



Walking on Wilton Drive A linguistic landscape analysis of a homonormative space

Heiko Motschenbacher

Department of Language, Literature, Mathematics and Interpreting, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Postboks 7030, 5020 Bergen, Norway



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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the linguistic landscape of Wilton Manors, Florida, as it surfaces on its main street, Wilton Drive. Wilton Manors is a community with one of the largest LGBT populations in the US. The study thus makes a contribution to the field of linguistic landscapes and sexuality, using normativity as a central theoretical reference point. The data for the study were collected during a daytime walk on Wilton Drive and consist of photos of store fronts, restaurants, bars, advertisements and other signs, supplemented by printed material collected on the Drive and information provided by the official website of Wilton Drive. In my multimodal analysis, I investigate linguistic and non-linguistic signage, identifying mechanisms that render Wilton Drive a gay space. More specifically, I analyze how signage is used to discursively construct sexual identity, gender, desire and sexual practices. It is shown that homonormativity plays a central role in this context. Same-sex sexualities are discursively constructed as the local norm. At the same time, the signage on Wilton Drive is highly exclusive in the sense that it represents predominantly gay male experiences, whereas heterosexualities, lesbian and other sexualities are discursively marginalized or even silenced. At the same time, particular versions of gay masculinity are privileged, namely ones that can be described as white, middle-class and focused on consumption, gay identity politics and non-romantic forms of sexual activity.

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1. Introduction

“For more than a decade, Wilton Manors has been known anecdotally as South Florida’s gayest city. Day and night, same-sex couples promenade hand-in-hand along the main drag, Wilton Drive, which is lined with rainbow flags, gay and lesbian bars and shops with names like Gaysha sushi and Gay Mart.” (Rothaus, 2011)

Southeast Florida is an area where LGBT life has flourished for a long time. The Fort Lauderdale area, and more specifically Wilton Manors (Little, 2011) – with a population of about 13,000 residents – is widely known as a community that has welcomed and embraced LGBT residents, creating a safe space for this population. The association of Wilton Manors with LGBT culture has developed gradually since the 2000s, and has served to economically revive and socially re-shape the area. According to a 2011 US census, Wilton Manors has the second highest density of gay couples in the US (after Provincetown;

E-mail address: heim@hvl.no.

Rothaus, 2011). Within the local community, people generally refer to Wilton Drive affectionately as *The Drive*. There is also an official website (wiltondrive.org; [Wilton Drive, 2019a](#)) that markets the place with the slogan *WELCOME TO “THE DRIVE”* and describes it as “the city’s signature boulevard.” Beside its strong presence of LGBT residents, the area is a popular vacation destination for LGBT tourists, creating a place where gay life is not just publicly visible but also largely taken as the norm.

This study aims to investigate how these normativities ([Motschenbacher, 2014, 2020](#)) are discursively constructed through public (linguistic and non-linguistic) signage and which discourses of LGBT life are prevalent on Wilton Drive. After situating my research within the field of linguistic landscapes and sexuality (section 2), I outline the methodological underpinnings of the study (section 3). The analysis of signage on Wilton Drive (section 4) highlights central discourses revolving around sexual identity, gender, desire and sexual practices. The concluding section (section 5) discusses the findings in relation to homo-normativity and agency.

2. Linguistic landscapes and sexuality

The term “linguistic landscape” (LL) has been defined in the following way:

[It] refers to linguistic objects that mark the public space, i.e. inscriptions – or LL items – [and] includes any written sign found outside private homes, from road signs to names of streets, shops and schools. The study of LLs focuses on analyzing these items according to the languages utilized, their relative saliency, syntactic or semantic aspects. These language facts which landmark the public space are social facts that, as such, relate to more general social phenomena. ([Ben-Rafael et al., 2010: xiv](#))

In other words, the object of study is linguistic signs that render the public space socially, culturally, politically or economically meaningful. This has been extended to include the meanings conveyed by non-linguistic signs in connection with linguistic signs in public space (see [Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010](#); [Milani, 2013, 2014](#)). The process of making spaces socially meaningful through public signage has been described using terms like “spatialization” ([Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010: 7](#)) or “semioscape” ([Lazar, 2018](#)).

Early linguistic landscape research was largely limited to studying the occurrence of “languages”, thus yielding evidence of the multilingual and translanguing practices in (often urban) public spaces (see [Shohamy, 2019](#) for an overview). These issues may be of limited relevance to the present study, but what multilingual public spaces clearly show is that linguistic landscapes are an indicator of who occupies a position of relative power in a certain place (see [Bourdieu, 1991](#); [Landry and Bourhis, 1997](#)). One indicator is the frequency in which the linguistic practices associated with a certain social group surface. Another indicator is the nature of the linguistic material that is publicized in a top-down fashion, through official authorities and agents of the state, i.e. institutions that are associated with official policies of the dominant culture (see [Ben-Rafael, 2008](#); [Ben-Rafael et al., 2010: xvii](#)). The voices of marginalized social groups are more likely to surface in the bottom-up linguistic practices of autonomous individuals and corporate bodies.

Linguistic landscapes have been shown to draw on both the indexical and symbolic meanings of signs ([Scollon and Scollon, 2003](#)). [Malinowski \(2008: 110\)](#) points out that signs may “index” the social community in which they are used and thus are not a matter of intentional design or individual agency. Symbolic uses of signs, by contrast, constitute an intentional manipulation, because they associate a product or service with a particular value for commercial purposes.

Four perspectives on linguistic landscapes have been highlighted by previous research (see [Ben-Rafael, 2008](#)): 1. the presentation-of-self perspective, according to which linguistic landscapes are a matter of social actors presenting themselves as different from others for commercial purposes; 2. the “good reasons” perspective, which predicts that the make-up of linguistic landscapes is governed by considerations of the values, needs, propensities and tastes of a certain target group; 3. the collective identity perspective, which is based on the notion that social actors use signage to index a belonging to a certain social group; and 4. the power-related perspective, which asks to what extent a certain social group can represent its own communicative patterns in the public sphere. The individual perspectives may exhibit various degrees of relevance in a specific linguistic landscape.

Linguistic landscape research has demonstrated that sexuality can be an enlightening entry point when analyzing the social significance of signage in public space (see, for example, [Milani, 2018a](#), for a recent special issue on this topic, or [Lazar, 2018](#); [Milani, 2018b](#)). Although sexuality-related linguistic landscape research is a fairly recent phenomenon, it can be seen as a continuation of earlier work at the interface of (mainly urban) geography and sexuality (for example, [Bell and Binnie, 2004](#); [Leap, 2005](#)). Sexuality-related aspects analyzed using a linguistic landscape approach to date include homonationalism in Tel Aviv ([Milani and Levon, 2016](#); [Milani et al., 2018](#)), sexual citizenship at the Johannesburg Pride Festival ([Milani, 2015](#)), female sexuality discourses surfacing in Brooklyn ([Trinch and Snajdr, 2018](#)), Tokyo’s gay district ([Baudinette, 2017, 2018](#)), restroom graffiti at a university in Rio de Janeiro ([de Vasconcelos Barboza and Borba, 2018](#)), the sexualization of travel spaces in the city of Basel ([Piller, 2010](#)), and sexuality-related graffiti in Athens and Belgrade ([Canakis and Kersten-Pejanic, 2016](#)).

While previous work has primarily focused on public signage in metropolitan areas to document heteronormative discourses or contexts where same-sex sexualities compete with the heterosexual mainstream, the present study concentrates on a suburban space on the outskirts of Fort Lauderdale that is dominated by the representation of same-sex sexualities as the norm. Therefore, it makes a complementary contribution to research on sexualized linguistic landscapes.

The work of [Baudinette \(2017, 2018\)](#) on the linguistic landscape of Tokyo’s gay district is an important point of orientation for the present study, because it focuses on an exceptional space where alternative sexualities are discursively produced as

normal, privileged, or at least as a strong competition to heterosexuality-by-default. Baudinette (2017) shows how the signage (male images, script, color, language choice) in the district is used to discursively construct three types of gay masculinity. Drawing on interviews with gay men during a walk through the district, Baudinette (2018) shows more specifically how the use of English (vs. Japanese) within the linguistic landscape is associated with a gay representation for the informants. This representation orients to notions of cosmopolitanism and globalness, that is, a wider sphere that transcends the more traditional sexuality-related ideologies that are perceived to be tied to the national Japanese realm.

While it is issues of language choice that play a central role in the gay district of Tokyo, the linguistic landscape of Wilton Drive under investigation here largely draws on other linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of meaning making to mark the Drive as a gay space. The basic research questions are thus: How is a gay association marked in a largely monolingual (native English) linguistic landscape? And how are sexual normativities discursively constructed through public (linguistic and non-linguistic) signage on Wilton Drive?

3. Methodological considerations

The study presented here draws on common techniques of linguistic landscape methodology (see Barni and Bagna, 2015; Gorter, 2019; Lou, 2017) and follows Milani's (2013) call for queer linguistic analysis to engage with multimodal meaning making in situ. The data were collected during a walk on Wilton Drive, which I undertook on 27 August 2019, from 9.45am to 12.15pm. This time was chosen because it allowed me to inspect the linguistic landscape by daylight and at a time when the Drive is less populated than in the evenings or at night, when many people visit the bars, restaurants and clubs. I was interested in how public signage (permanently) turns the Drive into a gay space, rather than in how the crowds temporarily contribute to this effect. Some residents I talked to claimed that Wilton Drive is a "normal" – meaning not predominantly gay – community throughout the day (see Baudinette, 2017: 509 for the same perception in Tokyo). My analysis thus concentrates on gay signage that is deemed fairly unobtrusive to the public eye and qualifies as "banal sexed signs" (Milani, 2014), which have the cumulative effect of creating a gay space.

To observe such instances of gay spatialization, I started my walk from 1220 NE 4th Avenue and walked northwards on Wilton Drive up to where it crosses NE 26th Street, and then back southwards on the Drive up to NE 20th Street, thus covering both sides of the street in the heart of Wilton Drive (see Fig. 1). Throughout my walk, I took a total of 300 photos of the landscape, including restaurants, storefronts, advertisements, road signs and other aspects that may contribute to making the Drive a gay space. The aim was to cover the public signage on Wilton Drive comprehensively, that is, photos of all signs on the Drive were taken and then later analysed against the backdrop of the research questions formulated in Section 2. The only two buildings I entered, at the end of my walk, were the Stonewall Gallery Wilton Manors (a local branch of the Stonewall National Museum) and the thrift store Out of the Closet. These two places were selected because they were deemed good entry points for a more detailed look at the culturally (museum) and commercially (store) shaped discourses that are prevalent on the

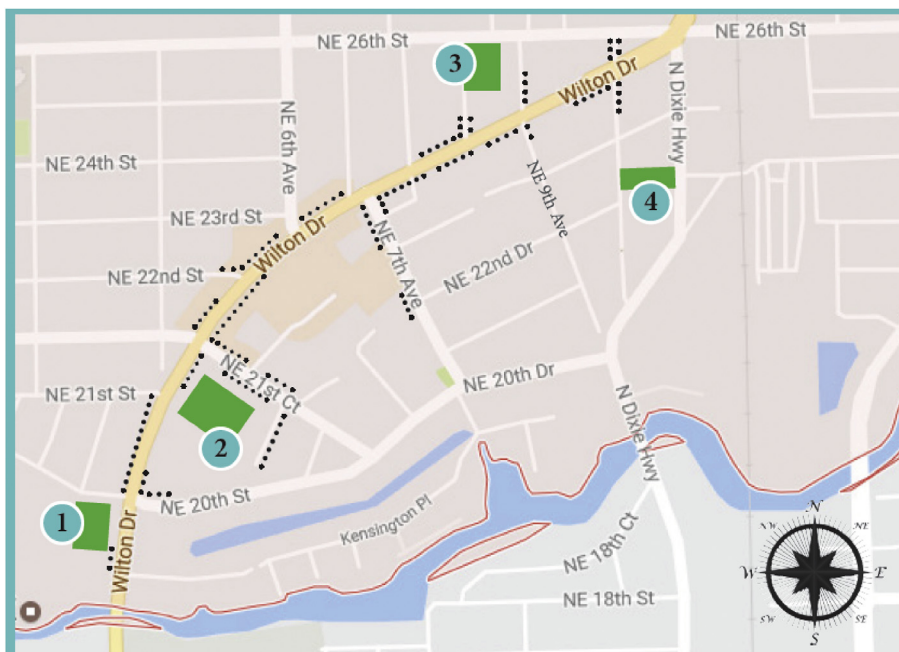


Fig. 1. Map of Wilton Drive (source: wiltondrive.org).

Drive. The photos were systematically inspected for linguistic and non-linguistic signs that constitute direct or indirect indexes of LGBT life. To cross-check my analysis, I consulted two gay male informants who live in the area. I also collected free printed materials (flyers, magazines) available on the Drive and consulted the official website of Wilton Drive (wiltondrive.org; Wilton Drive, 2019a).

It needs to be acknowledged that I approach Wilton Drive from a specific perspective. Even though I had been living in Florida for almost two years when I went on the walk, it was the first time I went to the Drive during the daytime. I had gone out on the Drive twice before, but always at night. My perspective is therefore an explorative one – that of a foreigner who is somewhat familiar with gay culture. It is also important to note that the analysis of my walk experience implicitly draws on two types of contrasts: comparing the daytime walk to my previous night-time impressions of the same location, and comparing the central part of the Drive (from 20th to 26th Street and back) to the initial part (up to 20th Street) of my walk, which constitutes a clearly less gay-centered space.

Using the data outlined above, I perform a critical discourse analysis (see Krzyżanowski, 2011a, 2011b) of the discursive practices that render Wilton Drive a space where being gay is seen as normal or even expected. The analysis includes linguistic and non-linguistic public signs that possess sexuality-related meaning potential. Besides semantic descriptions, the analysis incorporates syntactic (positioning of signs in relation to other signs) and pragmatic (connection to social context) aspects, as is common in the field of critical geographical semiotics (Zebracki and Milani, 2017: 428). In order to demonstrate that the discursive patterns outlined possess a broader relevance in this context, an effort was made to incorporate a larger number of signs in the analysis, since cherry-picking only a few signs cannot convey how common the detected discourses are.

4. Analysis

4.1. Sexual identity discourses: creating a gay space

At first glance, Wilton Drive appears to be located in a relatively normal suburban community. It provides its residents with common amenities: restaurants, shops, hairdressers, a police station, the city hall, a park with tennis courts, a museum and a concert hall. On closer inspection, however, the Drive exhibits numerous signs that mark it as a gay space, even at daytime. There are several newspaper stands on the Drive, offering gay-themed magazine publications free of charge (*South Florida Gay News*, *Mirror*, *SFGN Guide*). Rainbow flags, hearts and ribbons – traditional gay pride symbols – can be seen throughout the Drive. They are often used to indicate that a restaurant or shop is gay-friendly or to specifically target gay customers (Fig. 2). For example, several storefronts display an American Express sign showing the word *Welcome* on a rainbow flag, with the slogan *Proud to celebrate diversity* printed underneath. The rainbow flag is further echoed in various advertisements and logos on the Drive, promoting products and services ranging from alcoholic beverages to barbershops and night clubs (Fig. 3).

The gift shop To The Moon presents various fun gifts in its window, many of which have some connection to gay culture or possess gay camp potential (Fig. 4): a life-size replica of the British Queen, the lesbian tennis player Billie Jean King as an



Fig. 2. Rainbow flags, hearts and ribbons at storefronts.



Fig. 3. Rainbow colors incorporated in advertisements and logos. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)

action figure, a male mermaid doll wearing a flamingo floating tire, doll imitations of drag artist Ru Paul and the four main characters from the TV series *Golden Girls*, mugs with photos of pop artist Prince and other gay icons, and numerous accessories in rainbow colors. At the political level, we find troll dolls making fun of President Trump, who is generally perceived as not supporting the LGBT community. Other public figures who have supported LGBT issues in the past, such as politician Hillary Clinton and lawyer Ruth Bader Ginsburg, are purchasable as true-to-original action figures in the shop.

Besides these visual symbols indexing gay culture, one finds other signage on the Drive that works multimodally, that is, visual and verbal signs interact to construct gay-related messages. Two such examples are depicted in Fig. 5. *Maker's Mark* uses the headline *Enjoy it straight, or not.* to advertise its whisky, playing on the ambiguity of the form *straight*. The latter can be read as denoting a way of enjoying the drink, namely in its “pure” form. In an alternative reading, the adjective *straight* qualifies the drinking person as “heterosexual”, with the addition of the tag *or not* conveying the message that non-heterosexual people are also included in the group of consumers. This last reading may be less plausible out of context,



Fig. 4. Gift shop displaying gay camp objects.



Fig. 5. Multimodal sexual identity construction: Ads for alcoholic beverages.

but it is supported here by the bottleneck depicted right below the headline in the ad, which looks as if a rainbow-color coating has just been poured over the bottle, making the product gay-compatible, so to speak.

In a similar vein, the Absolut Vodka advertisement (Fig. 5) depicts a whole bottle in rainbow colors. The gay association of the product is further supported through the text displayed on the bottle, which is reproduced in (1).

- (1)
We are proud to believe in equality. We believe that the world needs to change. Change so that each and every individual can be proud, and decide for themselves who they belong with, live with and love.
Since 1979, Absolut has been supporting the rights of proud people around the world. We will never stop.

The text uses buzzwords of LGBT political activism (*proud, equality, supporting, rights, change*) to target gay customers. Addressee-exclusive first person plural pronouns are used to refer to the company as a social actor (*we are proud, we believe, we will never stop*), thus forming a group distinct from LGBT people, who are referred to in the third person. Note that these third person references (*each and every individual, themselves, they, proud people*) are lexically gender- and sexuality-neutral, i.e., on the surface, the ad is maximally inclusive, as there is no specification that the product is for female, male, gay, lesbian or straight people. However, the rainbow design of the bottle and the use of the adjective *proud* suggest an LGBT-related reading to onlookers familiar with LGBT culture.

Another cue is the statement that the proud people targeted *decide for themselves who they belong with, live with and love*, which implies that other (not proud, maybe closeted) people let others or society at large make such decisions for them. This can be read, on the one hand, as a (strategic) awareness of the heteronormative pressures on people who engage in same-sex relations and, on the other hand, as a privileging of open and out gay people. The three verb phrases used underline central aspects of the discursive construction of sexuality and, therefore, draw a fairly comprehensive picture, covering sexual group identity (*belong with*), romantic relationships (*live with*), and desire (*love*).

Apart from these examples, we find numerous other instances in which linguistic signage is centrally involved in expressing a gay targeting (2):

- (2)
 (a) *Pride, Community, Support* (slogan of the foundation Latinos Salud)
 (b) *Cheap and proud of it!* (slogan of the GYM Sportsbar)
 (c) *Gaysha* (name of a sushi bar)
 (d) *PRAY THE GAY AWAY - A TRUE LIFE COMING OUT COMEDY* (advertisement for a theater play)
 (e) *H. H. Kloset* (name of a men's clothing store)

The foundation Latinos Salud, which provides counselling to the Latino gay population, uses the slogan *Pride, Community, Support* (2a) underlined by rainbow colors, thus drawing on common catchwords and visual symbols of politicized gay

identification. The GYM Sportsbar uses the slogan *Cheap and proud of it!* (2b), incorporating the adjective *proud*, a catchword of LGBT empowerment, and playing on the ambiguity of the adjective *cheap*, which literally means “inexpensive” but is understood in sexual contexts metaphorically as “easily laid.” Note that this points to a privileging of a particular type of gay man, namely one who has a casual attitude toward superficial sexual encounters. A sushi bar carries the name *Gaysha* (2c) – a blending of the Japanese word *geisha* and *gay*. The restaurant self-identifies as a *New World Sushi Bar* on its front door, which suggests that the *gay* in *Gaysha* is an American innovation.

Several posters on the Drive advertise the theater play *PRAY THE GAY AWAY*, which is described as *A TRUE LIFE COMING OUT COMEDY* (2d). The left half of the poster shows a pink closet door, and two naked men are depicted peering at the viewer from behind the closet. One man is positioned on top of the other man, and the man at the bottom is holding his index finger against his lips, as if asking onlookers to remain silent or not betray something. The ad thus plays in a humorous way (*comedy*, *pray away*) with linguistic (*coming out*, *gay*) and non-linguistic (closet, pink, silencing gesture) features stereotypically connected to gay culture.

A shop selling *Contemporary Men's Apparel, Fragrances & Accessories* is called *H. H. Kloset* (2e). The name plays with the double meaning of the *closet* as a place where one can store apparel and accessories and as a metaphorical place where gay people are conceptualized to be before their coming out. What the examples in (2) have in common is that they use gay identity-related buzzwords and visual symbols, mostly in a playful way.

Other gay indexes on the Drive are more cryptic and require some insider knowledge to be decoded as such. One example can be found in the name *Bona Italian Restaurant* (logo in Fig. 6), with *bona* not being an Italian word, as may be thought, but rather a signature word of the former British gay male variety Polari, where it means “good, attractive” (Baker, 2002). An additional motivation for the name may be its phonetic similarity with the English word *boner* “hard-on” (note that throughout the Drive, we get many lexical items that potentially denote male genitals, but none that denote female genitals). The logo of the restaurant shows a silhouette of the head of an ancient Roman soldier whose helmet crest is in rainbow colors. The phrase *Roman soldier* is also a slang expression for a stereotypically gay male sexual practice (Urban Dictionary, 2019). The restaurant has existed since 1979 and used to have a different logo consisting of a heart-shaped Italian flag. The Roman soldier symbol and the rainbow crest are, therefore, recent developments that can be understood as a response to the social context on the Drive.

Another example is a blue-painted men's clothing store of the name *True Blue Clothing* (logo in Fig. 6). This name is also the title of an album and a famous song by pop star Madonna, who is widely celebrated as a gay icon. Various aspects mark the shop as connected to masculinity: the symbolism of the color blue (with *true blue* suggesting an interpretation as “truly masculine”), the motorcyclist in the logo, and photos of male models.

The name of the *GYM Sportsbar* (logo in Fig. 6) exploits the fact that, for many gay men, going to the gym to exercise and meet other men is an integral part of their lifestyle. At the same time, the capitalization of *GYM* facilitates a reading as an acronym standing for phrases like *gay young male/man/men*.

We also find signage that may not seem connected to gay life in other contexts but receives a gay meaning potential on the Drive. The name of the restaurant chain *Dairy Queen* (DQ) (Fig. 7), for example, contains the noun *queen*, which in gay male circles is commonly used to refer to an effeminate gay man or, within compounds, to a (gay) man who shows a strong (often sexual) liking for something (*a size queen*, for example, is somebody who likes large penises). The latter meaning, in connection with the term *dairy* may be taken to suggest a preference for white men as sexual partners (like in *rice queen* as a slang term for a man favoring Asian men), or for *milk*, which is sometimes used as a euphemism for *sperm* (Urban Dictionary, 2019). In addition to this, the logo of the company displays the two letters *DQ* inside a red shape that is reminiscent of lips or a mouth and can, therefore, also activate a sexual reading. In other places outside the Drive, one finds advertisements for the DQ



Fig. 6. Logos with covert gay messages.



Fig. 7. Contextually activating sexual meaning potential: Dairy Queen.

restaurant on Wilton Drive that use the headline *We Treat you right!* (Fig. 7), exploiting the ambiguity of the phrase *to treat somebody right*, which in certain contexts is used to describe sexual favors. We can see in examples like this that the creation of a gay space is a two-way process. On the one hand, certain signification practices index gayness, and, on the other hand, the gayness of the context invites one to apply gay readings to signage that is generally not viewed along these lines.

Some signs exhibit a mismatch between linguistic and visual modes of representation in the sense that the verbal part may explicitly claim that a product is for everybody (that is, for people of all sexual identifications), while visual elements in the context suggest a privileging of same-sex sexualities. A sign in one shop window states, for example, that *EVERYONE SHOPS HERE*, but the letters of the sexually neutral indefinite pronoun *EVERYONE* are in rainbow colors, and so are the shopping bags depicted underneath the slogan (Fig. 8). Similarly, a Pinnacle Vodka advertisement uses the headline *EVERY FLAVOR FOR EVERY KIND OF LOVE*, and the hashtag *#loveinallflavors* beneath its logo (Fig. 8). The logo, however, shows a rainbow over a mountain range, which suggests a privileging of non-heterosexual love. That the gay meaning potential in these examples is conveyed at the visual level indicates that a verbal specification (“gay and straight people shop here”) may be deemed too risky, as it may be thought to deter heterosexual customers.

One institution on the Drive that centrally contributes to an affirmative presentation of a gay-identified community is the Stonewall Gallery. The gallery hosts exhibits documenting US LGBT history on permanent display as well as temporary LGBT-themed exhibitions. Most of the exhibits possess a strong leaning towards a politicized approach to sexual identity, as illustrated in Fig. 9, which shows a photo of a boy holding up a sign saying *IF I END UP GAY DON'T TAKE MY RIGHTS AWAY*. But even on the outside of the museum, one finds a plethora of gay-related signage. In front of the gallery, a colorful sign is placed



Fig. 8. Visually disambiguating verbal all-inclusiveness.



Fig. 9. Sexual identity signage at the Stonewall Gallery Wilton Manors.

on the sidewalk, informing passers-by that this is a *FREE LGBT MUSEUM* (Fig. 9). The side wall of the gallery has a poster advertising the museum attached to it, which displays a collage of pop art photos of LGBT celebrities such as Ricky Martin, Martina Navratilova, Neil Patrick Harris, Anderson Cooper, Suze Orman, Wanda Sykes, Tammy Baldwin and Laverne Cox.

I discuss two of the three museum windows below (section 4.3) as examples of the discursive construction of sexual practices and desires. The third museum window, however, has a clear identity focus. Besides thanking people for their donations to the museum, the window displays the following text:

(3)
 THIS IS YOUR STORY. THANK YOU FOR HELPING US TELL IT.
 OUR MISSION: Stonewall National Museum & Archives promotes understanding through preserving and sharing the proud culture of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and their significant role in American society.

There are several aspects that make this passage remarkable in its linguistic make-up. The direct address through second person pronouns (*your, you*) implies that onlookers are assumed to be LGBT subjects, while the museum takes on the role of a service provider for customers, using the addressee-exclusive “company we” (*help us, our mission*) to identify itself. At the end of the passage, LGBT subjects are referred to in the third person (*their significant role*). This referential strategy indicates that they are conceptualized as a different group of people than the museum officials and thus has a distancing effect. It is also stated that LGBT culture is *proud*, but the experiencer of this pride is not specified, which suggests that it may be LGBT people themselves rather than the museum officials. In other words, there is no creation of an LGBT in-group through an inclusive use of *we* or a shared feeling of pride, which has the effect of dissociating the museum curators from the LGBT onlookers. It is noteworthy that inclusive *we* is also not used in connection with other gay-related signification practices on the Drive (compare examples under (1) and (2)). So instead of discursively creating a space by and for LGBT people (“We’re here. We’re queer...”), the general strategy adopted on the Drive can be verbalized as “You’re queer. And we’re there for you.”

4.2. Gender identity discourses: creating a gay male space

In (3) above, we see an inclusive listing of *lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender* issues that is to some extent true for the museum, but clearly not for signage practices on Wilton Drive as a whole, which are dominated by a gay male representation. Besides the museum, the *LGBT+ Visitor Center* and the *LGBT Chamber of Commerce* are in fact the only other spots on the Drive, where lesbian, bi and trans subjects are co-represented with gay male ones.

That Wilton Drive is mainly a gay male space becomes fully visible at night, through the presence of gay men inside and in front of the bars and restaurants. During the day, there are no larger groups of people on the Drive. Almost all people I encountered during my walk were on their own, going about their everyday business or running errands (note the contrast with Rothaus’s (2011) quote at the beginning of this article: no hand-holding same-sex couples). However, there was a strong preponderance of male people, with female people accounting for less than 10% of all passers-by I saw. This impression is also supported by representational practices on Wilton Drive’s official website (Wilton Drive, 2019a), which shows photos almost exclusively of men. In fact, the only female person on the site occurs in a black-and-white photo, inviting users to *Take a look at the history of Wilton Drive*, thus creating a contrast between former times, when the presence

of women on the Drive was still deemed normal, and today's male predominance, as represented in the colored glossy photographs on the website.

Another domain of male predominance on the Drive is advertisements. Nearly all ads on the Drive that depict human beings feature male people exclusively, thus creating a (mainly) male gaze on the male body. These depictions are often openly sexualized, showing particular types of naked male bodies, namely athletic ones, in erotic poses (Fig. 10).

Certain products and services are advertised using gender- and sexuality-neutral language but receive a gay male meaning through the visual juxtaposition of the exposed athletic male body. For example, a shop that offers *Custom Framing & Galleries* displays paintings of scantily clad male models exclusively, and a similar store offering *Custom Picture Framing* displays four pictures of male-male couples in various sexual poses and one male nude in its window (Fig. 11).

Another representational strategy is the depiction of two male people in the same ad, which suggests gay male coupledness or at least a product or service that is gay-male friendly. Fig. 12 shows an advertisement for apartments in Wilton Tower, which uses the headline *Celebrating All Lifestyles* and features two smiling young men as a visual. The man on the left is sitting, while the man on the right is standing and resting his arm on the other man's shoulder, thus constructing a physical closeness that is suggestive of male-male intimacy. The picture displays two types of masculinity in stereotypical roles: the more stereotypically masculine man with short hair and beard being in an elevated position, as if protecting the other man, who has longer hair and no beard.

The all-inclusiveness of the headline clashes drastically with the absence of couples other than gay male ones, both in the advertisement and on the entire Drive. The marked absence of female-male couples in this space rules out a heterosexual or even heteronormative perception of the location. Contrary to what the headline claims, the advertisement, and by extension



Fig. 10. Eroticizing the athletic male body.



Fig. 11. Eroticizing male-male intimacy.



Fig. 12. Depicting (potential) male couples.

Wilton Drive, celebrate one particular lifestyle, namely one that can be described as gay male, white, middle-class, domestic and centering on consumption, coinciding with Duggan's (2002) description of "the new homonormativity."

The Wilton Tower advertisement is exceptional in its explicitness concerning gay male intimacy and coupledness. Most advertisements featuring two male people ultimately leave it open whether the depicted men form actual gay couples, but the close physical proximity is, in most cases, suggestive enough to spark onlookers' gay male imagination. The mybocasmile.com ad in Fig. 12 is such an example. A gay male intimacy reading is supported by the fact that the dollar sign in the price information \$69 is barely visible, thus inviting a reading of 69 as a synonym for a sexual position that is stereotypically popular among gay men.

At the verbal level, potential male coupledness can also be found where the owners of businesses are referred to by means of conjoined male names, as, for example, in the name *Shawn & Nick's Courtyard Café*. Note that, in this example, the grammatical construction of the name supports a couple reading since the genitive inflection modifies the entire conjoined name phrase (*Shawn & Nick's* rather than *Shawn's & Nick's*).

Male predominance is, furthermore, linguistically produced through business names like *Ron's Barbershop* (using a male personal name to suggest a service for men by men), *Dudes Barber* (using a male personal noun to delineate the target group), *Richard's – Men's Hair Shop*, or *Jimmy Cohen's Day Spa for men* (combining the two previous strategies). Male-as-norm thinking is expressed in the name of the foundation *Latinos Salud*, which draws on a Spanish generic masculine form (*Latinos*) to describe its target group. A coffee house carries the name *JAVA BOYS* and its logo depicts two nude male figures viewed from behind, touching each other with their arms and feet (Fig. 13).

A fashion store calls itself *Some Men Like It Haute* (Fig. 13), a pun on the (gender-neutral) name of the famous Marilyn Monroe film *Some Like It Hot*. Exchanging the adjective *hot* with the nearly homophonous form *haute* creates associations with fashion (*haute couture*) and carries gay male camp potential through the use of French (Harvey, 2000). The English word *hot* has sexuality-related meaning potential, as it can be used to describe somebody who is sexually very attractive ("He's hot.") or a state of sexual arousal ("She got me so hot."). As we can see in Fig. 13, the word *Men* is positioned above the line *Some Like It Haute*, printed in red and linked to an insert sign, suggesting that somebody has edited or corrected the sentence to make it male-specific. In accordance with this, the store is described in male-specific terms with the phrases *Men's Fine Fashion Consignment* and *Fashion Reinvestment for the Well Dressed Man*. Also note that the film *Some Like It Hot*, which is intertextually echoed here, features men dressing up as women.

Finally, the delivery service *DD – DELIVERY DUDES* stresses in its name that it provides a male service. The company uses the slogan *WE DELIVER WITH THE DUDES*, which is likely to be read as a claim that men deliver certain products but also allows for a more objectifying reading of products delivered with the men as an extra service. The verb *deliver* also carries meaning potential related to sexual performance. The male sexual performance reading is further supported by the fact that the abbreviation *DD* can, as a slang term, stand for various phrases containing the noun *dick* (for example, *dick deprived*, *deep dick* and *daddy dick*; Urban Dictionary, 2019).

Besides the use of lexically male linguistic forms to mark male territory, lexically gender-neutral forms (like *friends*, *all*, *couples*) are generally disambiguated as male through referential gender on the Drive (see examples in Fig. 14). For example, a dry cleaner's shop tries to gain new customers by asking passers-by *REFER YOUR Friends to OXXO*. The ad shows a male person



Fig. 13. Signage creating a male space.



Fig. 14. Referentially disambiguating gender-neutral messages as male-specific.

with a speech bubble containing the sentence *TELL ALL OF YOUR FRIENDS!* The addressee depicted in the advertisement is also male, thus suggesting that this is about male-male friendships.

Another store displays a series of advertisements for wellness treatments, claiming *Beauty and Longevity for All*, but all ads show male models. In another ad, the *Green Jade Mens [sic] Spa* offers a *Couples Room*. The noun *couple* is lexically gender-neutral and would in most contexts be interpreted as referring to heterosexual couples by default. However, as the spa carries a male-specific name and the picture displays a male person giving a massage to a male customer, male-male couples are constructed as target group.

The few lexically female forms to be found on the Drive are used to refer to gay men. A bar named The Pub announces its drag shows under the titles *The Ladies who Brunch* and *Show Girls*, both illustrated with photos of men in drag. Besides female nouns (*ladies, girls*), the female names of the drag queens (*Erika Norell, Rianna Petrone, Kalah Mendoza, Nicole Halliwell, Missy Meyakie LePaige* etc) fulfil a similar gender-crossing function. Such practices of “inverted appellation” (Bunzl, 2000) or linguistic “gender inversion” (Harvey, 2000) have been shown to be typical of certain gay male subcultures and form an integral component of gay male camp talk.

The fact that nearly all people pictured in advertisements on the Drive are male also means that the depiction of female people is a dispreferred move and thus may require additional mitigation work. This is illustrated by the ad in Fig. 15, which shows an individual female social actor but, at the same time, makes sure that it provides a reason for this female presence in the first line: she is an attorney who specializes in *LGBT WILLS AND TRUSTS*. Also note that the logo in the ad contains a shape



Fig. 15. Legitimizing the presence of women through LGBT-relevance.

that is reminiscent of a pink triangle, which also suggests a link to gay identities. In other words, an almost apologetic stance on the depiction of women is adopted here.

Viewed in total, the personal representational practices on the Drive convey an image of homonormativity in the sense that same-sex sexualities, and more specifically, gay men are treated as the contextual norm, with lesbian sexualities and trans identities being as othered and excluded as heterosexualities.

4.3. Discourses of sexual desires and practices: what gay men like and do

When investigating the discursive construction of desire and sexual practices on the Drive, the first aspect to note is the commonness with which they are represented in this public space. Suburban neighborhoods are normally not spaces where one would expect to find overt communication about such issues. We already saw that the eroticization of the athletic male body plays a central role on the Drive, but representational practices go well beyond this.

Outside the central part of the Drive, we find a bar that self-identifies as *A Levi/Leather/Uniform Bar*. This description refers to the eroticization or fetishization of certain types of clothing that are associated with some gay male subcultures (see Barrett, 2017). The actual name of the bar, *Ramrod*, oscillates semantically between literal and non-literal, sexual meanings. In its literal meaning, the term is connected to the military field and denotes a device used to push ammunition up a gun shaft. Such a device is also depicted in the advertisement of the bar (Fig. 16), where it is shown to pierce (or, read in a more sexual fashion, penetrate) the letter *O* of the name *RAMROD*. Non-literally, the term *ramrod* is used as a metaphor for the penis. Connected to this, the verb *ramrod* may be used to describe any kind of penetrative sexual intercourse, and the noun *ramrod* can denote a sex toy used for penetrating or, as an exocentric compound, a (less intelligent) man who frequently performs penetrative intercourse (Urban Dictionary, 2019). All of these meanings play a role in erotic practices stereotypically associated with certain groups of gay men, uniting references to an eroticized body part (the penis, the “rod”), sexual practices (penetrating, “ramming”) and a context of potential all-male intimacy (the military). The vulgarity of the signage employed also indexes a preference for certain types of sexual activities (more “wild” than “mild” in common gay parlance; Adams-Thies, 2019). The sexualization is further underlined by the word *PRIVATE* placed under the bar’s logo.

Another place where I could find similarly explicit references to sexual activity was both inside and outside the Stonewall Gallery, which at the time of my walk hosted an exhibition on gay male porn pulp literature (Fig. 17). Two of the museum windows present the name of the current exhibition (4a) and use classic book covers with sexually explicit titles (4b to i) as illustrative examples.

- (4)
 (a) *PULP – EROTIC PAPERBACKS in GAY MALE CULTURE*
 (b) *HOT LIVING: Erotic Stories About Safer Sex* (by John Preston)
 (c) *STUD* (by Phil Andros)
 (d) *I ONCE HAD A MASTER AND OTHER TALES OF EROTIC LOVE* (by John Preston)
 (e) *DIFFERENT: An Anthology of Homosexual Short Stories* (by Stephen Wright)
 (f) *Whisper His Sin* (by Vin Packer)
 (g) *WHEN IN ROME DO...* (by Phil Andros)
 (h) *Mr. Benson* (by John Preston)
 (i) *Inside the “MOD” SODOMIST* (by Joe Berne)



Fig. 16. Ramrod Bar advertisement.



Fig. 17. Gay male porn pulp exhibition at the Stonewall Gallery.

Of course, these book titles (4b to i) are today mainly of historical value, as they describe male same-sex sexualities partly in a pre-Stonewall fashion, using semantically negative terminology like *homosexual*, *sin* or *sodomist*. Therefore, they have an important consciousness-raising function for onlookers. Central linguistic elements in the book titles include lexically male names and pronouns (*his*, *Mr. Benson*), male nouns denoting sexual roles (*stud*, *master*, *sodomist*) and explicit references to sexual activity (*safer sex*, *do*, *inside*) and desire (*hot*, *erotic*, *love*, *sin*). Also note the complete absence of female forms in the titles, which distinguishes the books on display from straight or lesbian porn literature. Some book covers depict scantily clad male figures. The oldest book displayed, *Whisper His Sin* (4f), depicts a woman seductively approaching a man who is looking the other way. It documents a time period when male same-sex desire was not yet treated as a legitimate subject in its own right but was invariably viewed in relation to heterosexuality as the norm and thus as an aberration. Accordingly, male same-sex love is described as *a strange and twilight love* on the book cover. This is the only picture of a female-male couple I could find on the Drive.

- (5)
 (a) *Making Porn* (advertised theater play)
 (b) *Gallery XO* (name of an art gallery shop)
 (c) *Grindin'?* (advertisement of the AIDS Healthcare Foundation)
 (d) *Ball* (name of a beachwear store)
 (e) *Johnsons* (name of a bar)
 (f) *ROCKHARD* (name of a sex shop)



Fig. 18. Advertisement of the AIDS Healthcare Foundation.

Other verbal references to sexual activity on the Drive include those illustrated in (5). Example (5a) is taken from a poster advertising a theater play of the name *Making Porn* (depicting a naked man with his private parts covered by a clapperboard). An art gallery on the Drive carries the name *Gallery XO* (5b; Fig. 11). The letter sequence *XO* stands for “hugs and kisses” in digital communication, and the gallery windows exhibit pictures of male couples.

The AIDS Healthcare Foundation promotes its free checks for sexually transmitted diseases by ads displayed on public trash bins that address onlookers using the question *Grindin'?* (5c; Fig. 18). This slang verb can be used to denote sexual activities in which one person rubs their body against another person’s penis, often while dancing. In gay male culture, the verb also creates a connection to the gay male hook-up app *Grindr*. This second reading is supported by the black mask symbol forming the dot of the question mark, which resembles the icon of the app, and by the depiction of an eggplant – a symbol that is commonly employed by users of the app as an icon standing for “penis.”

The window of the beachwear shop *Ball* (5d) shows ball symbols and the word *ball* in alternation, forming a line that functions like a caption to the male-bodied display dummies wearing bathing trunks on display. The name of the gay bar *Johnsons* (5e) exploits the ambiguity between a common English family name and the use of the word *johnson* as a synonym for penis.

The Drive also hosts a gay male sex shop of the name *ROCKHARD* (5f), which is reminiscent of the description of an erection, or maybe an athletic male body more generally. The shop describes itself as a *LOVERS BOUTIQUE*, using the lexically gender-neutral personal noun *lover*, but the window display makes it clear that this shop is for gay male lovers in particular: masks, hats, flags and decorations in rainbow colors, athletic male models and torso dummies presenting underwear, sex products and brands linguistically marked as male-specific (*Manfuel*), gay-specific (*Pride Play Set*) or containing (parts of) male genital terms (*Oxballs*, *Icicles*, *Pipedream*, *Doc Johnson*; *Perfect Fit*, with the letter *i* replaced by a phallus symbol). At the verbal level, highly positive descriptors are used to promise customers maximal sexual pleasure (*shockingly superior*, *maximum strength*, *amazing*, *perfect*).

The examples in (5) all contain verbal references to sexual practices (5a to c) or male genitals (5d to f). Both aspects are co-represented in the window of another store on the Drive that advertises various male enhancement products. These products supposedly facilitate a better sexual performance, promising an increase in penis size (*male enhancement pills*) and longer or more intensive erections (*a male sexual enhancer*, *maximum performance*, *wicked hard*, *super long lasting*, *larger*, *harder*, *stronger*). The verbal references to sexual activity range from vague indications (*Easy to be a man*, *Naughty Delight*) to highly explicit phrases (*Increase Stamina*, *Longer Erection*, *Lasts Longer*, *Increase Size*). Interestingly, at least two of the ads originally target the heterosexual male market, as the original product packaging depicts female-male couples making love (Fig. 19). In the adapted versions of the packagings displayed on Wilton Drive, however, the female-male couple or the head of the female person have been cut out of the picture, which can be read as a process of de-heterosexualization in response to the surrounding gay spatialization.



Fig. 19. Male sexual enhancement: Original product packagings (left) vs. adapted versions on Wilton Drive (right).

Another widespread discursive strategy of referring to sexual matters on the Drive is through humorous word plays and jokes, as illustrated in (6). These resemble the pragmatic strategy of ludicrism, described as a central component of gay male camp talk (Harvey, 2000).

(6)

(a) *What The Pho?* (name of Vietnamese restaurant)

(b) *Of course size matters... No one wants a small glass of wine!* (text on towel in a fun gift shop)

(c) *I may not Understand Football... but I do know a Tight End when I see one* (text on towel in a fun gift shop)

In the name of a Vietnamese restaurant (6a), the sexually explicit word *fuck* within the vexation phrase *what the fuck* has been replaced by the form *Pho*, which is the name of a typically Vietnamese noodle soup. Examples (6b) and (6c) are sexual jokes printed on towels sold by a fun gift shop on the Drive. The motto *size matters* is widely known as referring to penis size. In (6b), however, it is transferred to the size of wine glasses in jest. Example (6c) plays on the stereotype that gay men are not interested in or knowledgeable about American football: the phrase *tight end* denotes a position in American Football but is also a slang word for a gay man with a tight anus.

Ludicrism is a discursive device that intentionally draws on meaning ambiguities to aim at a more intensive reception, by facilitating entertainment and evoking reflexive thinking about language. It also has an important social dimension to it, since “ambiguity provides a cognitive exercise of bonding meaning to form that in turn creates social bonds among interlocutors”

(Trinch and Snajder, 2018: 225). In the space studied here, ludicism is specifically applied to the (stereotypical) representation of gay men's experiences and is therefore easily decodable as a means of gay male bonding and the marking of a gay male territory. Note that the desires and sexual practices of heterosexual or lesbian-identified people are not discursively represented at all on the Drive.

5. Conclusion

In this linguistic landscape study, we have seen that verbal and visual signage are centrally involved in making Wilton Drive a space where gay male identities and sexual practices take center stage. Linguistic and non-linguistic resources are employed in complex ways, with individual texts often using multimodal tactics to exploit gay-related meaning potential. Representational practices range from the most serious and politicized sexual signage to humorous puns and jokes about sexual matters.

Viewed in total, these practices achieve the effect of a social space that has been appropriated and is dominated by gay men and their (stereotypical) needs and experiences. In other words, three of the four perspectives on linguistic landscapes outlined in the theoretical section turn out to be important for this linguistic landscape: the collective identity perspective (the signage constructs a belonging to gay men as a social group), the good reasons perspective (the preferences and needs of gay men as a central target group become visible in the signage), and the power-related perspective (gay men are the social group that is in a position to substantially shape this linguistic landscape).

Appropriation via signage is reminiscent of diasporic communities (Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010: 8). This is maybe not surprising, given that ethnic minorities are in general marginalized and stigmatized in society in a similar way to same-sex identified people. Based on this reasoning, we can read the signage on Wilton Drive as a form of discursive empowerment – the result of a process of re-semiotizing a public area to lay claim on it. Contrary to pride parades, which “function as a spatial tactic for non-normative sexualities to momentarily re-claim parts of the cityscape and thus make themselves visible for audiences of (un)supportive onlookers” (Milani and Levon, 2016: 76), Wilton Drive represents a permanent space of public gay visibility. This is the cumulative effect of numerous “banal sexed signs” (Milani, 2014: 204) that reverberate with gay men's life experiences.

Keeping in mind that most public spaces are (implicitly or explicitly) heteronormative, in that they presuppose (certain) heterosexual identities, relationships, desires and practices as the norm, it can be viewed as a positive development that such alternative spaces for gay men exist in Western societies today – spaces where gay men can be themselves and among themselves without having to fear social sanctions. Still, the signification practices on Wilton Drive can also be viewed more critically, as they qualify as homonormative in various senses.

First, as outlined above, the discursive make-up suggests an atmosphere in which gay male sexualities and experiences are viewed as the local norm. However, the signage on Wilton Drive goes far beyond that, because heterosexual public representation is not just minoritized but almost completely absent, which makes the Drive as exclusive as many heteronormative public spaces that render same-sex sexualities invisible.

Second, we also see a privileging of particular types of same-sex sexualities over others. The gay male sexualities represented are primarily middle-class and white, and they focus on matters of consumption, the politicization of a community-centered gay identity, and the celebration of “wild” rather than “mild”, non-romantic forms of sexual activity. The full spectrum of lesbian sexualities and alternative gay male sexualities are as invisible as heterosexual representation. (Note that this is not an uncommon situation in spaces claimed as “gay”; see Leap, 2005: 258 on lesbian erasure in Cape Town). The inclusive picture drawn by Rothaus's (2011) quote does therefore not correspond to the social realities on the Drive today.

In its linguistic landscape, Wilton Drive shows remarkably little of the linguistic “chaos” or “jungle” (Ben-Rafael et al., 2010: xv) that we find in the representational practices of other urban linguistic landscapes. It is neither a particularly multi- or translingual space, nor is there a high degree of competing identity-related discourses or overt struggles over power and visibility. While researchers have evoked the Foucauldian concept of “heterotopia” for other sexual linguistic landscapes, to grasp the high degree of diversity and conflict in the discursive representations displayed (de Vasconcelos Barboza and Borba, 2018; Milani et al., 2018), the signage documented on Wilton Drive must strike one as unusually monotonous in its unquestioned privileging of gay men as a social group.

It is easy, and fairly common in academic circles, to criticize commercialized, neoliberal forms of homonormativity as exclusionary and therefore restricted in their emancipatory value. Duggan (2002), for example, speaks of

a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption. (Duggan, 2002: 179)

However, when comparing Duggan's description to the linguistic and non-linguistic representational evidence on Wilton Drive, it is clear that it clashes substantially with the realities on the Drive. Consumption clearly does play a role, with shops, restaurants and advertisements forming a substantial share of the space. However, based on the signage practices documented, Wilton Drive is neither a depoliticized space nor a space where explicit communication about gay sexual activity is banned and pushed to the private realm. By contrast, the permanent presence of gay signage in a suburban space cumulatively results in a novel form of predominance that possesses a confrontational value. Wilton Drive is clearly not a globalized, metropolitan area. Rather, it constitutes a spot where gay representation is transported into a social milieu that has

traditionally had very little contact with the LGBT community. In other words, the spatialization of a suburban public location as a gay “counterpublic” (Berlant and Warner, 1998: 558) might actually be a more subversive act than the presence of gay signage in big cities, which today exhibit a certain degree of LGBT visibility anyway.

Another aspect that distinguishes Wilton Manors from other, metropolitan “gay villages” is that it is not a case of “any aspiring competitive city must have a themed gay space” (Bell and Binnie, 2004: 1814) or of “gay consumers of gay villages [being] positioned as producers of spectacle for straight observers” (Bell and Binnie, 2004: 1816). The gay signage on Wilton Drive does not suggest top-down governance but rather presents itself as a community-based formation. It is interesting to compare the bottom-up signage on the Drive with the representational practices on its official website (Wilton Drive, 2019a) and in its promotional video (Wilton Drive, 2019b), which can be considered more top-down. This comparison reveals a stark contrast between the ubiquity of gay signage on the Drive and an almost complete absence of it on the website and in the video.

Simplistic notions of authorship or agency in connection with public signage do not do justice to the complex mechanisms at work. As shown in an insightful study by Malinowski (2008), it is often not a single person who produces a certain sign, and signs are generally affected both by “individual intention and social convention” (Malinowski, 2008: 116). Moreover, sign producers are, in general, not fully aware or in control of which meanings will be retrieved from their signs by onlookers. Recipients may employ less common, idiosyncratic or even resistant readings that evolve from their personal life experiences (gay men, for example, may apply gay readings to signs that are uncommon with other populations). It is therefore more productive to conceptualize public signage not as conveying absolute information values or truths but as offering a wider meaning potential from which recipients draw their readings depending on context, life experiences and personal motivations.

Still, the bottom-up gay signage practices on Wilton Drive document a high degree of intentionality and agency, because they need to go against the grain of heteronormativity as an otherwise ubiquitous dominant discourse. It is here that both the indexical and symbolic sign meanings coalesce to achieve the effect of a gay male spatialization: the signage reflects a community of sign users and is, at the same time, shaped by commercial interests that make business owners associate their products and services with gay men as a target group.

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