



MEDIA & COMMUNICATION STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Threshold event: Exploring a commercial sponsorship of LGBT rights during the Sochi games

Adam Klein^{1*}

Received: 13 June 2016
Accepted: 20 October 2016
Published: 28 October 2016

*Corresponding author: Adam Klein,
Department of Communication Studies,
Pace University, 41 Park Row #506, New
York, NY 10038, USA
E-mails: adgklein@hotmail.com,
aklein@pace.edu

Reviewing editor:
Vassil Girginov, Brunel University, UK

Additional information is available at
the end of the article

Abstract: This mixed methods study examines the 2014 Sochi Olympics as an exceptional time period in which the commercial culture shifted potentially forming a convergence of mainstream support behind LGBT rights. A content analysis initially illustrates how LGBT-coverage surged among popular US magazines and websites in sports, business, home & lifestyle, technology, and entertainment, surrounding the Olympic games. From the 2011 repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” to the 2014 Olympics, LGBT coverage among these media increased by 1024%. A deeper frame analysis of select media then reveals how within 77% of the articles, LGBT rights were aligned with “pro-Western values” set against Russia’s “oppressive antigay culture.” Twenty percent of the characterizations reflexively focused on the lack of equality in certain US/Western policies. Thus, as nations openly criticized the antigay culture of Russian society, they were also forced to confront their own definitions of LGBT equality. Finally, a political economy analysis of brand name institutions such as AT&T, Chevy, NFL, and Google found an unprecedented sponsorship of LGBT equality emerging during the Games, which continues today as major American corporations like PayPal and sports organizations like the NBA and NCAA increasingly boycott US states that discriminate against LGBT citizens.



Adam Klein

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adam Klein is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Pace University in NYC, where he teaches courses in Intercultural Communication, Propaganda, and Media, Culture & Society. He received a PhD in Mass Communication & Media Studies from Howard University in 2010. His research concentrates on the positive and destructive forces of change that impact global conflicts through the media. The subjects of his published works include antiwar activists, reformist movements in authoritarian states, hacktivists, and even hate groups, as each exist within an evolving spectrum of media influence in today’s global network of communication. The present study examines how the LGBT equal rights achieved unprecedented support and sponsorship during the 2014 Sochi Olympics, and how that platform became activated as a symbol of protest regarding human rights.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

In the face of the historic 2015 Supreme Court decision affirming the right of same-sex couples to marry across the United States, this research explores evidence of a cultural tipping point that may have been reached one year prior in the long fight for LGBT equality. This study examines the 2014 Sochi Olympics as an exceptional time period in which commercial culture shifted forming a convergence of mainstream support behind gay rights, signifying what this research calls a *threshold event* in popular culture. The study begins by presenting a model to illustrate these rare theoretical “moments” when a marginalized cause becomes an accepted part of the mainstream culture. Then, an analysis of the media coverage, advertising and expressed sponsorships of commercial institutions like AT&T, Chevy, NFL, NBC, and Google demonstrates how an unprecedented support of LGBT equality emerged amidst the Sochi games, while the Olympic platform itself became activated as a symbol of protest and human rights.

Subjects: Sport and the Media; Sport and Politics; International Media

Keywords: Sochi olympics; LGBT equal rights; threshold event model; critical mass; cognitive dissonance; commercial brands

1. Introduction

In the days that followed the Olympic games in Sochi, Russia, a handful of journalists chose to review the success or failure of the LGBT rights movement that had become an unlikely participant in this biennial global event. It began the previous summer, when the Kremlin passed strict new anti-gay legislation banning so-called “gay propaganda” in the state, and an international spotlight suddenly fell upon the LGBT community. But now, among the headlines circulating online news and the political blogosphere were a few negative reviews such as, “Why Didn’t More Olympians Speak Out in Sochi Against Russia’s Antigay Laws?” and, “At Sochi, Athletes’ Criticism of Russia’s Antigay Laws Grew Quieter” (Geoffroy, 2014; Terlep, 2014). One article, written by journalist and LGBT activist Masha Gessen (2014), concluded, “It all failed. Sure, American Apparel sold the T-shirts, hats, and bags, and Etheridge sold the song, and money was raised, and representatives of Athlete Ally and Human Rights First went to Sochi. But nothing happened there” (para. 4).

However, a broader focus on the commercial forces and popular media attention that surrounded the LGBT equal rights campaign during the 2014 Games revealed that, in fact, something had just happened there. This study examines the Sochi Olympics as a rare communication event in which a once-marginalized movement can be observed crossing over a critical threshold, from peripheral status into the popular commercial culture. The research employs a political economy and content/frame analysis to measure evidence of a cultural tipping point that may have been reached during the 2014 Olympics in the long fight for LGBT equality. In no way, however, does this study propose that the Sochi Olympics was *the* variable that allowed gay rights to finally achieve a status of social acceptance, nor is it being suggested that such equality for the LGBT community has now been fully realized. The crusade against LGBT discrimination is a centuries-old struggle that has been fought on many grounds, and will likely remain a human rights campaign in the years ahead.

But what this study does propose to evaluate is the two-month period surrounding the 2014 Olympics as, perhaps, an exceptional time period in which the popular commercial culture in the United States shifted in support of LGBT rights, while simultaneously, the once-accepted stance of anti-gay opposition moved toward the fringe. This study attempts to define this rare occurrence as a *threshold event* in popular communication, a theoretical “moment” when a marginalized cause or community becomes an accepted part of mainstream culture. In our attempt to capture such a moment with regard to LGBT equality, the research will first present a theoretical model that helps to illustrate four stages of imminent social change. The study will then examine the business, advertising, and media culture that each shifted in noticeable ways, potentially forming a new convergence of commercial support behind the LGBT community. Specifically, this mixed methods research sought to learn the following:

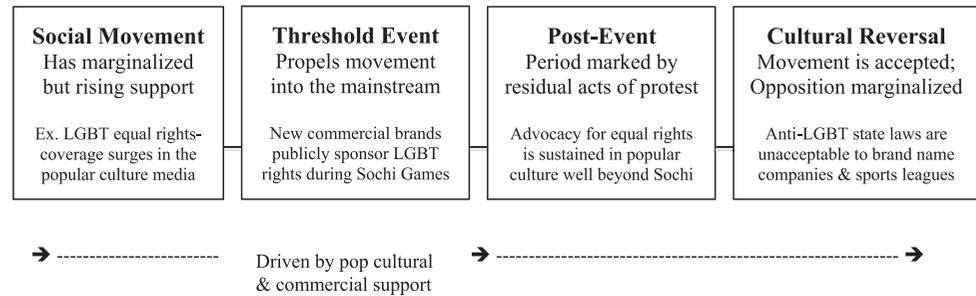
RQ1: To what degree did popular media, as represented by leading US magazines and websites from nonpolitical sectors, cover the issue of LGBT rights during the Sochi Olympics as compared to earlier seminal moments for the LGBT community?

RQ2: How did these popular media collectively frame the LGBT community and equal rights during the 2014 games?

RQ3: How did the Olympic broadcast serve as a vehicle for propelling equal rights, and what new forms of commercial advocacy emerged on behalf of LGBT rights during the games?

RQ4: Did a sustained commercial support for LGBT equal rights, and against antigay action, continue after the games?

Figure 1. Model of a threshold event.



The variables selected for the analysis were chosen to reflect the stages of the proposed Model of a threshold event (see Figure 1). They also speak to some of the larger structures of mass media and brand name commercial institutions that revolve around the popular culture, both expressing and producing it. The initial focus on popular media, for example, investigates magazines and websites as barometers for determining whether, amid the 2014 Olympics, certain cultural sectors recognized the issue of gay rights as now being germane to their communities, and potentially at levels we had not seen before Sochi. The decision to focus on nonpolitical genres in business, sports, entertainment, home/family, and technology, rather than news and politics, is an extension of the goal to capture a broader cultural response to LGBT equality, and not a purely political one. The frame analysis of select publications aims to address the deeper question of why the Sochi Olympics was perhaps able to catalyze certain forms of political engagement among corporations and media publishers in the US, where other landmark victories of LGBT politics had failed to sustain that critical mass of popular support.

The second set of research questions focused on the Sochi Olympics as a threshold event. A political-economy analysis examines the sponsorship of LGBT rights as one particular form of currency that is offered by major brand names, sometimes coming in the form of advertisements, and other times, as commercial protests. The Olympics, for example, is more than a global sporting event. Over the years, it has become an institution through which endorsements, of not only athletes, but also ideas, causes and communities, are expressed and exchanged by powerful commercial and political agencies on a global stage. This portion of the study sought to locate these public expressions of commercial support and protest that occurred, not only amidst the Olympics, but also, and perhaps especially, after the Sochi Olympics when there was the potential that the spotlight on gay rights would fade along with the winter games.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

This study aims to contribute to a growing literature that examines how the Olympics have been used as a platform for protest (Neilson, 2002; Perry & Kang, 2012), or a site where powerful representations of ethnicity, gender, and nationalism, are contested before a global stage (Angelini, MacArthur, & Billings, 2012; Billings & Angelini, 2007). This study now intersects these approaches by examining how popular media and commercial brand names recognized and sponsored LGBT rights amid the Sochi games, and helped position that cause in the mainstream.

The heightened focus on the commercial sector in this study speaks to a fundamental goal of many political-economy analyses, which is to evaluate “the structures through which a society develops and allocates its resources” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 11). The sponsorship of brand name businesses constitutes one powerful form of an allocated resource being given to a cause in society, where within the expressed support of the commercial sector, a mainstream status is being established. Corporate sponsors and advertisers, in particular, can also provide a critical perspective on popular culture, representing both a community of consumers, and the businesses that target those markets. Both demographics in this case—the citizen-consumer and the commercial interest that surrounds them—are compelling indicators of mainstream opinion because of the way they typically tend to bypass controversial issues. Herman and Chomsky (2002) observed how advertisers customarily avoid topics of controversy out of fear that they will “interfere with the buying mood of the consumer,” while

respectively, the companies they represent also do not want their brands associated with “sensitive and divisive issues” (p. 18). In other words, it is the very apolitical nature of the commercial sponsors that makes them *less* likely to recognize, let alone support, a controversial issue like gay rights—an advocacy that has subsequently been marginalized in the mainstream media for decades. And it is for this very reason that these rare political sponsorships of brand name products are ideal markers for gauging whether a significant, structural change has occurred in the popular culture.

The concept of a *critical mass* is also significant to this study. The term originally derives from physics where it is defined as “the smallest amount of fissile material needed for a sustained nuclear reaction” (Marland, 2013, para. 1). But over time, the concept has come to adopt a more figurative use in language to explain any point at which an emergent idea or product is accepted by a large enough portion of society that it becomes part of the culture. But whether we are talking about nuclear science or a social movement, the same question is being asked: What factors existed in this moment that allowed a critical mass to finally be reached, and sustained? That is the question at the heart of this research. But with shifts in popular culture, such moments are more abstract, and therefore, difficult to ascertain.

Critical mass theory has been used to explore the tipping points in support for women’s equality in political representation (Childs & Krook, 2008; Raaum, 2005; Studlar & McAllister, 2002), in which researchers are able to determine a rising number of legislative positions. The theory has also sometimes been associated with diffusions of innovation research, where with new technologies or products researchers are able to gauge the steady growth of their usage by examining evidence such as subscriptions, online views, web traffic, and other analytics that reveal fluctuating levels of interest and popularity. But for the reception of social causes, such as LGBT equality, the turning points of popular culture are much harder to establish.

Traditional methods of gauging national sentiment, such as public opinion surveys or political commentary, have each been thoroughly critiqued for their tendency to provide skewed perspectives on social issues, which are often far removed from mainstream opinion. Several scholars, for example, have studied the media’s consistent marginalization of so-called outside or dissident groups (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Boykoff & Laschever, 2011; Byerly, 2005), a trend that poses a problem not only for the activist group being relegated by the press, but also for the public that receives their version of reality. For years, as the LGBT equal rights movement gained momentum in the public square, news outlets continued to overlook or marginalize the cause, meaning they continued to offer a social representation that was behind the times.

Where news and political commentators fall short, some favor going directly to the source of social perspectives, the public themselves. Certainly, evidence of shifts in public opinion can be measured in surveys, such as one post-Sochi Olympics poll conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute, which found that 53% of Americans now supported same-sex marriage (Simpson, 2014). But to what degree does the 53% really represent popular culture? Notable studies have found flaws in polling as a reliable measure for assessing broad national sentiment (Link & Freiberg, 1942; Perry, 1979). One such concern is the likelihood that those who choose to participate in surveys still share one quality in common—a moderate interest in politics or the issue at hand—thus calling into question the reliability of a political poll as a true measure of broad opinion. Thus, rather than focusing on political comment or public polling, this research attempts to pinpoint the theoretical moment when a social movement has reached a critical mass of popular and commercial support, and the defining characteristics of that process.

Beyond popular culture, notable theories have offered insights into the process that the individual goes through when faced with new ideas that conflict with the desire for consistency. Festinger’s (1957) *cognitive dissonance* theory was concerned with how people experience and negotiate conflicting attitudes when suddenly forced to reconcile contradictory ideas or beliefs. The theory’s particular relevance to this study exists in the likelihood that large segments of society will experience

dissonance during a threshold period when formerly unwelcome ideas suddenly become an accepted part of the mainstream culture, and the signs of change become readily apparent in the social pastimes and longstanding traditions that suddenly adopt the new norm (i.e. LGBT equality). Studies in social change prompting states of dissonance have focused on subjects such as the nomination of the first African-American President (Tremayne, 2015), provocative feminist activism (Betlemidze, 2015), and new anti-tobacco norms in the US (Voisin, Stone, & Becker, 2013).

In many ways, it could be argued that cognitive dissonance, on a cultural level, is a necessary evil in the long process of a marginalized movement fighting for its place in society. The LGBT community, for example, triggered a cultural state of dissonance when for years they fought for the right to be open members of the military. For the anti-gay community—a largely conservative base—they were forced to reconcile a common support for the armed services with the knowledge that some of their defenders, fighting and dying for their freedom, were gay and lesbian soldiers. In the present study, cognitive dissonance is a highly functional concept in that we are examining an age-old tradition of sports culture that was challenged in 2014 by a new convention. We will soon see how iconic symbols of athleticism and commerce, once perceived to be nonpolitical and uncontroversial, began to express progressive, pro-LGBT positions.

2.1. A model of threshold event

This study has proposed that the 2014 Olympics was more than a significant milestone for the gay rights movement; it was a rare threshold event when the political-economic forces of popular culture established their conventional support for the LGBT community. What makes such moments rare for social movements, in particular, is the fact that most societal change is a slow process, with tremors of activity occurring over years if not decades of protest, legal battles, election cycles, and other forms of activism. Sometimes, however, a significant event in society unfolds that presents a more seismic shift in the culture, which can rapidly alter the landscape of popular opinion. Such events are often as unpredictable as they are infrequent, but they typically impact the everyday citizen. Hurricane disasters, for example, can dramatically shift public opinion about a sitting president; just as a school shooting may suddenly revise the national sentiment about gun control. These pivotal events can also mark the critical moment when a social movement or outside perspective is embraced by a social system.

The proposed model of a threshold event (see Figure 1) presents a four-stage process that emphasizes the role of the media and commercial sectors, which can act as collective change agencies by expressing their institutional form of support for a given cause. Such forces can also act as a litmus test on the culture by representing a bottom-line perspective that is traditionally more resistant to change, and thus, more cautious to acknowledge when it has occurred. In the following section, the model will be presented in relation to the LGBT movement, though its application can extend into other platforms, as will be explored.

2.1.1. Social movement on the rise

On June 26, 2015, the US Supreme Court ruled 5–4 to invalidate same-sex marriage bans across the country, thereby legalizing the right of all same-sex couples to marry. In the years leading up to this historic moment for gay rights, the LGBT community had to win other notable victories toward achieving greater legal equality. At the same time, LGBT citizens also had to fight a slower, much more arduous battle in the court of public opinion for cultural acceptance. If one were to imagine an invisible line that exists for every social movement—that point at which a cause accumulates enough support to become resistant to its detractors, and sustained by the popular culture—then such a juncture is likely to be preceded by a period of significant momentum.

For the gay rights movement, the months leading into the Sochi Olympics could be seen as a final surge for the campaign's ascendance toward acceptance, beginning with the Supreme Court's June 2013 decision that overturned the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). This original ruling potentially signaled the beginning of the end to same-sex marriage bans across the US. A few days after DOMA's

repeal, Russia's government ironically signed new anti-gay legislation into law, seeking to mute certain forms of homosexual expression in the state. But the law's passing only served to charge a more vocal global response in support of gay rights. Groups such as the Human Rights Watch and the Human Rights Campaign began looking to Sochi, and calling upon the Olympic Worldwide Sponsors, such as McDonald's, Visa, and Coca-Cola, to speak out against Russia's discriminatory laws. Soon thereafter, social media campaigns surfaced on Twitter that were largely aimed at holding these commercial sponsors of the Sochi games accountable if they did not publicly condemn the anti-LGBT laws of the host nation (Franta-Abdalla, 2014; Pegoraro, Blaszk, Frederick, & Newman, 2016). From this point, the question of LGBT equality became a news cycle mainstay, perhaps best encapsulated by Emma Margolin's (2013) MSNBC article, written 100 days before the opening ceremonies, which asked, "Sochi Olympics, watershed moment for gay rights?" With the issue of LGBT rights evidently on the rise, it is a movement seemingly primed for a moment of social change.

2.1.2. *The threshold event*

From the preceding period, the once-marginalized cause may continue its ascent toward winning legal rights, political support, or simply news recognition, but the most important triumph, and the victory that is hardest to measure, is cultural approval. The threshold event represents a significant cultural experience occurring in society that propels the social movement into mainstream culture. These occasions may vary, whether it be a natural disaster, national tragedy, or an international competition, what underlies these and other such events is their unusual ability to bring together the population for a brief period of time. For the cause that has aligned with the threshold event, the merger may be unexpected, like two separate variables coming together.

Large-scale events, like the Olympic games, catapult social issues into the public's attention, in ways that politics cannot, because they integrate them directly into a culture that has been briefly united around a single experience. The media that surround communities in areas like business and entertainment play a major role in covering these events, filming, producing, and even sponsoring them. They offer a potent political-economic perspective that is responsive to social changes occurring within their markets and society. When a new standard is set, it is often the brand name companies and major media figures that express the commercial community's response and potential conversion. This is especially true today through social media outlets that connect commercial outlets directly with their consumers, and visa versa (Becker & Copeland, 2016; McGillivray, 2014). In other words, the juncture at which a social movement crosses into mainstream culture is detectable by the very presence of these kinds of advocates, whose support and sponsorship is made known through advertisements, social media, press statements, and protests. And so, during the Sochi games, this study will show that it was not the Olympic athletes who signaled the popular shift in support of LGBT equality, but rather, Google, AT&T, Chevy, the NFL, and other powerful change agents of commercial culture.

2.1.3. *The post-event period*

If the threshold event represents the stage at which a social movement is finally propelled into mainstream culture, as established by the support of powerful new voices, then the aftermath should reflect the signs of measurable change. This research focuses attention on the month that followed the Sochi games as an indicator of whether the newly established support for gay rights would endure. Moreover, the study sought to discover if residual forms of protest would emerge, independent of the Olympics, or, would the public's interest in LGBT equality subside?

Returning to the premise that threshold events are identifiable by these shifts that occur in popular commercial culture, the post-event period provides evidence of a continuous ripple effect in society, such as has recently been seen regarding the issue of gun violence in the US. In the wake of several high-profile school shootings in 2013, a corporate chain reaction to sponsor gun control measures began to develop. The issue remained in the national spotlight as companies like Target, Starbucks, Ikea, AMC Theatres, Chipotle, and others began to align with anti-gun advocacies, while publicly prohibiting customers from carrying guns in their stores. Of course, the advancement of any

social movement into mainstream society does not presume that its opposition is subsequently silenced or defeated. Certainly, both the anti-gay and pro-gun advocacies each remain highly active movements. But, as the mainstream media and corporate community have historically shifted together in reflecting new standards, like racial equality, so too it seems, have they begun to acknowledge the changing winds around gay rights and gun control, and adjusted their sails accordingly. In this new paradigm, the opposition movements do not disappear, but they have been reassigned to a new place in popular culture.

2.1.4. *Cultural reversal*

Today, few would argue that tobacco lobbyists and chain smokers are viewed as the proverbial “good guys” in American society. It is hard to imagine a time when smoking was “as everyday an activity as drinking a cup of coffee and was widely practiced and accepted in society” (Jowett & O’Donnell, 1999, p. 321). But before radio and TV ban on cigarette advertising in 1971, a moment when tobacco companies lost their most direct contact with popular culture, smoking was a part of that culture, and anti-smoking sentiment, barely relevant. Clearly, with contested issues, the balance of power can transfer over time, creating a lasting state of winners and losers. If one were to view the 1971 break-up of broadcast and tobacco as the threshold event for that issue, it is logical to conclude that a cultural reversal of sorts had occurred, the results of which could be seen in the growth of anti-tobacco campaigns, and the newly established taboo for smoking.

Just as some events may establish the time period when a social movement enters the mainstream, so too, do they mark the point of the opposition’s departure from popular culture. The loss of cultural status is admittedly the more difficult to recognize in this study, because whereas a cause suddenly gains proactive support from the media and commercial communities, the opposition’s social standing is unceremoniously reduced. Advocacies, like big tobacco, may appear just as vociferous and powerful as they were before, however, it is not their cause that has shifted, but rather the culture that surrounds them.

At this stage, the mainstream media and commercial sectors, ever careful to be on the right side of the average consumer, recognize the diminishing popularity of the opposing viewpoint. Evidence of a cultural reversal can be found in numerous places, from movies that once cast the opposition’s ideals in line with the hero, now aligning them with the villain, to the news media that previously treated the opposition’s politics as legitimate, now reframing them as fanatical. As this study examines whether the 2014 Olympics was the time when gay rights solidified its place among mainstream commercial culture, it is reasonable to deduce that, simultaneously, this could be the period when anti-gay activists lost their remaining footing at the center. Certainly, some may question whether anti-gay sentiments have been marginalized in the US, especially as new laws emerge trying to restrict LGBT equality at the state level. This model, however, does not suggest the anti-gay movement is any less active today than it was prior to Sochi, but rather, significantly less relevant.

3. Methodology

The goal of the study was to identify the pop cultural and commercial expressions of support that indicated a mainstream embrace of the LGBT community, while also illustrating the theoretical process of a threshold event in action. In their work on mixed methods research, Creswell and Clark (2007) explain how a “combination of qualitative and quantitative data provides a more complete picture by noting trends such as generalization as well as in-depth knowledge” (p. 33). This research design echoes that philosophy, balancing a content/frame analysis of popular media coverage with a political-economic focus on the emerging LGBT advocates from the commercial sectors. Whereas the magazines and websites would present an overview of the popular media’s rising attention to gay rights, the symbolic support of brand names like Chevy, the NFL, NBC and the Olympics itself, would represent the voices of powerful institutions that are reflective of a threshold event in popular culture.

For the initial content analysis, the research chose to examine the coverage of the gay rights issue in 38 popular American magazines and websites representing nonpolitical interests in society. The media study would produce quantitative data that could allow for the basic comparison of three conceivable “threshold events” of the LGBT campaign in the United States: The December 22, 2011, repeal of the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (DADT), which allowed gay and lesbian soldiers to openly identify their orientation in military service; the June 26, 2013, Supreme Court ruling that repealed DOMA, which ended a federal ban on same-sex marriages; and the February 2014 Olympics, which signified a global state of protest against host Russia’s national ban of so-called “gay propaganda.” By comparing the media coverage of each pivotal event, the study could determine whether a significant surge in popular interest had transpired in the US signifying a *social movement on the rise*.

While the repeals of DADT and DOMA were marked by single calendar days, the Sochi Olympics fell over a two-week period. The research set February 15, the midpoint of the Olympics, as the date from which to collect magazine and website articles for one month prior to and following the games. For the survey of magazines and websites, keyword searches were made within a two-month timespan surrounding each event using Gale’s Popular Magazines Infotrac, Google, and, the websites themselves. The terms “Gay rights” and “LGBT” were cross referenced with their respective events; “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” “DADT,” “Defense of Marriage Act,” “DOMA,” and “Sochi Olympics.” The magazines and websites selected for analysis were intended to reflect mainstream consumer and commercial interests in business, sports, entertainment, fashion, home & lifestyle, technology & gaming (see Appendix A). Magazines were selected from among the top-circulating titles in 2014, as reported by the Alliance for Audited Media (Top 25 U.S. Consumer Magazines, 2014), while websites were chosen based on visitor traffic, as monitored by Alexa web analytics (Top Ranked Sites, 2016).

Next, the research selected nine of the leading publications to perform a deeper frame analysis of the LGBT community and equal rights. In all, 140 articles were examined from *Sports Illustrated*, *Bleacher Report*, *ESPN.com*, *Forbes*, *Business Insider*, *Advertising Age*, *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Hollywood Reporter*. An inter-coder reliability test was conducted using Scott’s Pi to measure the level of agreement between the coders in 10% (14) of the articles. Coders yielded a 92% level of agreement. A chi-square goodness of fit test was also later used to assess the significance in the overall findings of the frame analysis. The framing of LGBT citizens was determined by evaluating the descriptors used by journalists to portray that community. A pre-analysis found LGBT citizens to be described in neutral terms, such as “LGBT people,” as well as more inclusive identifiers, such as “LGBT Americans.” These, along with the potential for negative portrayals, became the three designations that two coders looked for in determining how a journalist chose to frame LGBT actors in the story. The analysis also focused on those themes with which LGBT rights were aligned, such as “Olympic values” and “Russian discrimination.” Snow and Benford (1988) describe *frame alignment* as a message structure in which the storyteller, in this case the journalist, adjoins two issues into a unified cause. Such unifications may persuade audiences to identify more so with one particular side.

From the content/frame analysis, the study next took a qualitative approach using political-economy analysis to explore the sponsorships that emerged on behalf of LGBT rights. Part two begins by analyzing the Olympics itself as a *threshold event*, focusing on symbols of identity and citizenship, as well as human rights concerns that were emerging out of the host nation at the time, as each played a role in propelling gay rights into a global spotlight. Activated as a vehicle of protest, the Olympics broadcast illustrates how an iconic event can become a transformative source of both cognitive dissonance and social change. Finally, the research focused a deeper investigation on locating those LGBT advocates that emerged from the commercial sectors of business and popular culture before, during, and after the 2014 Olympics to reflect the proposed *post-event* and *cultural reversal* period. Lexis-Nexis was used to collect stories relating to the “Sochi Olympics” and “LGBT” and “Gay rights” from January 15–March 15. By bracketing and analyzing the various voices of support and protest that surfaced during this time, the study could identify those commercial institutions that demonstrated a mainstream brand of support that is relatively new to the LGBT campaign.

Table 1. Three milestone events in LGBT rights: A comparison of popular media coverage

Magazine/web genre	Sochi 2014	DOMA 2013	DADT 2011
Business	114	73	16
Entertainment	117	47	12
Sports	94	7	2
Fashion	37	17	2
Home & lifestyle	13	8	0
Technology & gaming	7	3	2
Total:	382	155	34

Note: N = Total number of articles writing about LGBT rights amid three milestone events.

4. Part I. Social movement on the rise: Media coverage

Table 1 presents the findings of the first media analysis, which tabulates the total number of magazine/web articles writing about LGBT rights at the height of the three historic events: the 2011 repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT), and the Supreme Court's 2013 overturn of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), and 2014 Sochi Olympics. As the findings demonstrate, the 382 examined articles that reported on LGBT rights in 2014 signified a broad shift in popular media now recognizing a movement that had once been ignored by the American press. From 2011, to 2013, to 2014, it is clear that every one of the popular media genres increases their attention on the LGBT community, and by significant margins. On the whole, the total number of stories about LGBT rights increased from the 2011 repeal of DADT to the 2014 Olympics by 348 stories, representing a 1024% surge in overall coverage. And comparing the coverage of Sochi to the more recent repeal of DOMA, just eight months prior, the increase in reporting was by 227 articles, or a 147% spike in interest. In an initial reading of these numbers, it becomes evident that the gay rights movement, which had been progressing gradually along a timeline toward equality, has experienced a breakthrough in recent years, both legally and culturally. The swell of popular interest in the LGBT cause, as evidenced by these nonpolitical publications, indicates a movement that was clearly on the rise in the public domain and potentially crossing that theoretical threshold of popular support.

It is also important to consider the relevance of the single article in this context. The nature of magazines and websites is to cover matters pertaining to the world of their consumers, such as the trendsetting music culture or the diehard sports fan. As such, the accumulation of stories directly about or referencing LGBT rights represents an acknowledgement that such concerns are becoming relevant to their readers. "Sochi has helped make gay rights a sports issue" wrote one journalist to their respective readership (Rapoza, 2014, para. 3). In the corporate world, *Forbes* reported on the "considerable pressure" on sponsors of the Games to "make strong statements against the Russian "anti-gay propaganda" law" (Taylor & Murphy, 2014, para. 1), while the website *Wired* shared "disturbing video" with its tech-culture audience depicting "horrific attacks on LBGQT people at the hands of hate groups buoyed by Russian anti-gay laws" (This Week in Photography: Moroccan Biker Gangs, a GoPro Free Fall, & Olympic Extravagance, 2014, para. 1). And *Rolling Stone* covered notable examples from the music industry's response such as stories about Madonna and Lady Gaga's denunciations of the Kremlin's policies while on stage in Russia (Reed, 2014).

Such examples reveal how these popular interest media chose to not only cover the cultural conflict, but also to hail the LGBT struggle, further aligning their markets with the side of gay rights, and potentially challenging some of their own readerships. Whereas in 2011, during the repeal of DADT, most popular interest magazines chose to remain largely silent on the issue of gay rights—inferring that it was not of concern to their readers—the media of 2014 demonstrated an entirely different outlook. Now, magazines and websites such as *Fortune*, *Advertising Age*, *Us Weekly*, *Elle*, and *Bleacherreport.com*, were openly embracing the story, exhibiting a complete transformation from

2011 when these five outlets neglected to produce a single article about DADT or the LGBT community. Of this representative sample of five, coverage of LGBT equal rights went from zero articles written in 2011, to 96 stories published about the movement during the 2014 games.

In a later section, the research will show how influential brands of commercial culture sponsored LGBT rights through the Olympic broadcasts, advertising, and advocacy. However, magazines such as *Variety* and *Rolling Stone*, and websites like *Businessinsider.com*, which respectively represent pillar publications in film, music, and finance, should also be recognized as cultural gatekeepers of their industries. Through their surging coverage of LGBT equal rights, we see these publishers of leading magazines and websites acknowledging a broader, more inclusive view of their consumer base.

4.1. Nature of coverage

Of course, numbers alone cannot tell the whole story. A deeper frame analysis sought to determine how nine leading publications (*Sports Illustrated*, *ESPN*, *Bleacher Report*, *Forbes*, *Business Insider*, *Advertising Age*, *Rolling Stone*, *Hollywood Reporter*, *Vanity Fair*) presented the LGBT rights issue to their distinct readerships, which could then provide evidence of why this story reached a critical mass amidst the Games. The research analyzed 140 articles from the Sports, Business, and Entertainment categories, exclusively, as these particular genres accounted for 85% of the entire sample and were most relevant to the Olympic games and broadcast.

Table 2 illustrates the predominant framing of the LGBT citizen/community across the spectrum of articles, the focus of which ranged from reporting on protests during the Games, to stories on gay and lesbian athletes, to more readership-based articles on LGBT representation in commercials, sports or music. A chi-square goodness of fit test was calculated comparing those observed descriptors used by journalists to frame LGBT citizens to the expected breakdown, wherein it was conservatively hypothesized that a greater number of neutral representations (60%) would be found than inclusive (35%) or demeaning (5%) depictions. But due to a conversely overwhelming number of inclusive characterizations of LGBT citizens (66%), the null hypothesis was rejected, $\chi^2 (3, N = 140) = 60.16, p < .05$.

Though many of the neutral articles could have been classified as positive in their representations of LGBT citizens, the research was concerned with how closely a magazine or web article chose to align or identify with the community. Inclusive articles used language that defined LGBT citizens as part of the greater community. For example, descriptors such as “LGBT Olympians,” “LGBT Americans,” “Gay citizens,” and “human rights” were regarded as inclusive because they recognized the LGBT identity as part of the greater society, whereas terms such as “Gay people,” “LGBT activists,” and even strictly “Gay rights,” were viewed as neutral because, even in mostly positive usages they isolated the LGBT identity. Where an article would use both inclusive and neutral descriptors, the dominant frame was given to the former for it demonstrated a journalist’s embracing understanding of the community. Of note, out of 140 articles, there were no examples found using demeaning or dismissive language, such as might include terms like “so-called Gay rights,” “LGBT agitators” or “Gay circus.” The absence of such language, which has been historically used in the past to describe antiwar and feminist movements, is a potential indication of these media’s dismissal of anti-gay sentiment.

Table 2. Media framing LGBT citizens during the 2014 Sochi Olympics

	N	%
Use of inclusive descriptors	92	65.7
Use of neutral descriptors	48	34.3
Use of demeaning descriptors	0	0

Notes: N = 140 dominant characterizations of LGBT citizens. $\chi^2 = 60.16, p < .05$.

Table 3. Predominant framing of LGBT equal rights in relation to the 2014 Sochi Olympics

	N	%
Aligning LGBT equal rights with US/Western stance Against Russia's anti-gay laws & discriminatory culture	117	76.9
Reflecting back on US/Western anti-gay laws and culture	31	20.3
Other stories mentioning LGBT citizens and Sochi games	4	2.6

Notes: N = 152 recurring frames of LGBT equal rights identified in 140 news articles. $\chi^2 = 53.82, p < .05$.

Finally, the analysis also identified two reoccurring stories that framed the equal rights movement amid the Olympic games. By far, the most dominant of these linked LGBT equality to American/Western democracy set against Russian oppression and anti-gay culture. Table 3 demonstrates how the alignment of LGBT freedoms with pro-democratic values accounted for 77% of the identified story concentrations, $\chi^2 (3, N = 152) = 53.82, p < .05$. Often times, this frame alignment was directly related to the consumer interest of a particular magazine or site. For example, *Advertising Age* and *Forbes* each often wrote about Coca-Cola and Chevy running pro-LGBT commercials before the Olympic broadcast in response to Russia's anti-gay measures, while *Rolling Stone* and *Hollywood Reporter* covered the music and celebrity scene unifying behind equal rights in the directly face of Russian oppression, and *Sports Illustrated* covered extensively the story of gay and lesbian athletes representing America as Olympians and official delegates in Sochi in defiance of Russian intolerance. This theme set up the binary discourse, cited earlier, in which "LGBT equality" and "anti-gay beliefs" are respectively presented to readers as "us versus them."

To a lesser degree, a second frame that emerged notably reflected on an irony that was present in the Sochi story: the United States' own problems with LGBT discrimination. Twenty percent of observed characterizations reflexively focused on the lack of equality with regard to US/Western policy. As one *Vogue* reporter wrote, "having a better gay rights record than contemporary Russia is no great triumph...for one [it] obscures the challenges that still face LGBT people, and athletes, here at home" (Crouch, 2014, para. 1). The same *Forbes* journalist who wrote that the "Sochi Olympics are part of an ongoing cultural shift," also examined Russia anti-gay laws and concluded the "U.S. has similar policies against homosexuality, at least at the state level" (Rapoza, 2014, para. 2).

These common sentiments, as expressed through the media's framing, capture one of the underlying reasons why Sochi had perhaps such a profound impact on the international community for the issue of LGBT rights. As nations brought together openly criticized the anti-gay culture of Russian law and society, they were also forced to confront their own conflicting definitions of citizenship and national identity with regard to the LGBT community. In effect, the mainstream dialogue about LGBT rights may have triggered a necessary moment of cognitive dissonance to transpire among these popular media outlets and the greater public square.

5. Part II. The Olympics as a threshold event

Conventionally, the Olympics have come to embody the ideal symbols of human competition, athletic preeminence, national pride, and international unity. Beyond the event itself, these themes have also been echoed in the broadcasts and commercial advertisements that respectively narrate, sponsor, and also profit from these games. The 2012 London Olympics, for example, featured NBC broadcasts that told the inspiring story of athletes like Michael Phelps and Gabby Douglas, while TV ads like Nike's "Find Your Greatness" and Tide's "Proud Keeper of the Red, White, and Blue" celebrated themes like human endurance and patriotism. Of course, though the games are meant to unify the global community, they have also at times become a political spectacle where international conflicts have played out both on the field and in the media's narrative.

Thematically, the 2014 Sochi games were not unlike previous broadcasts in that they featured the storyline of a sports competition painted in international controversy. Even before the Olympic torch was lit, the global media spotlight had fallen upon 2014 host Russia, and the geopolitical tensions building between that nation and other world powers. As sports broadcaster, Bob Costas, summated, “These Olympics take place amid questions about terrorism, human rights, the staggering cost of staging and securing them, and to some, the basic question of whether the games should have been granted to Sochi in the first place” (Sheehan & Michaels, 2014). It is within this familiar backdrop of a politicized sports competition, and of East versus West, that an unexpected variable entered into the narrative—the gay rights movement.

In the 2014 Sochi Olympics, the LGBT human rights cause suddenly found itself aligned with other global affairs in a convergence of interests that would normally not be paired together. The gay rights movement, a campaign about identity and equality, became a symbol of Western democracy, pitted against Russian oppression. With Moscow’s attempt to silence gay rights protest, the LGBT community took an unfamiliar position at the center of media coverage about the games, which was clear from the onset of the NBC broadcast, in which Matt Lauer decreed: “In a perfect world, tonight would be all about the athletes and the athletic competition, but this isn’t a perfect world—it’s the real world—and there have been all kind of issues swirling around these games from ... tensions between the United States and Russia, [to] gay rights” (Sheehan & Michaels, 2014).

The overlap of patriotic symbolism between the Olympic games and gay rights may have triggered a cognitive dissonance among the skeptics, which arguably had to play out in society. We had seen it before, when conservative Americans were forced to reconcile pro-military ideals with the knowledge that many servicemen and women were actually members of the LGBT community. Now, it was gay and lesbian athletes representing American ideals and national pride. In this pairing of public interests, a message was formed, that LGBT rights are American. And just as the repeal of DADT challenged the notion that there are only “straight warriors” on the battlefield, the Olympics confronted the belief that only “straight athletes” can compete on behalf of their country and represent attributes like athletic superiority and American democracy.

Throughout the broadcast of the games, a growing acknowledgement of LGBT rights was expressed in everything from the commentary of the broadcasters, to the US delegation selected by President Obama, to the celebrities who spoke out in support of LGBT equality; an influential list that included Madonna, Lady Gaga, Cher, Ian McKellan, Jonah Hill, Rihanna, Kristen Bell, Kevin Bacon, George Takei, Andy Cohen, and others. NBC’s opening broadcast, which began with a focus on human rights, proceeded to an interview between Bob Costas and President Obama, where the sports anchor bluntly stated to the president: “[Y]ou are sending openly gay athletes like Caitlin Cahow and Brian Boitano as part of the delegation. It’s hard to miss the message that’s being sent there.” The American president’s response was equally as direct:

Well there’s no doubt that we wanted to make very clear that we do not abide by discrimination in any forms, including discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation ...One of the wonderful things about the Olympics is that you are judged by your merit—how good you are—regardless of where you come from, what you look like, who you love. (Sheehan & Michaels, 2014)

As a platform of protest, the Sochi Olympics may not have featured as many athletes voicing dissent as some expected, but LGBT solidarity was communicated in other ways. There were gay rights demonstrations staged beyond the official protest boundaries of Sochi that saw the arrests of over two-dozen activists, including members of the band Pussy Riot. One politician, Vladimir Luxuria, managed to briefly protest inside the Olympic stadium, holding a sign that read “gay is okay,” and later attending a women’s hockey game in a rainbow skirt before being removed by police. Notable former gold medalists, such as tennis champion Billie Jean King and skier Bode Miller were among

those sports figures who vocally sponsored LGBT equality, while one Dutch snowboarder, Cheryl Mass, made headlines as a participant of the games when she defiantly waived her Olympic rainbow gloves in front of the camera.

The mainstream media played perhaps the biggest role in interpreting these and other events as symbolic protest. In his study on symbols of protest, Ibrahim (2009) explained how “the public must be able to readily recognize an act of resistance as resistance” (p. 218). Much of the media coverage of the Sochi games ensured that a global audience would interpret certain events as protest, whether or not the acts were in fact political. For example, articles framing Germany’s multicolored uniforms or Johnny Weir’s flamboyant costumes as “pro-gay rebellion” were among the stories that offered political symbolisms where none was necessarily confirmed, illustrating how sometimes, popular culture will see what it wants to see.

5.1. Commercial sponsorship

Corporate sponsorship plays a particularly significant role during an Olympic year when companies like Pepsi and Nike put their brand name’s stamp of approval on the event and the athletes that, in turn, associate with their products. During an Olympic cycle, there are varying forms and degrees of sponsorships. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) sponsorships are broken into tiers, including the largest worldwide sponsors that in 2014 included companies like Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, and Visa; as well domestic partners that typically sponsor athletes, which in the case of the US included Nike, AT&T, Hershey, and Kellogg’s. There are also unofficial athletic sponsors that have included companies like Gatorade and General Mills, which choose to align their brands with specific star athletes or teams. And finally, there are the companies that unexpectedly choose to endorse the Olympics through ambush marketing, which might include press releases, or statements on their websites, social media, and other platforms. It is important to recognize that, on a global stage, each of these sponsorships can provide a form of currency that is both economic and political, through campaigns that embrace not only the Games, but the current themes that the games represent, i.e., human potential, patriotism, and unity. The 2014 Sochi Olympics added *human rights* to the list of attributes openly supported by trademark companies like Google, Chevrolet and AT&T.

DaSilva (2014) described how the commercial trend began when AT&T “became the first major U.S. company with Olympic ties to strongly condemn Russia’s anti-gay laws” (para. 4), after other worldwide sponsors received a social media-based backlash for failing to do so. On its consumer blog, AT&T declared: “We support LGBT equality globally and we condemn violence, discrimination and harassment targeted against LGBT individuals everywhere. Russia’s law is harmful to LGBT individuals and families, and it’s harmful to a diverse society.” In the days that followed, other symbols of corporate resistance began to emerge. Google transformed its internationally recognized homepage into a “rainbow-colored, Olympic-themed version of its iconic logo,” beneath which the world’s most visited webpage posted the Olympic Charter’s own anti-discrimination policy. The Greek yogurt company Chobani also decorated its product in a rainbow-theme display of support publicized via Twitter. Chobani’s product was quickly banned from Sochi shortly after its CEO released the following statement: “We are against all laws and practices that discriminate in any way ... for that reason, we oppose Russia’s anti-LGBT law” (Fields, 2014, para 1). And during the opening ceremonies, Chevrolet ran two advertisements featuring LGBT couples among other American families, as a spokesman narrated: “And while what it means to be a family hasn’t changed, what a family looks like has. This is the new us” (Buss, 2014).

In corporate culture, press releases, blogs, logos, and advertisements are how businesses mass communicate with society. Kellner (1995) contended that, “All ads are social texts that respond to key developments during the period in which they appear” (p. 334). In the examples of AT&T, Chobani, Google, Chevy, and NBC, which broadcast their message, the social text was clear: the acknowledgement of gay rights. But beyond the politics of the moment, a further significance can be found in these industry giants who represent a corporate philosophy known for not taking risks by promoting controversial issues. Their sponsorship of gay rights amid these Olympic games sends

another message: that LGBT equality is no longer a controversial idea. For Google, a company that symbolizes advancement, and had already been vocal in its support of LGBT rights in the past, such a message is powerful, but perhaps expected. Chevrolet, however, represents an older conventional American standard, and thus, their support of gay rights was perhaps even more emblematic of a commercial/cultural shift.

6. Post-Sochi and reversing anti-gay traditions

Finally, the threshold event model focuses on the post-event period as a telling measure of whether the newfound support for a given movement would extend beyond the examined event. In the case of gay rights, the evidence established that it had. The first signs of lasting change occurred just three days after the closing ceremonies, but having no relation to the games in Sochi. The issue at hand was a law in Arizona that would have allowed businesses to refuse their services to members of the LGBT community on the basis of religious grounds. In this high-profile story, gay rights and LGBT discrimination were publicly weighed against each other in a traditionally conservative arena. This time, AT&T was not one of the few, but rather, one of the many businesses to openly challenge the discriminative policy. AT&T was joined by American Airlines, Apple, eBay, Intel Corp, Major League Baseball, Marriot, the NFL, Petsmart, Southwest Airlines, Starwood Hotels, Verizon, and other brand names that all objected to the law via national press releases and letters to the governor of the state. The law was vetoed.

Moreover, the trend that followed signified a firm rejection of the once-conventional anti-gay stance in popular culture. Another example of residual protest occurred three weeks later, during the St. Patrick's Day celebrations. After parade organizers in New York and Boston refused to allow LGBT groups to partake in the procession, Guinness, Sam Adams and Heineken withdrew their sponsorship and participation in the event. The beer companies' boycott, which was joined by the likes of NYC Mayor Bill DeBlasio, was a stunning departure from tradition, and a powerful statement on a new standard set for both gay rights and anti-gay discrimination.

Two years after the 2014 Olympic games, the outspoken commercial support for equal rights, and against anti-LGBT laws, has continued. Providing further evidence that the Sochi experience was a threshold moment for the cause, we have seen pressure brought by major US institutions against emerging anti-LGBT legislation at the state-level. In North Carolina, the NBA announced that it would be relocating the 2017 All-State Game that originally slated for Charlotte, as a protest against that state's latest law barring the transgender community from using a public bathroom of their preference. In Indiana, the NCAA, which is headquartered in the state, spoke out forcefully against the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which affords businesses the right to refuse their services to LGBT citizens based on religious grounds. Promising to reevaluate the NCAA's relationship with the state going forward, President Mark Emmert said, "[Inclusion and diversity] are values that are fundamental to what college athletics are all about and what higher education is all about" (Boren, 2015). A year later, the organization followed the NBA by announcing it would pull its championship basketball games from North Carolina in protest to the "bathroom bill." Major sports leagues have been joined by a chorus of Hollywood elite, and major commercial institutions such as Apple, Bank of America, Facebook, Google, and PayPal, in speaking out against anti-LGBT laws and politics. This new norm reflects a cultural reversal in the thinking of brand name companies and major organizations that only a few years ago, would have chosen to remain silent on such issues. Now, it would appear that overlooking anti-LGBT laws is viewed by these institutions as akin to supporting discrimination, which is simply not in keeping with their brands' standard.

7. Discussion

This study sought to explore a theoretical event wherein evidence could be found indicating a significant shift in the popular commercial support for gay rights. The research demonstrated how the Olympics became a global platform from which LGBT equality was perceived as being united with themes of democracy, patriotism, and human rights. The question being raised through the context of these Games echoed some of the same sentiments that were shared in the popular media

coverage: “Where does LGBT citizenship exist in the national identity of *all* cultures?” Beyond symbolism, the surge of media attention on the LGBT movement indicated a mainstream culture that was on the brink of monumental social change after the repeals of DADT and DOMA. The political-economy analysis of commercial advocates then showed how powerful new allies from brand name businesses, organizations, sports leagues, and media networks converged to vociferously sponsor gay rights. And in the Olympic broadcast, the message of LGBT equality was also not hidden in sub-text, but rather expressed openly by the commentators, celebrities, athletes, and world leaders.

This central focus of this research adds to a growing field of study of how the sporting event of the Olympics can occasionally transform into a global platform of protest and site of critical cultural representation (Angelini et al., 2012; Billings & Angelini, 2007; Neilson, 2002; Perry & Kang, 2012). From a broader perspective, this study’s proposed threshold event model offers an alternative framework for future investigations on the rise of social movements. Whereas traditional methods of measuring national sentiments focus on public opinion surveys or political news commentary, the threshold event model looks for the evidence of social change in our nonpolitical media and commercial sector—the popular magazines, celebrities, sports figures, and mainly brand-name businesses—that recognize and follow those valuable cultural fluxes that occur first in society. These markers of culture can sometimes indicate the shift in a perceived consumer standard about not only products, but also ideas, such as what the American family looks like, or what cultural stereotypes have alas become unacceptable.

Future studies on the critical mass theory or the tipping points of social movements might test further the four stages of the threshold event model using other signifiers of commercial culture, such as brand-sponsored social media campaigns utilizing Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and other vehicles for companies and organizations to express statements of protest and social responsibility. More focus should also be given to exploring the final proposed stage of the model, which posits that opponents of a formerly-marginalized movement will experience cognitive dissonance, and ultimately become *less* visible and decreasingly represented in commercial culture following the perceived threshold event.

Certainly this model and study are also not without limitations. From a theoretical perspective, there is always an inherent dilemma in conducting an analysis of “popular culture,” because it is a highly abstract and subjective concept. In “Toward a Definition of Popular Culture,” Parker (2011) critiques the many disparate attempts throughout history to carve out a single meaning of the term. At the onset, he equates popular culture to a well-known court opinion on pornography, stating “we may not be able to define it, but we know it when we see it” (p. 147). In much the same way, the standards of popular culture that evolve over time are also difficult to project, and yet, we often seem to know once they have changed. This research of LGBT sponsorship amid the Olympic games has tried to define “popular culture” through a mainstream commercial lens, but recognizes that there are other significant measures of an evolving social standard.

Additionally, some may also reject the premise that LGBT equality has been recognized, or antigay sentiment for that matter, marginalized. It is true that some research has shown how high-profile coverage of gay rights can trigger a digression in society. Hubert’s (1999) study on the public response to Ellen DeGeneres’ coming out on her TV talk show, contended that the broadcast only served to “reveal the level of hostility toward gays and lesbians” still prevalent in society (p. 31). Others may yet argue that the seminal moment for gay rights actually occurred years earlier, citing perhaps a steady decline in overtly homosexual stereotypes in the media, or the rhetorical recognition of “homophobia” in society. These and other communication trends are important cultural indicators to consider.

8. Conclusion

On the issue of LGBT equality, the research does not assume that a proverbial finish line has now been crossed, or that going forward, gay rights will go unchallenged. Shortly after the US Supreme Court has rendered its historic decision affirming the right of same-sex couples to marry across the

country, the national debate shifted to whether private businesses could deny LGBT couples their services on religious grounds. In the future, it is possible that anti-gay voices may become even more fervent to compensate for their diminishing relevance in society. Conceivably, the presence of cultural tensions is likely to be greatest during the cultural reversal stage when societal belief systems are rapidly evolving. Future studies might focus on the anti-gay opposition that follows 2014 to gauge whether its treatment in the media and popular culture has shifted to a state of marginalization, as this research suggested it would.

In fact, evidence of a cultural reversal can already be observed in many corners of popular culture, such as a Dear Abby article that coincided with the end of the Sochi games. In it, the famed advice columnist rebuked a married couple for openly expressing anti-gay views about their neighbors, writing: “If you interact only with people like yourselves, you will have missed a chance for growth, which is what you have been offered here. Please don’t blow it” (Van Buren, 2014). Dear Abby is not so unlike the magazines and businesses examined in this study. Like *People*, Sam Adams, the NFL, and Chevrolet, her 60-year-old advice column is a symbol of American culture that likewise represents a mainstream consumer base. By observing these kinds of commercial change agents, we can better identify when a social movement becomes part of the cultural establishment. Certainly, the insinuation is not that “mainstream status” is its own public virtue—it is not. But the endorsement of society’s brand name symbols does communicate a code of cultural identification that establishes a sense of belonging, which in the case of gay rights, has long been denied.

Funding

The author received no direct funding for this research.

Author details

Adam Klein¹

E-mails: adgklein@hotmail.com, aklein@pace.edu

¹ Department of Communication Studies, Pace University, 41 Park Row #506, New York, NY 10038, USA.

Citation information

Cite this article as: Threshold event: Exploring a commercial sponsorship of LGBT rights during the Sochi games, Adam Klein, *Cogent Social Sciences* (2016), 2: 1252302.

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Appendix A

List of surveyed magazines and websites by genre

Business	Entertainment	Home & Lifestyle
Forbes	People	AARP
Business week	Vanity fair	Reader's digest
The Economist	Us weekly	Cafémom.com
Fortune	TMZ.com	Good housekeeping
Adweek	Rolling stone	Parents
Businessinsider.com	Hollywood reporter	Martha Stewart living
Advertising Age	Variety	Better homes and gardens
Sports	Fashion	Technology & gaming
Sports illustrated	GQ	Wired
Bleacherreport.com	Elle	Mashable
ESPN.go.com	Vogue	Game informer
CBSSports.com	Cosmopolitan	
NFL.com	Marie Claire	
MLB.com	Glamour	
NBA.com	In Style	



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