 1995

Despite widespread attitude shifts and legislation on gender equality, women and men are still socialised in ways which predict asymmetrical female/male sexual behaviours in many domains. There is an expectation (still not fully documented in research) that men will be proactive and women reactive in the relational/sexual arena. For lesbians this can pose problems for interpersonal communication, even resulting in 'an impasse in which neither woman is comfortable making the first move – even, for example, to ask another to dance'

(Huston and Schwartz 1995: 93). Ironically, while the dating ad medium is sufficiently disinhibiting to allow lesbians to adopt a more aggressive stance, there is still sometimes a need to overcome the framing of woman-to-woman relationships as mutually passive by formulating the discourse in a traditional man-seeks-woman frame. Text 3 reveals just how complex such negotiation of codified selves and others can be.

The advertisement is framed intertextually, with self and other identified with the culturally iconic figures of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Despite being products of a different time and place, the continued showing of 'Fred and Ginger' films in the U.K. continues to give viewers access to a carefree environment where individuals and their values are focused on a glitzy world of hedonism. The urbane wit, lithe unmuscular physique and fluid grace of Astaire made him a quasi-feminised 'antidote' to the testosterone-driven female-pursuer portrayed by Hollywood contemporaries such as Errol Flynn, Humphrey Bogart and Clark Gable. This near-androgynous quality has useful semiotic potential for same-sex identifying individuals. Parallel to this, Rogers played roles often characterised by strong will and a feisty independence, in contrast to the passive ornament portrayed by many other leading ladies of the time. While the narratives acted out by Fred and Ginger never fully cancelled the asymmetric heterosexist model, they did blur the established division of gender-roles, and posited what might be thought of as a more egalitarian partnership.

The homosexual relevance of these cultural references is, however, only a background issue in Text 3, and the Fred and Ginger theme is developed for its connotations of romance, dignity and traditional relational values. Much of the text is filled out with conventionally phrased demographic categorisations. Age is given as a decade range (*I'm 40-50*) with middle-age mitigated by the familiar implication of being 'young at heart' (*years young*). Apart from the plain characterisation of appearance (*short fair hair, 5' 7"*) and place (*living in West Yorkshire*), the only specification of the target is that she should be *feminine*, which gives considerable discretion to potential respondents. The dance metaphor casts the advertisement as an invitation and embeds the idea of a long-term commitment. The final COMMENT slot again encodes tentativeness (*Hoping to meet*) and respect for the partner and the relational process: she will need to be *the right lady*. The advertiser blends attributes of chivalry with idealised romance and restraint, and revitalises this nostalgic heterosexual myth as a 'traditional' model for lesbian desire.

Interactional genres, even those like dating ads which display high generic predictability (Coupland 1996: 192), evolve new rhetorical constructions and ideational fields prompted by the communicative needs of text users. Such local creativity as we have seen in the preceding examples can be explained within this general rubric, although the general process of recontextualising dating ads as a homosexual medium is itself an evolution of the genre. A sub-set of the lesbian ads in our sample, however, are more radically counter-normative,

breaking the scripted formula and requiring more elaborate inferential work from readers/potential targets, as in Texts 4 and 5 below.

#### Text 4

Woman who runs with the wolves seeks she-wolf, unafraid of the moon, spirit, and soul. Enchanted with sweet lyrics of the night for celebrating wolfdom. Box 99F7.

*The Pink Paper*, 22 December 1995

#### Text 5

Can't just sleep it away, no it's love, nothing else is enough. Extraterrestrial, waking up slowly, must find my Earth Angel. Box 1200.

*The Pink Paper*, 22 December 1995

Even these poetic texts maintain at least aspects of the six-element internal organisation we mentioned earlier. The violation of convention is achieved mainly by avoiding conventional representations of self through demographic and physical markers. If we see this avoidance of unmarked rhetorical style as resistance to the dominant discourse practices of heterosexist marketisation, and reclaiming discursive self-entitlement, it obviously has a specific resonance as homosexual discourse practice. (It is interesting that heterosexual females, though not males, in the earlier Coupland study tended to show somewhat similar resistance). Poetic ads like Texts 4 and 5 are of course still marketing selves through a form of positive display, but the logic of the market-place – that potential 'buyers' must 'see' commodities prior to purchase – is inverted, and the self is rewritten in conceptual terminology which achieves meaning through shared cultural coherence. As Moonwomon (1995: 46) writes:

The authenticity of lesbian text . . . cannot be assessed using the criteria of linguistic structure alone. It is not the case that variants of phonological, morphological, syntactical or lexical variables have been found to correlate with lesbian social identity . . . Rather, authenticity depends on assumptions of shared knowledge.

As in the earlier vampire instance, Texts 4 and 5 introduce metaphors that may remain obscure outside of specific communities of knowledge. The advertiser in Text 4 accesses the literary domain of lyrical lycanthropism as used by such feminist storytellers as Angela Carter and Tanith Lee, while Text 5 brings into play the alternative discourse of New Age-ism. Both images reflect societal outsider-status, werewolf and alien, presumably to appeal to members of a group whose social cohesion is defined through its contrast with heterosexuality. In Texts 4 and 5, lesbianism is celebrated as synonymous with metaphysically empowered super-nature.

In the first line of Text 4, the advertiser echoes the title of a book *Women who run with the wolves* (Estes 1992) and in so doing self-identifies with the unrestrained power of the feminine body and psyche. For readers familiar with the reference, she is invoking the values of emotional creativity, sexual liberation and the celebratory physicality of the wolf-woman (Estes 1992: 25). The advertiser seeks a relationship with a fellow *she-wolf* who can share and

enhance this distinct lifeworld perspective. In Text 5, lifestyle guidance is sought from an *Earth Angel* who, within a loving lesbian dyad, can initiate a subcultural novice who is *waking up slowly*. Both advertisements sustain a poetic, anti-rationalist design which cancels conventionality.

Instances like these show how dating ads can engage with fundamentally political and ideological debates about language and homosexuality. For example, Loulan has argued that the lexicon of gay female identity is impoverished. She says it is 'wooden and simplistic' (1990: 190), limited to the denotations and connotations that others have seen in lesbianism. According to this political critique, avoiding conventional self-defining category-labels amounts to wresting back control of the narrative voice. In their spiritual and metaphorical constructions, the advertisers of Texts 4 and 5 are seeking alternative means of conveying what Loulan (1990: 70) calls 'individual lived experience', where the avoidance of the literal and the conventional may be as important as the semantic content of what is conveyed. If, to take the general political stance of feminist sociolinguistics, the 'structures, the categories and the meanings' of language have been constructed and validated by males (Spender 1980: 143), we can equally see these advertisers' innovations as moves to reclaim some sort of linguistic potential to articulate lesbian subjectivity. They are resisting not only the commodification that advertising implies, and the subordination and restriction of female sexual roles that Spender addressed, but also the heterosexist illegitimation of female-female desire.

### EXPRESSING GAY MALE DESIRE

We should repeat that the structuring of this analysis, segregating female from male homosexual ads, is not intended to imply a simple opposition between the two sub-sets. In fact there are many overlaps at the levels of theory and strategy. Gay male advertisers in our data sample, for example, develop complex meanings and implications in their texts through intertextual references not unlike those we have been examining in the lesbian ads. Text 6 illustrates how a gay male can construct a specific version of male homosexuality through language many people would associate with classical heterosexual male ideology.

#### Text 6

Ex-Forces bloke, 30, straight lifestyle and outlook, fit rugby build, rugged, handsome looks, honest, reliable, and totally non-scene, great SOH, comfortable life. Seeking other fit, well built, rugged, masculine bloke, must be 100% straight Forces/builder/farmer type, non-scene and sane, as best mate and more for quiet pints, long walks and life. Box 1044X.

*Gay Times*, January 1996

This advertiser's choice of *Ex-Forces bloke* as his initial self-categorisation proposes a cultural frame of near-exclusive masculinity, but a masculinity

where homosexuality has been denied official status and where gays are legitimately sanctioned. Even so, parallels between militarism and gay male culture can be drawn. As Morgan (1994: 67) notes, military life is a body culture energised by a strong sexual imperative. Perhaps for this very reason, military and gay-centred projects are fundamentally divergent. As Morgan continues: '[military] emphases on aggressive heterosexism and homophobia seem to lend support to the argument that masculine group solidarities . . . serve as a defense against homosexuality'. In the dating ad context, an explicit military association would therefore seem self-denying, just as *bloke*, together with *straight lifestyle and outlook*, would seem to distance the advertiser from the gay community. However, this evaluation ignores the potential for strategic recontextualisation of core societal values, which is emerging as a defining quality of homosexual discourse.

In Text 6, the invoking of male stereotypes is best described as a discourse of *pseudo-masculinisation*. Within gay male discourse, the erotically objectified 'soldier', 'rugby player', 'farmer' or 'builder' are often promoted as the apotheosis of sexual fantasy. Advertisements in homosexual publications, for example, frequently introduce images of military life. The uniform fetish is strongly alive, with 'uniform', 'sports kit', etc. being emblems of hyper-virility for many gay men. A further coded implication in Text 6 – where ADVERTISER and TARGET slots are filled out by similarly categorised identities (in the muscular imagery of militarism and manual labour) – goes beyond issues of physical health and pseudo-masculinity. Leap (1996: 113) has reviewed how the AIDS pandemic has 'recast . . . interests in physical fitness'. Within post-AIDS gay male culture, overt maintenance of physical health has a more specific symbolism. By repeated emphasis on fitness the self-advertiser may be offering and seeking HIV-negative status.

The text therefore operates fully within gay male cultural semantics, although it appears to endorse opposing values. A heterosexual cultural taboo is textually reinforced (i.e. 'real' men do not associate with homosexual culture – *non-scene*), but the advertiser simultaneously refers to sexualised gay male archetypes associated with 'highly charged eroticism' (Humphries 1985: 77). His gayness is unchallenged – *100% straight* is identifiable to a gay readership as ironic. At the same time, *non-scene and sane* invites the implication that gay existence embedded within the active context of gay subculture is 'insane'. Once irony is identified as a rhetorical principle at work in the text, 'ordinary' lifestyle markers can be re-evaluated. Perhaps the GOAL of having *quiet pints* and *long walks* can itself be interpreted as part of the theatricality and performance dimension of gay male life, which has been described as assuming roles and costumes (Gough 1989: 121). The phrase *best mate and more* similarly evokes the 'mainstream' practice of heterosexual male bonding, then subverts it with the suggestive 'and more'. Text 7 is a far more elaborate excursion into gay iconography.

### Text 7

Greater Manchester/North Cheshire. Hold on Toto, let me see! Yes, he's a good looking guy about mid 30s although I know he's early forties. He's definitely an honest, caring, intelligent health professional but is bereft of friends near the village. Well, when he puts down his glass of wine and cigarette I'll describe him. He's 6ft, 12 stones [76 kilos] with short fair hair, grey-green eyes, clean shaven and of medium build as he played rugby. What's that Toto? Well, I think he would like to meet similar, intelligent attractive friends of slim-medium build who live near as he's had an awful year. No Toto I haven't forgotten, he wishes to meet friends about 30 years old, let's hope he meets some. What's that? Yellow Brick Road? No Toto, you daft hound, M62! Box 3WS7.

*Gay Times*, January 1996

The ad is decidedly non-formulaic (though again incorporating the predictable structural elements), obviously intertextually oriented, and pseudo-interactive. Leap (1996: 26) has highlighted the use of established iconography to reinforce ingroup identity as a design principle of homosexual texts. One of the most salient gay male subcultural metaphors is the Hollywood film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). In this film a young girl, Dorothy, unhappy with life in a small Kansas town, is magically transported to a fantasy land inhabited by strange and fantastic characters. With a group of companions she undertakes a quest up the Yellow Brick Road, and discovers in the course of her journey that the happiness she sought was hers all the time. The queen of camp icons is undoubtedly Judy Garland, who plays Dorothy in the film. The reasons for this have been debated (e.g. Koestenbaum 1993: 33–34), but hinge upon the (possibly) sexually ambivalent and tragic status of Garland's own life, and comprehension of the film as an extended metaphor for gay existence: escape from inhibiting reality (drab, monochrome Kansas) into an environment where anything is possible (the camp and colourful world of Oz).

Through repeated reference to the film's characters and places and the artificial dialectic, the advertiser casts himself as controlling narrative voice in the Garland-Dorothy role. His self-identifying work is done through third-person reference in this recreated narrative and parodied conversation, allowing 'Dorothy' to mouth his personal attributes. The exchange is nominally conducted with the fictitious Toto, Dorothy's beloved dog. There are further intriguing complexities of role and self-definition in the text, not least the fact that the advertiser reassigns his gender status from male (advertiser) to female (narrator). His Dorothy identity is counteracted by the detailed markers of appearance that Dorothy 'notices': height, weight, hair colour and style, eye colour, clean-shavenness and build, culminating in a reference to himself as an ex-rugby player.

There are also strong dissonances between factual, even mundane advertiser attributes and the fantasy context of the *Wizard of Oz*. As a *health professional* the advertiser presumably projects his respectability, class and solvency, meshing with the social implications of being a wine-drinker and village-

dweller. The stated GOAL is establishing contact with *friends* (plural *friends* is mentioned twice, and the pronoun is *some* rather than 'someone'), although close specification of TARGET of the sort provided here (*similar, intelligent, attractive, slim-medium build*) is usually done in the search for one ideal individual. The specific implications of 'desired friendship' are of course always open to interpretation in a dating ads context, although the ten-year age gap (between the TARGET(S) being *about 30* and the advertiser's being *about mid-30's though I know he's in his early 40's*) might imply more-than-Platonic priorities. Yet another disjunction emerges between the light-hearted and (through association) childish frame of the Oz scenario and the admitted loneliness of the advertiser, who is *bereft of friends* and has *had an awful year*.

Behind these various dimensions of contrast and – in Bakhtin's terms – multi-acculturality, we again find a movement to embed lived experience in a new, more vivid and dynamic, fictionalised context. An advertisement like Text 7 is a knowing expedition into a borrowed fictional world, and the text refers to its own fictionalised nature as it ends. The LOCATION data is not, as Toto suggests, the *Yellow Brick Road* but the M62, an overcrowded urban motorway, and this pseudo-exchange provides a reflexive exit from the Oz metaphor.

Sexually explicit self-advertisements are a distinct sub-genre for both hetero- and homosexual dating advertisers, although there is a preponderance of sex-focused texts in the gay male section of our corpus. As in Text 8, some ads provide a 'catalogue of desire' (Bolton 1995: 179) for readers and targets.

### Text 8

Randy as a ram. VWE, told the best, thick and uncut. Also wearing well for a tall, slim, 32, seeks guys, 18–39, for deep, wet kisses. Box 1001.

*Boyz*, 23 December 1995

This advertiser's specific sexual GOALS are formulated through coding systems specific to gay culture. The advertiser articulates only those self-aspects which are salient to desired sexual self-projection, but conveying maximum self-positivity, presumably to engage the reader's sexual empathy in a competitive market. In their discussion of the self as 'theorised in discourse', Potter and Wetherell (1987: 102) highlight the danger of constructing metaphysical perspectives which allocate 'real-world ontological status' to the metaphorical self (107). Rather, this identity construct should be seen as context-evoked, encoded in language which is 'credible and conventionally acceptable' in the gay dating ad column (106), and which 'derives its meaning from the context in which it is used' (Maher and Pusch 1995: 20). In fact the *performative* dimension of overtly sexual gay discourse has been identified as an essential aspect of the construction of homosexual subjectivity (Leap 1996: 160).

Text 8 gives a demographically and socially minimalist self-description, backgrounding the self as an individual in all domains other than the sexual. The ADVERTISER slot is filled with a clichéd alliterative simile – an aggressively sexual initial hard-sell – developed by drawing upon an established canon of

sex-imagery and animalistic hyper-virility. This metaphorical self is presented (in fact self-displayed) as synonymous with embodied biological drives and sexual imperatives. *VWE* [very well endowed] *thick and uncut* describes the advertiser's genitals in three salient regards. Giddens has noted how promotion of physical appearance within marketised discourse is the 'prime arbiter of value' (1991: 198), and the comment is highly relevant in gay male self-promotional discourse. Coxon (1996: 44) has highlighted 'the centrality of the penis in male virility symbolism . . . the symbolic significance of a big cock has enormously important overtones of virility and potency and (for gay men) sexual attractiveness and arousal . . . in our culture'. He also notes the increase of foreskin restoration operations among circumcised gay males whose sub-cultural discourse evaluatively loads the 'uncut' penis with a sexual charge and activity versatility which its 'cut' counterpart is perceived to lack (Coxon 1996: 56). The lexical item *thick* also has a subcultural erotic significance which has been commented upon in the literature (Bolton 1995: 194; Fisher, Branscombe and Lemert 1983). The advertiser's attributing of his sex standing to the judgement of others (*told the best*) is unlikely to function as facework mitigation and implies there is an evidence base for his potency claims.

It is worth noting that this and many other ads in the sample perpetuate elitist and exclusive evaluations of youth, which is as much a feature of gay as of non-gay cultural values (Vince 1996). Targets sought are almost universally younger than the advertisers who seek them. However, a specific sub-set of texts proposes relationships in which age-difference is more extreme – the relationships are effectively intergenerational – and where there are implied economic/transactional and power components. Texts 9 and 10 represent a commonly occurring sub-category in which a younger/older male dyad is being projected/ marketed, with the older advertiser foregrounding his high solvency status and wish for relational control.

#### Text 9

Strict, but caring uncle type, 46, seeks compliant nephew/houseboy type. If you're 18–30, straight acting, slim/medium build, and looking for a permanent, secure, relationship, write with photo. Hampshire/anywhere. Box 120B.

*Gay Times*, January 1996

#### Text 10

Writer, designer, teacher, lively 53, 6' 1", offers witty conversation, log fires, country pleasures, loving commitment to younger man, any race, who is attractive, intelligent, loyal and honest. Box Z309.

*The Pink Paper*, 22 December 1995

Ideal implied readers of these texts (Iser 1974) – gay men acquainted with socio-cultural mores – can decode what is being proposed: an older man offers a secure home environment and a materially comfortable lifestyle (sometimes qualified by domestic rules) to a younger man in return for a relationship

synthesising elements of friendship, companionship and sex. A primary implication appears to be that the potential 'negativity' of older age can be cancelled by significant materialist positivity.

The issue of mature gay men 'buying the sexual favours' of younger gay men via financial/lifestyle enticements is sensitive in societies dominated by heterosexist discourse, and particularly in the current U.K. climate of highly-publicised paedophilia cases. Indeed, the dominant ideology is likely to demonise such advertisers as pederastic predators, even though older/younger male sexual dyads have existed in many times and places previously (see Spencer 1995, for a discussion of the socio-civilising effects of 'man-boy relationships'). Arguments from within homosexual ideologies would point to the benefits in protecting and nurturing possibly fragile gay-identities in protective, stable relationships. Texts 9 and 10 both stress continuity, caring and commitment in the relationships sought (*permanent, secure relationship* in Text 9; *loving commitment* in Text 10), but also the wish for control. In Text 9 *compliant* and *houseboy type*, and in Text 10 *loyal*, plus the mentioned age-disparities (46/18-30 and 53/*younger man*) suggest the relational pattern of the 'older dominant man, the younger passive boy' (Miller 1995: 13). Neither advertiser describes his own appearance (with the exception of height in Text 10), but each specifies, rather vaguely, physical characteristics of the target – *slim/medium build, attractive*.

Older men seeking to form sexual relationships with young females are a noted feature of 'straight' ads (Davis 1990; Koestner and Wheeler 1988). To this extent the (hetero)cultural vilification of men who seek the company of younger men is a symptom of homophobia. Theoretically it is useful to recall Sacks' argument that narratives are writer-reader contracts which depend for their success on evaluative responses from audiences (Sacks 1992). Of course personal column ads (ADVERTISER seeks TARGET for GOAL) are structurally analogous to performed narratives (opening situation, complication, resolution and evaluation, as characterised by Labov and Waletzky 1967). In terms of narrative evaluation, transactional and age-asymmetrical relationships are an historically-anchored and a well understood facet of gay male culture.

## CONCLUSION

We should not lose sight of the basic relational processes in which dating ads play some small part. Forming romantic or sexual relationships, irrespective of individual circumstance or sexual orientation, is often problematic. Lesbians and gay males may find these processes more difficult than others, given that their early socialisation is likely to be in social contexts which assume 'straight' ideals and suppress gay identities. Young homosexuals rarely have access to school or teenage dating circuits, and a potentially painful 'coming-out' stage may precede willingness or ability to engage in homosexual relationships. Later in life, many of the social channels that heterosexuals use, such as the workplace or family/friendship networks, may also be blocked to them.

Homosexuals come from a variety of social backgrounds, and adopt a vast range of life perspectives, and they are not exclusively city-based or affluent. In common with heterosexuals, middle-class and urban dwellers enjoy greater opportunities for forming and maintaining relationships than poorer, rural dwellers. Undoubtedly, many professional lesbians and gay men develop successful relationships through face-to-face encounters, but for many others, dating ads are a readily accessed, ego-protective social resource.

For post-'out' lesbians, finding a partner can be especially difficult. There is a lack of available social meeting places, relative to the gay male situation. Reasons for this are complex and beyond the remit of this paper, but they are shaped by the more general social disempowerment of all women. Disposable income is probably smaller for lesbians than gay men and there is also probably a positive correlation between personal capital and available markets. In their research into gay relationships, Huston and Schwartz (1995: 95) have noted that the 'closeted' nature of lesbianism renders women-only social locations financially unstable and difficult to maintain. Existing lesbian meeting venues may not be conducive to the specific interpersonal needs of contemporary lesbians, and many feminist lesbians have strong political/ideological objections to the activities and lifestyles that some of these venues promote. Also, gay bars and clubs are predominantly youth-oriented places and uncomfortable for middle-aged and older gay woman to use. Clearly, the socio-cultural activities of all 'real' lesbians (whether or not politically self-aware) are a threat to the equilibrium of the male power base, which needs to constrain lesbianism as a fantasised construct. Patriarchy exerts pressure on gay women to remain invisible and voiceless. For this reason we have also speculated in the preceding commentaries that dating ads can offer one (admittedly minor) opportunity to reclaim the lesbian voice.

The traditional method by which gay men contact partners has been the 'scene', a subculturally established and flourishing bar-club network. Yet for many this situation is far from ideal. The sexually energised gay-male scene cultivates a relational ephemerality which many find unacceptable in the post-AIDS world. This has led to increasing numbers of gay men looking for ways to form potentially stable, more long-term relationships. Also, while gay male bars and clubs offer their clientele an environment sympathetic to establishing male-to-male encounters based upon physical/sexual rapport, such venues are not often sympathetic environments for the search for intellectual and socio-economic compatibility in projected partners.

For all these reasons, the personal column can be a functional and attractive dating context. In formulating their texts, advertisers access, sift, reject and select among available linguistic and pragmatic resources. We have suggested, both through the self-categorisation survey and through the more detailed critical discourse analyses of individual texts, that lesbians and gay men use different but overlapping resources to commodify their sexuality and gender-orientations. In all cases we feel we have established the importance of linking

micro-level analysis of the textual features of dating ads to a macro-level critique of contemporary lesbian and gay male sub-cultures. The texts themselves combine and re-accentuate voices available to these discourse communities. They enable advertisement authors to create portrayals of themselves and their targets that are variably, strategically – and at times simultaneously – highly personalised and highly conventionalised. Within the obvious limits of a single sample and a restricted set of instances analysed in detail, the study does suggest some generalisations.

In the data, gay men often activate a rich and varied sexual lexicon, using slang, euphemisms (but also dysphemisms), abbreviations, acronyms, etc., which can occasionally result in an elaborate coding of sex-practices and physical qualities. They also refer to many different iconic and performance aspects of contemporary gay lifestyle to identify how they view themselves and their desired relationships. Lesbians express desire in generally less physicalised terms. This fact resonates with the wider socio-cultural situation where women are denied active participation in the discourses of sex. At the same time, there is evidence of significant discursive self-agency on the part of lesbians. Many of them choose to reject textual constructions derived from heterosexist small-ads genres and posit their own alternatives to them, sometimes poetic and intertextual.

There are positive and negative aspects to this state of affairs for both lesbians and gay men. While the lesbian advertisers we have surveyed tend to articulate states of emotion, spirit, and personality, they may consider themselves ideologically excluded from the use of sex-explicit language. And although gay men do often use discourses of hyper-masculinity, this is within the cultural context of hetero-sexist discourse which typifies the homosexual male as a 'feminised' or 'failed' man. The result is that, at times, the reading of gay male ads evokes a 'fetish bazaar', in which self-aggrandisement of the body and sexual performance can eclipse complementary factors relevant to forming successful relationships.

As texts which rely on writer-reader co-involvement, dating ads provide insight into the ideology of contemporary lesbian/gay subjectivities. They index current systems for sexual-identity construction, such as lesbian butch/femme binarism and gay male masculinisation. As we have seen, lesbian advertisements are at times highly creative, realising a complex poly-vocality of identity which does seem to cover a wider range of stances and styles than in gay male advertisements. For males, pervasive self-masculinisation paradoxically imposes its own discursive hegemony, which may marginalise those who would prefer to self-present in some way as feminised. While 'camp' remains a dynamic force in homosexual subculture, camp self-display is almost invariably offset by masculinised references. Lesbian advertisers, on the other hand, portray more flexible identities, with masculine self-identification being just one of a range of productive self-presentational possibilities for them.

Early in the paper we noted how commodified self-representation imposes

constraints on identity which might be particularly damaging for lesbians and gay men. At the same time, we argued that commodification is not universally constraining, when individuals can creatively resist the constraints of the genre they are operating within. The instances we have analysed which show people accessing alternative realities through intertextual allusions to films, fantasy systems, imagery and a cast of iconic figures seem to us to be evidence of *resistance* to the forces of prototypical commodification. They propose alternative realities to the oppressions experienced by homosexual people in everyday social interactions. These particular instances show how the personal column functions as a textual avenue for gay-empowerment. Here female and male homosexual advertisers creatively manipulate a traditionally constrained and formulaic text-genre to give vent to idealistic identity formulations and playful, fantastic relationship projections. In itself, the lesbian/gay personal column is unlikely to make a significant contribution to emancipation, and all minority group discourses remain bounded and coloured by the dominant ideologies which they seek to resist. We certainly do not wish to romanticise these texts as major tools of liberation, and we have recognised their more mundane social functions. Yet we do contend that these positive imaginings of self and other show gay culture striving creatively for self-definitions in a society which up to now has resolutely denied lesbians and gay men such opportunities.

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## NOTES

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2. Our thanks to P. L. for her involvement in discussions on these data and their socio-cultural significance. We are also grateful to Celia Kitzinger for her constructive input to an earlier draft of this paper, and to two anonymous reviewers for their comments which have recognisably (to them) been incorporated into our final version at specific points.
3. Lesbian and gay consumerism is increasingly exploited commercially, as in the recent acknowledgement of 'pink pound' spending capability in mass-media advertising. Homosexual sub-culture has more generally become the target of discourses offering ways of 'purchasing' gay self-images. Still, homosexuals may find some positivity in the concept of a promotionalised and marketised existence, and may in fact be well disposed to a 'bought and sold' lifestyle.

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Address correspondence to:

*Adrian Thorne*  
*Centre for Language and Communication Research*  
*University of Wales Cardiff*  
*PO Box 94*  
*Cardiff CF1 3XB*  
*United Kingdom*  
*senjc@cardiff.ac.uk*