

In U.S., gays see growing influence

Wider acceptance fueling advertising, entertainment, trends

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June was Gay Pride Month, and the celebration couldn't have been timelier. The U.S. Supreme Court overturned Texas' sodomy law, and Canada legalized gay marriage. Broadway's Tony Awards featured a nationally televised kiss between *Hairspray's* two male composers and handed out best-play honors to the gay-themed *Take Me Out*.

Then came July, and 2003 started to look like Gay Pride Year. Wal-Mart, the country's largest private employer, prohibited discrimination against gay employees. MSNBC talk-show host Michael Savage was fired for making vulgar anti-gay remarks. And this week, the Bravo network unveils two gay-themed series that go where TV has never gone before.

Although it may look as if, all of a sudden, gay characters, gay images and gay sensibilities are everywhere, producers, advertisers and media observers see these social changes as ripples from a trend that's been building for years, if not decades.

"It's kind of a gay moment right now," says advertising executive Howard Buford, whose New York firm Prime Access targets minority and gay audiences for clients including Ford, American Express and AT&T. "We're seeing a nexus of popular culture, our legal system and, quite frankly, the American capitalist system all coming together."

So what's fueling it?

While fiery objections remain from some conservative and religious groups, a

majority or near majority of Americans now support anti-discrimination laws and gay marriage at record levels, according to a *USA Today/CNN/Gallup* poll taken in May.

Eighty-eight percent said they favored equal rights in the workplace; 62 percent expressed support for health and Social Security benefits for gay partners; 54 percent approved of the "alternate lifestyle"; and 49 percent favored gay marriage. (An equal number opposed it.) Some of those figures have risen by 20 to 30 percentage points since the early 1980s.

Relationship insight

The No. 1 reason people have changed their minds? More Americans, polls show, know someone who's gay – a family member, a friend, a co-worker – because more gay men and lesbians have been coming out of the closet.

"You work with people on a day-to-day basis, and they're not ogres, they're not something demonic, and it becomes more acceptable," says Edd Sewell, a communications professor at Virginia Tech.

At the same time, the public is more aware of the contributions of gay men and lesbians in the entertainment industry – partly because so many "infotainment" shows look behind the scenes of TV, movies and the fashion world.

"Never before have we been so media savvy, nor have we had so much

information at our fingertips about who's designing these clothes and who's writing these songs and who painted that picture," says Carson Kressley, a stylist who's starring in Bravo's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, a reality makeover show debuting Tuesday.

Changing TV

The cable network, which is owned by NBC, barely registers in the Nielsen ratings, something Bravo executives are hoping to change with *Queer Eye* and the reality-romance series *Boy Meets Boy*, which debuts July 29.

They aren't Bravo's first forays into gay-oriented programming; it aired the *Out of the Closet* film festival and last year's *Gay Weddings*, which drew a larger-than-normal audience for the network.

"I think these shows are going to do very well for us because there is significant buzz about them, and the concepts are highly original," says Frances Berwick, Bravo's senior vice president of programming and production. "The appeal isn't going to be exclusively to the gay audience."

Reflection of cultures

Queer Eye for the Straight Guy is a reflection of how gay and straight cultures have been merging. In each episode, Mr. Kressley and four other style experts make over a semi-hapless straight man – his hair, his clothes, his furnishings.

The show is really a comedy, trading on gay and heterosexual stereotypes in a way that also questions them.

The producers prefer to call it a "make better" show, and the first episode bears that out. While the gay stylists make a little fun of their subject, it's also clear that they're trying to improve his look in a way that pleases him.

This is not a new concept for straight men concerned with what label they're wearing or how their apartment is laid out. There's even a name for such fellows: metrosexuals.

"It's neither straight nor gay to look good," says David Metzler, a straight guy who developed *Queer Eye* based on an idea from his gay business partner, David Collins.

Media influences

The pair believe the rise of the metrosexual can be attributed, at least in part, to media images created by gay fashion designers – the same images that have led to greater acceptance of gays by mainstream culture.

"The straight guys realize, 'Just because I like to have my hair a certain way or wear great shoes doesn't make me gay,' " Mr. Collins says. "It's OK to like shoes or shopping, or 'You know what? I might even dye my hair.' "

Some conservative observers, meanwhile, see *Queer Eye* as part of a continuum. Andrea Lafferty, executive director of the Traditional Values Coalition, calls efforts to mainstream gay life a "bait and switch."

"For a long time, homosexuals said, 'We just want to live our lives, we don't want to get married, we don't want this, want that.' That's bogus. That's been part of the plan all along. Now what are they pushing for? Marriage, adoption, all kinds of stuff like that. They want their lifestyle legitimized."

As acceptance of gays and lesbians has grown, so have business opportunities.

While advertisers are targeting gay consumers, they're also using that trend-setting group to figure out what might sell to a wider audience.

"People who want to ignite a brand with a large, trendy audience will often start with the gay market," says Mr. Buford, the ad executive.

But with so few gay-oriented TV shows, advertisers have had to focus on print sources such as *The Advocate*. "There's definitely a need for more and more high quality vehicles with significant reach," Mr. Buford says. "The ones that are most

efficient are print vehicles, but they don't have the reach you get in broadcast."

Lately, television has been catching on to the possibility of marketing to gays.

Media giant Viacom has been considering a gay cable channel for more than a year, though no startup date has been set. So far, niche channels have been more willing to take risks than the broadcast networks, which depend on advertisers seeking a mass audience.

NBC helped alter the TV landscape when it launched the sitcom *Will & Grace* in 1998, but the show has been careful in depicting gay sexuality. Not so *Queer as Folk*, Showtime's frank look at a group of gay friends, or HBO's *Six Feet Under*, which features a complicated and flawed gay couple.

Conservative worries

"The broadcast networks still worry about advertisers and are extremely conservative in their programming," says Scott Seomin, entertainment media director for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. "When we do see gay characters, we often see them gay in name only. We don't see them in relationships equal to their straight counterparts."

As evidence, Mr. Seomin cites *It's All Relative*, an ABC sitcom coming this fall. It's the story of a Harvard-educated woman who falls for a blue-collar bartender. Her parents are two gay men.

"It's the first time that we've seen gay parenting on prime-time television, and that's terrific," Mr. Seomin says. "It's interesting, however, how careful the show is. Their daughter is already raised, so we don't see gay men being nurturing to children. And it's a daughter, not a son, though we do see the men in bed in the pilot episode. If that premise was on a cable network, it would be much different, much more realistic."

That doesn't mean cable isn't borrowing from broadcast, while adding elements the Big Four networks haven't dared touch.

A prime example is Bravo's other gay-themed debut, *Boy Meets Boy*, a takeoff on reality-romance shows such as *Joe Millionaire* and *The Bachelor*. For the first time, a gay man will be searching for love among a group of strangers. And he won't be told about that twist – straight men are lurking to deceive you – until well into the process.

Reality wave

It's the kind of "gotcha" reversal that marks the reality wave. Gay viewers and others who may not like to see the bachelor humiliated are holding their breath until *Boy Meets Boy* premieres.

"GLAAD's wish would be to have a gay dating show without deceptions – with twists, but not leaving hurt feelings," Mr. Seomin says. GLAAD is the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

"But what I like about this is, only reality television could create a closet for straight men. I've seen footage where some of the straight participants express guilt about having to pretend to be something they're not."

Yet do gay men and lesbians want to be subjected to the same embarrassment as heterosexual reality-romance contestants, even if it means more media exposure?

"In America, if you're not on television," Mr. Buford says, "you don't exist."